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This dissertation explores similarities between humor and ambiguity in poetry. While there are many books and articles on humor in the work of individual poets, there are no full-length projects on the role of humor in poetry more generally. To develop such a theory, this study builds on the small handful of broader treatments (Smith, Pettersson, Rosenthal, Rourke), uses literary theories of ambiguity as a vocabulary for speaking about humor (Empson), adapts established theories of humor in fiction and drama for a poetic model (Bakhtin, Frye, Propp, Twain), and reveals parallel arguments in poetic theory and philosophy about linguistic play (Bergson, Brooks, Hulme, Kierkegaard, Lewis, Nemoianu, Plato, Vico, Von Balthasar). Following Henri Bergson’s description of humor as the interplay of tension and elasticity, we entertain a definition of poetic humor as that which relieves the tension of opposition. As the case study of the dissertation, Emily Dickinson’s poetry epitomizes the use of surface bleakness as a foil for humor. The dissertation’s individual chapters shed light on these issues through discussions of the following points: a distinction between poetic humor and funniness; detachedness and broadminded vision as mechanisms of humor; William Empson’s terms mood, poetic actions, and the reader’s correct feeling as tools for analyzing poetic humor; playfulness in Dickinson’s manuscripts as explored through the juxtaposition of compression and multiplicity; the role of ambiguity in elucidating the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of
poetic humor; and concluding observations on cartoon-like imagery in humorous poetry and on bafflement as a process that includes both humor and ambiguity.
This dissertation by Eleanore Forbes Lambert fulfills the requirements for the doctoral degree in English as approved by Virgil Nemoianu, PhD, as Director, and by Ernest Suarez, PhD, and Rosemary Winslow, PhD, as Readers.

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Virgil Nemoianu, PhD, Director

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Rosemary Winslow, PhD, Reader
Dedicated to His Song
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Nelly Lambert

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Introduction

The Intrinsic Humor of Poetry

I. What is Poetic Humor?

Humor in poetry scatters levity the way a prism refracts light. A prism itself is a conduit of light, and while we might perceive the light it emits, the light’s source often eludes us. So, too, humor in poetry is a conduit of light. Scarcely perceptible at times, it raises the poem to a giddier—though not necessarily sillier—place. It renders poetic seriousness softer, more tenable, and sometimes more serious after all. Yet, despite the many definitions of humor in literature, one is hard pressed to find a theory for analyzing humor in poetry. Of laughter in general, Mikhail Bakhtin has written:

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. ¹

While Bakhtin relays what is compelling about studies of humor in literature, his words do not—and were not intended to—isolate what is special, both stylistically and philosophically, about humor in poetry. Similarly, although many books have been written about humor in the work of individual poets, one wonders if there is not something universally revealing about the relationship between humor broadly understood and poetry broadly understood.

Max Eastman has defined something called “poetic humor” in the following way:

[Poetic] humor lies in what is suggested to the imagination, rather than in any trick that is played upon the mind. I call it poetic humor, because it bears substantially the same relation to wit that poetry does to practical or prose speech. Its central preoccupation is with the communication of an experience, not with the manipulation of thought-process.¹

Although, for Eastman, “poetic humor” is merely the expression he uses to describe humorous incidents in the world—“not a joke, but a funny picture”—his definition reveals something about the same phenomenon in poetry.² Eastman describes the delayed nature of “poetic humor” as the result of situational incongruities, ones that are often not immediately apparent. So, too, poetic humor results from ambiguities in a poem, and the humor is often a delayed impression, one preceded by confusion or even bafflement.

The push and pull of gravity and levity is of special interest here; as we will explore towards the end of this study, humor stands both in opposition to tragedy and relieves the tension of dualistic opposition altogether. For this reason, poetic humor is sometimes most apparent in seemingly “heavy” poetry. Of humor in American poetry, M. L. Rosenthal has written, “The readiest quarry for examples of modern American humor is our most serious and accomplished poetry.”³ The present study is aligned with Rosenthal’s broad claim; however, it diverges from

² Ibid., 76.
³ The small handful of articles on humor in poetry broadly understood includes, most relevantly, M.L Rosenthal’s “Volatile Matter: Humor in Poetry” in The Massachusetts Review 22.4 (Winter, 1981), 807. As with the present study, Rosenthal is drawn to modernism as a turning point in humorous poetry. His examples include T.S. Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday,” ee cummings’s “nobody loses all the time,” and references to Pound and Stevens; and he finally also cites Dickinson as a comic poet—as well as Williams and Lowell. He describes “comic vision” in “Sweeney Among the Nightengales” and even compares the poem to the “simplicity of a cartoon”—a comparison that comes up at several points in this dissertation. Yet Rosenthal’s exempla lead to a definition of humor that cannot transcend macabre elements. Rosenthal notes the tension of comedy and
Rosenthal’s contention that “[Humor]…is used to project pity and terror.” While certainly true of many macabre poems, this dissertation finds more complexity in the elevating qualities of poems containing subtler humor. Yet, similar to the refracting light and shadows from a crystal prism, with its shifting facets, this particular brand of humor often eludes us. In addition, because it represents a delicate dynamic in poetry, one is conscious of over-burdening its levity and bounce with too much talk. As W.P. Trent reflected at the turn of the Twentieth Century, “It almost seems impertinent…to subject humor to criticism. Yet butterflies are pinned and catalogued, and flowers are dissected.”

