



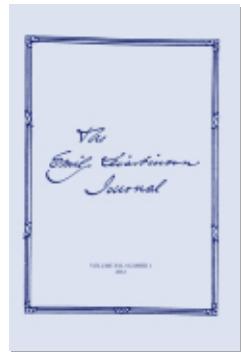
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Troping the Unthought: Catachresis in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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**ENIKŐ BOLLOBÁS**

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*Troping the Unthought:  
Catachresis in Emily Dickinson's Poetry*

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion — Lyn Hejinian

Catachresis is an outstanding trope within Emily Dickinson's regime of innovation, although little attention has been paid to it.<sup>1</sup> In particular, catachresis contributes formidably to meaning making in what Margaret H. Freeman calls Dickinson's "conceptual universe" (645). As one of the poetic devices used by this poet in favor of "polytropy" (see Hagenbüchle, "Poetic Covenant" 28), it stands out as the trope that gave Dickinson ample linguistic space, a "Capacious[ness]" within language, to use her own term (Fr713). She could thus play with her "loved Philology" and her "Lexicon," her "only companion," without having to leave the realm of language (Fr1715, L261). As Wendy Martin points out, Dickinson believed that words are crucial to making "perceptions palpable" and that language "made emotion and thought possible" (117). Through catachresis, Dickinson can access the knowledge that has been accumulated into language. In addition, catachresis enables her to accommodate language's ambiguities and undecidabilities.

Catachresis fits into the linguistic, poetic, and rhetorical "patents" on poetic invention identified by Roland Hagenbüchle, Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, Sharon Cameron, Josef Raab, and Shira Wolosky in their various discussions of Dickinson's poetic language.<sup>2</sup> What these critics focus on—and also defines catachresis—is a process of creating connections between signifiers without anchoring signs in the realm of the signified, thus making room for startling innovations and the creation of concepts formerly unthought. Indeed,

among the defining characteristics identified by classical and modern rhetoricians as being central to catachresis, the following two features are relevant when discussing Dickinson's catachretic work: (1) troping that comes about by shifts among signifiers and (2) a radical potential for innovation.

(1) *As a metaphor without a referent, catachresis is not brought about by analogical duplication and replacement. Rather, changes in meaning come about by extension, that is, by shiftings along what Roman Jakobson termed the horizontal structure of language.* Rhetoricians early on emphasized the reliance of catachresis on extension. Pierre Fontanier (1827), for example, defined catachresis as a figure in which one expression is assigned to both a "first idea" and a "new idea," to which no expression had been assigned earlier (213). In other words, extension becomes the operative process in catachresis, replacing substitution (based on similarity) and duplication (of the literal into the figurative). Richard Parker's *Aids to English Composition*, one of the textbooks that were in use at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke during the time Dickinson was studying there (see Ross 93), explains catachresis in similar terms: it is "the reverse of tautology," where the same word [is used] in different senses" (70). Catachresis, in other words, is solely operative in signifier-signifier relationships—not signifier-signified, or sign-referent, relationships.

While metaphor is grounded in human experience—the perception of similarity, analogy, or other "correlations in experience," as Zoltán Kövecses puts it (79)—no such "perceived structural similarity" moves catachresis (81). Catachresis does not point outside of language; it does not fold experience, as it were, into "metaphorical analogies" (288). Instead, relying on processes of extension and shifting, catachresis is a purely linguistic operation. These two features—not pointing outside of language and not relying on analogical duplication—gain particular significance in Dickinson's poetry. Both the idea of circumference and her radical performances of gender are constructed within discourse in order to duplicate, in language, a pre-existing extra-linguistic reality.

(2) *Offering a radical potential for innovation, the horizontal shiftings and extensions of catachresis account for the outstanding creative power of the trope.* Catachresis was considered to be "the most free and powerful of the tropes" by Renaissance rhetoricians, a "source of invention" providing "expression of imagination" (qtd. in Herman et al. 47). It was posited by César Du Marsais (1757) and Thomas Gibbons (1767), among others, as the "form of all invention," which "reigns over all the other figures" (qtd. in Herman et al. 47). Modern rhetoricians have also defined catachresis as a vehicle for invention: a trope that can, as Paul de Man explains,

"dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways"; the speaker is thus allowed to invent "the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language" (21). As such, catachresis has proven to be most helpful when referring to intellectual or philosophical concepts formerly viewed as unrepresentable or incomprehensible. As Michel Foucault explains, this trope creates a linguistic displacement that alters or subverts the order of things thus allowing authors "to *discover* an unexpected space and to *cover* it with things never said before" (*Death and the Labyrinth* 16).

In Dickinson's poetry catachresis indeed allows her to describe complex ideas and develop as-yet-unthought meanings. It is, moreover, the vehicle of a staple Dickinsonian operation: the "semantic shift," which Hagenbüchle describes as "the poet's tendency to select elements that as clues point to other elements as further clues" ("Poetic Covenant" 28); catachresis naturally takes Dickinson on a "linguistic quest that focuses on semantic boundaries" (34). To quote Hejinian, "language is one of the principal forms [poetic] curiosity takes" (49); "[I]anguage discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say" (48). Such a claim would probably have pleased Dickinson, who uses catachresis to hear what language has to say and can say.

Dickinson also seems to find in catachresis a response to her fears about the limitations of language. Holding two somewhat incongruous or incompatible opinions about language, Dickinson, as Miller points out, both feared that words could not adequately express our thoughts and that words are beyond the control of the speaker (*Grammar* 131). Dickinson often believes that words are inadequate and lack force. For example, when, writing to Mrs. Bowles, Dickinson claims "My words are far away when I attempt to thank you" (L196). Dickinson complains on other occasions too that her words of gratitude cannot match her feelings: "To 'thank' you - [s]hames my thought!" (L249); "To thank you, baffles me" (L268); "I would like to thank you for your great kindness but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold" (L330). Catachresis, however, allows Dickinson to scramble word semantics, as it were, in order to add new meanings and thereby make words more adequate. For, language, as Dickinson insists, does not have words for every experience. For example, she writes that "There's something quieter than sleep" that "will not tell its name" (Fr62). Similarly, no name exists for that "certain Slant of light" which she famously claims to be a "Seal Despair" (Fr320); and Dickinson alludes to another death-like, night-like, and frost-like moment of despair when she writes that "everything that ticked - has stopped - / And space stares - all around -" in "It was not Death, for I stood up" (Fr355).

When an unfamiliar experience demands expression, Dickinson can revert to catachresis and create new meanings by extending an existing concept. This kind of innovation is especially imaginative because extension reaches across the gaps and inadequacies of language. According to Dickinson, words must therefore be chosen with care: "I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest" (L873). And catachresis, which allows Dickinson to reorder and recreate meaning, indeed gives her the freedom to explore what is "chiefest." Dickinson's ideal speaker maps the importance of human sociality onto linguistic connections: "How lonesome to be an Article! I mean - to have no soul" (L354). This empathic speaker does not view language as a transparent medium but rather as another living being; poets can thus gain the "consent of Language" by way of "loved Philology" ("A word made Flesh is seldom" [Fr1715]). According to Miller's interpretation of this poem, human language consents to the "manipulation" of the loving philologist and will "in turn replenish its meaning" (*Grammar* 172). When encountering experiences for which no adequate word exists—for example, the "Bandaged moments" of the soul, "moments of escape" that "are not brayed of Tongue" ("The Soul has Bandaged moments" [Fr360]), and the "formal feeling" that comes after great pain ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes - " [Fr372])—Dickinson nevertheless finds a description for it: she fills gaps in language and "cover[s]" them, as Foucault puts it, "with things never said before" (*Death and the Labyrinth* 16).

