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# Completeless Show

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# Completeless Show

Kathleen Raymond-Judy  
2015

Sponsor:

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*Of Bronze— and Blaze—  
The North— Tonight—  
So adequate— it forms—  
So preconcerted with itself—  
So distant— to alarm—  
An Unconcern so sovereign  
To Universe, or me—  
Infects my simple spirit  
With Taints of Majesty—*

*Till I take vaster attitudes—  
And strut upon my stem—  
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,  
For Arrogance of them—*

*My Splendors, are Menagerie—  
But their Completeless Show  
Will entertain the Centuries  
When I, am long ago,  
An Island in dishonored Grass—  
Whom none but Beetles, know.*

Emily Dickinson (no. 290)

## Introduction:

I have always been fascinated by poetry, enjoying both reading and creating it. I suppose one could say it held a certain magic for me, if one wanted to be sentimental about it. In any case, although I knew that I had many reasons for my interest in poetry, I rarely took the time to articulate them in any detail, except that in the broadest sense I considered poetry a powerful human need, at a basic psychological level.

After beginning this project, however, I began to sketch out more and more of the details of my ideas. It quickly became clear that a thesis on “the human function of poetry” just wasn’t going to be feasible. That sort of thing would have to wait for a time when I had a decade or two to devote to it instead of just one year. Somehow I had to narrow down my scope. I could, of course, have chosen just one of many available aspects of poetry’s purpose to focus on, but I liked better the thought of channeling all (or at least, most) of my ideas through a single poet’s work: specifically, Emily Dickinson. This would allow me to explore all facets of my theories without the project expanding too large and getting out of hand. As this idea has evolved, I have delved deeper and deeper into the texts of the poems, but always returned the original, philosophical question of their appeal.

I chose Emily Dickinson for this analysis for two key reasons. The first is the simple fact that I enjoy her work very much and therefore had reason to believe that I could spend an entire year researching and writing about it without going insane. Secondly, from my previous exposure to her work, I thought Dickinson’s work fit in very well with nearly all of the points I wanted to make about the value of poetry; wit and creativity, universal human themes, imagery and musicality. Reflecting on it, these two reasons are probably subconsciously connected;

chances are I am fond of Dickinson's work because it exemplifies the very reasons why I like poetry in general.

Each of my sections will detail one of the main reasons why I think Dickinson's poetry has "entertained the Centuries" as well as it has. Ultimately, however, all of these concepts return over and over again to the central idea of a quality of unfinishedness in a poem or even a body of poems, and the ways in which such incomplete works spark the interest and involvement of the readers and enhance their experience. I was especially caught by a line in one of Dickinson's poems (my epigraph) in which she refers to her "Splendors" as "Menagerie" and her body of work as a "Completeless Show." It struck me that this was exactly what appealed to me about Dickinson's work—it is "completeless", as a style, as a body, even as individual poems or, more accurately, poetry fragments. Emily Dickinson's poetry is never just any one thing; instead, it is bits and pieces of many things.

The completeless aspect of Dickinson's poems invites her readers in to explore and interpret her work, because the human mind is drawn to things it considers unfinished, primarily out of a desire to finish them and close the gaps in the pattern that it perceives to be broken, and afterwards out of a sense of satisfaction gained from having participated in creating something whole, even if that wholeness then exists only within our own minds.

The interpretation the mind places on its experiences is true reality, which is vaster by far than the outside world—possibly infinite. Dickinson herself acknowledges the importance of the imaginative act to fill in the gaps of both poetry and the world around us:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
One clover, and a bee,  
And revery.

The revery alone will do,  
If bees are few.

(no. 1755)

Here, the existence of the prairie is not in the prairie itself—or at least not in a complete prairie. It is in a few little pieces, and the emotion and idea in the human mind. What we know and see in the meaning of a prairie comes from within us and relies on nothing but ourselves. In a sense, we are able to see the forest because there are no trees to block the view.

To see the Summer Sky  
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie—  
True Poems flee—

(no. 1472)

When we try to grasp the meaning of the world in writing, all we can capture are snippets. By leaving them this way, rather than trying and failing to complete the image, Dickinson is truer to that reality of perception. Thus, her poems work, because the factors that make them completeless provide a space for the reader to enter into. Poetry exists permanently only as impressions in our minds; both the mind of the reader and of the author.

It is for this reason that I intend to focus only on Dickinson's work itself, instead of looking into personal influences, which bind her vision to her mortal life. She created her world in her words and this is where I seek for her. From my research I can safely conclude that there has been plenty of writing done speculating on how parts of Dickinson's life did or did not affect her work and that the amount of biographical material on her borders on the excessive. Certainly the world does not need me to write yet another dissertation on her psychology. Instead, I am going to work exclusively with the texts themselves; basing my work in formalism and then

regularly expanding outward into reader response theory. Where I delve into psychology it will be that of the poems' effect on the reader, but I mean to approach it through intensely dissecting and distilling the essence of her poetry—for, just as Dickinson scholar Kenneth Stocks says, it is their poems, and not the details of their daily existence, that reflect the inner truth of the poet's "living reality" (64).

*Author's Note:* Unless specified otherwise, all of Dickinson's poems quoted or referred to in this work come from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1960) and are cited by the numbers given to the poems rather than by page number.

## Wit and Aphorism

One of the ways in which Dickinson crafts an incomplete work is through wit: creating a maze of words. The reader then tries to thread through this maze, and solve the puzzle of ideas. Wit connotes many possible meanings, but here I use it to refer to clever, twisty words and ideas, and to new ways of looking at old things. It ties together apparently disparate bits and pieces into a whole, or presents a whole as many separate pieces, like a jigsaw puzzle. Wit is a riddle, and sometimes, it is a joke, because humor is related to wit just as eloquence is. Wit is wordplay, and like other forms of play, it is a way for us to learn and grow.

In his book *The Storytelling Animal; How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall describes the exercise of wit as just that—a form of exercise. Physically, we exercise our muscles, and just so must we exercise our mental faculties, including wit. In this view, wit—and, by extension, related elements such as humor and eloquence—are ways of perfecting and

showing off one's mental stamina and linguistic dexterity to attract a potential mate (27). The pleasure we get from producing and consuming wit is also part of why we enjoy jokes, especially witty ones, games, and other forms of entertainment. Most incorporate aspects of mental or physical exercise, ways to practice, and by practicing, strengthen and improve our various skills. Since this would be beneficial to survival and reproduction, those who appreciated such exercise and became bored by inactivity passed on their genes, and others did not. This idea provides an evolutionary and psychological explanation for why we create and appreciate wit.

It is this appreciation—at least as we perceive it in our conscious mind—that is why wit makes a work interesting to us. We enjoy working our way through a puzzle, especially when it is difficult enough to be a challenge but not so impossible as to be frustrating—when it contains something that makes it clear, after the fact, how the pieces were meant to be put together. For example, in Dickinson's poem "The Guest is gold and crimson," the answer to the riddle is not immediately obvious, but having guessed correctly, it becomes so; each line clearly relates to the conclusion:

The Guest is gold and crimson —  
An Opal guest and gray —  
Of Ermine is his doublet —  
His Capuchin gay —  
He reaches town at nightfall —  
He stops at every door —  
Who looks for him at morning  
I pray him too — explore  
The Lark's pure territory —

Or the Lapwing's shore!