Even though we cannot—or should not—“pin down” the essence of poetic humor, we will nevertheless attempt to appraise its effects. Like Rosenthal, our definition of poetic humor takes for granted that humor is a subset of play—both verbal and philosophical play. However, while Rosenthal aptly writes, “the comic sense is as indispensable to lyrical process as to Shakespearean tragedy” and “the play of humor is an important process in deeply serious writing [author’s italics],” like many treatments of humor, his article is most interested in what humor

tragedy implicit to humorous poetry, but his conclusion is that this creates poetry of “eerie cheerfulness” or “flippant humor” (809). While it echoes some of his points about the interplay of tragic and comic themes in a humorous poem, this study argues instead that the humorous poem undermines the comedy and tragedy binary, but does so through incongruous levity.

4 Rosenthal, 807.
6 Piaget’s “play theory” will not be addressed directly in this study. Rather, this study takes for granted certain precepts of the Reader Response movement of Literary Criticism, notably that the reader’s engagement with a humorous poem—while not the determining factor—is the verifying element. In other words, paraphrasing Wolfgang Iser’s assessment of Piaget’s theory, the reader of a humorous poem grapples with defamiliarization (Alea) as well as points that inspire conflict in the text (Agon), and subversions and contradictions (Ilinx); we will see that all three modes apply to the humorous poem, only we will analyze them following William Empson methodology; Wolfgang Iser, “The Play of the Text” in The Language of the Unsayable (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 330-336.
reveals about tragedy. To the contrary, our aim here is to discover the ways in which humor lightens poetry, even while it makes it more profound.

In poetry, humor matters to both the discursive elements of a poem—its personae, speakers, and listeners—and to the stylistic elements—its word sounds, word play, rhythm, rhyme, grammar, and punctuation. Our analysis also builds on the so-called Incongruity Theory of Humor. Of the three main theories of humor, the Incongruity Theory is best suited to lyric poetry, since it does not require social competition between multiple characters; it can work within language. The Superiority Theory, which was outlined in the Poetics of Aristotle and also explored by Thomas Hobbes, in its simplest sense, is humor at the expense of another’s inferiority—foibles, clumsiness, or misfortunes. We laugh on account of feeling superior to others. The Relief Theory of Humor describes a pattern of laughter set down by Sigmund Freud: simply understood, we laugh to relieve tension.

While we are interested here in the release of tension in a humorous poem, the tensions in question are not created by psychologically challenging situations per se. Rather, they are the result of incongruities in the language or in the philosophical implications in the poem. The

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7 Rosenthal, 813. Rosenthal also aptly cites Dickinson as an example of a “cruel,” humorous poet, and builds his claims on Constance Rourke’s thesis that Dickinson is a tragicomic poet. Yet he finds the lack of sentimentality in her “‘sudden unprepared ironical lines’” (Rourke qtd. in Rosenthal) akin to that of a “sadist whose vision expands, by the end, to full sadomasochism” (something he does not seem to disapprove of). Rosenthal reads a humorous turn in her poetry in helpful and accurate ways, yet he views this a mode that delvers her further into pain: “it can force intolerable pressure in a poem” (815). Where he notes that “incongruity has the quality of hysteria” in Dickinson’s poetry, he locates the proper source for much of her humor, incongruity, but gives it the incorrect diagnosis. Like many recent critics of Dickinson’s work, the intensity of her poetry is disorienting enough to force readers to question the sanity of its speaker. Dickinson’s humor is rigourous in this way, but ultimately harmonizing—even when its harmony feels more like a pressure cooker than a strain of light music. Rosenthal skips over that levity.

8 In its most mean-spirited vein, this is sometimes called the Hostility Theory of Humor.
Incongruity Theory, articulated by Kierkegaard, Kant, and many recent philosophers of humor, is therefore, through and through, the ideal choice—and perhaps the only choice—for analyses of lyric poetry.

In terms of the methodological frames of the discussion, poetic humor will be defined variously in this study as a mood in poetry as opposed to a tone, as an effect of linguistic and structural elements in a poem, and as the result of ambiguities. Ambiguities both accompany humor in poetry and serve as helpful analogies for theorizing about humor’s role. This dissertation will at times posit the presence of humor in poems, even if we do not immediately recognize it there.9 It will show that humor is an effect of the poem’s shifts and incongruities, autonomous to the poem as much as it is a response from the reader. Where humor does not complement tragedy, through incongruities it diffuses it. Following Henri Bergson’s notion of humor’s mutually dependent push and pull between “tension and elasticity,” we will analyze examples in which tension and elasticity describe the poem’s structure, style, or subject matter.10

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is a representative example of poetic humor, because it epitomizes the ways in which poetry can, through humor, make its subject both lighter and more serious at the same time. Thus, to reiterate: as this project undertakes a more solid articulation of the workings of poetic humor in general, it simultaneously seeks to redefine poetry in terms of its essential levity, as galvanized in Dickinson’s unique poetics.

