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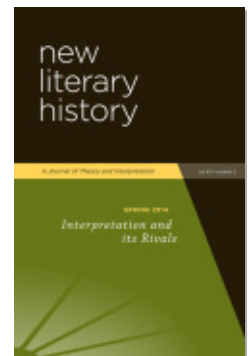
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## On ED's 754/764

Susan Stewart

**L**AST SPRING I WAS TEACHING a poem I have often taught, or often tried to teach: Emily Dickinson's "My life had stood—a loaded gun." This work, known in the Thomas Johnson edition of Dickinson's work as number 754, and in the Ralph Franklin edition as number 764, has been described as "the single most difficult poem Dickinson wrote."<sup>1</sup> Since 1930, when the poet/scholar Genevieve Taggard suggested that the poem is "about an outlaw and his bride," this single lyric of six quatrains has prompted more than fifty articles and at least two books.<sup>2</sup> Taggard contended that Dickinson's "ferocious poem . . . ends on an appalling discovery which applied to Emily's whole behaviour; it shows how, at times, she loathed her scheme of renunciation, her metaphysic of love."<sup>3</sup> In 1970 the psychoanalyst and critic John Cody claimed that the poem remains "just short of autism in the obscurity and strangeness of its symbols"—a work subject "only to the kind of interpretation that renders intelligible dreams and schizophrenic communications."<sup>4</sup> Commentators throughout the early 1970s continued to read the poem as a "love poem," until the advent of the feminist movement at mid-decade led to many readings of the poem as a statement on the position of the woman poet—an argument powerfully developed by Adrienne Rich's influential 1976 essay, "Vesuvius at Home."

Over nearly a century, the multiplication of critical arguments and observations about the work has produced little agreement, not only with regard to what the poem is "about," but also as to the poem's most fundamental qualities: Who is speaking? Who is listening? What are the parts of the poem and the connection between its parts? To what do its images refer? What is the significance of the poem's opening lines? What is the significance of its closure? Since there are no common answers to these questions—the kinds of questions that we routinely bring to any poem—the work seems stranded in underinterpretation. At the same time, the abundance of critical, even if incommensurable, responses might lead us to ask if the poem has been overinterpreted. Is there a continuum along which underinterpretation and overinterpretation somehow meet?

When, as individuals and generations, we read and teach a work, engaging it closely over time, it changes as we ourselves change; although the work has a fixed form, our perspectives and interpretations do not. As Dickinson's contemporary Thoreau wrote of point of view in *Walden*, our experience of finite objects in the world is like that of a traveler who finds "a mountain outline varies with every step, and it has an infinite number of profiles."<sup>5</sup> From this principle, we recognize that Dickinson's poem is not changing—we have the work as she left it for us—rather we, her readers, begin from new perspectives and assumptions. Thoreau's insights anticipate Wittgenstein's well-known thoughts on perception as a matter of aspect—where seeing is always seeing *as*, and so interpretation and seeing are bound up with each other, even in those situations where aspect-blindness holds.<sup>6</sup> Assuming that a fixed form—a mountain or a printed text—can pose an indeterminate, if not infinite, number of views and frames indeed seems to be a reasonable way to proceed as both an individual critic and as a member of a community of critics—that community, not only of peers, but also of the dead and the unborn, that will sanction or reject, in the end, one's readings.

Even so, where does the indeterminate establish its boundary with the infinite? This question deeply preoccupied Umberto Eco in his 1990 Tanner Lectures on "Interpretation and Overinterpretation," delivered at Clare Hall, Cambridge. There Eco distinguishes Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of the unlimited process of semiosis itself from the hermeneutic bound to an object: "To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it 'riverruns' merely for its own sake."<sup>7</sup> Eco goes on to suggest that interpretation is limited by what he calls the intention of the text, which he is at pains to distinguish from the intention of the author—the latter, he concludes is "very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of the text."<sup>8</sup> What, then, is this "intention of the text"? Late in his lectures, Eco explains, "The text intention is not displayed by the textual surface. Or, if it is displayed, it is so in the sense of the purloined letter. One has to decide to 'see' it. Thus it is possible to speak of text intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text intention."<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on "seeing" something that is both present and conjectured, depending on the reader's approach, returns us to the notion of aspect and puts into question whether the perception is "in" the text or "in" the reader's assumptions.

Eco concludes that a text can mean many things, but not everything—for the principle of noncontradiction eventually would be violated. And

he contends that a reader can be guided by the cultural and linguistic milieu of a text even in the absence of any knowledge of the author. A message in a bottle, he explains—that is, a message with no determinable context—must be recognizable as a message. (Although Eco does not say so, a message in a bottle nevertheless must be, along with the purloined letter, one of a handful of paradigmatic “highly interpretable” objects.) In the end, as Eco surveys some critics’ misreadings of his own fiction, he indicates that overinterpretation is not a matter of quantity (or too much interpretive energy spent on any given text), but instead, quality—that is, the overinterpreter has been led astray by his or her mistaken line of thought, like a paranoid whose readings of what people are saying about him or her are wrong even though he or she nevertheless is in truth a topic of conversation.