(no. 15)

In this poem, the sunset takes on a surprising new image, but from a retrospective point of view, it fits itself to the ideal essence of itself which is present in our minds, like a bolt striking home after a key is turned, as though it was meant to be.

Charles Anderson, a scholar of Dickinson, combines several definitions to describe wit as an “association of ideas in a manner natural, but unusual and striking, so as to produce surprise joined with pleasure” (4). Dickinson’s poems often work this way, at first seeming unusual, then natural, leading to a striking response from the reader. The poems are not for the most part so difficult as to leave the readers frustrated; instead they can delight in the cleverness of the metaphor with quite as much joy as though they had thought of it themselves.

An example of Dickinson’s “striking” wit occurs in the poem below, where she extends a cliché into something much more thought-provoking.

The Lightning is a yellow Fork  
From Tables in the sky  
By inadvertent fingers dropt  
The awful Cutlery  
  
Of mansions never quite disclosed  
And never quite concealed  
The Apparatus of the Dark  
To ignorance revealed.

(no. 1173)

Although describing the splits of a lightning-bolt's path as forklike is hardly a new idea, it is usually taken for granted and used as merely a turn or phrase. Dickinson's poem explores the nuances and implications of the idea, making the reader think twice and breathing new life into a tired metaphor.

Here is another very witty poem, which this time employs an original metaphor of Dickinson's own invention:

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms—  
And leaves the Shreds behind—  
Oh Housewife in the Evening West—  
Come back, and dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling in—  
You dropped an Amber thread—  
And now you've littered all the east  
With Duds of Emerald!

And still she plies her spotted Brooms,  
And still the Aprons fly,  
Till Brooms fade softly into stars—  
And then I come away—

(no. 219)

This clever presentation of the sunset is an excellent example of the glorious made mundane; Dickinson renders this marvel of nature into a careless housewife. She begins the riddle-poem

with the shredded clouds, which an observer may say look like dust. The genius is in how she then expands that metaphor far beyond the standard, but in a way that still seems logical and fitting rather than absurd. This is wit, again, a description which is both “unusual” but also “natural”.

The form of the riddle is ancient, both in the comparatively young form of the English language as well as in more primal tongues; for example, the Exeter Book, a very old and relatively large work in Old English, contains numerous riddles. Like Dickinson’s riddle-poems, these combine ambiguous phrasing with deliberate omissions in order to confuse. The readers will constantly think the poem means one thing or another, which usually has almost nothing at all to do with the real subject, until they arrive at the end of the riddle and realize that the answer has been staring them in the face the whole time. Having come to this truth, suddenly not only can the riddle no longer mean anything else, it is as though it never could have meant anything else. Dickinson’s poem “A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” below, is an excellent example of how this style works:

A narrow Fellow in the grass  
Occasionally rides—  
You may have met Him—did you not  
His notice sudden is—  
  
The Grass divides as with a Comb—  
A spotted shaft is seen—  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre  
A Floor too cool for Corn—  
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—  
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash  
Unbraiding in the Sun  
When stooping to secure it  
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature's People  
I know, and they know me—  
I feel for them a transport  
Of cordiality—

But never met this Fellow  
Attended, or alone  
Without a tighter breathing  
And Zero at the Bone—

(no. 986)

In Dickinson's poems which function as riddles, like the above, Dickinson approaches the subject obliquely, never naming it directly. In fact, she doesn't really even describe it directly

either; for example although this poem is pretty clearly about a snake, she never says that the object of her poem is a living thing covered in scales with no legs and a forked tongue. Instead she describes it in metaphoric impressions, subconscious connections in the mind to a whiplash, a shaft, or a comb, and also tells the reader at least as much about how the thing moves and where it lives than about what it looks like. It is not an object so much as an experience of the object. She even relates her own reaction not simply as a gasp and shivers up the spine but as “a tighter breathing, and zero at the bone,” unique ways of describing well-known sensations. In this way she makes the commonplace seem extraordinary. In fact, these new presentations of everyday experiences are certainly much more interesting than simply listing physical details and work more strongly than clichés or even basic literal descriptions, in terms of making a lasting impression on the reader. In this way the riddle becomes the best description for the object or idea in question.

Essentially, a riddle is an unfinished poem; the actual name or direct identification of the object is left out, and we are given only bits and pieces surrounding its nature. Thus, wit showcases the completeless, and is in turn supported by it. Our minds must fill in the missing part—usually, in a riddle, the “big picture” or overarching idea that connects seemingly disparate ideas together into a single whole. It is a little like having a missing piece from a jigsaw puzzle; we can know its shape and approximately what it looks like based on what is around it. As such, the completelessness of a riddle-like poem draws the readers in and makes them part of the creative process. We enjoy the sense of power and understanding that we get from that experience, and the ability to take a new way of seeing the old and make it a part of us, reshaping both the old idea and ourselves to accommodate the concept that so fascinated us, as though it were something entirely of our own doing, and as if we had the power of a god, to remake the

world around us. It is the act of mental creation which the author leads us to that we find so attractive about the incomplete.

Dickinson was conscious of this view of the riddle-poem even as she wrote her own; making people work through a puzzle to reach the answer. The skilled writer leads the reader around in a twisty maze, making the path so convoluted it travels several times longer than is necessary, yet at the same time building up support for the idea so gradually that it is almost unnoticeable. Then suddenly around a bend, right in the middle where it was the whole time, there is the answer clear as day, just as it was meant to be. This is how Dickinson suggests a riddle-poem should work:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind —

(no. 1129)

In this case, “truth”—the depth of reality beyond the immediately obvious—exists as a sort of divine; recalling that the divine is neither safe nor comfortable to look at directly with mortal eyes. In Dickinson’s work, however, divinity expresses itself not only through bringing the one truth down to the people’s level but also in elevating the mundane up to the transcendental. Thus she leads people to truth through riddles of real life, approaching seemingly simple things

sideways in order to show people new senses of weirdness about reality and the beauty of what is taken for granted. This approach reflects arguments of Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* that art is to instruct by being delightful, so that the student may not be bored but actually enjoy being educated; may be entertained while learning something useful. Similarly, in *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall presents a theory that there is an evolutionary reason behind the creation and consumption of art and literature—that these forms of expression actually teach us how to be human. Or, as Dickinson herself wrote:

He ate and drank the precious Words—  
His Spirit grew robust—  
He knew no more that he was poor,  
Nor that his frame was Dust—

He danced along the dingy Days  
And this Bequest of Wings  
Was but a Book—What Liberty  
A loosened spirit brings—

(no. 1587)

What is written well has the power not only to free and transform us spiritually, but to nourish us mentally as well.

The answer to this next riddle-poem of Dickinson's is also ends up being rather less concerned with the thin mystery of the physical object itself. Instead, it shows us a lot of what we can learn about ourselves and how our minds work through the processes that we use to try to solve it:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple  
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky  
Then at the feet of the old Horizon  
Laying her spotted Face to die  
Stooping as low as the Otter's Window  
Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn  
Kissing her Bonnet to the Meadow  
And the Juggler of Day is gone.