9 In this sense, like Stanley Fish’s Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities, this study will analyze both discursive and stylistic elements in a poem in terms of how they guide or confuse or potentially amuse the reader; the reader’s potential experience of humor will gage whether or not humor is present in a poem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Her poetry is uniquely suited to this study because, while playful, it is never frivolous; typically, it is a mechanism of philosophical insight. Roland Hagenbüchle describes Dickinson’s role as philosopher-poet this way:

Dickinson achieved in the realm of art what Kant had brought about in the realm of philosophy, namely, an epistemological revolution in thought and perception, by shifting the emphasis from the outside world onto the constructive potential of the human mind.\(^\text{11}\)

Charles Altieri adds:

\[\text{[Dickinson] shifts poetry to a second-order level where what matters most is how we can find sufficient power in self-reflection to stand up to the pervasive sense of insufficiency generating the drama of self-concern in the first place.}\(^\text{12}\)

In other words, despite selecting ostensibly grave themes for her poetry, Dickinson’s work exposes the relative insignificance of “dramatic” subject matters. It achieves this through abrupt shifts, which suddenly flip the order of what seems most important to the speaker. These shifts, like flashes of light from a prism, are often disorienting, yet we can gage an element of truth in their reversals. That truth, however, comes not in the form of a logical, intellectual, or analytical solution to the poem’s problems; it comes in the form of a wholly incongruous impression of levity.

Dickinson’s poetry, which one friend described as “a nuclear bomb in a thimble,” is the quiet explosion that prefigured, modeled, and, some would argue, was even more “new” than the subsequent achievements of Literary Modernism. Harold Bloom states the

\(^{12}\) Charles Altieri, “Dickinson’s Dialectic,” The Emily Dickinson Journal 5.2: (Fall, 1996), 68.
point more strongly: “Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other western poet since Dante.”

Dickinson’s work is therefore also the quintessential example of a proto-modernist expression of humor. Yet this study is not limited to the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: in order to define poetic humor, it will draw on examples from Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth and Shelley, among other pre-modernist voices. Thus, based on the historical range of the evidence gathered here, one might be tempted to conclude that humor in poetry is both a phenomenon special to modernism and at the same time universal to all poetry in any era.

But how can these two pronouncements be reconciled? In fact, the concluding discovery of this study is both aesthetic and historical in nature. The seeds were planted for lighter and freer uses of language as early as Shakespeare and Donne, but they did not

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13 Quoted in Richard Sewall’s essay in The Emily Dickinson Handbook, 6. Laura Riding and Robert Graves’s seminal essay on Shakespeare’s sonnet 129 in A Survey of Modernist Poetry (St. Claire’s Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1927/1972) is structured as a comparison between philosophically complex but verbally accessible sixteenth-century poetry and what they see as the philosophically simplistic but verbally abstruse poetry of ee cummings. Although Dickinson’s experiments do not usually resemble those of cummings, it could be said that her poetry is both philosophically puzzling like Shakespeare’s and stylistically difficult like cummings’s. For our purposes, it is then doubly rich with opportunities for interesting moments of humor and ambiguity. Their book is also thought of as one of the inspirations for Empson’s method (David Perkins).

14 In The Emily Dickinson Handbook, Roland Hagenbüchle invites more scholarship on Dickinson’s humor and specifically calls for the use of Bakhtin as a model; Roger Lundin connects Bakhtin and Dickinson through what he sees as a common treatment of parody—p. 200 in Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998)—especially of religious topics. Lundin qualifies his idea this way: “In Dickinson, parody is not sickly, but wistful” (201).

15 The subjective element of humor comes up frequently in translation studies. Idiom, culture, and manners can all influence whether one person will laugh and another will not. Some philosophers of humor make much of this; others (namely Kierkegaard and Propp) seem to see this as one of many distancing but not determining aspects of what makes something intrinsically (this is my word) humorous. This is all to say that while the present study is not intended to exclusively serve the English language, for the sake of minimizing linguistic complexities in the analysis sections, the exempla are all from English and American literature.
reach their apex in poetic language until Dickinson. One might even say that all along poetry emitted flashes of humorous levity, but as modernist critics took the onerous pains to show, the flowery heaviness of language obscured this potential more than it unveiled it. In other words, from the perspective of aesthetics, poetry has perhaps always had a special potential for humor; from an historical point of view, this potential did not, and could not, emerge until the latter half of the Nineteenth Century—and, in its purest, rawest strains, from the unaffected perch of a self-knowing, self-trusting voice who, rather than test out her jokes in literary salons, tossed them, like silent pebbles, across the clear lake of her own soul. With bemused concentration, we can, after a while, appreciate their ripple.
II. Overview of the Chapters

It is not an accident that the case study of this dissertation, Emily Dickinson, is better known (at least in the popular perception) for her suffering than her humor. Yet the suffering depicted in her poems is not irrelevant to their humor. As noted earlier, even though humor in poetry is essentially a matter of levity, poetic gravity is actually sometimes a source of humor. One encounters similar discoveries in countless philosophies of humor. Following this curious truism, here we investigate, through analyses of poetic ambiguities, whether poetry is especially well suited to the humor-tragedy paradigm and therefore whether its “jokes” are necessarily subtler than those in fiction or drama.

