Introduction

Towards an Aesthetic of Emily Dickinson's Transcendence

Emily Dickinson seeks to surmount the limits of the lyric mode of expression in her poetry by a slant telling of the truth. The versified state of her poems renders them into five groups which can be seen as the five stages of her composition. The present study intends to explore the course of this aesthetic act.

Much has been written on the general trends and individual strands of Dickinson's poetry. But there has not been any full length study on the process of her aesthetic transcendence. The present project is an attempt in this direction.

The word 'transcendence' is derived from the Latin 'transcendere', which is, at root, a fusion of 'trans' and 'scandere', meaning 'to climb over', 'step over', 'pass over'. In English, it was first used in the sense of passing over a physical limit, such as a mountain or a river. Then it came to signify the idea of going beyond the limits of something non-physical. Hence the philosophical and theological extensions to the term.

The present study employs 'transcendence' in its aesthetic aspect, considering poetry as an act of surmounting the limits of expression. It recognizes Dickinson's difficulty in expressing herself in the lyric; and it examines the verbal and extraverbal items used in the telling of the truth. Dickinson's aesthetic as a transcendent poet, therefore, is to give complicated and dazzling truth in ways that can be received. Her poetic transcendence differs from the Transcendentalism of her times.
The flight of creative imagination considers the poet's experiences and observations, and passes over them with a view to arriving at an impersonal rendering in verse. It seeks to get beyond the mere description of things, turning everything into palpable poetry. This aesthetic act results in a feeling of elation in the reader "because the poet is following some arc of association that corresponds to the inner life of the objects" of her utterance.

Verbal and extraverbal elements are used to represent her arc of association. The 'verbal' refers to words with their semantic and figurative significance. The 'extraverbal' stands for items such as dashes, capitals, and syntactic inversion employed in the arrangement of words in poetry. Undoubtedly, verbal and extraverbal items are essential materials of versification. In Dickinson's case, the extraverbal deserves special attention.

The truth of poetry exists apart from its materials but it is also revealed through them. This correspondence makes truth in poetry both transcendent and immanent. Dickinson's search is to make the immanent accord and agree with the transcendent.

A direct telling of the truth may not be possible in poetry. It is because truth "can never be fully known, rationally phrased or directly stated." But an indirect means to it can overcome the difficulty. Suggestive indirection can succeed where direct statement may fail. Dickinson is seen to have resorted to suggestive indirection for the success of her poetic utterance. The concept of it is set forth in Poem 1129.
In Poem 1129, Dickinson boldly declares: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--/ Success in Circuit lies."\(^6\) The poem gives her canon of telling the truth in an oblique manner. One has to do it by slow degrees, and with utmost care. One simply cannot unveil all the truth, and soon. The truth is too bright for human eyes; and "mortals cannot withstand unmitigated contact with glory."\(^7\) It is too strong for man's fragile understanding; humankind cannot bear very much reality. Its superb surprise oppresses his senses as lightning does to the children. Hence the necessity of an "explanation kind" (1 6), essential but gentle. Just as the elders explain to the children the phenomenon of lightning with appropriate details of interpretation, the poet must tell the truth 'slant.'

The word 'slant', as Webster's Dictionary would tell the poet, means "An oblique reflection or gibe; a sarcastic remark;" and 'oblique' means "Indirect; by a side glance; as an oblique hint."\(^8\) It is probable that Dickinson, while reading Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, came by the notion of poetry as an oblique reflection of truth,\(^9\) even as Shakespeare found the concept of love at first sight in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. She made capital out of her find, as did her Elizabethan counterpart.

The 'slant' evidently holds the key to Dickinson's aesthetic transcendence. It is her "fundamental view of poetry,\(^10\) as Sandra Newton observes in *Enjoying the Arts: Poetry*. Her aesthetic, as given in Poem 1129, involves "a kind of hermeneutics, a telling of the truth 'slant', in metaphor and linguistic figures."\(^11\)
Poem 1129 was written in 1868. By that time nearly two decades had passed since she began composing poetry. She had already written a thousand-odd poems, along with their variants. Therefore, when she gave her canon of the slant telling of the truth, she did it with the hindsight of numerous experiments in verse. Evidently, Dickinson had evolved her "system of aesthetics--" (P 137) from her own practice.

