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SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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The poetic world of Emily Dickinson is governed by the principle of renunciation, which seems to determine the poet's concerns and their actualisation in the lyrics. Renunciation serves to gain a clearer vision and to liberate imagination: since things are experienced more intensely through their absence – a sign of presence, more conspicuous than the presence itself – rejection entails more acute perception which brings one closer to insight. Moreover, only unfulfilled desire generates the tension necessary for poetic creation and provides the intensity of emotion in which Dickinson can confirm her identity and assert her independence. Renunciation not only influences her general attitude towards reality – nature, other people, worldly affairs – but organises the spatial structure of her universe as well.

The space presented in a literary text (especially a poetic text) does not necessarily model natural space – as a matter of fact, it may be entirely devoid of any referential function (Łotman 1977: 252 ff.). Primarily, represented space is the author's individual model of the universe expressed in his or her language of spatial imagery and spatial modelling, with all the symbolic, temporal, ethical, and social connotations this language carries; connotations determined largely by the socially and culturally encoded meanings and values inherent in spatial relations, which are hardly ever free of superimposed sense (Łotman 1977: 214 ff.). Their markedness is connected with the fact that they provide one of the main sources of metaphors in everyday language. Such opposites as top – bottom, high – low, right – left, etc. carry definite value judgements; likewise, spatial images are usually endowed with a positive or negative value, e.g., sky – earth, mountain – abyss, etc. (Głowiński 1992; Genette 1976). The symbolic meanings and value judgements are still present in the semantics of poetic lan-

guage, where they are in constant interplay with the structure of poetic space, which may enforce, accept, or negate them.

Assuming the basic self-referentiality of a literary text (Rifaterre 1990), we may spell out the textual relationship between the Dickinsonian microcosm and macrocosm, or poetic universe: The microcosm of an individual poem is simultaneously an independent unity and a subordinate component of a superstructure – the macrocosm presented in Emily Dickinson's poetry treated as "one long poem" (Weisbuch 1975, quoted in Salska 1982: 41) of 1775 "chapters". Dickinson's universe can be further extended to include the represented world of her letters, treated, too, as a literary text. The choice of a vantage point in the above tripartite hierarchy is of consequence for the status of space in a scrutinised poem: whereas the world of a poem read separately constitutes a finite (in the textual sense) model of the universe, that same world viewed from the perspective of the Dickinson corpus becomes a segment of a larger whole; an element in another, more comprehensive model, whose (textual) finiteness is in turn questioned by the broad context of all Dickinson's writings. That context enables us to complete some of the gaps, or, to use Ingarden's term, places of indeterminacy in the represented world of her poetry with data from the letters, and thereby to create a more faithful concretisation of her poetic universe as well as a fuller picture of her imagination.

The spatial form of Dickinson's universe reflects the principle of repudiation, withdrawal, and unfulfilment, and demonstrates the central, controlling position of consciousness, as well as the unrestrained power of imagination. Far from being a mere backdrop for the more abstract, spiritual, or philosophical themes, such as love, death, or immortality, space is actually in the foreground of her poetry, both as a component of the world and as an expression of the poet's most essential concerns. Most poems are set in a definite kind of space and overtly create their scenery. Although not always specified by name (room, garden, grave, etc.), the scenery is usually well-defined by the presence of images which either build the setting, such as hills, or the door, wall, and floor in poem 636:

> The Way I read a Letter's this –
> 'Tis first – I lock the Door – ...
> Then – glancing narrow, at the Wall –
> And narrow at the floor ...
> Peruse how infinite I am

or presuppose particular surroundings, like a chair, table, or vase. The setting may also be indicated by a "spatially marked" word or words:

> The Wind – *tapped* like a tired Man –
> And like a *Host* – "*Come in*"
> I boldly answered – (436, my emphasis)

Here, spatial relations can be inferred from the words in italics: a guest tapping on the door or window comes from outside and is let in by the host, who is inside her house or room and on her own territory. The lines that follow confirm these implications by naming the spatial relationship and adding some objects of scenery:

> – entered then
> My Residence within
> A Rapid – footless Guest –
> To offer whom a Chair
> Were as impossible as hand
> A Sofa to the Air

Even if the scenery is merely signalled by very scant descriptive elements, it can be complemented by analogy to more detailed descriptions of the same setting, which seems justifiable practice when analysing "one long poem".