(no. 228)

The “completeless” in this poem is mostly in its timing—the poem captures the sun’s journey across the sky, a full day’s passing, in three short moments: sunrise, sunset, and the aftermath. In first two lines the sun rises, then, skipping over the entire course of the day without a single mention, it takes five whole lines out of eight for the sun to set. As it sets, the sun lingers, stopping time to showcase its beauty. In the next, it is gone, just like that—almost before we had the chance to know it was there. The poem is true to our peculiar human understanding of time, specifically, which focuses on exciting events while largely ignoring the time in between. It also reflects, therefore, our understanding of the world in general: scattered fragments, pieced together with the glimpses and impressions of fleeting things which we know more about through their absence and our imaginations than any sort of objective reality.

Another reason that the impressions which Dickinson creates often stick in the mind is because of the aphoristic quality of Dickinson’s wit. Aphorism is the ability to condense an idea into a concise, pithy statement; like a newly minted proverb. Where wit in general can be light and playful, even biting, its aphoristic side tends to be deeper and more meaningful, but most

especially more eloquent. Because Dickinson's work tends to be both eloquent and very short, many of her poems contain aphoristic phrases.

For example, the poem below muses on the passage of time for the life of one's soul rather than one's body, and begins and ends with aphoristic phrases that the mind is inclined to cling to:

Not all die early, dying young—

Maturity of Fate

Is consummated equally

In Ages, or a Night—

A Hoary Boy, I've known to drop

Whole statured—by the side

Of Junior of Fourscore—'twas Act

Not Period—that died.

(no. 990)

Then there is this poem on the truth of knowing things best in their absence:

Water, is taught by thirst.

Land—by the Oceans passed.

Transport—by throe—

Peace—by its battles told—

Love, by Memorial Mold—

Birds, by the Snow.

(no. 135)

It reads like a string of proverbs on a universal truth. Each line is concise, both short and full of meaning—an aphorism.

These aphorisms come about because not only does Dickinson present old, powerful, universal ideas in new ways, but she also does so in a way that is short and memorable—which is to say, easily quoted. Stocks calls her “one of the most quotable poets in our language” and compares her to Shakespeare, whose works, having been around longer and had more time to become known well enough to seep into common knowledge, have become part and parcel with common phrases (22). Dickinson herself was aware of the need for this quality in poetry and of its existence in her own work. In her poem “This was a poet” she describes the poet as someone who takes something that is commonplace—but also, therefore, relevant to many—and draws out its meaning, condensing it into something stronger and purer. More importantly, the poet separates that stronger meaning from everything else and then pares it down even further and squeezes it tighter and tighter until it is a tiny hard core of an idea, like a little gem contained within itself:

This was a Poet – It is That

Distills amazing sense

From Ordinary Meanings –

And Attar so immense

From the familiar species

That perished by the Door –

We wonder it was not Ourselves

Arrested it — before —

Of Pictures, the Discloser –

The Poet — it is He –

Entitles Us — by Contrast –

To ceaseless Poverty —

Of portion — so unconscious –

The Robbing — could not harm –

Himself — to Him — a Fortune –

Exterior — to Time –

(no. 448)

Anderson explores the metaphor Dickinson uses in “This was a poet” in more detail. The distillery, he explains, presses the perfume from flower petals, taking the essence of what we find most appealing and multiplying it (72-74). This is not just about pretty words, however. Dickinson’s short poems are not just so much flowery, empty language, but are actually meaningful. The poet’s distillery concentrates meaning and ideas so that they are even more of what they used to be and we can carry them about easily. They linger in the mind, as we subconsciously memorize parts of poems with these qualities because they are both meaningful and short enough to be taken with us and unpacked elsewhere when we have need of them. This is what it truly means to be aphoristic.

Some other lines that demonstrate this witty, concise quality are “Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne’er succeed” (no. 67) and “Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all

we need of hell” (no. 1732). Sometimes, the entirety of a short poem, like the one presented below, reads like an aphorism:

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.

(no. 1212)

These examples show the eloquence and concision that is part of what makes Dickinson’s poetry so popular. They are clever little sayings that have relevance to concepts we think are important, and are either the perfect new way of saying something otherwise well known, or a way of saying something never before thought of as though it were obvious. Although aphorisms seem incredibly simplified, this is an illusion. In reality, they are riddles in miniature, and must be both complex enough to be interesting and ambiguous enough for the individual reader to connect with personally.

## Ambiguity and Complexity

Through this ambiguity and complexity, Dickinson’s poems exemplify the subjectivity of poetry. Poetry is an expression of the poet’s fiction, the world inside the author’s mind, and the human mind is infinite. Each reader, too, has a fictional mental world in which they live, and therefore a unique, subjective reading experience. Thus, in poetry, any word can have infinite connotations; any idea can be connected to innumerable others, and so on, in a never-ending web

of multiple meanings. The completelessness of Dickinson's poems is tied into ambiguity of meaning and complexity of execution, both of which help to make the space required for multiple interpretations. Even a very little poem can contain both complexity and ambiguity used to create the completeless:

Had I not seen the Sun  
I could have borne the shade  
But Light a newer Wilderness  
My Wilderness has made—

(no. 1233)

Because they are ambiguous and complex, Dickinson's poems are often ones we can return to for a slightly different meaning each time, finding new nuances or emphasis based on personal experience. It is hard, therefore, to grow tired of them or grow out of them, unlike simpler pieces that only ever say one and the same thing. As Stocks puts it, we must approach Dickinson's poems with "imaginative exploration" in order to grasp "the full range and depth of the implications" they contain (24). As we grow and change, so too do the images and ideas we keep for ourselves. With an incomplete poem, part of the meaning derives from what we put into it, thus each time we read the poem as a new person we read it differently. The poem below works exceptionally well in this case:

There is another Loneliness  
That many die without –  
Not want of friend occasions it  
Or circumstances of Lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought

And whoso it befall

Is richer than could be revealed

By mortal numeral –

(no. 1116)

The feeling of being separated from the world, even or sometimes especially when the feeling seems unwarranted, is more than universal enough to appeal to just about anyone, at any stage of life. However, each time the poem is read, the reader will have different memories of this emotion, and different reactions to it, in almost infinite combinations.

Here is another example, this time one depicting an emotion that is positive, but still ambiguous:

As if I asked a common Alms,

And in my wondering hand

A Stranger pressed a Kingdom,

And I, bewildered, stand—

As if I asked the Orient

Had it for me a Morn—

And it should lift its purple Dikes,

And shatter me with Dawn!

(no. 323)

The fact that the cause of this incredible, unexpected joy is left to our imaginations allows us to fill in the gap with our own experiences—experiences which are not only unique to each individual, but fluid and ever-changing throughout that person's life. Thus, the seeming

simplicity achieved by leaving a poem completeless actually makes it more complex and ambiguous.

Anderson describes the poet's world as existing at a middle layer of complexity. The least complex world is the real one, which is stable and constant with only one form, and the most complex world is God's world, in which all things are possible. The poet lives in a world somewhat more confined than that of a god, but immeasurably more fascinating than "reality" (104-106). Through exploring her works, we can try to understand the author's world as she saw it, since the poet exists not in the world but in her perception of the world, and the creation of this perception, which Anderson calls her "best efforts," is poetry (124). Furthermore, since we participate in this creation by completing the completeless, we are also building our own world through our perceptions.

Beauty, too, is a form of perception, "in the eye of the beholder" as the saying goes. This is especially obvious in Dickinson's poem "A Route of Evanescence," in which she captures the essence of the hummingbird.