A decade earlier, Stanley Cavell had suggested a rather more straightforward account of overinterpretation in his study of Hollywood comedies, *Pursuits of Happiness*. There, over several pages, Cavell suggests that “an interpretation must have competing interpretations” and that overinterpretation is only a problem when, as we address a text, it “steers us from completeness,” for Cavell holds that abandoning a critical account is a kind of interpretive sin.<sup>10</sup> Here Cavell, too, follows Wittgenstein, writing:

for something to be correctly regarded as an interpretation two conditions must hold. First there must be conceived to be competing interpretations possible, where “must” is a term not of etiquette but of (what Wittgenstein calls) grammar, something like logic. Hence to respond to an interpretation by saying that there must be others is correct enough but quite empty until a competing interpretation is suggested. Second, a given person may not be able to see that an alternative is so much as possible, in which case he or she will not know what it means to affirm or deny that an interpretation involves reading in, hence will have no concrete idea whether one has gone too far or indeed whether one has begun at all.

Cavell’s argument inadvertently raises the question of whether some works of art—like allegories and riddles—are so complete that they preempt the extent of their own criticism, making interpretive closure beside the point, since interpretation is already closed.

Whether poem 754/764, unpublished in Dickinson’s lifetime, has been overinterpreted or not, there is no question that critics have been steered from completeness in their account of it. From the outset, it is difficult to locate the temporal world of the poem. The speaker, moving abruptly and clearly from interior to exterior, and the objects and animals in the poem, the locations of mountains, forests, and wetlands, as well as the

poem's diction, do all evoke the everyday world of Dickinson's home in nineteenth-century Amherst. Yet these are not particular allusions and the action of the poem could be placed at any time since the invention of guns and down pillows.

Furthermore, we cannot date the manuscript of the poem with any certainty, for Dickinson bound her poems in small undated fascicles. Sharon Cameron has made a compelling case that we can learn more about Dickinson's individual poems if we consider their place in these gathered sequences. 764 is the ninth poem in fascicle 34 and is followed by nine more poems. As Cameron has noted, the first poem of that fascicle ["Bereavement in their death to feel"] recounts a death without recompense and the last one ["Essential oils are wrung"] is an account of the consolations memory affords after a death.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, fascicle 34 does not readily appear to be a sequence.<sup>12</sup> The fascicle includes a poem imagining the death of strangers, others on pain and dying, an account of the grassland songbird the bobolink, and another lyric describing the sun setting on the mountains.

Dating the poem isn't a completely hopeless task, however. We can sometimes trace allusions to contemporary events and concerns through our knowledge of Dickinson's reading habits and passages in her extant letters. A number of critics, including Dickinson's authoritative modern editors Johnson and Franklin, contend that this poem alludes to the Civil War, and they place it around 1863, dating the fascicle as a whole to 1862–63. Seeing the word "master," many critics also connect this work to a group of letters, perhaps never sent, composed between 1858 and 1862, that Dickinson addressed to a "master" who may or may not have been an erotic love interest. In the second master letter Dickinson refers to herself as a person of "backwoodsman ways." In the third, dated to 1861, she begins as well with hunting imagery: "If you saw a bullet hit a Bird—and he told you he wasn't shot—You might weep at his courtesy." She mentions as well both a bobolink and the eruptions of Vesuvius and Etna. Vesuvius did in fact erupt in 1861, as it had in 1834, 1839, 1850, and 1855, and as it would again in 1868 and 1872.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, dating this poem isn't the main problem in interpreting it. A greater difficulty lies in determining the voice of the speaker of the poem. Critics also have been puzzled as to why, if the poem celebrates an erotic relationship, the speaker would find sharing the pillow to be less appealing than guarding the master's head. And a number of words and phrases present considerable semantic confusion, including *identified*, *carried*, *speak*, *smile*, *yellow eye*, *emphatic thumb*, *power to kill*, and *power to die*.

Since Taggard's "outlaw" reading, critics addressing this poem have been unable to build a complete account based upon any particular

reading by earlier critics. The poem has been considered under many approaches: theological readings, feminist readings, and readings of the poem as a commentary on artistic process, and yet there is still no consensus about the voice of the speaker, the significance of the images and their interrelation, and the argument or weight of the poem's ending. All in all, the history of interpretations of the poem raises the possibility that a body of criticism can bury or occlude a text over time.

Consider the following brief survey of some of the criticism. In her influential 1976 essay, Rich wrote:

There is one poem which is the real "onlie begetter" of my thoughts here about Dickinson; a poem I have mused over, repeated to myself, taken into myself over many years. I think it is a poem about possession by the daemon, about the dangers and risks of such possession if you are a woman, about the knowledge that power in a woman can seem destructive, and that you cannot live without the daemon once it has possessed you. The archetype of the daemon as masculine is beginning to change, but it has been real for women up until now. But this woman poet also perceives herself as a lethal weapon.<sup>14</sup>

Rich's argument does not address the language of the poem closely. Instead, she is concerned with imagining the psychological state of Dickinson in composing the work, assuming that she is "possessed by a [male] demon," presumably the master by whom she has been "carried away," as she also imagines herself as a "lethal weapon."

But where does Rich's term "demon" find its origin? The word does not appear in the concordances to the poems of Emily Dickinson, including the comprehensive online "Emily Dickinson Lexicon." And the 1844 *Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language*, Dickinson's dictionary, ends with the following definition of contemporary usage, one far from Rich's: "in general, the word, in modern use, signifies an evil spirit or genius, which influences the conduct or directs the fortunes of mankind."<sup>15</sup>

Further, can we be sure that here and in other poems Dickinson depended upon a paradigm of male mastery in order to imagine herself as powerful? There is, in fact another (undated) poem, not cited by Rich, where Dickinson speaks in the voice of someone perfectly capable of using a gun [Johnson number 118]:

My friend attacks my friend!  
 Had I a mighty gun  
 I think I'd shoot the human race  
 And then to glory run

Here we are in a realm of tragically tautological human relationships, where using a “mighty gun” and being capable of running “to glory” express desires to be something other than human in a world unburdened by humans. Yet this imagery does not depend upon hierarchical human relationships, gendered or otherwise. And the language of the poem is speculative: “had I”; “I think”—the most powerful force in the poem is the imagination, where anything is possible, including a post-human consciousness.