Thus, Emily Dickinson's lyric speaker, by whom the space is perceived and in relation to whom it is oriented,[1] usually finds herself in specific surroundings, as the space is to a high degree determined and oftentimes dominant over the other elements of the presented world. There are a number of descriptive nature poems, or poems of the landscape, in which we observe the process of constructing the setting, like the putting up of stage scenery at the theatre. Never, though, does spatial imagery exist for its own sake; it is always connotative of superimposed meanings, the result of, among other things, the essential subjectivity of lyrical space. The speaker is invariably located at the centre of the represented world in that the latter is viewed through her eyes; consequently, her shifting of perspectives and vantage points induces varying orientation, status, and character of scenery. Her perception of space is reflected, above all, by the manner in which scenery comes into being in a poem.[2]

In this poem about rain, objects seem to appear only at the moment rain starts falling on them:

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[1] According to Ingarden, literary space is always oriented: represented space "is a kind of space that corresponds to perceptually given space. It must then be exhibited, so to say , through the medium of orientational space. In particular, orientational spaces must thus be used which belong to the represented psychic subjects 'perceiving' this represented space. If this is the case, the question arises where the center of orientation ('the zero point of orientation', as Husserl calls it) is to be found. That it is always to be found within the represented world is indubitable" (Ingarden 1973: 230).

[2] This gradual, temporal presentation of space is necessitated by the poem's unavoidable linearity. Joseph Frank speaks of "the time-logic of language": "since language proceeds in time, it is impossible to approach ... simultaneity of perception except by breaking up temporal sequence" (Frank 1974: 88).

A Drop fell on the Apple Tree –
Another – on the Roof –
And Half a Dozen kissed the Eaves –
And made the Gables laugh –

A few went out to help the Brook
That went to help the Sea –
Myself Conjectured were they Pearls –
What Necklaces could be – ... (794)

Since perception focuses on the drops, the description is dynamic, governed by their falling, and brings the effect of randomness and discreteness of the scenery, creating the impression of spontaneous, disorderly joy in nature which has been longing for rain.

Besides the specific, well-defined settings and the prevalence of spatial images in the majority of Dickinson poems, another aspect of their spatialisation is the fact that the poet conceives of other phenomena in spatial terms. Because of space being the basic dimension of human existence, such perception, in varying degrees, is a universal experience (Genette 1976: 227 ff.); in Dickinson's poetry, however, it finds a very strong poetic expression. First of all, Dickinsonian time is chiefly cyclic, circular, manifesting itself through the repeated sequence of seasons and experienced through the medium of visual perception, i.e. the observed changes in the world's appearance. The poet's usual lack of preoccupation with the passage of time (the epigrammatic no. 781, "To wait an Hour – is long – If love be just beyond – " being one exception)[3] again seems related to the spatial situation of her speaker: isolated in her enclosure, cut off from the trivial worldly affairs, she can stop or neglect time, whose lapse does not disrupt "the stasis of an overwhelming emotion" (Salska 1982: 142) or affect the permanent state of unfulfilment.

Similarly, loss and death are rendered in spatial rather than psychological terms, as the speaker's feelings are projected into spatial images. The well-known poem 49, most often read primarily as a reflection of facts from Emily Dickinson's biography and provoking speculations as to its historical referents – a reading which dismisses the lyric's more important poetic aspects – contains distinct spatial modelling:

[3] Griffith argues to the contrary: he claims that traumatic experience of time is Dickinson's chief preoccupation, an obsession which governs her whole life and poetry. He goes so far as to suggest that "Emily Dickinson turned indoors on the premise that, once she had got inside, she could best find release from temporality" (Griffith 1964: 106). Furthermore, he derives this obsession from Dickinson's childhood experience with the clock, reported by Higginson, an experience whose very authenticity, let alone significance, is unverifiable and by no means self-evident: she claimed to have been incapable of understanding how the clock worked till the age of fifteen (Griffith 1964: 278).

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

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

Space is represented in a vertical order: below, *the sod*, where the dead are removed; above, the domain of God and angels (behind the door); between, the place where the speaker resides. Death, inflicted from above (by God the Burglar), eventuates the person's disappearance from the space of the living into the below – there is no mention here of him or her being taken to heaven. Likewise, consolation and "reimbursement" come from above, brought by the descending angels. Besides, the image of a beggar is combined with that of the door, which connotes God's distance, inapproachability, and his position of power. The speaker's change of tone in addressing him – from the accusing *Burglar* through the more neutral Puritan *Banker* to the pleading *Father* – might be effected by God's reluctance to open the door again.

The third and chief aspect of spatialisation in Emily Dickinson's poetry is the fact that the poems present a definite, easily reconstructed model of the universe. The first level of this model is the topography of the setting which emerges from the poems when read together. There is a village with streets of houses, a church and a cemetery; the houses have gardens full of flowers; trees grow along the road. The village is surrounded by meadows and there is a forest nearby. On one side the place is bordered by the sea-coast, on the other – by mountains or hills. Beyond them is the unfamiliar, unknown, impenetrable space, stretching into infinity. At this level – the level of description – the setting seems ordinary and may tempt identification with the real town of Amherst, which is actually mentioned in poems 179 and 215. Topography, nevertheless, is just the starting point for the spatial organisation of Dickinson's universe. Besides, it is only approximate: the mutual situation of particular objects or areas is for Dickinson unimportant, hence not specified. What does concern the poet is the orientation of presented space and its perception by the speaker.