The forthcoming section on “Conceptual Foundations” offers a theory of the intrinsic nature of humor in poetry—intrinsic in the sense that humor is an organic feature of a poem, whether or not the poem deals with tragic or comic themes. Next, this introductory chapter attempts to negotiate the fine line between comedy and tragedy. As further explored in Chapter 1, misery and unhappiness are common topics in humorous poems—if only as foils for the subtle, cheerful surprise of the poem’s humor. Sorrow and joy, pain and bliss, death and life lose their distinctiveness in a humorous poem. To further explore the relationship between sorrow and humor, we will look briefly at sections of William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, a play in which humor and poetry have a simultaneous birth. The play is also a blend of genres, culminating in tragedy. Finally, using Billy Collins as a counter example, the last section of the introductory chapter distinguishes between a funny poem and a humorous one. A funny poem is
immediately entertaining because the humor in a funny poem is conversational and often quickly accessible. Conversely, the humor in a “humorous” poem is more delayed and often more surprising than joke-oriented poetry.

Chapter 1, titled “Emily Dickinson and Death: The Humorous Element in Apparent Tragedy,” re-introduces Emily Dickinson as the case study for the dissertation by beginning with her seemingly most somber poems, her death poems. Emily Dickinson’s death poems demonstrate one of the central principles of incongruity with which the dissertation is concerned, i.e., the harmonization of apparent opposites—in this case death and life, absence and presence. Revealing the humor in Dickinson’s death poetry challenges a conventional sense of what these poems are meant to do for a reader. If a poem seemingly about mourning at the same time reveals itself to be a poem about the futility of mourning, how do we respond to this poem? What pleasure can we hope to derive from it? Is it the pleasure of cathartic identification or the pleasure of laughter? Or, do both pleasures comingle and conflict, inviting us to gradually unravel our response to the poem? Since it was a known literary source for Dickinson, the complex definition of death in William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is analyzed towards the end of this chapter as a related example of a humorous treatment of this theme.

Chapter 2 provides a close comparison of the linguistic and structural similarities between humor and ambiguity. Like humor, ambiguity in poetry can prompt curiosity or bewilderment; it can thwart logic, end in irresolution, contain sudden surprises, and turn on incongruities. For all of these reasons, patches of ambiguity in a poem are frequently also sources of humor. Using William Empson’s foundational study of ambiguity, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, as a springboard, this chapter begins by describing Dickinson and
Empson’s unwitting shared philosophy of poetry. Humor in poetry is analyzed in this chapter as an effect of what Empson calls a poem’s actions. Both Empson and Dickinson are more concerned with what a poem does than with what it means. Empsonian ambiguities alert the reader to the most important actions in a poem, thereby guiding the reader to a more “correct” reading of a poem.

Chapter 3 illustrates the interplay of ambiguity and humor in a poem through local analysis of Dickinson’s original manuscripts. Dickinson retained variants for word choices in fair copies of her poems, which suggests that multiplicity was a desired element in her work. When they are compared, Dickinson’s variants for an individual word not only expand that word’s meaning, but they also undermine the poem’s surface tone. For example, if the word “despair” is described simultaneously as sustenance, an exercise, and a privilege, then it changes our notion of what despair might mean to Dickinson and whether our impression of the poem’s tone is ultimately somber or cheerful. Dickinson’s style of manuscript composition also concretely illustrates poetry’s capacity for play.

Having outlined the principle of intrinsic humor in the introductory chapter, provided illustrations in Chapter 1, linked the principle of intrinsic humor to a literary definition of ambiguity in Chapter 2, and provided illustrations of the humor and ambiguity working together in Chapter 3, the final two chapters explore some of the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of poetic humor.

Ambiguity is the bridge to riddled meanings, mystery, and complexity of thought in a humorous poem. Chapter 4, titled “Bees, Wine, and Butterflies: Smallness, Sweetness, and Spirit in the Humorous Poem,” uses local analysis of Dickinson’s poetry
to explore the connection between poetic humor and spirituality. This chapter narrows its focus to Dickinson’s insect poems, since they contain some of her loftiest commentary on religious ideas, yet they are at the same time some of her most playful poems.

Dickinson’s choice of subject illustrates the incongruity inherent in poetic humor: how can a small and seemingly insignificant creature such as an insect stand in for principles as vast and all-encompassing as the cosmos, the soul, or an individual’s meditations on God? In its ability to link the immense and the minute, poetic humor is the basis for much philosophical insight, particularly in Dickinson’s case. In these insect poems, poetic humor is a mechanism for harmonizing mundane and divine themes.