Dickinson's 'slant' can be found in her suggestive use of verbal and extraverbal elements in versification, as in her non-variants. It is also to be noted in the way she employs speculation in certain poems each of which remains in one copy but carries suggested changes, verbal and extraverbal. It is further observed in her method of redaction for making the rough and semifinal versions fair. Duplication is yet another method of her slant, reproducing the fair variants of a poem. The ultimate in this line can be traced to her gathering of select versions of poems, from variants as well as non-variants, into a complex sequence.

It can be seen that Dickinson's slant telling in verse is an attempt at making poetry true and alive. Dickinson's first letter to Thomas W. Higginson, written on 15 April 1862, opens with the question: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" Again, in the same letter, she asks him, "if you please -- Sir -- to tell me what is true?" The second question also concerns her very profession of poetry. What gives life to her verse, therefore, is the amount of truth it contains. The poet moderates the quantum of truth expressed at a
time though the design is to tell all; and who decides how it is to be done. Verbal and extraverbal items are used accordingly. Dickinson's aesthetic act seeks to render the dazzling truth in ways that can be received.

Between the perception of truth and its expression, falls the shadow of the poet's decision regarding what to reveal, and how. Therein lies Dickinson's slant, as Poem 1129 would put it. Her perception is an intuitive act: "By intuition, Mightiest Things / Assert themselves -- and not by terms --"(P 420), which enables her to "see the shape and size of objects inside the unconscious," to behold "the hidden limbs between the 'ghosts of things' and the things themselves."14

The Dickinson slant also accounts for the poet's gender consciousness.15 Though she was not a militant feminist she remains "the strongest Amazon"16 on the American literary scene. She reflects the time when women were not expected to speak out loud or bold, but were to expend themselves between the kitchen and the parlour. The Puritan New England must have made Dickinson feel that "women could not yet speak as openly as they wished."17 She therefore used strategies of indirection in order to avoid the raising of eyebrows as well.

Dickinson committed herself to the slant telling of the truth because it brought her relief.18 Her personal heartaches get translated into an impersonal utterance of undying beauty. That is how her transcendent art arrives at a universal statement of the truth. Even where her personal emotional experiences are not involved, she prefers to express herself through suggestion,
connotative use of language, manipulation of syntax, use of understatement, overstatement and other figures. What Williamson says of Eliot is true of Dickinson as well. He points out that Eliot "sails to his glory by a side wind. Indirection and all forms of emotional reticence" occupy a very large space in his poetry. 19

Towards this end Dickinson pressed all her artistic resources into service, finding "the words to every thought / I ever had --" (P 581). It has evidently been far from easy. The poet had to wrestle endlessly with verbal and extraverbal elements in her struggle to express herself in verse. The process of this aesthetic act calls for study.

The word 'process' is rooted in two Latin segments, 'pro', meaning 'forward', and 'cedere', 'go'. Process, therefore, is the way something takes shape; the changes by which something develops. It is a systematic series of actions directed to some end. A study of 'process', in the present context, is to trace the course of poetic expression. It is to observe the details of Dickinson's aesthetic work in progress. It is to pursue the different stages of her creative art leading to its accomplishment.

All consideration of poetic process is bound up with conjecture, wandering between what might have been and what has been. Poets themselves are probably the best equipped to tell us of the process of their creation. Dickinson's precept of the slant can serve a study of her poetic composition on her own terms, as envisaged by the present project.
The slant telling of the truth in Dickinson can be viewed from two standpoints. It can be observed in the way verbal and extraverbal items are used in a given lyric. It is also seen in the five-phased course of her versification.

The present study focuses on the slant involved in the use of the verbal and extraverbal items in the five stages of Dickinson’s process of transcendence. The five stages represent the five phases in Dickinson’s attempt at surmounting the limits of lyric utterance. They do not have any chronological bearing at all: none of the phases precedes or succeeds another. Besides each phase signifies a poem’s state of versified existence, according to the Dickinson canon.