For Emily Dickinson objects do not primarily exist together, in relation to one another, but in individual, sometimes momentary relations to the lyrical I, or the central consciousness.[4] There is no holistic, unifying vision which would once and for all fix the position and connotations of particular elements of the

[4] Salska's term (Salska 1982).

world. The result is discreteness of the microcosm, observed e.g., in poem 794 (quoted above); discreteness paralleled by the discontinuity of the macrocosm, which is cut up into separate areas without a spatial passage from one to another. Such structuring of space reflects Emily Dickinson's artistic vision: a poet of doubts, questions, and contradictions, she could not have created a complete, continuous, and conclusive vision of space. The Dickinsonian consciousness in its various states projects spatial images, or at least determines their perception, rather than reflects them. Renunciation in all its aspects, including the renunciation of a unifying principle (Salska 1982: 138), entails the rejection – and impossibility – of a unified spatial form. And *vice versa* – a unified, continuous space would eliminate the cracks and tensions inherent in Dickinson's world, and thereby virtually deprive her of her poetic *raison d'etre*.

At the level of superimposed meanings, renunciation manifests itself in the speaker's elected or self-imposed enclosure and her reluctance, refusal, or inability to cross borders. Dickinsonian space is organised into concentric circles which surround the speaker, situated at their centre:[5] her room, her (or her father's) house, the garden, the meadow or countryside, and finally, the boundless sea which surrounds them all. The fundamental spatial category in Emily Dickinson's poetry is the border, an impenetrable barrier restraining movement and perception, and responsible for the discontinuity of space. The border divides presented space into heteromorphic territories, separating the familiar from the unknown and the protective from the perilous, but also the confining from the liberating. In the Dickinsonian universe, the borders between territories are usually enforced by firm physical barriers: the room and house are guarded against intruders by walls, as well as the closed door and window; the garden is encircled by a fence ("The Fence is the only Sanctuary. That no one invades because no one suspects it.")[6], and the whole domesticated countryside bounded by the mountains and sea. The sea stretches far beyond the limits of perception, out into infinity, just like the unseen, unattainable area behind the hills.

[5] Salska visualises a Dickinson poem as "consisting of 'center' and 'circumference' with the rings in between missing", adding that "the 'center' provides a springboard for 'the leap' [into infinity] and, consequently, receives more attention" (Salska 1982: 141). This statement might just as well be applied to spatial modelling in a poem and, when slightly supplemented, to the spatial structure of the Dickinsonian universe – which again proves the correlation between artistic vision and the structuring of space. The word "circumference", echoing St Augustine's definition of God (Salska 1982: 141), is a key term in Emily Dickinson's poetry, albeit one not always easy to define. As Anderson puts it, "The emphasis is on the notion of encompassing, suggesting an extension outward to include something longer than can be found at a particular static point" (Anderson 1963: 55). Dickinson sems to use the word both for the inside of a circle and for the line surrounding it. For a discusion of the symbolic meanings of the term, see Anderson (1963: 55 ff.), Sherwood (1968: 218 ff.).

[6] Letter 359, to Mrs. Holland, 1871.

Despite the organisation into subsequent circles, however, Emily Dickinson's universe displays no spatial gradation of familiarity or domestication. Dickinson thinks in oppositions (Salska 1982: 142). In an individual poem only one border is activated, marking a sharp contrast between confinement and freedom, the domesticated and the foreign, the earthly and the transcendent, or, to use Salska's words, the enclosed centre and the open, endless circumference, as e.g., in poem 128:

> Who built this little Alban House
> And shut the windows down so close
> My spirit cannot see?
> Who'll let me out some gala day
> With implements to fly away,
> Passing Pomposity?

or poem 500, where the hummingbird, unlike the speaker, defies any spatial restraint:

> Within my Garden rides a Bird
> Upon a single Wheel –
> Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
> As 'twere a travelling Mill – ...
>
> Till every spice is tasted –
> And then his Fairy Gig
> Reels in remoter atmospheres –
> And I rejoin my Dog ...

The space presented in a poem of "centre" and "circumference" might be compared to rings on water surface when we throw a pebble: the first wave round the centre is always distinct, the other rings blur as they radiate further and further outwards. Similarly, the non-activated borders blend into circumference.

The domesticated centre is the speaker's territory, where she is in the position of absolute control. In order to retain this position, Dickinson chooses to stay within the borders of the familiar, tempting as journeys into the unknown might be.[7] Or, indeed, she has to stay within these borders if she is to respect the laws she herself has established.