In 1979, Albert Gelpi argued that the “he” in the poem was a masculine dimension of Dickinson’s own personality and not a figure separable from the speaker. He, too, relied on a semimystical term that appears neither in Dickinson’s work or in *Webster’s*—what he called “the animus.” He wrote: “Dickinson sees the chance for fulfillment in her relationship to the animus figure, indeed in her identification with him. Till he came, her life had known only inertia, standing neglected in tight places, caught at the right angles of walls: not just a corner, the first lines of the poem tell us, but corners, as though wherever she stood was thereby a constricted place. But all the time she knew that she was something other and more. Paradoxically, she attained her prerogatives through submission to the internalized masculine principle. In the words of the poem, the release of her power depended on her being ‘carried away’—rapt, ‘raped’—by her Owner and Master.”<sup>16</sup> A very high degree of retrospective imagining accompanies this reading, as we witness in the phrases “Till he came” and “But all the time she knew.” And although Gelpi says he is noticing “the words of the poem,” Dickinson’s phrase is “in corners,” not “corners”; her phrase is “carried Me away”—not “rapt,” and not “raped.”

There’s nothing in the poem that indicates the speaker is confined, let alone in a “tight corner.” If the meaning of “in corners” is obscure to us today, both the 1828 *Revised Unabridged Webster’s Dictionary* and the 1844 *Webster’s Dictionary* list “To be or keep in with, to be close or near” as one use of *in* with spatial nouns. A survey of the literature available in Dickinson’s lifetime indicates “in corners” is most often associated as well with hiding or withdrawing.<sup>17</sup> We find “skulking in corners” in *The Winter’s Tale*, Act I, Scene II. In *Wuthering Heights*, a novel of much importance in Dickinson’s pantheon of works, Heathcliff and Catherine go to see whether “the Lintons spent their Sunday evenings standing shivering in corners” as they do, along with their dog Skulker.<sup>18</sup> Louisa May Alcott writes in her 1865 collection, *Moods*, of “moping in corners.”<sup>19</sup> In *Malbone: An Oldport Romance* (1869) Dickinson’s friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson describes “feeble couples, who meandered aimlessly and got tangled in corners.”<sup>20</sup> And in an 1838 lecture at Dartmouth

College, Emerson declared, "Let us live in corners, and do chores and suffer and weep and drudge, with eyes and hearts that love the Lord."<sup>21</sup>

Gelpi also collapses the terms "Owner and Master." Dickinson, however, relies heavily on the separation of these terms by beginning in the first stanza with "Owner" and never mentioning the Owner again; in the fourth stanza, she uses "Master." Nothing in the first stanza identifies the gender of the Owner; presumably guns can be owned by men and women alike. "The Owner" is a term of objective reference and "My Master" a term of subjective relation.

In 1986 Paula Bennett argued on the one hand that the speaker of the poem is meant to represent Dickinson herself, and on the other that the speaker is talking as, imagining herself as, a gun. Bennett wrote, "Speaking through the voice of a gun, Dickinson presents herself in this poem as everything 'woman' is not: cruel not pleasant, hard not soft, emphatic not weak, one who kills not one who nurtures . . . she is proud of it, so proud that the temptation is to echo Robert Lowell's notorious description of Sylvia Plath, and say that in 'My Life had stood,' Emily Dickinson is 'hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess.'"<sup>22</sup> This set of conclusions is difficult to follow: the critic is engaged in an act of considering a gun as a volitional agent ("cruel," "hard," "emphatic," "one who kills") to be contrasted to the passive figures we find in stereotypes of women and "poetesses." Bennett's account of the speaker of the poem necessarily occludes a number of details: the speaker as "carried away," as a being who speaks and smiles, and as the guard of his or her "master's head"; nor is there any distinction between having the "power to kill" and actual killing. If in Bennett's view, Dickinson is here a gun and not a person/woman/poetess, the gun is in turn imagined as a kind of person—to confusing effect.

The situation and attitude of the speaker also poses problems for Cristanne Miller in her 1987 close reading of the images of the poem. There she proposed, a little uncertainly, "The speaker prefers guarding the master to having shared his pillow, that is, to having shared intimacy with him—primarily sexual, one would guess from the general structure of the poem."<sup>23</sup> Miller does not explain further this "general structure of the poem," but to commit the heresy of paraphrase, the poem could be described in this way: The first stanza describes a state of waiting that ends when the speaker is "carried . . . away"; the second stanza describes roaming, hunting, and a form of speaking that evokes an echo from mountains; the third stanza is an extended simile describing the speaker's smile of pleasure as like a "Vesuvian face"; the fourth stanza testifies to the end of the day of hunting as a period when the speaker guards the master's head, a duty the speaker prefers to having



shared an “eider duck’s deep pillow”; the fifth stanza is a statement of loyalty—the speaker is foe to the master’s foes and will insure, with his “yellow eye” or with his “emphatic thumb,” that no being opposes the master twice; the final, sixth, stanza is an aphoristic declaration that the speaker may live longer than the master, but that the master must live longer than the speaker, stating that this is so because the speaker has the power to kill without the power to die. A literal notion of being “carried away” ends the first stanza, and some heat and light accompany the pleasure of the smile in stanza three, but where is the implication of sexual intimacy here?