The word *circumference* functions as a recurrent catachresis in Dickinson's poetry. In her usage of this term, she extends the dictionary meanings associated with circumference as found in the 1844 edition of Webster's: a "line that bounds a circle"; "a circular line or spherical limit; the whole exterior surface of a round body"; a "periphery"; "the space included within a circle." Dickinson, however, extends the meaning of circumference to include a particular state of consciousness, a formerly unthought or unconceptualized idea. In his landmark chapter on circumference in Dickinson's poetry, Albert J. Gelpi defines it as both referring to an "extension and limit": "the farthest boundary of human experience" as well as "the 'terminus' of human delimitation" (122). According to Robert Gillespie, circumference refers to "a limitless expansion away, a radiation in all directions" (255). Citing "At Half past Three / A Single Bird" (Fr1099), Gillespie describes circumference as an "absorbing event" demanding "expansion," when consciousness "swells out to encompass time and space" (256).

In several poems, circumference indeed refers to a state of being taken to the edge of space and time. In "When Bells stop ringing - Church - begins - "

(Fr601), Dickinson presents it as a moment in which time is suspended and space is frozen: "When Cogs - stop - that's Circumference - ." In "I saw no Way - The Heavens were stitched - " (Fr633), circumference allows the speaker 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"). Circumference belongs to what Gillespie terms Dickinson's "vocabulary of awe" (250) and the catachresis of "Bride of Awe" marries, so to speak, the experience of circumference with that of awe ("Circumference thou Bride of Awe" [Fr1636]). Or, as Raab puts it, "the awe of the ungraspable is caused by and also calls for the poetic method of circumferential approximation" (274). Although the catachresis of "Bride of Awe" seems to reaffirm conventional patterns of heterosexuality, semantic shifting nevertheless introduces elements of subversion because the power relations of the bridal pair ("Circumference" and "Awe") remain unspecified and in flux: "Circumference" appears as both subject and object, "Possessing" as well as being "Possessed."

The exploration of boundaries features prominently in Dickinson's understanding of the concept of circumference: the self leaves its own peripheries in order to dissolve into the limitlessness of space and time, ultimately allowing circumference to become the "Business" of the poet (L268). Other poems dealing with the boundaries of space and time further elaborate on this new idea of circumference: "This was a Poet - " (Fr446) describes an experience "Exterior - to Time," while "I had no time to Hate - " (Fr763) depicts the bizarre sensation of losing gravitation, of passing things, and addresses the fear of never coming back. Although obviously not familiar with the physical experience of stepping out of time and place, Dickinson nevertheless gains access to such concepts figuratively, through troping.

Moreover, the catachresis of circumference in Dickinson's poetry seems to act as a meta-term for the catachretic process itself. As used by Dickinson, circumference, like catachresis, becomes a free-standing sign with no referential meaning and with nothing (literally) *out there* to be pointed at or duplicated by language; as such, circumference "does not go outside the language," as Jacques Derrida puts it ("White Mythology" 59), but retains those "uncertainties of reference" that Miller names as being among the most prominent figures of Dickinson's language (*Grammar* 1). Both circumference and catachresis focus on boundaries—circumference on the boundaries of consciousness and catachresis on the boundaries of semantics—and point to Dickinson's curiosity about what language can mean. Finally, definitions of Dickinson's use of circumference as an "outreaching" (Raab 285) and a "limitless expansion away" (Gillespie 255)

correspond to the meaning-making process of catachresis, in which one expression expands to envelop another. Dickinson herself uses the word “Disseminating” to describe the epistemic outreaching of “Circumference” in “The Poets light but Lamps - ”:

Inhere as do the Suns -  
Each Age a Lens  
Disseminating their  
Circumference -

(Fr930)

Circumference shares with catachresis the ability to shift and extend. Just like the lens that multiplies, or disseminates the rays of the sun, catachresis pushes poetic knowledge to its limits of circumference and thereby multiplies and disseminates meanings. In short, the concept of circumference used as a catachresis becomes a figuration of the workings of the trope itself, a catachresis of catachresis.

Although she never used the term catachresis, Dickinson, a “rhetorical poet,” as Fred D. White calls her, must have been acquainted with the trope (13). She could easily have had the catachretic mode in mind in “The Poets light but Lamps - ” (Fr930) in which “Suns”—referring to poets—are “Disseminating their / Circumference.” In other poems too Dickinson articulates ideas associated with the poet as an active shaper of language, one who “Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings - ” (“This was a Poet - ” [Fr446]). As Jane Donahue Eberwein points out, the process of “distillation” represents “the essence of poetry” for Dickinson (138). But poetry can also derive from the violent compression of rose petals (“Essential Oils - are wrung - ” [Fr772]). In the latter poem Dickinson uses the image of “Screws” metaphorically to refer to the poetic technique of “wr[il]ng[ing],” as it were, new meanings from words. In the former, distillation is applied to the attar itself, thus creating an even more concentrated and as such more valuable liquid (see *Grammar*, especially 27, 118-21). Both poems are about the poetic process; both use the metaphor of perfume, which expands and diffuses in an unbounded, limitless manner. And both poems can be read as theorizing catachresis due to their emphasis on how poetic language is created. Meanings reside in words in an immanent manner and are brought to light (made visible, excavated) by evaporating non-essential elements during the process of distillation or by the compression of words against one another. Or to use Dickinson’s words: “To the faithful Absence is condensed presence” (L587).

Dickinson's other accounts of the poetic process can also be interpreted as referring to catachresis, or some characteristics of it. Whenever she sets poetry against prose, and distinguishes between techniques of liberating and anchoring language in reality (shutting in the poet, as if in a closet, and putting shackles on her mind), her gestures can be interpreted as referring to this trope. For example, in "I dwell in Possibility -" (Fr466), possibility, being "A fairer House than Prose," allows Dickinson to collect more meanings: "The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise - ." And by this gesture of "spreading wide," the poet can catch opposites too; like in the catachreses constructed for captivity and life-death: "Captivity is Consciousness - / So's Liberty - " in "No Rack can torture me - " (Fr649) and "Life is death we're lengthy at, death the hinge to life" (L281). Moreover, in "There's a certain Slant of light" (Fr320), the famous "Meanings," located in "internal difference," seem to translate rhetorically into products of catachretic construction. The poem describes events that take place within the closed space of the cathedral. Neither the beam of light nor the heft of tunes leaves this space. The "internal difference" thus comes about solely by a change in the inner dynamics of lights and tunes or word combinations. The "Slant of light," which Dickinson credits with throwing light on meanings, thus turns into a possible metaphor for catachresis, which is built out of differences in meaning *within* a system of signifiers. Following this logic, the other famous poem about a "slant[ing]" method of poetry, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant - " (Fr1263), can also be read as a description of the catachretic process.

In the rest of this essay I will explore how catachresis becomes a vehicle for Dickinson for contesting some master concepts that her culture took for granted. Prominent among these is the concept of gender, or womanhood, as a performance. In her catachretical performances of gender Dickinson developed a matching catachretical poetics that spilled over into poems on various other subjects: God, death, and psychological states.

Performances of womanhood, traditional as well as untraditional ones, form a conspicuous group of Dickinson's poems. As Vivian R. Pollak puts it, gender was a "generative obsession" of Dickinson, who was radically aware of herself as a female subject. And critics have indeed long noticed and interpreted Dickinson's so-called "poses" (18). Lindberg-Seyersted refers to Mabel Loomis Todd's journal entries on the poet's poses and quotes Austin's remark that his sister "definitely posed" in her letters (27). Adrienne Rich discusses the various "careers" open to Dickinson and the feminine "roles" her poetic personae tried on (58). Suzanne Juhasz writes about Dickinson's "rejection of women's traditional roles" (*Naked*

and Fiery 21) in order to get out of her “double-bind situation”: the conflict between her two selves as a woman and a poet (2-3). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar cite critics calling Dickinson “one of American literature’s most expert poseurs” (583). Dickinson’s poses allow her to metamorphose from “a real person (to whom aggressive speech is forbidden) into a series of characters or supposed persons (for whom assertive speeches must be supplied)” (584).<sup>3</sup> Gilbert and Gubar examine these various “supposed person[s]” whom Dickinson ‘becomes’ as her inner novel unfolds”: from irresponsible child, “little Pilgrim” (Fr148), defiant child-woman, and Daisy to “Loaded Gun”/speaker (Fr764) and other figurations of masculinity that came to be associated with womanhood. Paula Bennett, however, restricts Dickinson’s poses to her life, insisting that her poetic personae form a coherent sensibility that is associated with her maturity as a poet: “Dickinson seems to have confined most of her highly manipulative posing to life; in her art there was a gradual growth towards greater and greater coherence and integration as she learned to accept choices she had made earlier” (273).