Chapter 5, “The Poet-Riddler and Fool: Sensible Madness in the Humorous Poem,” interweaves themes from Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4. Through etymological analysis, this chapter explores the relationship between riddles and poetic humor as well as the riddle’s fool-like poetic speaker. Taking a few key words from Dickinson’s poetry, this chapter reviews the range of playfulness in her lexicon. Drawing on Shakespeare’s King Lear, the philological writings of Giambattista Vico, and the aesthetic theory of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, here we focus on how words, when employed in a poetic context, contain their own implicit jokes. Through ambiguities of syntax, prosody, or overall structure—or, in Dickinson’s case, through the evolution of a word’s meaning over the course of many poems—the etymologies, sounds, and connotations of individual words invite unpacking. Since they contain their own incongruities, contradictions, and layers of nuance, such words are independent pockets of humor in a poem. Deceptively connoting a single tone or meaning, the words’ histories, definitions, and phonological resonances contain innate variants and innate opportunities for humor. This chapter also examines
the role of the humorous poet. What is the persona of a riddler in lyric poetry? What characteristics does that persona share with the fool or clown? What does the riddler’s expertise tell us about his philosophical stance? Positioned outside of society, what are the riddler’s function and agenda?

Most chapters include an array of exempla from literature across many eras. Apart from Dickinson, whose work is the central case study, Shakespeare’s plays feature prominently throughout the dissertation. Following models such as Virgil Nemoianu’s study of Coriolanus in A Theory of the Secondary and Stanley Cavell’s use of The Winter’s Tale and The Taming of the Shrew in Pursuits of Happiness: A Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage, Shakespeare’s work is frequently invoked because it offers a vocabulary of human actions to this discussion of humor.

The conclusion to the dissertation reviews the findings from each chapter and readdresses questions about the universal nature of poetic humor. Its discussion is centered on the structure of bafflement in humorous poetry, an umbrella term encompassing ambiguity, humor, and harmony. Because bafflement has both extreme and seemingly harsh stages, as well as pleasant stages, it contains some of the paradoxes with which the dissertation wrestles: namely, as mentioned, how can it be that painful or tragic themes produce humor? In an epilogue to the dissertation, we reprise the question of whether humor in poetry is special to literary modernism, or whether there is something implicitly humorous about all poetry—whether there is an intrinsic humor in poetry.
III. Conceptual Foundations and Literature Review:

i. Silent Laughter

The matter is quite simple. The comical is present in every stage of life . . . for wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present. The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; *but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comic, the painless contradiction* [author’s emphasis].

-Søren Kierkegaard

As we have already intimated, humor in poetry is liminal by nature. It functions a bit like the eponymous speaker in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “The Cloud” who exits the poem silently laughing:

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise and unbuild it again.

Shelley’s cloud resides at the horizon line between the sun and the earth: light and rain pass through him; he filters both warmth and darkness. His “silent” laughter at his own extinction is the knowing laughter that he will reappear, both as ghost and as child, as new life and as a reminder of death.

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So, too, poetic humor filters sorrow with joy, tragedy with comedy. Shelley’s cloud is mobile, active. Poetic humor is also an active element of the poem—an effect of William Empson’s poetic actions. Some poetic actions include basic verbal ambiguities, such as abrupt juxtapositions, incongruities, thwarted expectations, puns, breaks in logic, and other surprises within the poem’s structure and content. As such, poetic humor is intrinsic to the poem on the level of its structure—i.e., its overall form, the shape of its words and sentences as they form a single, unified idea. Poetic humor is rarely an extrinsic feature; it seldom immediately results in the reader’s audible laughter. Yet it takes a reader who is external to the poem to recognize it as humor. Thus, humor in poetry introduces several paradoxes: how can humor exist in silence? How can it come to awareness gradually and still be called “humor”? And how can it sit so close to tragedy and still retain its levity?

A cursory answer to all three questions is that poetic humor releases the tension of apparent opposites. In poetry, this release of tension registers in the reader’s mind in a more delayed way than in fiction or drama (generally speaking), probably because the “poetic actions,” through which humor is woven, are subtler than narrative events and dramatic actions.

While there exist no well-established broadly applicable theories of humor in poetry, there are theories of fancy, charm, newness, juxtaposition, and so forth. It is not accident that many of these theories emerged during Literary Modernism. In spite of their reputation for absorbing the seemingly bleaker, more despairingly fragmented nature of modernity, modernist poets also brought a conscious playfulness to poetic composition.

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18 William Empson’s definition of poetic actions will be defined at some length in Chapter 2.
Gertrude Stein exemplifies a modernist poet for whom playfulness was the basis for experimentation. Her version of a sonnet, for instance, went like this:

Please be pleased with me.
Please be.
Please be all to me please please be.\(^{19}\)

William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* exemplifies the playfulness of modernist innovation through the use of collaging and multiple voices; and Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* plays with both the visual and semantic value of multiple languages.