Mary Loeffelholz summed up the state of criticism of the poem in 1991, writing: “In this and other poems, Dickinson’s often violent transactions with what is ‘outside’ her reflect a situation for women poets of the dominant Anglo-American tradition. . . . The male Other who occasions her speech may also commandeer her very bodily identity, leaving no refuge of interiority that is her own.”<sup>24</sup> According to Loeffelholz, then, the gun and hunting images in the poem evoke unspecified “violent transactions” in Dickinson’s own biography; a male Other has come to occupy, in the style of the demon of Rich and the animus of Gelpi, the historical poet’s “interiority.” Wherever interiority might be, it is hard to picture an abstraction (the male Other) “commandeering” an actual bodily identity.

The most sustained and complex reading of the poem, Susan Howe’s book-length study from 1985, *My Emily Dickinson*, suggests that we not be so ready to assume Dickinson herself is the speaker of the poem. Howe notes that here, as in many of her dramatic monologues, Dickinson demonstrates “Soliloquy’s power to conceal as it reveals messages.” Howe points out that a variant for the line “power to die” is “art to die” and she concludes that the poet skillfully conflates a self-portrait as poet and thinker within a constellation of figures: “The stoic Scout-Gun’s Yellow-Bullet-Eye, is righteous, isolate, cyclopean, feminine.”<sup>25</sup>

Most recently, in a 2012 commentary on selected Dickinson poems, Helen Vendler has concluded that the poem presents “three basic ways of imagining the relation of Gun to Master. The Gun is prosthetic, it speaks for him; it belongs to him by its very identity; it kills his foes; and the Master is the only one to activate its ‘Vesuvian powers,’” or, she continues, “we could read the Master as a male Muse and the Gun as the poet.” After excoriating those “women readers” who would view the poem as a realistic, and deplorable, presentation of the killing of helpless female deer, Vendler ends her commentary with the thought that “perhaps no single allegorical meaning can be made to fit the poem perfectly.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet why assume that our critical difficulties are due to the poem being an allegory? Isn't the assumption of allegory here a kind of subterfuge—a means of claiming, by displacing, a unity we actually cannot detect in the poem's own language? In the end, critics either have viewed the poem as spoken in Dickinson's, or an otherwise human, voice or as an "it" narrative in the voice of a gun—the premise from which Vendler summarizes the gun/Master relation. Although a number of scholars have tried, the two readings cannot be brought together without great difficulty in reading the poem's imagery or lines. Confusion regarding the speaker only increases as the poem unfolds, as illustrated in this exchange from a workshop on the poem held in 1989 by three prominent Dickinson scholars, Joanne Dobson, Lillian Faderman, and Ellin Ringler-Henderson:

“. . . she says she's a deadly foe, 'none stirs' because she kills; and then she says 'On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—Or an emphatic Thumb.' The thumb is what pulls the trigger, right?

"No, the thumb cocks the top of the gun, doesn't it . . ."

"Well then, what is the emphatic thumb?"

"It's a matter of language. You could not get 'emphatic forefinger' in there with any sense, right? It's the word 'thumb.'"

"It has to do with the gun image still . . . Somebody else has to do it . . ."

"In those lines, though, it's 'I lay a yellow Eye—Or an emphatic Thumb.'"

"Well, she could lay a yellow eye if once she'd shot it, a spurt of flame comes out? It's not the eye that sights down the barrel . . ."

This goes on until someone concludes "perhaps the eye is the gun, the flash that comes from the barrel of the gun, and it's also the eye that sights down the gun."<sup>27</sup>

The poem thus has continued as a series of puzzles that extend from the most basic questions of point of view down to the meaning of individual words—as we have seen, "yellow eye," "emphatic thumb," "Vesuvian face," and more. And we come to wonder about the difference between being a master and an owner, between the power to kill and the power to die.

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So, to return to my class, as our seminar group was reading the poem in my office that day, we raised the question we usually raise when we

read a poem for the first time—"Who is talking and who is listening here?" And at that moment, someone passed in front of my office window with a dog—and the dog barked. And in the next moment, as the dog's bark awakened other memories of dogs barking, it occurred to me that our long-standing assumption that the speaker in the poem is Dickinson herself or Dickinson speaking as a gun might not be the only possibilities.

Indeed, why this insistence that Dickinson is portraying herself as a gun rather than creating a metaphor as she narrates a situation of immanent action? The expression "My life had stood—a loaded gun" can be read as an appositive of the kind that Dickinson often uses in her poems. For example, in fascicle 34 alone we find in 755 "Clove to the Root— / His Spacious Future— / Best Horizon—gone—." In 757 "The Mountains—grow unnoticed—Their Purple figures rise / Without attempt—Exhaustion— / Assistance—or Applause—." Or in 758: "Paradise—the only Palace / Fit for Her reception—now—."