A Route of Evanescence,  
With a revolving Wheel –  
A Resonance of Emerald –  
A Rush of Cochineal –  
And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts its tumbled Head –  
The Mail from Tunis – probably,  
An easy Morning's Ride –  
(no. 1463)

The existence of this hummingbird is something we perceive in its absence and its fleetingness; therefore we are not working with a concrete thing, but an ambiguous abstract idea, something nebulous and shifting, something not quite defined, which we know as much about from what we are not told about it as from what we are told. As a series of impressions, the details of the hummingbird are deliberately left out; each reader's mind must fill in what is missing. The "truth" of the hummingbird lies in the idea of it, which we supply from ourselves, and therefore seems more real to each individual than if the author had supplied her idea of the hummingbird. Thus, the bird of the poem actually comes across as more perfect as a result of its description being incomplete.

Like the other riddle-poems described in the previous section, the hummingbird shown here is an incomplete poem. It is list of descriptions, a color and a movement, rather than anything corporeal, making it a complex little puzzle to solve. The flowers bob after his passing; perhaps one who did not realize the truth might say that it was only the wind moving them, but the readers know it was a bright swift little bird because he is in their minds, for they have created him from the suggestion of a few words on a page and their own omnipotent imaginations. Those of us who have seen hummingbirds remember how they moved and what little we saw of them, one precious glance and a flash of joy. These memories do not have to depend on the imperfections of an author's words but rather are provided directly from our own minds to fill the emptiness the author has created. As such we are not distracted by unnecessary details but instead can envision for ourselves the ideal hummingbird based on our personalized, internal knowledge of it, on the authority of the individual definitions that our own minds have created for us.

## Breadth and Meaning

Nature, represented by the hummingbird, is hardly the only ideal form presented in Dickinson's work for the reader to recreate and appreciate. Dickinson did not just write many poems or even just many good poems, she wrote many good poems that also cover a broad range of topics and ideas. She also wrote almost two thousand poems or poetry fragments. Although it is hardly possible that all of these could or should be widely popular, it certainly leaves many more to choose from than can be afforded from most other poets' repertoires. Usually, the casual reader does not have to sift past the less-qualified of her poems, since there are about half a hundred or so of her better poems which are very well known. On the other hand, it can be hard for the casual reader to get past the popular works, which are much more commonly quoted, to dig into the true variety she created and find the multitude of other poetic gems that are, sadly, often overlooked.

Many of the ideas presented in Dickinson's poems are ones nearly everyone can connect with—things that intrinsically matter to us, or as Dickinson scholar Kenneth Stocks calls them, parts of the “perennial human real”—things that define what it means for us to be human. This concept includes all of the life-shaking, enormous, incomprehensible questions that have persistently haunted and hounded humanity for eternity. Stocks defines his use of the word “perennial” with “in contrast to what is perishable in men's responses” (3), which is to say, the things that are not specific to an age or a culture but rather are timeless and unending. Furthermore, the completelessness aspect is not just a factor in Dickinson's individual poems, but in her work as a whole as well, which does not have a central unifying theme, organizing structure, or clear direction.

For example, the following poem is about missing someone and the interminable nature of time spent waiting for something uncertain; on one hand, a pleasure, and on the other, an irritation:

If you were coming in the Fall,  
I'd brush the Summer by  
With half a smile, and half a spurn,  
As Housewives do, a Fly.

If I could see you in a year,  
I'd wind the months in balls—  
And put them each in separate Drawers,  
For fear the numbers fuse—

If only Centuries, delayed,  
I'd count them on my Hand,  
Subtracting, til my fingers dropped  
Into Van Dieman's Land,

If certain, when this life was out—  
That yours and mine, should be  
I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,  
And take Eternity—

But, now, uncertain of the length  
Of this, that is between,  
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—  
That will not state—its sting.

(no. 511)

In contrast, the next poem describes the paradox of the pain of terrible loss coupled with the joy of survival, and discomfort in the face of having to teach both, rather than just the positive, to the next generation:

Glee—The great storm is over—  
Four—have recovered the Land—  
Forty—gone down together—  
Into the boiling Sand—  
  
Ring—for the Scant Salvation—  
Toll—for the bonnie Souls—  
Neighbor—and friend—and Bridegroom—  
Spinning upon the Shoals—  
  
How they will tell the Story—  
When Winter shake the Door—  
Till the Children urge—  
But the Forty—  
Did they—come back no more?

Then a softness—suffuse the Story—  
And a silence—the Teller's eye—  
And the Children—no further question—  
And only the Sea—reply—

(no. 619)

Other poems of Dickinson's quoted throughout this project explore such varied themes as love, life, death, the fleeting nature of the world, man's place in nature, the passing of time, society's ills, loneliness, and all of the other struggles and joys of existence.

We have an interest in these ideas because they are a part of our being, but we are also called to what is completeless because it leaves an emptiness where we can enter. This is especially true of Dickinson's unfinished poems and poetry fragments—which make up about five hundred of her nearly two thousand poems (Anderson 78). For example, consider the poem fragment below:

The smouldering embers blush—  
Oh Hearts within the Coal  
Hast thou survived so many years?  
The smouldering embers smile—  
Soft stirs the news of light  
The stolid seconds glow  
One requisite has Fire that lasts—  
Prometheus never knew—

(no. 1132)

We will never know for sure what the author meant this requisite to be, or why the embers smile and blush. A very promising beginning paired with a vague not-ending fascinates the imagination. It is just possible, however, that our answers are better, because they are infinitely unique. We take pleasure in making the rest of the thought in our own minds, and shaping it to be our own. On the other hand, the incompleteness of the poem it reminds us that we can never truly answer its questions, which has its own strange sort of intrigue.

As in the allusion to Greek mythology above, these universal human issues are torn apart in in many other works besides Dickinson's, including the two traditions often considered the most foremost of Dickinson's muses; Christianity and Shakespeare (Anderson 35-37). This universality and importance of these ideas ties Dickinson's work to the past as well as keeping it relevant in the changing now and for years to come. Furthermore, since both of these particular "muses" are, in their own way, also timeless, and remain for the most part a foundation of common knowledge of the Western Tradition to this day as well, we likely recognize her subtle resonances and references to these themes in the Jungian subconscious, as they play both with a web of meaning established by cultural overtones as well as with eternal human themes.

Dickinson herself puts it thus:

Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day

That arise and set about Us —

Other Tragedy

Perish in the Recitation —

This — the best enact

When the Audience is scattered

And the Boxes shut —

"Hamlet" to Himself were Hamlet —

Had not Shakespeare wrote —

Though the "Romeo" left no Record

Of his Juliet,

It were infinite enacted

In the Human Heart —

Only Theatre recorded

Owner cannot shut —

(no. 741)

In other words, there are ideas that we as a species connect with eternally regardless of the personal experience of the writer or the reader.

Dickinson's poems work in this system especially well because she does not answer the questions about the things that matter most to us in a dated way, using clichés or being too specific to her time, place, and personal experience, but rather in as diverse a manner as the questions themselves. She makes the ideas human and reachable, connecting them to the individual but in a broad, rather than a detailed way, so they do not lose their timeless universality. In this manner, she strikes a balance, presenting the old, quintessential ideas in unique new ways, and, as mentioned previously, in quotable, eloquent simplicity. For example, the poem below captures the essence of a very large idea in only a few lines, a powerful promise of meaning fulfilled in potent miniature:

Of Life to own—  
From life to draw—  
But never touch the reservoir—

(no. 1294)

Here is a place where life and its meaning have become solid and real—enough to fill a reservoir—but we as humans must seek for and never reach it. It is not for us, being beyond our understanding. Although the poem contains a great deal for its size, by necessity as well as by design many details are left out. This leaves the reader's imagination with many places to go from here. It is a little completeless piece left open to our interpretation.