Juhasz and Miller discuss Dickinson’s performances of gender within the context of Judith Butler’s theory, understanding gender identity categories as performative productions effected by social practices and discourses. They demonstrate that Dickinson’s “variant performances of gender are crucial to the general construction of her poetry” (107). Among these variant performances, Juhasz and Miller identify, on the one hand, “proper configurations of the feminine,” those that include a “lack of agency, initiative, and power,” in poems that are “replete with conventional performative signs” and, on the other, “performances of alterity without the markers of the normative” (113). Among such normative markers and “conventional gender signs,” Juhasz and Miller list a girl looking into the mirror, one tying her bonnet, childhood dolls and a string of spools, a female speaker “going out with [a] basket to pick berries,” and “the ‘little duties’ of gender conventions” (116). Cultural signs that destabilize conventional notions of femininity include various presentations of power and activeness on the part of women, an “unattached and unsubordinated state (which may seem to be manly)” (114). Such “performances of gendered identity,” Juhasz and Miller continue, “utilize the gaps between acts of gender to enable the possibility for the breaking or subversive repetition of gender styles” (125).<sup>4</sup>

In Dickinson’s poetry, these kinds of performances invite two different figures: metaphor and catachresis. While Dickinson reserves metaphor for performances of familiar gender roles, she regularly employs catachresis for the performance of new gender constructs of alterity. As Adelaide Morris has argued, the figure of

metaphor is part of a conventional rhetoric well suited to an existing “conceptual realm” (103) informed by the dominance/submission structures of patriarchy (102). This is why the Master letters, for example, abound in images of “stasis” (107), or metaphors of dominance and submission. The letters construct the persona of Daisy, whose only desire is to please the Master: “only asks - a task . . . to make that master glad.” Aware of her weakness, she accepts punishment, while hoping for forgiveness: “but punish dont banish her - shut her in prison, Sir - only pledge that you will forgive - sometime - before the grave, and Daisy will not mind” (L248). But, according to Morris, Dickinson is also searching for a different rhetoric; one that “expand[s] metaphorical contexts” in order to describe a love that is “outside conventional romantic patterns” (106)—that which, as Dickinson herself puts it, is “Without a Formula” (“‘Tis Seasons since the Dimpled War” [Fr1551]). As examples, Morris cites non-static, or catachretic images in Dickinson’s solar poems such as “Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple” (Fr321), “The Sun kept stooping - stooping - low!” (Fr182), and “I send Two Sunsets - ” (Fr557), where the sun does not “stand for dominion but for daily sharing, the joining of the two houses in a moment of radiance” (108). Reflecting on Morris, Margaret Homans argues that the “rhetoric founded on metaphor’s hierarchical relation of difference” is modeled by heterosexuality. Homans points out, however, that alternative, non-hierarchical structures of a “rhetoric of sameness” come about “horizontally on the basis of similarity and equality,” and may be considered a “form of metonymy.” According to Homans, “[t]his model of language” involves the “greatest possible contiguity” (132, 120, 124, 126): “As the notion of ‘standing for’ or metaphor becomes metonymy . . . a dualistic heaven is revised into a perpetual breaking of boundar[ies],” and “gender difference passes into sameness” (130).

I would, however, argue that the figure that “expand[s] metaphorical contexts” (Morris) and the “form of metonymy” involving the “greatest possible contiguity” and allowing for the perpetual breaking of boundaries (Homans) is in fact catachresis. This trope posits a radical subversion of the production of meaning, thus allowing for the poetic figuration of formerly unscripted performances. Not only does catachresis move horizontally among signifiers (like metonymy), but this movement also affects the individual assignment of the signs. Catachresis connects signifiers (again, like metonymy) and opens up their signifying structures and affects the internal semantics of individual signifiers (changing what individual words mean); it thus creates new formulae for the formerly unscripted and unthought. This is what I see as the origin of Dickinson’s “revisionary language,”

which is made up of “internally generated meanings.” Dickinson, as Joanne Feit Diehl notes, thus “discovers within the very indeterminacy of language a radically modern linguistic home” (174).

Traditional gender formations come about when existing scripts of womanhood are evoked and replayed, making these constructions culturally intelligible. According to Butler, gender is most visibly “achieved and stabilized through heterosexual positioning” (*Psychic Life* 135). In Dickinson’s poetry normative gender performances are presented through metaphor, the figure which, as Hagenbüchle claims, “presuppose[s] a stable world” (“Precision” 40). Conforming women all belong to God’s heaven and act in accordance with convention; they perform God’s script—which, for Dickinson, is both “prosy” (Fr261) and metaphorical. And there are numerous poems of gender compliance in which Dickinson tries on several traditional gender roles: the courted lady, the innocent girl of “the White Election” (Fr411), a woman portrayed in a painting, the abandoned woman, the wife, and the bride. These roles are skillfully constructed to function in conformity with conventions (the love-and-marriage plot), and normative social scripts of nineteenth-century womanhood. As Barbara Welter notes, the “Cult of True Womanhood” included four behavioral attributes: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, and these seemed to regulate expected gender performances. As Juhasz and Miller point out, in “I tie my Hat - I crease my Shawl - ” (Fr522) gender is the act that “keeps us in culture”: “it makes us a ‘Man’ or ‘Woman,’” providing “protection” and “coverage” (116). Dickinson beautifully illustrates this claim through the poem’s presentation of “Life’s little duties”: the gendered “errands” the female speaker performs, like tying her hat, creasing her shawl, or putting flowers on the table, bring about a social equilibrium that allows us to “hold our Senses - on - .”

According to Derrida, metaphor is the trope of mimesis (“Flowers” 247). Relying on the dual structure of signifier and signified, metaphor thus seems to be the obvious figure for representing traditionally scripted gender constructions. For example, in an early letter to Austin, Dickinson presents herself as being able to carry out performances of traditionally feminine trivialities:

As *simple* as you please, the *simplest* sort of simple - I'll be a little ninny - a little  
pussy catty, a little Red Riding Hood, I'll wear a Bee in my Bonnet, and a Rose  
bud in my hair, and what remains to do you shall be told hereafter. (L45)

The seemingly feminine frailty of these personae is, however, ironically complemented by strength and cunning: the “pussy catty” might use her claws,

Little Red Riding Hood outwits the big bad wolf, bees can sting, and roses have thorns. Dickinson is at her most playful here: she reassures Austin of her ability to play the social game of heterosexuality, yet she evokes the possibility of speaking back and acting differently from even “the *simplest* sort of simple” positions. In “A Bee his Burnished Carriage” (Fr1351), the courting lover is presented as a bee, and the courted woman as a rose. The metaphor rests on the solid duality of one element evoking the other (bee/man, rose/woman), allowing for the figure to come about through substitution and remapping. But while the metaphors of the bee and the rose translate unproblematically into man and woman, the “Moment consummated” is unproblematic for one participant only: the bee/man. The rose/woman receives the visit with tranquility and submission, yet cannot share the ecstasy of the bee/man. Agency only pays off for the bee/man: the rapture is his; all that remains for the rose/woman of patience is “Humility.”