Dickinson’s poems can accordingly be classified into five groups. First, poems that exist in single and non-variant version. Second, poems that remain single copy but their text carries verbal and extraverbal changes given for substitution. Third, verses one or more copies of which bear suggested changes which are worked out on redaction. Fourth, poems with variant versions having incorporated changes none of which is suggested in the text. Finally, poems entered in the fascicles.

These groups are often overlapping: a poem in Group One or Two can be seen in Group Five; one of the several copies of a poem in Group Three or Four can also be found in Group Five. Though this division is somewhat arbitrary it suits the present project. It can provide a proper rationale for the five stages in Dickinson’s aesthetic transcendence. The five groups of poems can, therefore, correspond to the five stages in the act of
transcendence.

The five stages in Dickinson's poetry reveal an expanding course of expression, in search of a more precise and comprehensive telling of the truth. They indicate how the poet "Went out upon Circumference --" (P 378). The individual poems can be seen as the broken arcs which are gathered together in the fascicles in an effort to create the ultimate in her art.

The poems of Dickinson's crisis years, 1861-62, can best inform us on her aesthetic transcendence. Eighteen hundred and sixty-one, and sixty-two, were years of the greatest stress in Emily Dickinson's life. It was the time when distance and danger stood between herself and three of her friends.

The Rev. Charles Wadsworth, her "closest earthly friend" (L 765), had moved out across the continent to a new pastorate at the Calvary Church in San Francisco. Samuel Bowles was touring Europe for his health. Thomas W. Higginson was serving as an officer in the Union Army. Besides, Dickinson was afflicted with persistent eye trouble for the treatment of which she would later, in 1864-65, go to Cambridge, Massachusetts. The American Civil War had affected Amherst too, shooting dead Frazar A. Sterne, among others. There was another war being waged, inside little Emily, after her romantic failure; it was whether or not to continue her dalliance with Wadsworth. This probably was the true cause of her crisis. Her three 'Master' letters are evidence enough that she was a woman who at certain points in her life was deeply in love. Wadsworth could very well have been her 'Master' and lover.
There could have taken place a sexual union of these lovers sometime in September 1861. That might be the reason for the "terror" that she speaks about in her second letter to Higginson, on 25 April 1862. She writes, "I had a terror -- since September -- I could tell to no one -- and so I sing as the Boy does by
the Burying Ground -- because I am afraid --" (L 261). The dread
of the same "dark" secret (L 776) must have set Wadsworth sailing
for San Francisco on 1 May 1862. He was indeed keeping a safe
distance from Amherst.

It must have been the turning point of Dickinson's
life, when she began to treat herself as "The Queen of Calvary --"
(P 348). It marked her out for spinsterhood in white
robes. Dickinson wrote almost without intermission during 1862;
it was the most productive year of her poetic career, with the
average of a poem a day. Obviously, she was "driven to a kind of
poetic frenzy by her unrequited passion" for Wadsworth, a
married man and a father.

The poems of the Crisis Period become quite a "frantic
Melody" (P 1008). They belong to a time when Dickinson sought
"in Art -- the Art of Peace --" (P 544), and when the question of
expression could have mattered most. Her anxious queries to
Higginson (in Letter 260, of this period) concerning the 'truth'
and 'life' of her poetry, indicate how she has been struggling
to find an adequate expression in verse. The poems of this period
can, therefore, serve best an investigation into her process of
transcendence.

The Crisis Poems are found in Fascicles 13 - 19, which form
the third phase of the fascicles.²⁶ (See Appendix 1). Select poems of this phase are examined; and findings are related to the rest of the corpus through Notes and Appendixes. The explorative nature of the present study requires this manner of approach. In this way it seeks to cover the whole course of Dickinson's transcendence. A combined Johnson-Franklin framework appears suitable for this purpose. When the accuracy of the text of the poems, and the certainty regarding their date of composition, are considered, Johnson's Variorum Edition is necessarily to be supplemented by Franklin's The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson.