Dickinson is able to retain a sense of timelessness around these questions because her answers to them are not only non-specific and conceptual, but also incomplete. The meaning of life, such as it is, is universal within the expression of the human species by the average individual human, which quintessentially does not change, and is not defined by external and mutable circumstances. By focusing her material on the small shining condensed core of human emotional understanding, Dickinson is able to give us something we can relate to generally. As she puts it:

Estranged from Beauty—none can be—  
For Beauty is Infinity—  
And power to be finite ceased  
Before Identity was leased.

(no. 1474)

This spiritual sense is an ancient and enduring human truth. Then, she solidifies a connection to the specific individuals by leaving the mundane details of experience out of her works; creating

poems without the parts that an audience with an infinite number of different life stories could not possibly all understand or appreciate. Therefore, by leaving gaps and letting us fill in the rest with our own thoughts, she builds for her poems something that feels like a personal connection, despite originally being general.

Furthermore, Dickinson strives to answer deeply important, human questions, instead of just writing happy little poems, and it is the serious, not the frivolous, which makes her popular. Anderson, on the other hand, argues that the opposite is the case—he says that much of her popularity stems from her collection of overly sentimental nature poetry (which are, to be fair, less than stellar examples of her skill), such as the one below.

Nature — the Gentlest Mother is,  
Impatient of no Child —  
The feeblest — or the waywardest —  
Her Admonition mild —  
  
In Forest — and the Hill —  
By Traveller — be heard —  
Restraining Rampant Squirrel —  
Or too impetuous Bird —  
  
How fair Her Conversation —  
A Summer Afternoon —  
Her Household — Her Assembly —  
And when the Sun go down —

Her Voice among the Aisles  
Incite the timid prayer  
Of the minutest Cricket —  
The most unworthy Flower —

When all the Children sleep —  
She turns as long away  
As will suffice to light Her lamps —  
Then bending from the Sky —

With infinite Affection —  
And infiniter Care —  
Her Golden finger on Her lip —  
Wills Silence — Everywhere —

(no. 790)

However, I disagree, and strongly, with Anderson's idea that the average reader only appreciates the insipid. Rather, I find that people tend to want poems like "Because I could not stop for Death," which is one of her most famous poems:

Because I could not stop for Death —  
He kindly stopped for me —  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves —  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove — He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility —

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess — in the Ring —  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —  
We passed the Setting Sun —

Or rather — He passed us —  
The Dews drew quivering and chill —  
For only Gossamer, my Gown —  
My Tippet — only Tulle —

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground —  
The Roof was scarcely visible —  
The Cornice — in the Ground —

Since then — 'tis Centuries — and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity

(no. 712)

Another popular choice is the autobiographical "This is my letter to the world," which is another more meaningful piece:

This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me —  
The simple News that Nature told —  
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see —  
For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen —  
Judge tenderly — of Me

(no. 441)

Both of these poems have greater depth to them than Andersons' assessment credits readers with appreciating. In contrast to the opinion that popularity can come from blandness, Gottschall, who was once again seeking for evolutionary ideas behind literary themes, wrote that there is no long-lasting interest in a story—or in this case, a poem—if there is no trouble in it. Poets who write prettily of meaningless things rarely last, nor do such poems; tales of tragedy and struggle do—stories that do not end neatly or easily, but incompletely, like Dickinson's poems. For example, yet another of Dickinson's oft-quoted poems is not only on the rather dark subject of death but also approaches it in an almost existential way:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air –

Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –

And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset – when the King

Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away

What portions of me be

Assignable – and then it was

There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –

Between the light – and me –

And then the Windows failed – and then

I could not see to see –

(no. 465)

This is no insipid little rhyme, but a powerful musing on the banality of waiting and the inevitability of death.

## Modernity of Theme

Generally speaking, the shift to the modern consciousness was one of much increased questioning, and especially questioning without answers. It contained, a sense of having the world cut out from underneath one's feet, and ultimately a feeling of something missing. It is generally associated with works written following the horrors of the First World War, well after Dickinson's time. However, many of Dickinson's poems show early iterations of these concepts—in some cases, like in the poem below, potentially connected to the Civil War, which was waged during her life:

I many times thought Peace had come  
When Peace was far away—  
As Wrecked Men—deem they sight the Land—  
At Centre of the Sea—  
  
And struggle slacker—but to prove  
As hopelessly as I—  
How many the fictitious Shores—  
Before the Harbor be—

(no. 739)

This poem, in heartbreaking eloquence, contains elements despair and helplessness, emotions which explore both an eternal and a modern expression of the experience of warfare. The pain felt is something many, many people can relate to, most especially those who have experienced loss through seemingly endless and pointless war; but also possibly in life itself, struggling to find meaning before the restfulness of death. The way in which she describes this reality, this

universal human truth, however, is distinctly modern: an incomplete answer to the unspoken questions of meaning—an answer that, while capturing the author’s understanding of the situation, still leaves the questions open and unsolved, for the reader to finish struggling to piece together and make their own.

This modern understanding, defined for this work as an inescapable sense of loss, disconnection, and potential meaninglessness, also begins to seep itself into others of Dickinson’s topics. One of these is the view of nature in general, and especially how it relates to the sublime, which is a haunting pain and a sense of something which we can see or sense, but never truly reach.

As imperceptibly as Grief  
The Summer lapsed away—  
Too imperceptible at last  
To seem like Perfidy—  
A Quietness distilled  
As Twilight long begun,  
Or Nature spending with herself  
Sequestered Afternoon—  
The Dusk drew earlier in—  
The Morning foreign shone—  
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,  
As Guest, that would be gone—  
And thus, without a Wing  
Or service of a Keel

Our Summer made her light escape  
Into the Beautiful.

(no. 1540)

Here, summer is fleeting and unattainable, something that slips through our fingers just as we try to understand it. Within this experience are contained the dual emotions of the pain of loss and a strange joy; sweetness and sorrow somehow inextricably bound up in each other, an exquisite moment where we just begin to understand that we cannot understand. Nature, like other forms of beauty, is beyond us; all we have are our impressions of it, reflected on in its absence.

What, then, is the relationship between us and nature? Dickinson's answer to that question is that we are both a part of nature and separate from it (Anderson 177), that we cannot completely control nature but can affect it, cannot capture nature but only our perception of it, and that this is both good and bad. The poet in particular, being a creature of perception even more so than others, is bound up in this conundrum, because the poet not only tries to understand but also to create nature, despite being human:

The One who could repeat the Summer day —  
Were greater than itself — though He  
Minutest of Mankind should be —

And He — could reproduce the Sun —  
At period of going down —  
The Lingering — and the Stain — I mean —

When Orient have been outgrown —  
And Occident — become Unknown —  
His Name — remain —

(no. 307)

The speaker of Dickinson's poem promises would-be poets immortal fame in exchange for an impossible task—the challenge of recreating, with words or art or whatever other means, the world around them. Anderson calls this “the inadequacy of the artist's mimetic powers” which in this case rises as the inability of the poet, however skilled, to form her experience into the perfect words (92). Dickinson describes it in the poem below, which in fact itself fails mastery in the first part, but achieves truth in the final four lines:

"Nature" is what we see—  
The Hill—the Afternoon—  
Squirrel—Eclipse— the Bumble bee—  
Nay—Nature is Heaven—  
Nature is what we hear—  
The Bobolink—the Sea—  
Thunder—the Cricket—  
Nay—Nature is Harmony—  
Nature is what we know—  
Yet have no art to say—  
So impotent Our Wisdom is  
To her Simplicity.