[7] Discussing the celebrated poem 520, "I started early – took my Dog", Salska speaks of Dickinson's "shifting grounds", i.e. retreating onto her own territory where she can face reality on her own terms and where even the seductive sea turns into a courteous wooer (Salska 1982: 93 ff.).

Over the Fence –
Strawberries – grow –
Over the fence –
I could climb – if I tried, I know –
Berries are nice.

But – if I stained my Apron –
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear, – I guess if He were a Boy –
He'd – climb – if He could! (251)

Even the child identity, which in the light-hearted, ecstatic poem 214 ("I taste a liquor never brewed – ") enables the *Little Tippler* to evade the set patterns of "becoming" behaviour and, more importantly, to suspend the self-imposed principle of renunciation and fully participate in nature's feast, would not justify a violation of the border. The fence is a serious physical obstacle for the child speaker – the broken, pausing rhythm seems to render the effort of climbing a little up on the fence so as to see what is behind it – but one which could be overcome: "I could climb – if I tried." However, she does not dare to break the rules, and it is by no means obvious that they have been established by God rather than by herself. Quoting God's authority may be just the child's excuse for giving in to her fear of the unknown and reluctance to step out of her territory. A Freudian reading, virtually invited by the images of fence, forbidden fruit, and stained apron, renders the poem one of desired but failed transgression.[8]

The mountains, which constitute the last circle – the furthest and most inaccessible border that hides the mysterious unknown – acquire a magic quality. Standing between "this" and "that" part of the Dickinsonian universe (and also between life and eternity), they seem to belong to both and can, so to speak, freely transfer from one to the other. It is usually at sunrise and sunset, the most magic times of the day, that the *ancestors of dawn* (975) undergo a metamorphosis: they come to life and "In Purple syllables The Day's Adventures tell" (1016), or become a pasture for the *Herd of Opal Cattle* or the crew on huge ships in the sea-sky (628). The crossing of this impenetrable border is an act of such bravery and moment that the whole world stands motionless to observe the traveller, its solemn stillness a backdrop for his upward climb.

[8] Dickinson frequently conceives of sexual initiation in spatial terms – see poem 398 ("I had not minded – Walls – ") and Sherwood's reading of it: the images of walls, rocks, ane citadel, says the critic, produce "the underlying image ... of enforced virginity" (Sherwood 1968: 89 ff.).

The Road was lit with Moon and star –
The Trees were bright and still –
Descried I – by the distant Light
A Traveller on a Hill –
To magic Perpendiculars
Ascending, though Terrene –
Unknown his shimmering ultimate –
But he indorsed the sheen – (1450)

Dickinson seems to be watching the distant scene with admiring awe, unlike in poem 1603, where the prospect of a solitary journey into the realm of the mysterious causes the secret to lose its appeal:

Behind the hill is sorcery
And everything unknown,
But will the secret compensate
For climbing it alone?

The boundaries of the familiar world mark the end of measurable distances. Behind the border space expands abruptly; everything is simply "far away", too far to be attainable. Little does it matter whether the place should be a moor, the sea, Brazil or Italy, or just the other side of the hill – for Dickinson they all exist as "other countries", as they would for the child the described in a late letter: "A little Boy ran away from Amherst a few Days ago, and when asked where he was going, replied 'Vermont or Asia'."[9]

Dickinson's use of place names is one instance of her play with signification. Endowing them with symbolic meanings, she stretches the distance between signifier and signified, disrupts their conjunction and forces them into new relationships. *Alps*, *Italy*, or *India* do not denote places on the map or in the real world; rather, they are her private symbols, whose signifieds have been created by metonymy, the whole standing for a single feature. Thus, as Johnson notes, "Cashmere and the Indies typify opulence ... Ophir, Potosi, Teneriffe, the Himmaleh represent distance, wealth, limitless vista, unassailable height, and all are awesome prospects" (Johnson 1955: 136).[10]

[9] Letter 685, to Mrs. Holland, 1881.

[10] Calvary and Gethsemane, on the other hand, are place symbols of a different character – their association with agony (Johnson 1955: 136) is determined by the original biblical context of the Passion rather than private. Used to denote Emily Dickinson's own agony, however, they are signs of her identification with the suffering Christ.

It is renunciation and the elected enclosure that turn remote places into symbols and render them so enchanting. Wilbur's phrase "delectable distance" sums up this relationship perfectly:

> Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire, and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. *And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances.* Far-off words like "Brazil" or "Circassian" appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned-for (Wilbur 1963: 133, my emphasis).

Brazil must be denied; otherwise it would lose its "Brazilian" quality – that of the Promised Land, a longed-for escape from the agonising, or only dull, everyday existence.