The persona in the “Master letters” (L187, L233, L248) is also conveyed by metaphors. The normative script used here is that of the vulnerable and fragile woman, weak and ailing, like all Victorian women were expected to be. The Master letters can be read as performances of these scripts: the humble Daisy, interested in flowers and birds only, is wholly dependent upon her Lord, and is excessively characterized by what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls “romantic thralldom” (66). Dickinson, however, also plays with these roles and poses in an ironic manner; she offers to play humble Daisy as a generic convention. She initiates, asserts, and proposes, which results in a position that is anything but humble. Self-consciously asserting the power to choose one’s own love interest in writing would certainly not have fulfilled Victorian social conventions of femininity. This self-proclaimed submissiveness permeates the poems written around the time of the Master letters. In “I am ashamed - I hide -” (Fr705), the “Dowerless Girl”—bashful, self-effacing, and ashamed of her own worthlessness—gives a theatrical performance of well-known scripts of Victorian womanhood. “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” (Fr185) can also be read as an instance of expressive-citational theatricality; this time it is the bride on the eve of her wedding day who is speaking, and is still unable to comprehend the wonder of turning overnight from “Maid” into “Bride.” In “I would not paint - a picture -” (Fr348), Dickinson’s speaker performs what Rich calls an “orthodox ‘feminine’ role”: the subject is “receptive” rather than “creative”; “viewer rather than painter; listener rather than musician; acted-upon rather than active” (108). Since, as Juhasz and Miller point out, “gender is importantly imbricated in this relationship” (123), the alternative role is that of the masculinized artist who is

everything the woman is not: a creative painter or musician, a speaker, and a thinker 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 -

(Fr348)

The metaphors used in this poem stand solidly on their dual structures: 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). Given the fact that the renouncing speaker—whom her culture places as both the direct and indirect object of the soliloquy (she is the one being painted, sung, and versed; as well as spoken to)—is the active speaker of the poem, and because the acceptance of traditional roles is presented as a conscious choice, the poem nevertheless takes on a shrewdly ironic tone. The metaphors of the text (woman as portrait, woman as cornet, man as musician, man as poet) contradict those in the subtext (woman speaking as an artist: a painter, musician, versifier), leading to the conclusion that Dickinson plants a subversive subtext even in poems that on the surface confirm traditional gender roles.

This same self-deprecating tone is used by the female speaker who claims “I was the slightest in the House - ” (Fr473), who takes the “smallest Room,” never speaks “unless addressed,” and expects to die “noteless.” In “Heart! We will forget him!” (Fr64), the speaker addresses her own heart. Produced as much by the cult of purity as by the cult of female sacrifice, she is unable to decide whether she will be able to forget the man who has abandoned her. The neatly constructed metaphor of “wife”/“Czar”/“Woman” in “I’m ‘wife’ - I’ve finished that - ” (Fr225) also contributes to the performance of traditional womanhood, linking safety and comfort to marriage; however, a subversion of womanhood is also implied due to the male-associated sovereignty of the female “Czar” and again

lends ironic reverberations to gender constructs. Similarly, in “Mine - by the Right of the White Election!” (Fr411), the metaphors of “White Election,” the “Royal Seal,” “Delirious Charter,” and womanhood as a “Titled” state contribute to a self-mocking performance of a celebrated normative script, according to which, women are perceived as coming into their own after marriage.

Different performances of female subjectivity, however, can be detected in cases that reveal what Juhasz and Miller call “conceptual gaps between variant constructions of gender.” As Juhasz and Miller continue, in these spaces “between conventional constructions of gender [Dickinson] presents modifications, diversions, and conditions that are contentious or problematic, and in this fashion she skews and alters gender identities” (113). In these gaps or spaces womanhood comes about through acts of non-compliance with existing norms of heterosexuality. Unlike citational performances of traditional gender roles, these are processes with an ontological force: they bring about new discursive constructions of womanhood against a background of contrary expectations. Resisting and subverting gender normativity, such gender constructions are open, multiple, unstable, unpredictable, problematic, and often unintelligible.

As Juhasz and Miller note, Dickinson’s poetry is rich in unexpected gender representations that point to “the possibility for the breaking or subversive repetition of gender styles” (125). These performances of alterity seem to signal, as Bennett puts it, how Dickinson is “violating the basic prescriptions of her time and the entire thrust of the education she received both at home and at school” (16). They thus refer to “her inability to conform” (25); or, what Susan Howe calls Dickinson’s “insubordination” (144). This, in other words, is agency in the form of Foucauldian *assujettissement* (*Power/Knowledge* 97), a form of self-construction that resists power dynamics that were intended to subject women. In Dickinson’s poetry agency is appropriated against the intentions of power, agency being, to use Butler’s definition, “the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power” (*Psychic Life* 15).

Unlike citational performances of gender, constructed by way of dual metaphorical structures, subversive gender performances are regularly presented by catachresis; this trope is thus brought into the service of anti-patriarchal poetry. Dickinsonian topoi for gender roles for which no name exists, to invoke Gibbons’s definition of catachresis, place women outside conventional love-and-marriage plots and include bachelorhood, or creative celibacy, the female lover as a buyer, wifehood “without the Sign,” and the creative woman. These are all gender conceptualizations “Without a Formula”: new discursive entities that are

brought about, via catachresis, against or in the absence of existing discourses or conventions. While Dickinson's dominant topoi for the figure of the poet include fixed traditional metaphors such as a gardener tending to flowers or a songbird, whose "business [it] is to sing" (L269), no neat metaphorical conceptualizations can be detected in Dickinson's more subversive gender poetry. The figurations of these new subjectivities are multiple, unfixed, mobile, and mutable, involving transgressions and extensions of categories. The subject comes about by resisting normative codes of thought and behavior and by enacting ruptures from convention. These processes also rely on repetition, quotation, or citation, only this is quotation with a difference: one discarding previously coded scripts, ignoring pre-established formulae, and replacing earlier contexts with new ones.

Dickinson's practice of using catachresis for performances of gender alterity furthermore seems to prefigure the post-structuralist thesis that envisions womanhood as a catachresis. Butler, who first expounded on this idea in *Gender Trouble*, suggests that the theory of gender performativity necessarily implies what gender is not (an essence, objective ideal, or fact) and what it is (acts creating an idea).<sup>5</sup>

Because there is neither an "essence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (140)

Gender is thus a figure without a referent, one constituted solely by acts; in other words, the concept is created via the process of catachresis.

Dickinson somehow knew this, or at least knew that those female figures that do not conform to then current ideals of womanhood have less palpable connections with reality than women who did perform traditional roles. Indeed, while the figure of the bride does have its referent in reality, "The Wife without the Sign" in "Title divine, is mine" (Fr194) does not. This difference, however, does not run counter to understanding gender in both cases as an expression of catachresis. Presentations of traditional womanhood, of the bride, for example, invite the figure of metaphor into Dickinson's poetry. This is not because there is any existing female essence, ideal, or fact that can be expressed, but rather because these performances are so familiar and palpable that they create the impression that there is indeed an essence or fact behind them. Still, here too gender is a matter of pure performance. In the case of the "Wife without the Sign," womanhood does not even carry a semblance of the real: this reincarnation of womanhood does

not exist except as a catachresis, a figure without a referent. Both the bride and the “Wife without the Sign” are examples of role playing that merely differ in the nature of their scripts: in the first case these scripts preexist the performance, but in the second case they are created by the poet for each performance.<sup>6</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives a historical explanation of how, since Friedrich Nietzsche, theorists have insisted that woman, as a master concept, is a catachresis. Gender difference is constructed, as Spivak claims, “inside male-dominated historical narratives of propriation” (127), where the defining narrative preexists individual gender development; or, as Butler puts it, sex is always already gendered (*Gender Trouble* 7). Not only is woman not an ontologically given entity, she is also not a regular metaphor. Womanhood does, however, become a catachresis, when in an “emancipated moment of emergence” it becomes both “a metaphor without a literal referent standing in for a concept” and a “necessary and irreducible misnomer for this prior or primal figurative.”