Dickinson often writes riddle poems which describe a phenomenon or being by either delaying the name, or by not naming it at all: there is her beautiful riddle on a hummingbird ("A Route of Evanescence"); or we might think of her well-known poems on a bird ("Hope is a thing with feathers") and on a snake ("A narrow fellow in the grass"). The hummingbird, bird, and snake are not read as allegories of Dickinson's existential condition or position as a woman poet. Nor is she the speaker in this early poem J19/F25:

A sepal—petal—and a thorn  
 Upon a common summer's morn—  
 A flask of Dew—A Bee or two  
 A Breeze—a'caper in the trees—  
 And I'm a Rose!<sup>28</sup>

Why does "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—," far more intensely than this little riddle on the rose, appear to be spoken *within* a particular consciousness? And why do so many of the details of the poem remain obscure—an obscurity that seems to have prompted so many critics to leap from their incongruity into a compensatory, prematurely integrated, depiction of Dickinson's own thoughts and feelings? We might notice that the poem sets up a clear division between the indefinite article in "a" loaded gun, the definite article "the" in "the owner," and the use of the possessive "my life/my Master." The Owner has a different relation to the material thing, the *it*, than the Master has to the speaker.

This change in pronouns between the first stanza and the rest of the poem is accompanied by a parallel change in tense. The poem's strong

spatial contrast—between being “in corners” and roaming abroad—emerges through the abrupt temporal switch between the past tense and the poem’s cairotic “now.” What kind of being waits in corners to be carried away to a field where, released, his/her/its power is enacted? One answer is: a domesticated hunting dog.<sup>29</sup>

Now Dickinson had a dog, Carlo, named after the pointer owned by the character St. John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.<sup>30</sup> Dickinson’s Carlo was also a hunting dog—an enormous Newfoundland hound.<sup>31</sup> As Dickinson wrote in April of 1862 to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “You ask of my Companions. Hills—sir—and the Sundown, and a Dog large as myself, that my Father bought me—.”<sup>32</sup> Carlo plays a role in the master letters, close by the bobolink who also flits within fascicle 34. Dickinson writes in letter number 233, “Could Carlo, and you and I walk in the meadows an hour—and nobody care but the Bobolink—and *his*—a *silver* scruple?”<sup>33</sup>

Dickinson wrote of Carlo, her “mute confederate,” in her letters and poems more than two dozen times and allusions to the habits of dogs in her letters indicate he lived in the house as well as outdoors. We know, too, that Dickinson took him on her walks in fields and hills and meadows and considered him her “shaggy ally.” In several instances, Dickinson represents Carlo as having emotion and consciousness—in an August 1862 letter to Samuel Bowles she wrote: “I tell you, Mr Bowles, it is a Suffering, to have a sea—no care how Blue—between your Soul, and you. The Hills you used to love when you were in Northampton, miss their old lover, could they speak—and the puzzled look—deepens in Carlo’s forehead, as Days go by, and you never come.”<sup>34</sup> Here she lets Carlo’s furrowed brow express her entreaty and mentions roaming the hills. In a letter to Mary Bowles, his wife, she describes how she spills her longings to Carlo and “his eyes grow meaning,” and his “shaggy feet keep a slow pace.”<sup>35</sup>

What are the consequences, then, if “My life had stood—a loaded gun” is read as a poem written from a dog’s point of view?<sup>36</sup> Then it is a dog waiting “in corners” to go out into a wider space; identifying his owner, as dogs certainly do, and being identified in turn as his true hunter self;<sup>37</sup> it is a dog roaming the sovereign woods, and yelping/barking or otherwise speaking his echo through the mountains, and a dog smiling—for dogs can surprise us with their erupting smiles<sup>38</sup>—and guarding his master’s head, and remembering the soft feel of the eider duck’s down without being in need of a pillow. And it is a dog shooting a glance with his yellow eye at anything that threatens his master, for only a few species of animals have yellow eyes and most prominent among them are dogs that are retrievers such as the two Carlos; and it is a dog

who has a paw he later places down like an emphatic thumb, holding his prey. The poem acquires a comic tone from the braggadocio of its animal speaker and some of the poem's most puzzling imagery loses quite a bit of its puzzle.<sup>39</sup>

Backwoodsman in her ways or not, Dickinson quotes a hunter she knows directly in J169/F165: "A wounded Deer—leaps highest— / I've heard the Hunter tell." And hunting in Amherst in the late nineteenth century was commonplace, as it was in colonial times and as it is in some circles today. Hunters and their single dogs still search for ducks in the nearby Lawrence Swamp—though eider ducks in particular are sea ducks and would be far afield in Amherst, they do provide superior down for pillows.<sup>40</sup> And hunters continue to search for deer in the Holyoke Range. While modern critics have seen some pathos in the figure of the hunted female deer, does were in Dickinson's time an ordinary, and often preferred, source of venison. It is only in a period in the very late nineteenth century when deer herds were depleted, and with the eventual advent of sport hunting's emphasis on large racks as trophies, that hunting for does seems anomalous.<sup>41</sup>

Does substituting a dog speaker for a poet/feminist/nineteenth-century woman speaker (or for a poet/feminist/nineteenth-century woman speaker speaking as a gun) simplify the poem? Here we might follow Stanley Cavell and ask what would be the strongest competing reading of the poem. Let's return for a moment to the "it" narrative and assume that the speaker is a gun, for such a reading would begin with a literal and straightforward account of the first line, disregarding the possibility of an opening appositive. If the speaker is a gun, the close of the poem makes some sense with regard to "I than He—may longer live," for objects often outlive their owners. Further, a gun can "kill," but as an inanimate object, it cannot "die." Yet this reading does not clarify why the master *must* live longer than the gun. And of even more significance, the gun as speaker cannot enact the volitional motion that propels stanzas 2, 3, 4 and 5: *roaming, hunting, speaking, smiling, guarding, sharing, laying a yellow eye or an emphatic thumb*. From the moment of being "carried" forward, the speaker's perspective is literally grounded in and across the landscape of the poem and the images are part of organic life; there is no indication of being worked or manipulated as a device or thing.