> I asked no other thing
> No other – was denied –
> I offered Being – for it –
> The Mighty Merchant sneered –
>
> Brazil? He twirled a Button –
> Without a glance my way –
> "But – Madam – is there nothing else –
> That We can show – Today?" (621)

This short poem is very Dickinsonian in that it offers many insoluble ambiguities. While the Mighty Merchant is the Puritan businesslike God, his behaviour in the second stanza defies easy explanation. Although he sneers, which indicates a proud and disrespectful attitude, he seems clearly embarrassed by the speaker's entreaty – "He twirled a Button – Without a glance my way" – either because of its weight and frankness, or because of the highest price she has offered in the desperate effort to propitiate him; but, on the other hand, his embarrassment may be due to his sheer incapability of gratifying the speaker's request (in which case the attributive *mighty* would stand in ironic contrast with the actual state of affairs). Similarly, the final *Today*, which stands out in the Merchant's question, may either mean that the speaker has to wait longer for her Promised Land, or, added after a hesitant pause, imply that for her there is no Promised Land at all.[11] The three words singled out by alliteration (*Being*, *Button*, *Brazil*) appear to sum up the basic conflict and generate tension: the remote, delightful *Brazil* is contrasted with the trivial *Button*, which by association with

[11] This reading would probably be accepted by feminist critics, who argue that Emily Dickinson was oppressed by the patriarchal God and his laws (cf. McNeil 1986: 59 ff.).

thread, needle, and the feminine job of sewing (see e.g., the dressmaking imagery of poem 617) may symbolise the mundane housekeeping activities. Thus, twirling the button, the Merchant is sending the speaker back to her realm, the "proper" place of her *Being*.

The pertinence of such a reading is confirmed by an early letter, whose voice strikes as similar to that of the poem's lyric speaker:

> I am yet the Queen of court if regalia be dust, and dirt, have three loyal subjects, whom I'd rather relieve from service. Mother is still an invalid tho' a partially restored one – Father and Austin still clamor for food, and I, like a martyr am feeding them. Wouldn't you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance ...

The contrast of button and Brazil epitomises the basic Dickinsonian opposition of enclosure (whether cherished or loathed) and openness, and their respective domestication or unfamiliarity. At the level of description, the two territories are contrasted by varying the density and scale of presented space.[13] The speaker's territory is filled with objects, real and palpable, the ones she handles or encounters in everyday life. Their size is adequate to the limited area, which, apart from the household articles, is best observed in her choice of nature imagery: "Emily Dickinson ... hardly notices trees at all", Whicher remarks, while flowers of different species appear in her poems all the time (Whicher 1957: 257-258). Similarly, animal imagery favours the small creatures (apart from the dog, which, however, enjoys a special status as the speaker's most faithful friend and companion) – birds, bees, and butterflies, whose evanescence and absolute freedom, standing in sharp contrast with her own overwhelming sense of boundaries and inability to escape ("I never hear the word 'escape' Without a quicker blood, ... But I tug childish at my bars Only to fail again!" [77]) is for Dickinson invariably fascinating.

The unfamiliar, infinite, and unattainable outside, on the other hand, is spacious, empty, composed of "non-objects": the air, the sky, natural phenomena (the rainbow, sunrise and sunset, the rotating seasons perceived in spatial terms or personified); the sun, moon and stars; finally, the boundless sea and the hills, the latter frequently rendered unreal. The intangibility and unattainability of the non-objects is enhanced by the manner of their depiction: in contrast to the everyday concrete imagery of domestication used in describing immediate surroundings, they are portrayed in terms of precious stones, vivid colours, and flit-

[12] Letter 36, to Abiah Root, 1850.

[13] Cf. Łotman's remarks on the opposition between ordinary (real) and magical space in Gogol's stories, which generally apply to Dickinson as well: "One is filled with objects of firm materiality ... , the other with non-objects: these are natural phenomena, astral phenomena, air, the outline of a town or village, mountains, rivers, vegetation" (Łotman 1977: 226).

ting, dreamlike images, which all bring to mind the exotic opulence of Dickinson's Indies, as in poem 737 ("The Moon was but a Chin of Gold"), or 304:

> The Day came slow – till Five o'clock –
> Then sprang before the Hills
> Like Hindered Rubies – or the Light
> A sudden Musket – spills –
>
> The Purple could not keep the East –
> The Sunrise shook abroad
> Like Breadths of Topaz – packed a Night –
> The Lady just unrolled – ...
>
> The Orchard sparkled like a Jew –
> How mighty 'twas – to be
> A Guest in this stupendous place –
> The Parlor – of the Day –

The appearance of objects or use of everyday images for metaphors and similes in the poems of the open bring the effect of further defamiliarisation (Łotman 1977: 226): they are huge and surprising – out of proportion and out of place, like the grotesque animised train in "I like to see it lap the Miles" (585), the *Leaden Sieves* sifting snow (311), or the wind's "knead[ing] the Grass – As Women do a Dough" (824). Besides, they do not perpetually exist in the foreign space but show up and vanish, which adds to the instability and unpredictability of the unfamiliar.