Dickinson seems to be following this trajectory of making womanhood into a catachresis: she overwrites “male-dominated” “narratives of propriation” and adds new meanings to her concept of gender (Spivak 127). Dickinson’s revised womanhood does not satisfy the Nietzschean “condition of possibility of ‘truth’” (qtd. in Spivak 127): the signifier does not stand for any existing signified presence out there. Dickinson does not record truths that preexist the recording; instead, she constructs new concepts in language and poetry that she can only witness or experience as they are being constructed. Dickinson’s new conceptionalization of womanhood is a figure without a literal referent: it is brought about solely by linguistic operations and can only find expression within reimagined patterns of language. Dickinson often crosses familiar boundaries segregating gender categories and expands her idea of womanhood by appropriating meanings that are traditionally associated with manhood. Such an extension of meaning can be detected in Dickinson’s use of bachelorhood as fitting the female gender too. Writing that she was “born for Bachelorhood” (qtd. in Martin 151), Dickinson opted for a life that might give her the freedom of bachelors who enjoy the possibility of choosing and rejecting new potential partners. Dickinson asserts herself as a subject and agent here, who, with the same gesture, refuses spinsterhood, which frames women as repeatedly refused objects. This social self-construction as a bachelor is, moreover, complemented by a spiritual self-construction, conveyed by the term celibacy, another catachresis. Celibacy’s original meaning was restricted to male members of Catholic orders, whose devotion to Christ did not position them according to heterosexual lines of agency and submission, as was the case

for nuns. Nuns would not be called celibate; for, as so-called brides of Christ, they performed a heterosexual script of marriage within the bounds of the convent. Dickinson thus extends celibacy to include a woman devoting her life to a deity who is as powerful to her as Christ is to priests and monks: poetry.

Dickinson often thought of marriage as an unequal sacrifice, allowing no opportunity for her creativity to flourish. Indeed, seeing married women behave like flowers “with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun,” Dickinson dreaded the moment when she too would be “yielded up.” As she wrote to Susan,

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening, but to the *wife*, Susie, sometimes the *wife forgotten*, our lives perhaps 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. (L93)

Elsewhere Dickinson similarly disrupts conventional, idealized terms for love. In “I came to buy a smile - today - ” (Fr258), she pictures love in terms of a trade relation, with the woman bargaining for her lover’s smile. Dickinson thereby extends the concept of love to encompass the idea, or rather metaphor, of love as a form of commerce initiated by women as active subjects and not as objects to be owned.

I came to buy a smile - today -  
But just a single smile -  
The smallest one opon your face -  
Will suit me just as well -

(Fr258)

Indeed, the figure of the woman as a buyer dictating the terms of a contractual relationship could not be more different from the modest, self-deprecating girl in Dickinson’s traditional metaphors, who is offering herself to be mastered by her Lord. Although she too is conventionally feminine in her humble addresses, the speaker of “I came to buy a smile - today - ” claims to be in a position to actively “bargain” for a smile. In “I’m ceded - I’ve stopped being Their’s - ” (Fr353), Dickinson’s new woman emerges as a mature, willful, self-confident, independent, and majestic individual:<sup>7</sup>

I'm ceded - I've stopped being Their's -  
The name They dropped opon 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 - Crowning - 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 -

(Fr353)

As the passivity associated with part of the poem's verb forms ("I'm ceded," "Is finished," "Baptized," "Called") is counteracted due to the insertion of a new, more active set of verb forms ("I've stopped," "I've finished," "to choose," "to reject," "I choose"), the female speaker becomes a subject as she literally becomes the subject of her active-verb sentences and her acts. The idea of self-possession is now included into a new understanding of womanhood. Having discarded known scripts of Victorian womanhood, the speaker is in full command of herself. This is illustrated by a reference to a new type of circumference, one that "fill[s] up" "Existence's whole Arc." The speaker reigns over herself in full recognition of her creative powers: "Adequate - Erect, / With Will to choose, / Or to reject." As catachresis thus turns into a trope of mastery, poetics links up with experience.

Applying a similar catachresis of sovereign female creativity, Dickinson celebrates Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a woman poet whose "Head [was] too High - to Crown - " in "Her - last Poems - " (Fr600). Barrett Browning's agency is thus discursively produced through a reference to the lacks of conventional

language. Dickinson refuses to use discourses of power that “originally” constitute Barrett Browning as an object who can be “Crown[ed]” or identified by an existing script. In this case, the poetic subject does not come about in the Althusserian manner of being interpellated by ideology, but instead by enacting a rupture from convention: by the process of *assujettissement*. Indeed, as Butler points out, there is a difference between being acted upon by ideology and being enacted into a state: “[p]ower not only *acts on* a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being” (*Psychic Life* 13).

In “Title divine, is mine” (Fr194) the speaker gains her “Crown” by acting as a creative master. As Martin claims, “she is the territory that others must relinquish; self-centered, she now claims the right to devote her energy to her own work” (103). Indeed, it is the speaker’s creativity—and not her status as a bride, being literally held or “Bridalled”—that bestows “Title divine” upon her, allowing her to become a “Wife without the Sign,” clearly a contradiction in terms:<sup>8</sup>

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 gives 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 -

(Fr194)

Read closely, this piece is a catachretic bonanza, with at least five catachretic figures in the first half of the poem. The dominant catachresis occurs in the second line: “Wife without the Sign,” which turns lack into presence. This woman, as Bennett puts it, achieves “a new ontological status: woman-without-being-wife”; it allows for a new kind of power, gained from creativity, and keeps this woman in a perpetual state of transformation (78). “Acute Degree” furthermore functions as a catachresis inserting “slant[ness]” into the semantics of this new female

“degree,” or title. Acute, according to *Webster’s*, refers to “less than a right angle”; the speaker’s new “Degree” thus literally does not fit into pre-established, rigid patterns. “Empress of Calvary” links female power to the passion of Christ; it thus suggests both a partnership in suffering and a partnership in power. “Royal, all but the Crown” is a catachresis that parallels “Wife without the Sign,” except that the internal semantic contradiction is less prevalent: while it is not possible to be a wife and not be married, it is possible to be royal but not be on the throne. This inclusion of contradictory elements into a new (catachretic) concept is further explored in “Betrothed, without the Swoon.” This line implies that a woman’s fainting and nervous excitement, aspects that are denied by the poem’s speaker, are conventional and necessary gender signs accompanying a man’s proposal and the prospect of marriage. The coeval processes of becoming a poet and catachresis thus allow Dickinson to transform the meaning of wifehood into a complex figuration as yet unscripted. “Title divine, is mine,” however, seems to end on an ambiguous note as it returns to a conventional image: a female figure who finds her greatest enjoyment in “Stroking the Melody” of the words “My Husband.” Dickinson’s earlier redefinition of traditional womanhood, however, gives these last lines an ironic overtone; for, the birth-marriage-death trajectory is ironically presented as a “Tri Victory” specified in the catachresis “Born - Bridalled - Shrouded.” So the catachreses go two ways: traditional wifehood seems to be heading toward death, while a new creative type of womanhood arrives at a sense of openness and perhaps uncertainty, as suggested by the ambiguity of the dash following “the way.” The speaker knows she does not want to finish with the death of marriage and literally puts herself into a space of uncertain openendedness.