So, too, playfulness was a frequent topic in modernist theory. In the following quotation, I.A. Richards describes laughter as a quality of the poem’s *effect*:

But consider a [simple] case – a fit of laughter which is absolutely essential to conceal, in Church or during a solemn interview, for example. You contrive not to laugh; but there is no doubt about the activity of the impulses in their restricted form. The much more subtle and elaborate impulses which a poem excites are not different in principle. They do not show themselves as a rule, they do not come out into the open, largely because they are so complex. When they have adjusted themselves to one another and become organized into a coherent whole, the needs concerned may be satisfied.\(^{20}\)

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Richards argues that a poem produces a “more subtle and elaborate” version of the everyday laughter impulse. Moreover, he adds that the triggers of this gradual laughter would be hard to spot in a poem, since “they do not show themselves as a rule, they do not come out in the open, largely because they are so complex.” Similarly, as the example of Billy Collins explored, a humorous poem is not always a funny poem—in the sense that the laughter impulse is “more subtle and elaborate” and is not triggered right away. The word “impulse” is another helpful detail of Richards’s theory. Later in his study, Richards asks readers to distinguish between their unplanned response to a poem and their preconceived beliefs about life.\textsuperscript{21} Richards makes the point—a point that Empson extends in his notion of poetic actions—that poems do not yield single messages or “statements”; instead, they are things, and they do things. Poetic actions are therefore different from what we, as Richards puts it, “illicitly” might want the poem to say.\textsuperscript{22}

By way of a ready example, consider the last line of Shelley’s poem. The speaker “unbuilds” his cenotaph. He does not deconstruct it, and he does not construct it; he unbuilds it, i.e., he releases its bolts and pillars, its binding mortar and heavy cement. He also does this “again,” implying that the speaker is in a constant game of preparing for death, and then undoing his death and resuming life. Rhyming “tomb” and “womb” is just one of Shelley’s “jokes” designed to further weaken the opposition between haunting mortality and budding life. In unbuilding the cenotaph, the monument to his death, the speaker releases the tension of tragedy. His silent laughter is not insensitive, dark, or disturbed; it is merely the proof of that release. The cloud’s liminality challenges the tidy

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 157-59.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 159.
binary of life and death, cheer and sorrow. The cloud’s laughter is silent because it occurs outside of a social repartee. Instead, it is the internal laughter of heightened awareness. It is ebullient and elevated, bubbling above the push and pull of worldly events, like a cloud crested just beneath the wholly silent space of the sky.

A similar image appears in Emily Dickinson’s poem in which death is compared to a hot air balloon. When the balloon bursts—“The Gilded Creature strains – and spins – / Trips frantic in a Tree –/ Tears open her Imperial Veins –/ And tumbles in the Sea” (F730)—the crowd watching from below rationalizes the tragedy noting, “‘’Twas only a Balloon.’” The finale could be read as a dismissal of tragedy. Yet most of the poem is devoted to elevation and descent; the bursting of the pressure in a balloon is not a challenge to its levity. Like the balloon, levity in a poem precedes the bursting of the tension of opposition.

What we are now beginning to define more extensively as “humor” in poetry has been described many times over in critical theory, but it has been called other things. For example, T.E. Hulme never uses the word “humor” in his influential essay “Romanticism and Classicism,” but he does use the word fancy.\(^\text{23}\) Hulme favors what he calls “dry” poetry, and his slightly irritated tone makes it sound as though he would prefer to eliminate richness from poetry entirely. But this is not exactly his meaning. “Dry” is Hulme’s synonym for “precise,” and his “precise” means not only carefulness of diction, but also flexibility. Half a decade later, in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot developed Hulme’s foundational idea, articulating a similar

philosophy of poetry. (For example, Hulme’s “springy piece of steel,” a metaphor for the poet’s raw materials, is a rough-edged version of Eliot’s famous “shred of platinum,” a medium that stands in for the poet’s mind.)\textsuperscript{24} Hulme’s blunter approach to the same ideas isolates the importance of levity in poetry. In centering his predictions for the future of poetry on this complex little word \textit{fancy}, Hulme promotes the playfulness, detachedness, and subtlety of poetry. The problem with romanticism, as Hulme sees it, is that it is too serious. Fancy is the muscle within the poem that is emotionally and intellectually disinterested, but that is, at the same time, flexible, “cheerful, dry, and sophisticated.”\textsuperscript{25}

Hulme all but expresses the necessity for humor in poetry. It cannot be irrelevant, for example, that he references Henri Bergson. Furthermore, his deceptively disgruntled tone is peppered with wry little jokes. To illustrate the importance of precise diction, he deadpans, “The leg of a chair by itself is still a leg. My leg by itself wouldn’t be.”\textsuperscript{26} Or, admonishing people who value “freshness” in poetry, he writes, “There is nothing particularly desirable about freshness \textit{per se}. Works of art aren’t eggs.”\textsuperscript{27} Thus, Hulme’s treatise on \textit{fancy} in poetry approaches a humorous tone in its own right; yet, it is also significant that the word “humor” is never used in his essay.

Hulme, and other theorists after him, might not have thought that the word “humor” could describe the more elusive element of fancy, i.e., its subtlety and mystery. In Coleridge’s original comparison of \textit{fancy} and \textit{imagination}, fancy is the more precise and objective of the two, but it is also “a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of

\textsuperscript{25} Hulme, 54.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 53.
time and space.” Of course, when Ezra Pound adapted this idea for his manifesto on Vorticism, writing of an “Image” as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in in an instant of time,” he likely did not have humor in mind—probably at all. And there is no reason to confuse the two: poetic humor and fancy are by no means identical forces in a poem. Although more critical attention was devoted to fancy, a similar trend was allowing poetic humor to emerge more fully than ever before. Only, for a variety of reasons, it did not occur even to these most serious proponents of modernist fancy to conceive of humor and poetry as intrinsically connected.