Domesticated space, on the other hand, is essentially stable and unchanging (Łotman 1977: 226); most importantly, it is always filled with the same people (or always empty of persons other than the speaker) and the same objects. Only birds, bees, and butterflies may come and go, but again they always do it. If changes do occur, they are predictable and regular, as in poem 445, in which the speaker, who died "just this time, last year", remembers and misses the farm life in terms of a repeated sequence of agricultural jobs and holidays:

> I thought just how Red – Apples wedged
> The Stubble's joints between –
> And the Carts stooping round the fields
> To take the Pumpkins in –
>
> I wondered which would miss me, least,
> And when Thanksgiving, came,
> If Father'd multiply the plates –
> To make an even Sum – ...

Any unexpected change upsets the familiarity of the setting, be it a storm (824), snow (311), or the always too sudden outburst of spring in March (736).

The special status that the close and enclosed space enjoys is again the result of renunciation: rendering distances delectable, it simultaneously renders the immediate surroundings more significant. Perception restrained to a limited area grows more acute, and along with increased sensitivity becomes a more effective instrument of cognition, although full insight into the nature of things is never possible. Nonetheless, it is with the aim of approaching insight that the Dickinsonian speaker singles out objects of attention and focuses on minute details. She sees things separately so as to see them better, and individualises, or singularises them to the point of talking of *a Dew* (328) or *a Hay* (333). Such perception seems responsible for the discreteness of Dickinson's microcosms: she is a poet of extremes and will not compromise the intensity of perception for its scope if a unifying vision is unattainable anyway.

The celebrated poem 328 is an excellent example of the poet's perception and presentation of detail:[14]

> A Bird came down the Walk –
> He did not know I saw –
> He bit an Angleworm in halves
> And ate the fellow, raw, ...
>
> He glanced with rapid eyes
> That hurried all around –
> They looked like frightened Beads, I thought –
> He stirred his Velvet Head
>
> Like one in danger, Cautious,
> I offered him a Crumb
> And he unrolled his feathers
> And rowed him softer home –
>
> Than Oars divide the Ocean ...

Here, Dickinson employs her characteristic telescoping technique (see also e.g., poem 173, "A fuzzy fellow, without feet ..."). While the opening two lines only note the bird's appearance in the speaker's garden, the following ones shorten the distance and narrow the range of vision to the bird and its "polite" behaviour (cf. Salska 1982: 138), rendering the scale of scenery to suit the "guest's" size; as if creating a secondary centre of orientation located in the bird. Stanza three

[14] For a brilliant discussion of this poem, see Anderson (1963: 118 ff.).

abruptly breaks the light-hearted tone as the vantage point is brought even closer: the bird's eyes "like frightened Beads" reveal that the hitherto apparent domesticity was only make believe. So sudden is the change that it is not clear who behaves "like one in danger" – the bird, the speaker, who by this time has almost identified with it, or both. Finally, the guest flies away, and "as ... the speaker's eyes follow his flight, infinity of space opens in sharp contrast to the (playful) domesticity of the previous scene" (Salska 1982: 138, my parentheses).

Sensitivity to the phenomena of nature and acuteness of perception render Emily Dickinson a master in depicting small objects in motion. An unsurpassed example is the description of a 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 – (1463)

The first part of the poem (lines 1-4) depicts the bird and its presence in the garden: the accumulation of *r*'s renders the swiftness of its trembling flight, while the alliteration and syntactic identity of *A Route of Evanescence – A Resonance of Emerald – A Rush of Cochineal*, alongside the absence of verbs (which normally imply temporal sequence), create the impression of simultaneity; as if superimpose one image on another, setting the poem itself in revolving motion – like that of the Wheel. The four lines that follow slow down this speeding tempo: the bird is gone and the garden restores itself to order after the visit, or invasion, of the beautiful, almost unreal guest, trying to recover from the astonishment. The hummingbird's disappearance is accompanied on the phonetic level by the absence (disappearance) of initial *r* sounds. The only initial *r* in the final phrase *Morning's Ride* seems a fleeting memory of the bird's swift motion.

Much of the poem's effect is due to the elusiveness of its imagery. Dickinson, to use Hagenbüchle's words, combines precision with indeterminacy (cf. Hagenbüchle, quoted in Salska 1982: 183); she frees words from their representational function (Salska 1982: 183), breaking the conjunction between signifier and signified: apart from *the Blossom on the Bush* – the one concrete image which indicates the setting – the whole poem happens at the level of signifiers. The signifieds are absent, or so elusive they defy any referentiality, and it is the resulting immateriality of the bird that led one critic to call poem 1463 "a riddle about the wind" (Dickenson 1985: 66).