In several other poems Dickinson maps her creative powers through her active appropriation of well-known sexual metaphors: the “Loaded Gun” in “My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - ” (Fr764), the “volcano” in “On my volcano grows the Grass” (Fr1743), and the “Lip” in “Could mortal Lip divine” (Fr1456). As critics have shown, including Rich, Gilbert and Gubar, and Joanne A. Dobson, Dickinson uses masculine pronouns to gain access to aspects belonging to the patriarchal world, including, significantly, “her own creative powers, [that are] unsexing for a woman” (Rich 102). And indeed it seems natural, as Rich claims, “that Dickinson would assign a masculine gender to that in herself which did not fit in with the conventional ideology of womanliness” (105). Dobson argues that Dickinson’s masculine self-genderings realize a part of herself that was necessary but suppressed: the “masculine construct of Dickinson’s poetics” is therefore “an attempted realization in her poetic world of her dimly perceived ‘masculine’

self, the aspect of her psyche that had long been deprived in the real world of recognition and expression" (85). In "The Spider holds a Silver Ball" (Fr513), Dickinson presents a spider creating "from nought to nought." Although the spider is associated with feminine occupations, such as weaving and dancing, Dickinson uses masculine pronouns to refer to it: "He" is "dancing softly to Himself" while "His Yarn of Pearl - unwinds - "; Dickinson thus authors a new female/masculine sense of creativity.

By synecdochic transfer, Dickinson talks about books in masculine terms as well, referring to an "Antique Book," including one by Sappho, as a "He" in "A precious - mouldering pleasure - 'tis - " (Fr569); the physical object of the book may die away ("moulder[ ]"), but will still tantalize readers (a feminine coquettish attribute) centuries later. In "This was a Poet - " (Fr446), Dickinson again refers to the creative self by means of a masculine pronoun: "it is He - / Entitles Us." Although this poem seems to authorize an arguably female plural "Us" according to lines of heterosexual agency (male activity and female passivity), it also invites a more complicated reading. The male poet uses a humble "familiar species" to make poetry, a reference that according to reigning gender conventions points to femininity. However, the object literally seems to become a potential creative subject who not only provides inspiration but herself becomes inspired as well: "We wonder it was not Ourselves / Arrested it - before - ." The poem seems to end with an exclusive, male-associated illustration of the creative act of poetry in terms of an uncanny, but pleasurable, experience of circumference, of stepping out of time: "Himself - to Him - a Fortune - / Exterior - to Time - ." The previous lines, however, make the implied and indirectly present female subject function as a ghostly resonance who shares in this catachretic potential. In "No matter - now - Sweet - " (Fr734), Dickinson's combined male/female persona is indeed literally presented through sound: the rhymes of "Earl" and "Girl" construct a catachresis of a bi-gendered creative self that expresses the poet's belief in her artistic powers. In "One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted - " (Fr407), Dickinson further complicates the metaphor of "Corridors" in the "Brain" that hide an "Assassin" by playing on the dynamics of haunted chambers in the literal and metaphorical interiority of a "House": it is not a specific location that creates a sense of haunting, it rather emerges from individual *sights* of consciousness. The "Ghost," a "He" again, is thus responsible for the interior drama of a plurality of selves that is at times experienced as unnerving. In an early letter to Susan, Dickinson talks about her "metamorphoses" and poses across gender lines as "Mattie and Minnie and Lizzie"; "King Charles, Sancho Panza, or Herod, King of

the Jews" (L107); Dickinson thus acts as a flexible, bi-gendered catachrethic subject. Such use of metaphor in order to extend the meaning of existing expressions has been discussed by Fontanier as being a possible form of catachresis: he called this process *catachrèse de métaphore* (214) or *métaphore-catachrèse* (215) and investigated it as a grand type of catachresis proper (214). In metaphor-catachresis, metaphor is used as a building block to construct catachresis. In the above case, the catachrethic self comes about by a series of metamorphoses into personae: Mattie, Minnie, Lizzie, King Charles, Sancho Panza, and Herod. While metaphor points outside of language, catachresis does not: it merely combines these signifiers to make out the larger catachresis of a plural and changing self. As such, metaphor-catachresis serves a particular function in Dickinson's gender poems: by transgressing the binary oppositions of man/woman, it de-essentializes femininity and, as Naomi Schor puts it, "acknowledges" "the play of difference."<sup>9</sup> "Woman-as-different-from-man" is thus displaced, as Schor claims, "by the notion of internally differentiated and historically instantiated women," Dickinson's "Wife without the Sign," for example (45).

The diversity of Dickinson's gender performances reveals her stunning understanding of having many selves, multiple personae, that are best represented by the proliferative trope of catachresis. This does not mean, however, that these poems should be read as conventionally autobiographical. For, as Marjorie Perloff notes, Dickinson's writing clearly reveals an "indeterminacy of persons and places" (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 59).

However, at times it is indeed Dickinson's life that demands expression or justification as she constructs herself as a rebel via catachresis and through the pathos of her sense of singularity. There are "openly confessional poems," in which Gilbert and Gubar identify Dickinson as splitting herself into different personae, giving evidence of "her own psychic fragmentation" (622). At other times, however, biographical readings do not work because, as Weisbuch claims, "the poems are not literal," and "Dickinson's literal life will not occur in them." Given Dickinson's understanding of "the internal self as plural," the generative trope of catachresis serves her imaginative needs as a woman poet ("Prisming" 211, 212, 217). For, as Barbara Novak puts it, Dickinson "had to strategize (her word) with multiple personae to achieve her freedom" (109). Dickinson therefore does not resolve the undecidability between the autobiographical and the rhetorical or figurative; she will not tell whether she is recording things "as they are" (in a constative manner), realizing imagined possibilities (in a performative manner), or rhetorically experimenting with a concept she might plan to put into practice

in life. As Juhasz and Miller point out, the poet's subjectivity as staged in a poem is distinct from both the "I" of everyday speech" and the speaker of the poem: "Dickinson neither describes her speakers in narrative terms nor describes their positions as separate from herself" (109).

Dickinson herself, moreover, suggests that selves all belong to "supposed person[s]": "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person" (L268). Dickinson's selves are plural and scattered, in a very particular deconstructive manner, all over experience, whether real life or imagined. Deconstructing, as it were, the presupposed dichotomy between the real and the performed, Dickinson instead proposes that "supposed person[s]" should be taken as the general term, and "me" as a specific term, a subset. Moreover, Dickinson's catachretic performances of "supposed person[s]" contribute to the construction of particular real selves that her family, friends, and critics have understood to be "poses." Retaining undecidability by making the "supposed person" the primary term, Dickinson upsets relationships between the real and "supposed" and consequently displaces systems that differentiate between them. The constative-performative aporia is thus complete.

In general, this notion of undecidability can be detected in what Ryan Cull calls "the blurring of stylistic and formal lines between poem and letter" (38). Dickinson's poems were often sent in and as letters, while many of her letters served as addenda to poems, and both reveal a significant degree of uncertainty between autobiography and posing. Indeed, in Dickinson's case, as Miller points out, not even the letters can be taken as autobiographical: "one cannot trust that she will represent herself fully or accurately in a letter" (*Grammar* 13).<sup>10</sup> For example, by sending her famous "verbal self-portrait" to Higginson, Dickinson presented herself "as a kind of imaginative creation rather than as a flesh-and-blood woman" (Eberwein 15). This gesture is thus 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?" (L268). Dickinson here offers a catachretic construct as a substitute portrait and defers a purportedly non-existent signifier toward another, imagined, or constructed signifier. Dickinson takes an existing expression, a portrait, and extends its meaning to include the description of a wren-like woman with eyes the color of sherry left in the glass of a departed guest. While Dickinson offers a duplicate of sorts of her actual self, she also constructs a catachretic portrait of her own excessively original intellect. She thus in a sense makes this performed subject more real than the directly addressed Dickinson of whom the portrait was requested.