Both Coleridge and later Hulme describe fancy as an organic element of a poem, perhaps even autonomous to the poem. Humor, by contrast, implies the cooperation of a reader. *Fancy* is a way to describe the poem’s self-contained play. Humor is the reader’s experience of fancy. Yet, circling back, since it is rooted in fancy, humor in poetry is veiled by mystery and embedded in verbal and philosophical ambiguities.

Unveiling, decoding, and discovering are part of the reader’s experience of poetic humor. Discovery is also a guiding principle of non-competitive forms of humor. In his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, Henry W. Fowler drew up a chart delineating the nature and function of several comic modes. For example, the “motive or aim” of wit is “throwing light,” of satire, “amendment,” of irony, “exclusiveness,” of the sardonic, “self-relief.” For the “motive or aim” of humor, Fowler wrote, “discovery.” Fowler’s chart also states that the province of humor is “human nature,” whereas the province of

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wit is “words and ideas,” of satire, “morals and manners,” of the sardonic, “adversity,” and so forth. Finally, in Fowler’s chart, the audience for humor is “the sympathetic.” Thus, by 1926, when Fowler published his dictionary, the word *humor* meant something that comes from human beings and something that has a broadening effect. Moreover, from Fowler’s chart, we learn that compassion guides its expression: humor is recognized as such through the *sympathy* and *understanding* of the reader.

Figure 1: Reproduction of Fowler’s Typology in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOTIVE OR AIM</th>
<th>PROVINCE</th>
<th>METHOD OR MEANS</th>
<th>AUDIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Human Nature</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wit</td>
<td>Throwing light</td>
<td>Words and Ideas</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire</td>
<td>Amendment</td>
<td>Morals and Manners</td>
<td>Accentuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcasm</td>
<td>Inflicting Pain</td>
<td>Faults and Foibles</td>
<td>Inversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irony</td>
<td>Exclusiveness</td>
<td>Statement of Facts</td>
<td>Mystification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynicism</td>
<td>Self-Justification</td>
<td>Morals</td>
<td>Exposure of Nakedness</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Sardonic</td>
<td>Self-Relief</td>
<td>Adversity</td>
<td>Pessimism</td>
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Bergson’s theory is, to some degree, a counterpoint to Fowler’s typology. As we will see, however, even Bergson eventually offers the possibility of elevated, spiritual forms of humor, ones that lead to growth and discovery. As the aim and motive of humor, discovery must be preceded by a search, which, in the case of a poem, would involve poetic exegesis. Thus, poetic humor both leads to discovery and must itself be discovered
inside the poem. Locating the innate humor in most poems simultaneously illustrates what poems do, i.e., what tricks they play, what surprises they have in store, and what incongruities they force us to accept. Furthermore, rather than just a mechanism that produces laughter, humor is a built-in philosophical agent in a poem. It stimulates dialectic and necessitates the careful engagement with both linguistic and conceptual ambiguities. For example, a riddle demonstrates what a philosophical agent in a poem might do. A riddle presents a problem that must be decoded or worked out.

Silent laughter simply refers to humor that is embedded in the structural and stylistic ambiguities in a poem rather than in the poem’s meaning per se. The following passage (quoted earlier) from Kierkegaard suggests that humor is indeed present in more places than we might think:

The matter is quite simple. The comical is present in every stage of life . . . for wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present. The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction [author’s emphasis].

If these assertions are true, then humor may be an intrinsic feature of many more poems than we knew—more than just the poems that we think of as “funny.” Contradiction, paradox, incongruity, irresolution, breaks in logic, as the American New Critics took great pains to show, are all ingredients of good poetry. They are also, following Kierkegaard, indicators that humor is present. But, again, how can humor be present if we are not aware of its presence? Kierkegaard speaks of learning to see humor,
of developing a consciousness for the comic. In other words, recognizing intrinsic humor is an orientation towards life. In Kierkegaard’s opinion it is not a sillier orientation either. In fact, in some respects, he believes it is better to see things comically than tragically.

Thus, albeit unexpectedly, the philosopher best known for writing a treatise called Fear and Trembling, as well as other major works on death and despair, finds more human interest in comedy than in tragedy. Although they share essentially the same basic structure, comedy, when it is created by accidental contradictions or incongruities of circumstance, is not painful—and therefore it is better, in Kierkegaard’s view.