Does reading the poem as spoken in the voice of a hunting dog ask us to reveal a theme of subordination yoking the lives of domestic animals to the lives of nineteenth-century women—or can we assume Emily Dickinson undertook imagining a dog's point of view for other reasons? Is one of the greatest metaphysical poets in English-language literature

here writing like a painter of Victorian dog portraits? Sir Edwin Landseer after all preferred to paint retrievers and had a special fondness for Newfoundland dogs like Carlo; a common breed of Newfoundland retriever is now named for him. As Diana Donald has written in an essay on Landseer's dog paintings in Victorian culture: "Landseer's glorification of the dog was far from being peculiar to him. It represented a strong trend in nineteenth-century thought, shared by artists, poets, popular anecdotalists, expert writers on dog breeds and even those scientists who began to explore the mysteries of animal psychology."<sup>42</sup>

Yet as philosophers of hunting from Plato to Roger Scruton have noted, hunting only succeeds when a human being imitates an animal.<sup>43</sup> In a time of civil war when men hunted other men, dedicating themselves to both killing and self-sacrifice and turning the familiar deadly, the poet's decision to adopt the sensibility of an animal who is at once domesticated and wild makes sense.<sup>44</sup>

Whether the contemporary craze for dog portraits affected Dickinson or not, and whether the poem is an allegory of power, killing, and death or not, my own underinterpretation arrives at a different poem with a different puzzle at its closure. First of all, we find the emotional dilemma that we may outlive the animals in our lives or they may outlive us. Dickinson's first mention of Carlo appears in her first publication, a Valentine letter published in the Amherst College student newspaper, the *Indicator*, in 1850, the year she received the dog, most likely a puppy, as a gift from her father: there she already anticipated his death, writing "The Dog is the noblest work of Art, sir. I may safely say the noblest—his mistress's rights he doth defend—although it bring him to his end—although to death it doth him send!"<sup>45</sup> Dickinson knew well the story of Keeper, Emily Brontë's fierce mastiff with the glowing eyes, and the vigil he kept at her bedroom door long after her death.<sup>46</sup> Carlo, however, died before Dickinson, in January of 1866 at the age of seventeen and Dickinson, who would never have another dog, wrote to Higginson: "Carlo died. / E. Dickinson / Would you instruct me now?"<sup>47</sup>

In the difference between *may* and *must* we find the difference between contingency and necessity—anything might take one of us from the other, but human beings must by nature live longer lives than their pets (and shorter lives than most of their trees, perhaps a reason why woods are sovereign). Animals, including human animals, can kill other animals, but, at least so far as we know, only human beings can, as an act of willed artifice, kill themselves. We enjoy and suffer our knowledge of our existence, our sense of causes and consequences, and our ability to imagine the future. Our power to live is tied to our willed refusal of our power to die.

I offer this reading not as a correction, or even worse, an explanation of the poem—it is another profile, and one that makes the case for this poem as a commentary on Dickinson's environment and emotions, and on the killing and dying of the human-caused Civil War, in a more coherent way than some other readings. At the same time, each of the accounts I have cited, whether "reading in" or "reading out," "overinterpreting" or "underinterpreting," provides a measure of insight into Dickinson's poem and its reception. The many distinguished poets who have been inspired by "My life had stood—a loaded gun," from Taggard to Plath, on to Rich and Howe, have every license to claim the terms of their own inspiration; their readings of the poem shed light on Dickinson as they also are part of the history of their own work.

The commentators, scholars, and critics who have taken up Dickinson's poetry frequently seem driven by a desire, not only to understand the work, but as well to bestow retrospective gifts upon the poet: friends and lovers of both sexes, evidence of a strong inner life and personality, extraordinarily inventive artistic and social powers, and, ultimately, a realized fame. Is there any other poetic figure who has been approached with quite the same spirit of remedial attention? It is a testimony to the legacy of Dickinson's work that so many want to claim and augment it.

Meanwhile we seem always to be at the beginning of understanding what she is saying. Her poems are replete with enigmas and the greatest remain enigmas of thought, not of biography. The simple fact of her more or less exclusive use of hymn form—a congregational form that she adapts to solo lyric within a matrix of religious refusal—gives evidence to the remarkable existential burden she was willing to take on in her art. Assuming from the outset that her poems come out of her world and are not necessarily reflections of our own, we find the questions she poses grow more, and not less, profound.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

#### NOTES

- 1 Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 25.
- 2 The books are Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1985), especially 32–138, and Paula Bennett's book *My Life, a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Politics* (Boston: Beacon, 1986). Bennett's book follows the poem's influence on Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. Early criticism, from Genevieve Taggard's 1930 reading of the poem as about "an outlaw and his bride" (*The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* [New York: Alfred Knopf, 1930]) to Albert Gelpi's 1977 essay "Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America," *San Jose Studies* 3, no. 2 (1977): 80–93, are discussed in Joseph Duchac, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1890–1977* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979).