Catachresis is a very useful trope for Dickinson because it allows her to put the pointing function of language on hold. It allows her to write what Weisbuch calls “sceneless” poetry (*Emily Dickinson* 15-19), poetry without references to the outside world. This is a poet whose verse, as Hagenbüchle states, “displays no ‘what,’ no overt subject matter,” especially not a subject matter that would demand a referential or mimetic treatment. “Dickinson is a non-mimetic writer,” Hagenbüchle insists, who “makes almost no use of real-world (descriptive or first-level) mimesis” (“Poetic Covenant” 26). Instead, Dickinson develops a tendency to “collapse the real and the symbolic into one” (16). Or, in other words, the real is collapsed *into* the Symbolic, that is, language. Reality and biography are simultaneously defacilitated, while constative-performative aporias are retained. This is indeed a form of “indirect self-portraiture,” one constructed by strategies of indirection (Keller and Miller 547): Dickinson’s “poems stem from her life, but they do not point to it; there is no direct reference to a particular act of the poet or even necessarily to her real voice in the statement or voice of a poem” (*Grammar* 15). However, whether real or imagined, fantasized, staged, or performed, poetry still remains rooted in experience.

Through catachresis, Dickinson develops a poetics that matches her singular vision of the female subject, a vision previously unscripted in nineteenth-century America. However, this catachrethic poetics is by no means limited to Dickinson’s radical and sweeping re-conceptualizations of gender: it also spills over into poems dealing with other master concepts. Prominent among these are God, death, and consciousness.

Dickinson uses catachresis to develop new meanings for the idea of God. In “Is Heaven a Physician?” (Fr1260), the speaker asks whether Heaven—or, by synecdochic transfer, God—is a physician and an exchequer. This question shifts the meaning of Heaven/God to the very concrete and everyday resonances of physicians and exchequers. Dickinson, however, adds that God the “Physician” is not a conventional figure who saves lives as he heals with death and she will also not be “Party to” negotiating with God the “Exchequer” over what she “owe[s].” The meaning of God is similarly shifted in “I never lost as much but twice - ” (Fr39); here the speaker, verging on becoming blasphemous, calls Him a “Burglar” and a “Banker.” The catachresis of God as a banker and burglar is thus constructed by depriving the word God of its conventional semantic features of goodness and justice. In “God is a distant - stately Lover - ” (Fr615), God appears as a remote, hyperbolic lover, who sends Christ, his only son, to earth as an intermediary. Evoking the story of Miles Standish, John Alden, and Priscilla

Mullens 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. He thereby risks the alternative presented in the poem: that people—much like Priscilla, who preferred John to Miles—might choose Christ, not God. By offering this alternative of choosing the Son over the Father, Dickinson dares to go against Christian beliefs in her testing of concepts. In “God is indeed a jealous God - ” (Fr1752), God is conceptualized through the blasphemous catachresis of a petty, jealous God, who “cannot bear to see / That we had rather not with Him / But with each other play.” Elsewhere Dickinson raises doubts about whether God is the “Father in Heaven” by constructing a catachresis that does not operate by extension but by exclusion: “He [Benjamin Franklin Newton] often talked of God, but I do not know certainly if he was his Father in Heaven” (L153). Here the blasphemous tone arises from semantic shifting: the possibility that “Father” might not be included in the meanings associated with God.

In these texts, Dickinson, through various catachretic constructions, revises current conceptualizations of God, but at the same time alerts us to a particular feature of language. Using unorthodox images—such as Heaven functioning as a physician and exchequer and God not being a Father—Dickinson surprises her readers into becoming aware that these words are divisible and share meanings catachretically. Names become right through the process of deferring or disseminating meanings, so meanings might belong to several names at the same time. In this sense catachresis functions exactly in an opposite way to the nominalism described by Perloff in Ezra Pound’s poetry, which she defines as being characterized by an “overdetermination of nouns and noun phrases” (“Search” 193). According to Perloff, Pound insists on the desirability of “prime words—words divisible only by themselves” (198) and the “‘right’ name—a name that belongs to it alone” (208). Presenting, however, an “under-determination” of meanings, Dickinson resists such nominalism and instead accepts and illustrates that some words can and do shift their meanings in order to fill semantic vacancies.

Dickinson also redefines the concept of death by means of catachretic expansion. This private redefinition is articulated by a particularly Dickinsonian form of reification: she offers a new definition of death by attempting to pin down the physical experience of dying. Catachretic extension allows the concept of death to include a state of acute consciousness. Dickinson’s famous death poems—“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Fr340) and “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - ” (Fr591)—show her preoccupation with the act of dying. While in nineteenth-century America, the concept of death did include an emphasis on the physical

experience of dying, for Dickinson this experience became a fascinating journey heightened by a renewed sensorial awareness. Convinced that some faculties are sharpened during the process of dying and being curious as to whether awareness can remain alive after physical death, Dickinson allows the dying a capacity for self-inspection. Dickinson traces the superb intellectual effort of imagining one's own death.<sup>11</sup> No wonder that in these poems Dickinson comes close to touching rock bottom. However, in "The Tint I cannot take - is best -" (Fr696), death claims—"swagger[ing]" —to possess a different and valuable way of seeing. In "The last Night that She lived" (Fr1100), death adds significance to things otherwise unnoticed: "Things overlooked before / By this great light opon our minds / Italicized - as 'twere." Dickinson thus plays in an expansive fashion on the received opinion that death equals the end of all known things.

Poems on psychological states also provide arresting instances of master concepts that are catachretically expanded. In "This Consciousness that is aware" (Fr817), Dickinson reimagines the meaning of consciousness and expands it to include a capacity for intense experience as well. In "I never hear that one is dead" (Fr1325), Dickinson presents consciousness in terms of prosopopeia but also includes a syntactically indirect emphasis on how death fixes the face of the dying: "That awful stranger - Consciousness / Deliberately face." Infinitude also appears as a psychological experience in Dickinson's poetry, whether it is the infinity of the abyss ("Is Bliss then, such Abyss -" [Fr371]), or the recognition of a personified infinitude: "Infinitude - Had'st Thou no Face / That I might look on Thee?" from "My period had come for Prayer -" (Fr525). These poems about personal madness, a disjointedness between time and person, explosive or destructive moments, and moments of anguish are, to use Martin's words, the "excavations of the psyche" (117) of a poet known to have had "the courage to enter, through language, states which most people deny or veil with silence" (Rich 114).

Trying to understand the mechanics of perception, Dickinson also explores levels of consciousness coming after moments of pain or trauma. In "There's a certain Slant of light" (Fr320), the experience of "Hurt" and "Despair" allow for a particular way of seeing, seeing better, with the "Slant of light" revealing internal meanings. Similarly, in "By a departing light / We see acuter, quite" (Fr1749), a sense of loss heightens vision. Elsewhere, however, the intense experience of emotional loss seems to block perception: nerves are dead, feet feel heavy, and the whole experience weighs on the mind like lead. This happens in "After great pain, a formal feeling comes -" (Fr372), where the experience of numbness is remembered only after the fact; however, it is the *not* feeling that is felt with a

particular violence and sharpness. A little known psychological experience, that of encountering a thought one has had before, is described in the following poem:

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 -

(Fr731)

This poem describes *déjà vu*, or paramnesia, the curious feeling that one is reliving a familiar experience. Dickinson here presents thought as an agent that can sometimes visit the mind: it comes or goes, as it pleases. The mind does not have the ability to control its thought process; its only job is to remain open and receptive to the honor of thought's visits. Thought, moreover, can deceive the mind: it can give the impression of having visited the mind before. Dickinson performs the figuration of *déjà vu* through catachresis, a fitting choice indeed: she captures the experience of *déjà vu*, the illusion of a duplicating experience, with a trope that is similarly built on the illusion of reference, itself a form of duplication. Both establish connections between signifiers only: memories in the case of *déjà vu* and words in the case of catachresis. It seems that—similar to several of her contemporaries (Nathaniel Hawthorne and Leo Tolstoy, among them)—Dickinson was preoccupied with this unusual psychological phenomenon before it was defined in scientific terms by Émile Boirac in 1876 and Emil Kraepelin in 1886 (see Brown 394).