A similar technique is employed in this early poem, which too seems to speak of whirling motion:

> A sepal, petal and a thorn
> Upon a common summer's morn –
> A flash of Dew – A Bee or two –
> A Breeze – a caper in the trees –
> And I'm a Rose! (19)

Interestingly, the speaker of this poem, which depicts the creation of a rose – the making up of it from separate elements – only materialises in the ultimate line, with the delighted cry of surprise: "And I'm a Rose!" The centre of spatial orientation seems to be located within the whirl of objects, where the rose is being created – the absence of verbs again speeds the tempo and seems to render the swiftness, or instantaneousness, of the creation. Creation or, perhaps, transformation of a human speaker into a rose, since at the same time the poem resembles a recipe, and instructions given by witches in fairy tales to those who seek their advice. The imagery brings to mind associations with impressionist painting, where the marks of the paintbrush only form a picture when seen from a distance. Here, the scattered signifieds may only be somehow located from the perspective of the final exclamation. Italo Calvino seems to have meant this elusiveness of referents (observed in both no. 19 and 1463) when he quoted poem 19 as an example of lightness understood as

> Relieving the language, whereby meanings float on the verbal tissue, which is as if devoid of weight, until they acquire a similarly rarefied consistency (Calvino 1996: 20).

Emily Dickinson's elected enclosure brings about a special significance of the house image in her poetry (cf. McNeil 1986: 112-132).[15] Endowed with the universal, culturally determined semantics of an enclosed shelter separated from its surroundings and the *centrum mundi* rendering the universe meaningful,[16] the house is also the centre of the Dickinsonian macrocosm in that it constitutes the first, immediate ring around the lyric speaker and the necessary protection against the chaos, abundance, and unpredictability of the outer world.[17] The let-

[15] McNeil devotes a whole chapter of her study to a discussion of the role and ambiguities of the Dickinsonian house, considering them from a combined feminist, psychological and semiotic perspective.

[16] For a thorough survey of cultural, anthropological, and literary symbolism of the house/home, see Legeżyńska (1996: 7-35).

[17] As Sherwood argues, "To Emily Dickinson some 'house', some sheltering framework, was as necessary for her spirit as for her verse. ... In her poetry 'wilderness' connotes terror, waste, and destruction. ... She likes her land domesticated ... and above all she demands a roof over her head" (Sherwood 1968: 123 ff.).

ters overtly declare Dickinson's separation, withdrawal, and strong reluctance to leave the sheltering walls:

> You asked me to come and see you – I must speak of that. I thank you, Abiah, but I don't go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand, and then I do it obstinately, and draw back if I can.

Nevertheless, even though the Dickinsonian poetic house does afford shelter for her speaker to hide and cut herself off from the overwhelming abundance of summer:

> The Flowers – appealed – a timid Throng –
> I reinforced the Door –
> Go blossom to the Bees – I said –
> And trouble Me – no More – (793)

or safely observe a storm which dare not invade the sanctuary:

> The Wind begun to knead the Grass –
> As Women do a Dough – ...
>
> The Waters Wrecked the Sky –
> But overlooked my Father's House –
> Just quartering a Tree – (824)

it still is a building rather than a home, perhaps owing to the fact that home is invariably associated with the warmth of family life (Legeżyńska 1996: 9), apparently missing from Dickinson's poetic world centred around an isolated individual.[19] "I never felt at Home – Below – " (413), the poet declares, and when she speaks of home, it is in her distinctive "unreal" mode, describing the non-extant: "I learned – at least – what Home *could be* ... This seems a Home – And Home *is not* – " (944, my emphasis).

Thus, if home does at all exist for Dickinson, it certainly does not exist here and now: just like heaven, home seems to be "what I cannot reach". When the Dickinsonian speaker is indoors, she refers to the place as "house" or never mentions it. When she finds herself outside, though, and cannot get in, the house

[18] Letter 166, to Abiah Root, 1854.

[19] The letters, especially the early ones, do not quite confirm this impression. For example, the 17-year-old Dickinson wrote to Abiah Root: "You may laugh at the idea, that I cannot be happy when away from home, but you must remember that I have a very dear home & that this is my first trial in the way of absence for any length of time in my life" (Letter 18, 1847). The passage quoted, however, is in keeping with her poetic practice of speaking of home when she is not there.

becomes "home", as in poem 609, where the speaker "dared not enter" for fear of being a stranger:

> I years had been from Home
> And now before the Door
> I dared not enter, lest a Face
> I never saw before
>
> Stare solid into mine
> And ask my Business there – ...