- 3 Genevieve Taggard, *Life and Mind*, 306–7.
- 4 John Cody, "Metamorphosis of a Malady: Summary of a Psychoanalytic Study of Emily Dickinson," *Hartford Studies in Literature* 2, no. 2 (1970): 121–22.
- 5 Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 554.
- 6 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), part II, section xi. Of relevance for our discussion here are the following aphorisms: "So we interpret it [an image], and see it as we interpret it" (198); "But how is it possible to see an object according to an interpretation? The question represents it as a queer fact; as if something were being forced into a form it did not really fit. But no squeezing, no forcing took place here" (199).
- 7 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation: World, History, Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 143.
- 8 Eco, *Interpretation*, 145.
- 9 Eco, *Interpretation*, 180.
- 10 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 36. "Completeness is not a matter of providing all interpretations but a matter of seeing one of them through. Reading in, therefore, going too far, is a risk inherent in the business of reading, and venial in comparison with not going far enough, not reaching the end; indeed it may be essential to knowing what the end is" (37).
- 11 Sharon Cameron, *Choosing not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 34.
- 12 Cameron, "Dickinson's Fascicles," in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, ed. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 138–60. Explaining Dickinson's varying practices of producing bound fascicles, unbound fascicle sheets, worksheets, and fair copies, Cameron is interested in the relations not only between poems, but between lines and their variants—a strategy she reads as Dickinson's aesthetics of "choosing not choosing." (This practice had served as the starting point for Cameron's book, *Choosing not Choosing*. The poems in fascicle 34 include, by Johnson number: 645, 646, 647, 648, 478, 649, 650, 651, 754, 710, 755, 756, 690, 757, 758, 711, 993, 675.)
- 13 Etna erupted ten times in Dickinson's lifetime (1830–86): in 1832, 1843, 1852–53, 1865, 1868, 1869, 1874, 1879, 1883, and 1886.
- 14 Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home," *Parnassus* 5, no. 1 (1976): 64–65.
- 15 The Emily Dickinson Lexicon project: <http://edl.byu.edu>.
- 16 Albert Gelpi, "Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer," 83–84.
- 17 Survey of "in corners" from LION search: [lion.chadwyck.com/marketing/index.jsp](http://lion.chadwyck.com/marketing/index.jsp). Emerson's lecture "Literary Ethics," in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Boston: Thurston and Torrey, 1849), 170.
- 18 Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848), 42.
- 19 Louisa May Alcott, *Moods* (Boston: Loring, 1865), 35.
- 20 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Malbone: An Oldport Romance* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), 85.
- 21 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Literary Ethics: An Oration Delivered before the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College, July 24, 1838," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 1:176.
- 22 Bennett, *My Life, a Loaded Gun*, 6.
- 23 Miller, *A Poet's Grammar*, 72.
- 24 Mary Loeffelholz, *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 83.



- 25 Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 129.
- 26 Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), “764,” 318–22, 321, 322.
- 27 Joanne Dobson, Lillian Faderman, Ellin Ringler-Henderson, “Poem 754: Workshop Discussion,” *Women’s Studies* 16, no. 2 (1989): 139
- 28 In her book, *Emily Dickinson and Riddle* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), Dolores Dyer Lucas includes a number of riddle poems: J1034/F990, “His Bill an Auger is” [on a woodpecker]; J1332/F1357, “Pink—small—and punctual—” [on an arbutus vine]; J391/F558 “A Visitor in Marl—” [on frost]; as well as the often-anthologized J311/F291 “It sifts from Leaden Sieves” [on snow] and J585/F383 “I like to see it lap the Miles—” [on a railway train].
- 29 An indication that “carried me away” is not only a matter of being picked up and moved by another, but of being transported entirely is that the phrase appears in Dickinson’s letters in association with sleep, a coach, or death carrying “away” someone. Cynthia J. MacKenzie and Penny Gilbert, *Concordance to the Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Boulder: Univ. Press of Colorado, 2000), 100.
- 30 Dickinson had been reading *Jane Eyre* in 1849 just before she received her puppy. The original source for Brontë’s Carlo may have been an 1803–4 spectacle at the Drury Lane Theater involving a real Newfoundland hound, Carlo. The drama involved a staged reenactment of Carlo leaping into the sea to save the young son of the Marquis of Calatrava. In 1806 an “autobiography” of Carlo was published and become very popular. Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain 1750–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 136.
- 31 See the children’s writer Marty Rhodes Figley’s essay on Carlo, “‘Brown Kisses’ and ‘Shaggy Feet’: How Carlo Illuminates Dickinson for Children,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14, no. 2 (2005): 120–27.
- 32 Dickinson to Higginson, letter no. 261, April 1862, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), 404.
- 33 Dickinson to unknown recipient, about 1861, *Letters*, 374.
- 34 Dickinson to Bowles, August 1862, *Letters*, 416.
- 35 Dickinson writes to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, when Susan is away on a journey, that “Carlo [is]—comfortable—terrifying man and beast, with renewed activity—is cuffed some—hurled from piazza frequently . . .” (letter no. 194, 26 September 1858, *Letters*, 340). The letter to Mary Bowles, number 212, dated 10 December 1859, expresses that she misses the couple and describes Carlo’s response as she “talks of these things” (*Letters*, 358). We can find a similar portrait of Carlo’s emotional responses and capacity for “speech” in Johnson 186 / Franklin 237 (sent to Samuel Bowles around 1861—a copy made in summer 1861 is arranged in four stanzas and changes in wording, lineation, and punctuation. See R. W. Franklin. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 1:261.