Where did catachresis take Dickinson, and what did she hope to get out of this journey? Dickinson most probably used catachresis to such an extent because she expected that the creation of a more adequate language in her poetry would enhance the epistemic process whereby meanings approximate truth. As Perloff points out, in this respect “Dickinson is very much of her time: despite her complex and difficult metaphysic, she believes that poetry *can* articulate truths, even if those truths are to be told ‘slant’” (“Emily Dickinson”). Catachresis allows poets to make words more adequate and transport them toward unexpected meanings. This trope opens up an unlimited range of experiments with meanings; with catachresis at hand, Dickinson can do everything except that which is “Unknown to possibility,” as she writes in “What I can do - I will - ” (Fr641). Dickinson generates new concepts via catachreses by extending the meaning of existing expressions, allowing us, as catachreses always do, to change the way we look at the world and think differently.

Catachresis provides Dickinson with linguistic space for impropriety and subversion, as well as *assujettissement*. When Dickinson writes of circumference as a capacity, woman as a bachelor, God as a burglar, death as a dialogue, or consciousness as a stranger, she speaks improperly, both semantically and culturally, as she verges outside accepted lexicons and cultural norms. Dickinson's catachreses always suggest a subversion of normativity and thereby destabilize the idea of normativity itself. This impropriety, or subversion of propriety, linguistic and cultural, guarantees that Dickinson's claim that she was "standing alone in rebellion," as she proclaimed at the age of eighteen in a letter written from Mount Holyoke College (L35), would remain valid throughout the rest of her life as she kept fulfilling (performing) her own *assujettissement*.

Moreover, catachresis matches Dickinson's investment in re-accessing the flexibility of language in order to create new meanings that will facilitate the epistemic process. Words with fixed meanings and tropes anchored in the realm of the signified, Dickinson seems to suggest, lock us into what we already know. Metaphor seems to fit this pattern as it establishes analogies between existing entities and fixed meanings. As powerful as metaphors can be, their power lies not in pushing the limits of what we know, they rather change how we know: how we connect objects and concepts we are already familiar with. The poet, however, relishes in the unfixity, or slipperiness, of meanings. Or, to use much later terminology, the sliding of signifiers, words that are always already other, can help bring different versions of truth within the reach of the speaker. Poetry must therefore render and protect, as Raab points out, "the indeterminate meaning of the world and of human existence" (274). And catachretic slantness indeed has the huge advantage of not eliminating the "unknown," which, as Dickinson writes, "is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God" (L471). Catachresis can articulate different truths by lifting the unknown into language and accepting it as a purely discursive entity: the unthought, or that which has not been articulated or even conceptualized before. Dickinson's catachretic articulations of circumference, gender/womanhood, God, death, and psychological states keep her "reverence before the incomprehensible" intact; Dickinson can thus retain her two roles as keeper of the known and keeper of the unknown (Lindberg-Seyersted 104).

Although Dickinson might have doubted that given meanings allow speakers to know the world, she does not give up on the possibility of knowing. For her, however, knowledge is not anchored in the world, but in language, and approachable through catachresis, slantness, or "internal difference." Her

presupposition is not that truth cannot be known, but rather that truth cannot be known from *out there*, outside of language. Dickinson's answer, then, is to remain within language and to create new meanings by sliding, shifting, and moving existing meanings. The trope for such a proliferative production of meaning is catachresis, which, by permitting meanings to come about through other meanings, can redeem the promise of meaning itself.

### *Notes*

1. I have found only one mention of catachresis in Dickinson criticism in Miller's treatment of "There's a certain Slant of light" (Fr320). This is, however, different from the trope I describe as being central in Dickinson's poetry. Miller identifies "negative definition or reverse catachresis" in Dickinson's "difference": the poet "creates absence instead of providing a new name or concept of it" (*Grammar* 99).
2. The following list offers an overview of terms of other critics that I have used in this essay:  
Cameron, "opening semantic spaces for alternative words" (194).

Hagenbüchle, "deliberate indeterminacy" ("Precision" 50), "ambivalence" ("Poetic Covenant" 16), "poetic language of open possibilities," the collapse of "the real and the symbolic into one," "poetics of process" or "aesthetics of process" ("Sumptuous" 3; "Aesthetics of Process" 143), "method of metonymy" or the "shift from metaphor to metonymy" ("Precision" 51; "Aesthetics of Process" 135), "semantic shift" ("Poetic Covenant" 28), "preference for asymmetrical structures" ("Precision" 40).

Keller and Miller, "techniques of indirection" (534); "reliance on nondeclarative rhetorical patterns" (545).

Lindberg-Seyersted, "slantness" and "privateness" (103, 109).

Miller, "frustrated reference" (*Grammar* 5), language "free of determined meaning" (*Grammar* 19), "experimentalism" ("Dickinson's Experiments" 241), negating or subverting "established meanings in order to create new ones" (*Grammar* 182), the undercutting of readerly expectation by reordering "meaning along associative . . . lines" (*Grammar* 46), "parataxis" or the "disjunctive or coordinate linking of ideas" (*Grammar* 31), "vehicular language" ("Structured Rhythms" 393).

Vivian R. Pollak and Marianne Noble, "'patent' on invention" (42).

Raab, "method of approximation" (274).

Wolosky, "figural mismatch or slippage" (130-32).

3. With "supposed person[s]" Gilbert and Gubar refer to Dickinson's famous admission phrased in a letter to Higginson (July 1862): "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person" (L268).
4. I have tried to contribute to the discussion of performances of gender in my book *They Aren't, Until I Call Them: On Doing Things with Words in Literature*. Working in the conceptual space framed by linguistic theories of performativity and feminist/(post)-deconstructionist theories of social construction, I differentiate between gender performances relying on existing cultural scripts—gender constructed through stylized acts of dressing and other cultural codes—and new (unscripted) gender constructs that are multiple, transgressive, and sexually negotiated. I also identify gender passing as an act of performance, whether it is full passing (with the aim to deceive) or play passing (with the aim to reveal transgressions by constantly producing its own slippage). For scripted performances in the context of dress, I have read works by

Henry James, Kate Chopin, Theodore Dreiser, and Edith Wharton; for performances of Southern white womanhood, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Flannery O'Connor. With regard to the mechanics of new performative productions, I discuss modernist women writers like Gertrude Stein, H. D., Djuna Barnes, Willa Cather, and Carson McCullers for their unscripted performances. I read Mark Twain, Vladimir Nabokov, David Hwang, James Weldon Johnson, and Nella Larsen for instances of gender passing.

5. Butler does not use the term *catachresis* in *Gender Trouble*, but in *Bodies That Matter* and later writings she does explicitly discuss gender in this way.
6. Eberwein points to this metaphorical use in connection to what she calls “bridal poems” (176).
7. Rich calls this a “poem of great pride—not pridefulness, but *self*-confirmation” (111).
8. On Dickinson’s pun on “bridalled” and “bridled,” see Martin (104). I would only like to add that Dickinson here echoes “bridling metaphors” that were used to refer to married women and permeated English texts and images from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. For example, the author of “An Homily of the State of Matrimony” (1563) states that “good conscience might be preserved on both parties in bridling the corrupt inclinations of the flesh within the limits of honesty” (Payne-Hunter 175). The “scold’s bridle” appears as a sign of governance in marriage in the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (813), while the horse’s bridle refers to the act of keeping a woman down in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (IV.I). As Lynda E. Boose explains, the bridle was “implicated in the long history of women’s socialization into shame and its culturally transmitted, narrowed allowances of female selfhood” (189). Such instruments have indeed survived from as late as the nineteenth century (197).
9. This de-essentializing fits into the “re-gendering of hierarchical symbols” that White identifies in Dickinson’s poetry, whereby the poet “sweeps away the old hierarchical associations of light and darkness” (75).
10. Lindberg-Seyersted goes as far as to say that Dickinson’s poems show greater frankness than the letters (25).
11. In his 1915 essay “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death,” Sigmund Freud points out that it is almost impossible to imagine one’s own death. As Freud points out, “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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