The door, which in this poem forms an "awful", frightening barrier, is along with the window a particularly marked element of the house:[20] whereas the size and shape of the enclosed space is determined by the walls and the roof, it is the door and windows, or, strictly speaking, the gesture of closing them or the fact of having closed them which actually creates the boundary and completes the enclosure – as in poem 303, where "The Soul selects her own Society – Then – shuts the Door – ". Opening doors and windows, on the other hand, cancels the spatial division, or at least enables communication between the two sides of the (momentarily non-existent) border:

> Not knowing when the Dawn will come,
> I open every door,
> Or has it Feathers, like a Bird,
> Or Billows, like a Shore – (1619)

Despite their basically similar function, doors and windows differ in their semantics (Legeżyńska 1996: 13): while the door, usually closed, is in Dickinson poems a sign of separation or unattainability, an awesome barrier that cannot be forced – the window signifies a less finite division. An indirect, hence safe way of contact with the outside and a frame for the view into the open (McNeil 1986: 116 ff.), it appears to somehow tame the essentially foreign and threatening outer space, and is more often associated with enchantment than with fright:

> By my Window have I for Scenery
> Just a Sea – with a Stem –
> If the Bird and the Farmer – deem it a "Pine"
> The Opinion will serve – for them – ...

[20] Eliade calls doors and windows "places of opening" which enable the passage from one cosmic order to another (Legeżyńska 1996: 12).

Of its Voice – to affirm – when the Wind is within –
Can the Dumb – define the Divine?
The Definition of Melody – is –
That Definition is none – ... (797)[21]

In the poems of death, the central place of the house is taken by the grave. Emily Dickinson frequently refers to graves as houses ("Father does not live with us now – he lives in a new house"[22]) and depicts them accordingly:

The grave my little cottage is,
Where "Keeping house" for thee
I make my parlor orderly
And lay the marble tea. (1743)

a metaphor which seems to stem from underlying identification rather than be mere euphemism. Along with the role, the grave takes on the basic ambiguities of the house image and the spatial oppositions it involves.

Most often, the grave is a sanctuary which offers absolute protection from danger, pain, and, paradoxically, death: "Sweet – safe – Houses – Glad – gay – Houses – Sealed so stately tight – ... No Bald Death – affront their Parlors – No Bold Sickness come" (457), as well as shields from the unbearable profusion of experience or the triviality of worldly affairs:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone! (216)

But sometimes the enclosure becomes a claustrophobic, suffocating confinement with the speaker yearning for liberation – "Who built this little Alban House And shut the windows down so close My spirit cannot see?" (128). While in the house she could abolish the border herself by opening the door or at least was able to look at open space out of the window, the spatial restraint of the grave is absolute, depriving the speaker of her position of control – she has to wait until she is freed by the One in power: "Who'll let me out some gala day?" (128).

Renunciation is the organising principle of spatial form in Emily Dickinson's poetry, inducing the circular modelling of her poetic universe as well as the impenetrability of borders between subsequent circles. However, nothing is ever final with Dickinson, and the borders are no exception. Her poetry asserts the truth of Emerson's words, "There are no fixtures to men if we appeal to consciousness" (Emerson 1940: 282). Just as poetic creation can compensate for absence and unfulfilment, poetic imagination, which has the capacity for transcending any extant boundaries, offsets enclosure and the lack of experiential freedom: "To shut our eyes is Travel."[23] The mind knows of no spatial limitations since it comprises the whole universe, as if in a reversed Romantic microcosm-macrocosm relationship: "The Brain – is wider than the Sky – For – put them side by side – The one the other will contain" (632).

[21] For an excellent discussion of this poem, see McNeil (1986: 119 ff.).
[22] Letter 414, to Louise and Frances Norcross, 1874.

Thus, not having had the experience actually proves inspiring, since it stimulates the poet's imaginative faculties. Emily Dickinson writes of unseen places, overtly declaring that she has not seen them – "In lands I never saw – they say Immortal Alps look down" (124); "I have never seen 'Volcanoes'" (175); "I never saw a Moor" (1052) – because thereby she gains greater liberty with their actualisation in her poems: she may concretise far-off regions without being restricted by referentiality and the guiding instructions of empirical cognition. Imagination and intuitive knowledge go beyond the borders of this world as easily as they reach the hidden area behind the hills: the moor, the sky, or transcendental reality are equally accessible (by intuition) or equally inaccessible (in experience) since, being past the range of visual perception, they all exist primarily in the poet's consciousness, which bears the final responsibility for her spatial situation.

The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest –
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou –

Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy –
Captivity is Consciousness –
So's Liberty. (384)

Enclosure and entrapment, as well as impenetrability or non-existence of borders, are above all states of the mind, which can transcend the spatial dimension altogether, but also, in its omnipotence, may create its own limitations.

[23] Letter 354, to Mrs. Holland, 1870.

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