An inductive method of study is employed here. Each article of the argument is based on the findings from the poet's work. Data are gathered from relevant analyses of poems and fascicles; and conclusions are drawn a posteriori. The five stages of Dickinson's aesthetic transcendence studied, according to this method, are presented in five chapters.

Chapter One, "The Non-Variant Version," considers the first stage in Dickinson's poetic act. It identifies 12 items involved in the slant telling of the truth. Seven of these are verbal; and the others, extraverbal. These are used in surmounting the limits of expression, in the non-variant state of a lyric. Supporting evidence for the same is provided by findings from the analyses of select poems. Poems with a copy each are the object of study here because they come at the beginning of Dickinson's process of transcendence, according to the classification adopted.
Chapter Two, "Single Version with Changes Suggested", takes note of the second stage in Dickinson's transcendence. Speculation regarding possible changes in the text is introduced as a method of transcending the limits of lyric utterance. Verbal and extraverbal suggestions are advanced but the substitutes remain as they are. This phase of dwelling in possibility is observed in the poems each of which has only one copy though it bears suggested changes.

Chapter Three, "Versions with Changes Suggested / Incorporated", goes through the third stage of the process. It shows how redaction operates in Dickinson's poetry. The verbal and extraverbal substitutes given in one copy of a poem are worked out in another. This involves selection and rejection. Each of the poems examined has two or more copies one of which indispensably carries suggested changes.

Chapter Four, "Variants with Changes Incorporated", covers the fourth stage. It illustrates how duplication functions in Dickinson's art. A poem is rendered in two or more copies. The verbal and extraverbal alterations introduced upon reproduction are embodied in the text but not proposed in any version of the poem.

Chapter Five, "The Fascicle Version," considers the final stage of the process of transcendence. The fascicles are treated as an attempt at a complex sequence to set forth comprehensively Dickinson's slant telling of the truth. The manuscript of the fascicles is also examined for the purpose.

The Conclusion sums up the arguments and findings of th
preceding chapters.
Notes

1. During the pre-Variorum Period (1890 - 1955), response to Dickinson was uniformly positive with an acceptance of her unusual poetic technique. It was by far a historical / biographical approach. After the arrival, in 1955, of Thomas H. Johnson's Variorum Edition of the poems, critical concern has shifted to stylistic, linguistic, psychoanalytical, phenomenological, feminist methods / schools. From rather dizzy heights of cult Dickinson studies have come down to plains of clear understanding.

A survey of Dickinson criticism will be unwieldy here as the books and articles are far too numerous to be mentioned. The present study will make references to them only when called for.

2. In philosophy, 'transcendence' is understood as 'altogether outside experience', or 'unrealizable in human experience.' In theology, it means 'above and independent of', used in reference to the Deity in relation to the universe.

A study of this kind has been made by Zacharias Thundyil, "Circumstance, Circumference, and Center: Immanence and Transcendence in Emily Dickinson's Poems of Extreme Situations", Hartford Studies in Literature, 3, 2 (1971) 73-91.

3. Transcendence must be distinguished from Transcendentalism in that the latter was a New England literary movement, represented by Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, Parker and others, echoing certain religio-philosophical tenets, and socio-economic practices. Transcendentalism presupposed the need for the communication with the Over-Soul, which was to be achieved,


Where the poems have two or more copies the citations are from the 'first version' unless otherwise noted. The 'first' or 'second' version here does not show the chronological sequence of Dickinson's turning out the copies of a poem. It indicates only Johnson's order of entering, or referring to, the copies in the Variorum.

8. LAC 20664 - 65.

9. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading, 168, notes the echo of The Ring and the Book in Poem 1129. He cites Browning's "Art may tell a truth / Obliquely." Occurring 14 lines before this utterance, in The Ring and the Book, is a significant pronouncement regarding Browning's view of poetry which seems to have shaped Dickinson's as well: "it is the glory and good of Art, / That Art remains the one way possible / Of speaking truth", James A. Hanson, ed., The Poetical Works Robert Browning (London: Ward, nd) 988.