What shall I do—it whimpers so—  
 This little Hound within the Heart  
 All day and night with bark and start—  
 And yet, it will not go—  
 Would you *untie* it, were you me—  
 Would it stop whining—if to Thee—  
 I sent it—even now?

It should not tease you—  
 By your chair—or, on the mat—

Or if it dare—to climb your dizzy knee—  
 Or—sometimes at your side to run—  
 When you were willing—  
 Shall it come?  
 Tell Carlo—  
*He'll tell me!*

36 Indeed, in the discussion I've quoted among the three Dickinson critics, they marvel that she sounds like "the trusty squire or the dog or the Indian guide who will never leave his, that is the Master's side." Dobson, Faderman, Ringler-Henderson, "Poem 754: Workshop Discussion," 139.

37 Dickinson's theme of identification may borrow, too, from Charlotte Brontë, for in *Jane Eyre*, the figure in a white dress, Rosamond, tells St. John Rivers that his dog "is quicker to recognize his friends than you are, sir; he pricked his ears and wagged his tail when I was at the bottom of the field, and you have your back towards me." Charlotte Brontë (Currer Bell), *Jane Eyre: A Novel* (New York: Carleton, 1864), 385.

38 Dickinson used the imagery of gun and volcano, and the analogy of an expressive face to a volcano, as well in a poem dated to 1860 (J175/F165):

I have never seen "Volcanoes"—  
 But, when Travellers tell  
 How those old—phlegmatic mountains  
 Usually so still—

Bear within—appalling Ordnance,  
 Fire, and smoke, and gun,  
 Taking Villages for breakfast,  
 And appalling Men—

If the stillness is Volcanic  
 In the human face  
 When opon a pain Titanic  
 Features keep their place—

If at length, the smouldering anguish  
 Will not overcome,  
 And the palpitating Vineyard  
 In the dust, be thrown?

If some loving Antiquary,  
 On Resumption Morn,  
 Will not cry with joy, "Pompeii!"  
 To the Hills return!

39 Here, too, Wittgenstein is of use: "One *kind* of aspect might be called 'aspects of organization.' When the aspect changes parts of the picture go together which before did not." *Philosophical Investigations*, 208.

40 "The eider duck inhabits the north shores of both coasts of the Atlantic. In winter it is found in more or less abundance along the New England coast." George Bird Grinnell, *American Duck Shooting* (New York: Forest and Stream, 1901), 201. The Cornell Ornithology Lab notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, eider duck populations, like those of deer, were overhunted and severely depleted: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/common\\_eider/lifehistory](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/common_eider/lifehistory).

41 Thoreau, whom Dickinson read with great interest (see, for example, the discussion in Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* [New York: Random House, 2002], 518) wrote in *Walden* (1854) "Once or twice . . . while I lived at

the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me . . . Almost every New England boy among my contemporaries shouldered a fowling piece between the ages of ten and fourteen; and his hunting and fishing grounds . . . were more boundless even than those of a savage." Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord*, 490–91. Thoreau goes on to lament the increasing scarcity of game in his time. Although he advocates a vegetarian diet and "hunting" without guns (that is, for truth and wisdom), his ambivalence is clear and he asserts it is important that young boys learn to hunt. For native hunting practices in the area prior to settlement and in the colonial period, see Edward Wilson Carpenter and Frederick Morehouse, *The History of the Town of Amherst, Massachusetts* (Amherst, MA: Carpenter and Morehouse, 1896), 2–3, 6, 30, and 54. They mention that deer were especially plentiful in early periods. For current hunting practices in Amherst and a map of hunting areas, see: <http://www.amherstma.gov/index.aspx?NID=910>.

42 Donald, *Picturing Animals*, 135.

43 José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting*, trans. Howard B. Wescott (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972): "The most primitive method of hunting, apart from trapping the animal or pushing it over a cliff, is that which consists in going toward the animal and getting as close to it as possible, and this is based on resembling the animal, disguising oneself like it" (142–43). Ortega y Gasset also discusses what humans learn from their prey, the function of decoy calls, and the vividness of hunting metaphors in Plato's *Republic*. In *On Hunting* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 1998), Roger Scruton writes of the "spontaneous perceptions" and "instincts" of the hunter as an antidote to the modern separation of man from nature, adding: "The hunter-gatherer is a spontaneous 'joiner,' who co-operates not only with his own species, but also with those that are most readily adapted to his hunting, with horse, hound, falcon and ferret. Toward his prey he takes a quasi-religious attitude. The hunted animal is hunted as an individual. But the hunted species is elevated to divine status as the totem . . . At the universal level, the hunter-gatherer is the tribe, which is the deer or antelope, conceived as species" (73–74).

44 Dickinson uses the starkly noneuphemistic word *killed* in recounting the deaths of those she knows in the Civil War. See MacKenzie and Gilbert, *Concordance to the Letters*, 381.

45 Letter no. 34, *Letters*, 92.

46 Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Smith, Elder, 1857), 310–311, chap. 12, "Emily and her dog Keeper." Christanne Miller records in *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 162, that Dickinson read everything she could find by and about the Brontës, including Mrs. Gaskell's biography. Mrs. Gaskell makes a point of describing the mastiff's "red fierce eyes" (*Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 205) in her account of Emily's famous punishing attack on, and later soothing reconciliation with, the dog. Donald describes the dog's vigil at the master's grave ("The Chief Mourner") as a common trope of Victorian dog paintings and dog narratives, *Picturing Animals*, 154–57.

47 Dickinson to Higginson, letter no. 314, January 1866, *Letters*, 449.