(no. 668)

Anderson quotes a letter by Dickinson in which she described Nature as a haunted house, and art by contrast only as “a house that tries to be haunted” (103) —essentially, that art is humans trying to capture that feeling of nature, and of the strange together-separate feeling we share with it, which is not quite possible since it is ultimately a paradox.

However, the interaction between humankind and Nature is also properly an exchange; while it is Nature giving us something we don’t have the power to understand, this is not the only thing it is. A potentially more accurate example, below, shows both sides of this give and take, and that although the attempt by the artist to capture Nature might be unsuccessful, it is not necessarily valueless.

I send Two Sunsets—  
Day and I—in competition ran—  
I finished Two—and several Stars—  
While He—was making One—  
  
His own was ampler—but as I  
Was saying to a friend—  
Mine—is the more convenient  
To Carry in the Hand—

(no. 308)

Both the poet and Nature have something the other cannot replicate. One could say that although poets always fall short of true nature, the difference also makes poetry more accessible; or, alternatively, that the poets capture meaning not just from nature but also from themselves. In

this sense, the poet taps into the common spirit of humanity and expresses its reaction and relationship to nature.

To hear an Oriole sing  
May be a common thing—  
Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird  
Who sings the same, unheard,  
As unto Crowd—

The Fashion of the Ear  
Attireth that it hear  
In Dun, or fair—

So whether it be Rune,  
Or whether it be none  
Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree—"  
The Skeptic—showeth me—  
"No Sir! In Thee!"

(no. 526)

Here the poet—the human—gives meaning to nature, not the other way around. This implies that while the poet can never truly grasp nature in their poetry; neither can nature touch humanity except through the means of art of sorts, an expansion on the modern dissociative sense. Furthermore, as Anderson claims when the artist’s “natural” and therefore mortal human body has decayed, it is the art, the poetry that lives on (75). Dickinson, too, expressed the hope for some relief from mortality through poetry. For example, in the poem I used as my epigraph, her expectation was that even when she was long forgotten, buried “in dishonored Grass,” the “Completeless Show” of her work would continue to live and “entertain the Centuries”. The eternal life of poetry is not, however, a forced, zombie-like undeath, a perpetuation of the same tired material until it disintegrates. Rather, it is a cycle of life, death, and rebirth, fueled by generation after generation of new readers bringing their own experiences to the table of interpretation.

The eternal force that the poet tries to preserve and draw out of life is the ice and fire of our existence, the most powerful, overwhelming emotions the human spirit can experience. Poetry in this view should be violent, bold, and eruptive, both awful and awesome, leaping, wild, and extraordinary, striking trembling into the soul; made of words that, as Dickinson describes them, at once both “chill and burn” the reader (Anderson 80). For example, both of the following poems explore the vast capacity of the human spirit:

In this short Life  
That only lasts an hour  
How much—how little—  
Is within our power

(no. 1287)

This little poem succeeds in describing the difficulties of life because while the bones are there, there are gaps between them, left by the lack of context or details. One of these gaps is created by a paradox, similar to the one below, which looks inward rather than outward:

There is a solitude of space  
A solitude of sea  
A solitude of death, but these  
Society shall be  
Compared with that profounder site  
That polar privacy  
A soul admitted to itself —  
Finite infinity.

(no. 1695)

The deepest, most powerful feelings such as these are often unreachable by conventional means. Dickinson, like others, struggles to contain them and comes closest through paradox: pain and rejoicing all in one, hope and despair, wild energy and resignation, the closeness to God—like an angel in faculty—but also a low human creature, born of earth. In this case, a poem is like a circle; it has closure, but there is as much emptiness as fulfillment; infinity within as well as outside of it, made by a single thin line. The poem remains open, completeless, providing a space into which the reader's conscious can insinuate itself, and connect more strongly to the very modern sense of disconnection.

One of the main modern themes which surfaces in Dickinson's work is the sense of cosmic abandonment and confusion, even despair. This idea ties into the haunting pain of beauty, which itself returns to the question of Man's relation to nature. All of these concepts ultimately

fall under *agape*, the Greek word for a love defined by a yearning for what cannot—quite—be reached. However, in all the welter of emotions, the idea of despair is not relished; Dickinson does not sink into pessimism and give herself up to it. It's there—oh yes—but she is striking against it, always returning to try again, another poem, another angle, searching for hope or something else there. The insecurity belongs to existentialism, not Nihilism.

To lose thee — sweeter than to gain

All other hearts I knew.

'Tis true the drought is destitute,

But then, I had the dew!

The Caspian has its realms of sand,

Its other realm of sea.

Without the sterile perquisite,

No Caspian could be.

(no. 1754)

There is some joy in having lost something, for in its absence one reflects on the good that one has known. The unknown that is left by the loss can be filled with new meaning by the creative mind of the poet. Thus, despite all of the loss and other forms of human suffering Dickinson portrays, the last page of the book she writes is not bleak; rather, it is empty. She does not answer these terrifying, heartbreaking questions with a sense of meaninglessness or ending. Rather, it is a book left open to a blank page, for the reader to fill in. When asked “What does it all mean?” her answer is not “nothing” but “I don’t know,” not telling something directly but providing a space for continued exploration into the unknown realm.

## Modernity of Form

Another way in which Dickinson's poems begin to be modern in their structure. They are not quite fully modern, like free verse, which some readers find difficult or unappealing since it is a style so far departed from the structures of traditional poetic form that it has essentially abandoned it completely. Instead, Dickinson's work is pushing the boundaries of the poetic form in a proto-modern way, playing with poetic form to make it more interesting, while still retaining enough familiarity for comfort of the general reader. Her poems have both a relatively stable pattern to them, based on the beloved hymn form of her early life (Anderson 27), but also vary frequently in rhyme, meter, and punctuation when necessary to accommodate the author's peculiar perceptions.

The hymn form, demonstrated in the little poem below, recalls the beginnings of the art of poetry in song and epic tales, and its continuing status as part of a tradition that is oral as well as written.

Beauty crowds me till I die  
Beauty mercy have on me  
But if I expire today  
Let it be in sight of thee —

(no. 1654)

Long, long before writing was invented, people sat around the fire telling stories of gods and heroes and ordinary people, honing their abilities to craft words that could captivate an audience. This is one of the many factors that build into Gottschall's evolutionary theories about how poetry and storytelling may have helped (and may still help) humans gain each other's support

and affections. It is especially clear when one also considers situations like singing, where showing off the mental prowess implicit in poetry is combined with voice and body to create a physical display as well. While a small portion of poetry is written to remain on the page and reads better than it is spoken, much of poetry today still retains its oral nature; song lyrics, of course, are the most popular if not the most obvious form, but there are also poetry recitals, and author readings, and “slam poetry” or other forms of spoken word or performance poetry. Slam poetry in particular is participatory, since it often features call-and-response or other opportunities for audience reaction and feedback. These forms of vocal presentation remain popular because speaking or performing a poem out loud releases the power of its meter and sounds, adding meaning.