12. The variants are the different copies of a poem. Two hundred and fifty-nine poems of Dickinson carry more than one copy each. (See Appendixes 2 and 3). They exist, according to their
stage of completion, in rough, semifinal and fair versions. (See Appendixes 4 and 5). Fifty-two poems bear partly rendered variants; 783 pieces remain in non-variant single version.

However, the term 'variants' has at times been used in the narrative itself to refer to all poems that exist in two or more copies.


18. In her third letter to Higginson, Dickinson tells why she takes to poetry: "the verses just relieve --" (L 265).


20. Dickinson gathered 804-odd poems into booklets which Johnson calls 'fascicles'. Mabel L. Todd refers to them as 'versicles'. The booklets are made of four to seven folded sheets threaded together; and they bear 11 to 29 poems. These have been reconstituted in 40 fascicles by Ralph U. Franklin, ed., *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1981) 3-999.

The fascicles are identified by the numbers Franklin gave to them, as (F 19).


Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1968) 234-48, presents two circles in vertical alignment: a small one to represent the circuit world of Dickinson's consciousness, and a large one to stand for the circumference world to which Dickinson aspired; and the circles are linked by lines that cross at death. Circumference is applied both to a totally inclusive vision and to boundaries of thought, by Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975) 117. Circumference represents the boundary

22. Several reasons have been put forward to explain the crisis in Dickinson's life: romantic disillusionment, trouble with her eyes, lesbianism, or parental inadequacy.


Another group supports the candidacy of Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican*. Bowles was elevated to the position of Dickinson's lover by Winfield T.Scott, "Emily Dickinson and Samuel Bowles", *Fresco: The U of Detroit Tri-Quarterly*, 10 (Summer 1960) 3-15. Bowles's rejection of Dickinson led to the crisis in her life, and to her consequent withdrawal from Amherst society, argues David Higgins, *Portrait

It appears almost certain that Bowles could not have been the man who caused the crisis in Dickinson’s life. During the autumn of 1861, Bowles, suffering from sciatica, became a patient at Dr. Denniston's water-cure in Northampton; and, in October, he visited the Dickersons several times. Dickinson avoided him because she did not wish to inconvenience him. This she explains in her letter to him: "I knew you needed light -- and air -- so I didn't come" (L 241). Meanwhile she also owns, in parenthesis, the real reason for her withdrawal: "-- but something troubled me --", which, as she later tells Higginson, was her "terror -- since September -- " (L 261). If Bowles were the man she would not have written him thus. Obviously, the trouble was caused by someone else.


The view that Dickinson's lesbian affair with Kate S. Anthony led to the crisis is held by Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

Parental inadequacy has also been advanced as the cause of Dickinson's inner tension. Clark Griffith traces the dominating influence of her father Edward Dickinson on the life of the poet,

Paul Bray opines that Dickinson's crisis began from early childhood. He describes it as "a rather desperate struggle to maintain psychic integrity against a spiritualized natural world that encroached upon her, spoke to her, and, in a sense, threatened to engulf her." See Paul Bray, "Emily Dickinson as Visionary," *Raritan*, 12,1 (1992) 113.

23. Letters 187, 233, and 248 are the Master letters, addressed to some unidentified man. They "indicate a long relationship, geographically apart, in which correspondence would have been the primary means of communication," notes Ralph W. Franklin, ed., Introduction, *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Amherst: Amherst College P, 1986) 5. Opinion is divided on the identity of the Master; the chief claimants for the title are Wadsworth and Bowles.

24. The "Boy", of course, is Pip of Dickens's *Great Expectations*.


26. The poems of the Crisis Period are located according to the five-phase division of the fascicles made by Shurr in *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson*. 
Johnson dates 90 poems about 1861, and 389 as about 1862; 18 poems of the latter are dated by Franklin as about 1862 or 1863. Fascicles 13-19 contain 114 poems, one of which, Poem 7 of Fascicle 14, belongs to 1858, and is therefore outside the Crisis Period. Franklin dates Poems 241, 242, 271, 280, 281, and 282, of Fascicle 16, as about 1862 but Johnson, as about 1861. Twenty-seven of the Crisis Poems belong to 1861, and 86 to 1862.