Even the silent reader will often “hear” the words with the inner ears and voice of the mind, just as they would sound if performed. One should note, however, the difference between a poem that is performed and one that is merely read aloud without regards to the natural flow and meter it is meant to have. This theme, too, relates to the history of poetry, since before literacy became commonplace poems were always performed, even sung, and a great deal of focus was placed on the ability of the speaker’s voice to capture inflections that imply deeper meanings.

Dickinson’s poems specifically call back to poetry’s oral roots in two ways, the first of which is in their intrinsically lyrical nature, which is based on and retains the song tones and form of the hymn, the rhyme and meter that she based their structure on—including, frequently, the familiar iambic stress-pattern of everyday English speech (Anderson 27-28). She mixes this musical style with slant rhymes, which makes her poems playful and singsong. The other part is, of course, in those famous dashes, her hallmarks, which create breaks in the line to emphasize

where a speaker—even just the silent speaker in the mind of the reader—is to pause, altering the patterns of timing within the poem. Perhaps as you were reading you noticed my own dashes and commas doing just that, a moment ago, controlling in my absence the pace and cadence of your inner voice. Among other purposes, Dickinson’s dashes serve to emphasize the vocal, performative elements of her poetry. Removing them, therefore, modifies the sound and rhythm of the poem, wrecking its flow and effect, sometimes enough so as to change it into something else entirely.

The changes Dickinson made in the form were somewhat extreme for her time; from the beginning, editors tried to standardize her punctuation, her capitalization, and her rhyme scheme to fit the idea of “what poetry should be,” which was a much stricter path than she was willing to follow (Franklin XV). It is possibly for this reason than nearly all of her poems remained unpublished until her death. One of her common habits was to use slant rhyme, or “imperfect” rhymes as they are often called. Despite this term, however, Dickinson’s words were chosen with great care. One of the many “helpful” edits made in the original publishing of Dickinson’s works, along with “correction” of punctuation and capitalization, was to change words to fit traditional rhymes and rhythms better. For example, here is an edited poem:

I had a daily bliss  
I half indifferent viewed,  
Till sudden I perceived it stir,—  
It grew as I pursued,  
  
Till when, around a crag,  
It wasted from my sight,

Enlarged beyond my utmost scope,  
I learned its sweetness right.

(Franklin 19)

Contrast it with the original:

I had a daily Bliss  
I half indifferent viewed  
Till sudden I perceived it stir —  
It grew as I pursued  
  
Till when around a Height  
It wasted from my sight  
Increased beyond my utmost scope  
I learned to estimate.

(no. 1057)

The human mind, as I have mentioned before, seeks to complete the completeless. The early editors who so zealously “corrected” Dickinson’s poems called them “unpolished” or “unrevised”—another way, in the editor’s world, of saying “unfinished.” However, the choice of a slanted rhyme or broken pattern will be the precise word for the situation; it is also likely to be an important word, with the break in the pattern drawing the readers’ attention to that spot in a subconscious attempt to fix what does not seem right; as shown above, where the ending of the poem is much more dramatic in the original than with the more conventional rhyme scheme introduced. Other nuances are also lost without the irregular capitalizations and with the replacement of “Height” with “crag” and the addition of the word “sweetness.”

In the next poem, the edits effect an even more dramatic series of changes from the original, not only in tone but also in meaning, since it is not just the usual changes in capitalization, punctuation, and syntax, but also the replacement of some words, not for rhyme but, so it would seem, simply because the editor did not care for them. This is the original:

Of Tolling Bell I ask the cause?  
"A Soul has gone to Heaven"  
I'm answered in a lonesome tone—  
Is Heaven then a Prison?  
  
That Bells should ring till all should know  
A Soul had gone to Heaven  
Would seem to me the more the way  
A Good News should be given.

(no. 947)

The edited version, on the other hand, has destroyed not only the completelessness of the poem's style and phrases, but also some of the subversiveness implied in their message:

If tolling bell I ask the cause.  
"A soul has gone to God,"  
I'm answered in a lonesome tone;  
Is heaven then so sad?  
  
That bells should joyful ring to tell  
A soul had gone to heaven,

Would seem to me the proper way  
A good news should be given.

(Franklin 93)

The peaceful tones of the edited version provides a sharp contrast to the soul-rending question posed by the original; a question left unanswered, a concern not met, emptiness and uncertainty in place of calm assurance.

Another early modern irregularity of Dickinson's work that the editors sought to remove was her use of frequent dashes. These dashes, which are now usually included in publications that understand the visual presentation of more modern poetry, break up the traditional structure of sentence and line by making the reader stop temporarily. Removing these pauses not only changes the meaning of a poem but sometimes even destroys it completely. The dashes in Dickinson's poems serve to tell the mind to break the sentences into component ideas, to be read as though they were part of the darting stream of consciousness, where thoughts are not fully formed. To remove the dashes not only removes the oral tone of the poems, but also some of their broken-seeming unfinishedness. The editors who chose to do so are, in a sense, completing the completeless—and thereby preventing the reader from doing so. It's like buying a jigsaw puzzle only to open the box and find it already solved—not nearly as mentally challenging and no fun at all. For example, consider the original version of the poem below:

Many a phrase has the English language—  
I have heard but one—  
Low as the laughter of the Cricket  
Loud, as the Thunder's Tongue—

Murmuring, like old Caspian's Choirs,  
When the Tide's a' lull—  
Saying itself in new inflection—  
Like a Whippoorwill—

Breaking in bright Orthography  
On my simple sleep—  
Thundering its Prospective—  
Till I stir, and weep—

Not for the Sorrow, done me—  
But the push of Joy—  
Say it again, Saxon!  
Hush—Only to me!

(no. 276)

Contrast the poem in its intended form above with the edited version below:

Many a phrase has the English language.  
I have heard but one,  
Low as the laughter of a cricket,  
Loud as the thunder's tongue,  
  
Murmuring like old Caspian choirs  
When the tide's a' lull,

Saying itself in new inflection

Like a whippoorwill,

Breaking in bright orthography

On my simple sleep,

Thundering its prospective

Till I stir and weep

Not for the sorrow done me

But the push of joy.

Say it again, Saxon!

Hush - only to me!

(Jackson)

The alterations create a fully formed piece, not a puzzle to tie our own meanings to, to shape and explore. The interactive factor, which provides much of the entertainment for the reader, has thus been removed. We are presented with bland smooth “perfection” in place of a fragmented insight into the author’s infinite mind. Although some small amount of the original completelessness remains, such as the phrase itself being left to the imagination rather than revealed, the overall feel of the piece has been ruptured. The style of completelessness is gone, leaving behind a very different poetic experience for the reader. The edited poem follows the patterns of much more conventional poetry, with connecting commas instead of dissociative dashes, without Dickinson’s irregular capitalizations to show the emphasis she placed on the most important ideas—in short, it falls flat of the original. Compared to the original, the new version of the poem

is something static, empty, and boring. The well-meaning editor who meant to fix this nontraditional poem has ruined it, not because it is not broken, but because broken is what it is, and what it should be.

For the following poem, I have removed the dashes myself, in order to provide another excellent example of the importance of Dickinson's dashes:

Fame is a bee.  
It has a song,  
It has a sting,  
Ah, too, it has a wing.

Compared with the original:

Fame is a bee.  
It has a song—  
It has a sting—  
Ah, too, it has a wing.

(no. 1763)

With the dashes, the poem is made of separate, unconnected similarities. Without them, it is a unified whole, which is not accurate to the ways in which Fame and the bee are similar. The dashes create a sense of the way we think—in impressions. They provide gaps for the reader's mind to remember how Fame and the bee are also different. Completed is closed off.

Dickinson left poems even more open than many realize. In her original manuscripts, many poems contain places where multiple word options are left unchosen, such as in the example on the next page:

The Spider holds a Silken Ball  
 In unperceived hands; as he twine  
 And dancing softly, in himself  
 His own of Pearl - bewilder -  
 + expense.

He flies from danger to danger  
 In substantial trade.  
 Supplants our thoughts with his  
 In half the period.

His Name is near Supreme  
 His Continents of Light -  
 Then dwell from the Masses  
 Down  
 His Boundaries - great -  
 + Pursues his heart, strands, + Coil.  
 + theories + finish of + separate.

It's a bit difficult to see here, but the many little plus signs all over the page indicate places where more than one word choice is available. The version Johnson uses appears to be the most standard:

The Spider holds a Silver Ball  
In unperceived Hands —  
And dancing softly to Himself  
His Yarn of Pearl — unwinds —  
  
He plies from nought to nought —  
In unsubstantial Trade —  
Supplants our Tapestries with His —  
In half the period —  
  
An Hour to rear supreme  
His Continents of Light —  
Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom —  
His Boundaries — forgot —

(no. 605)

However, the original manuscript actually shows many variants: “expends” instead of “unwinds,” “perish on” in place of “dangles from,” “theories” for “continents” and “sophistries” for “boundaries”—among others. By making several different selections from the choices available, the editor could just as easily have created something more like what I have put together, here:

The Spider holds a Silver Ball  
In unperceived Hands —  
And dancing softly as he knits  
His Yarn of Pearl — expends —  
  
He plies from Nought to Nought —  
In unsubstantial Trade —  
Supplants our Tapestries with His —  
In half the period —  
  
An Hour to rear supreme  
His Theories of Light —  
Then Perish on the Housewife's Broom —  
His Sophistries — forgot —

This entirely different poem is not the only other version obtainable from this text, however. By mixing and matching all of the available options, one could create literally dozens of poems.

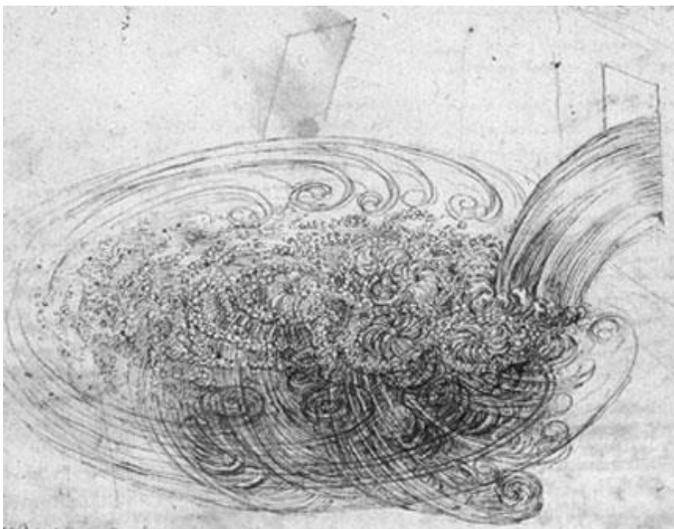
Like Schrodinger's cat, all possible forms of this poem are equally true until they are made known by the editor; it exists as many poems in a fluid state, rather than one set in stone.

Although not all of Dickinson's poems have word choices left open for them, and not all of those have as many as the one above, there are still many places where the reader, or in this case more usually the editor, is provided with a chance to join Dickinson in the creative process and complete the completeless.

## Conclusion

The theme of a “completeless show” is threaded throughout all of the aspects of Dickinson’s work, always connected with the reasons she has “entertained the centuries.” In a way, it defines her as a poet. The fragmentary worldview she presents is riddled with gaps to explore and fill in. The work as a whole, the unfinished poems, and the open nature of the “completed” ones still leaves room for the reader to enter the creative space and participate in giving the poem meaning. Humans are drawn to and thrilled by the seemingly unfinished, to what is left to the imagination; the readers can fill in what is missing, putting themselves into it and making it a part of themselves. Nor is Emily Dickinson’s work alone in possessing this quality.

Take, for example, not the masterpieces but the sketches of artists such as da Vinci or Picasso. These are often as much to be appreciated, if not more, than the final work, for although they may not be “finished”, they are nevertheless pure art. Da Vinci’s studies, like many of Dickinson’s poems, show the inner truth of a thing while presenting only part of it, like his sketch of moving water, below.



(cropped from Studies of Water)

This mere sketch is more the essence of water than anything but water itself, because it captures and connects to our perception of water. The broad, incomplete idea with which we define “water” within in our minds is made of impressions of movement rather than perfection of specific detail.

I recall once I had the privilege to see a series of Picasso’s sketches, which show how he practiced and progressed up to a master piece. Like Dickinson’s poems, these drafts showed how art, like poetry, is a process instead of a static, “finished” piece. Dana Rush (Assistant Professor of African and African Diaspora Art History at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) describes this idea as it applies to aesthetics in her field as an interaction between ephemerality and “the unfinished.” Although she also focusses on accumulation, there is a great deal about the idea of “art” as a verb in her essay on Vodun Aesthetics. Furthermore, she also explores how having something missing from a piece can actually make it seem bigger, through the interaction between things that are constantly fading or otherwise changing, and those that replace them, or are added later. In this view, the art piece—or poem—becomes something that gains immortality by never being finished, its open-endedness lending it some eternal quality as a constantly-in-progress work (Rush).

However, this particular piece, my writing, must come to an end, at least for now. I would like to finish by closing the circle, and returning to where I began. Here, once again, is the poem I chose for my epigraph:

Of Bronze— and Blaze—  
The North— Tonight—  
So adequate— it forms—  
So preconcerted with itself—

So distant— to alarm—  
An Unconcern so sovereign  
To Universe, or me—  
Infects my simple spirit  
With Taints of Majesty—  
  
Till I take vaster attitudes—  
And strut upon my stem—  
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,  
For Arrogance of them—  
  
My Splendors, are Menagerie—  
But their Completeless Show  
Will entertain the Centuries  
When I, am long ago,  
An Island in dishonored Grass—  
Whom none but Beetles, know.

(no. 290)

In this poem, the natural form is presented as basically complete. It is both “adequate,” which is to say, fit for its purpose, and “preconcerted,” or in harmony with itself. This perfection of nature cannot and should not be reached by the poet, just as one should not fly too close to the sun. The exact is divine, and therefore dangerous. It is not meant for us, nor are we meant for it, because we are completeless. Instead, we must try to reach it obliquely, like seeing an eclipse through a

telescope instead of looking directly at it. This is the paradox of Dickinson's work: her poems are "menagerie" yet also "splendors;" although they are in some ways unfinished, they quite good enough despite it, if not better because of it. The human body, as part of nature, goes from ripe to rot; it is mortal, but the poet's work is not. Dickinson's hope that her poems would last past her death has been and continues to be fulfilled; they "entertain the Centuries" precisely because they are a "completeless show."

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