Kierkegaard critiques the Superiority Theory of Humor—a theory first explored in Aristotle’s Poetics. As outlined in the overview of the chapters, this theory states that we laugh at the physical, emotional, or mental inferiority of others. Many philosophers after Aristotle have fleshed out this theory, underlining, in some notable cases, such as Bergson’s Le rire, the mean-spiritedness and social competitiveness which causes us to laugh at the expense of others. Kierkegaard’s belief that it is situations that are funny (insofar as they are contradictory) and not people situates him among the Incongruity Theorists of Humor. Kierkegaard also seems interested in correcting overly romantic notions about tragedy. Just as humor is less silly than one might think, tragedy is less satisfying. He writes:

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31 Kierkegaard, 89.
32 John Morreall objects to the idea that we search out “hostile” situations in order to laugh at them. For this reason, he finds the Superiority Theory of Humor less realistic than the long history of philosophers who have written about it have suggested. We do not seek out human suffering, he suggests, in order to laugh at it. As such, a broad definition of the Superiority Theory does not capture the “essence of humor”; “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought” in Philosophy East & West V. 39 No. 3 (July 1989), 243-265.
One finds, frequently enough, examples of a misdirected effort to emphasize the pathetic and the serious in a ridiculous, superstitious sense, as if it were a bliss-bringing panacea, as if seriousness were a good in and for itself, something to be taken without directions, so that all is well if one is merely serious at all times, even if it happens that one is never serious in the right place.\(^3\)

Kierkegaard’s description of the “superstitious sense” surrounding seriousness, “as if it were a bliss-bringing panacea,” also applies to clichés about poetry. Poetry has a surface reputation for being serious, sentimental, difficult, flowery, and even depressing—the very reputation that Hulme and many theorists after him wished to improve. Following cliché, the enjoyment of poetry stems from the belief that seriousness equals profundity: to indulge in the painful difficulties of life is to really take life seriously, as it were, to really approach something true. In the passage first cited from Kierkegaard, he notes that comedy actually retains that intensity. Like tragedy, it arises from contradiction; however, unlike tragedy, comedy is not painful to people. (Although, we might add to Kierkegaard’s claim that, even while incongruity-based humor does not cause pain, it can sometimes arise, as we will see, from objectively painful or grave subject matters). Here again Kierkegaard implicitly rejects the Superiority Theory of Humor. His suggestion is that, while it is not painful to laugh at some one else’s handicaps and foibles, the person with the handicaps and foibles experiences pain—either from his own clumsiness or from the fact that he is the cause of others’ laughter. Laughing at someone who slips on a banana peel, for example (a favorite illustration of Bergson’s), might not cause you pain if you are the one laughing; but if you are the one

\(^3\) Kierkegaard, 84.
who takes a hard fall on the sidewalk, then you might be in pain. For Kierkegaard, these socially competitive situations do not describe what he would call “comedy.”

Rather, Kierkegaard’s definition of comedy is a natural fit for poetry, because it hinges on the impersonal juxtapositions of opposites—i.e., contradiction. In one of his examples, he applies his theory to language:

A discontinuity in speech may produce a comic effect because there is a contradiction between the discontinuity and the rational conception of human speech as something connected. If it is a madman who speaks thus, we do not laugh.\(^{34}\)

We expect language to be logical and continuous, so when it is not, contradictions or incongruities arise. Unmet expectations, when they are not painful, produce laughter. (Vladimir Propp writes that laughter is the “inability to see a connection between cause and effect,” i.e., the inability to form logical connections.)\(^ {35}\) Kierkegaard admits that not everyone will be able to see these incongruities and appreciate their humor. An appreciation for humor must be cultivated. (Propp’s version of this idea is his contention that “not everyone is capable of laughter.”)\(^ {36}\)

It is one thing to develop a \textit{consciousness} for humor in life. It is quite another thing to develop such a consciousness as a reader of poetry. Poetry is deceptively open; resonances and connotations of words or phrases can lead us this way and that. In addition, we are more accustomed to recognizing the humor in prose than in poetry. We do not expect, when we read a poem by William Wordsworth, for example, that the poem

\(^{34}\) Kierkegaard, 86.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 16.
will seem humorous to us. Rather, we expect that it will move us, inspire us, or appear beautiful to us, and we do not typically associate these sensations with humor. Instead, we generally associate humor with more casual, earthier forms of communication, and prose often seems better suited to that mode.

Yet occasionally tragic circumstances produce audible laughter. Woody Allen has said, “I’ve always had an interest in heavy themes in general. I’m interested in them, I’m attracted to them, and I also find them very funny.” At the same time, Allen admits, “I put a higher value on the tragic muse than the comic muse. I’ve always felt that tragic writing, tragic theater, tragic film confronts reality head on and doesn’t satirize it, tease it, deflect it, opt out with some kind of gag at the last minute.” Allen conveys both that he prefers tragedy to comedy and that tragic or heavy themes are very funny. Many Woody Allen films contain jokes about death and parody the Freudian preoccupation with the eros-thanatos binary. However, the jokes in Allen’s films rest on his characters’ belief that tragedy is to be feared and that it causes despair. The humor in his films makes light of that fear but does not quell it entirely, hence his surprising preference for tragedy.

Allen’s point that heavier topics are wonderful sources of humor unwittingly clarifies a basic principle of humor in poetry. Poetic humor is often born of heavy topics, such as ruminations on death. When poems seem to choose tragedy as a topic, they are in a position to confront those tragic themes “head on,” as Allen says. Dickinson’s response to Allen’s quandary might come in the form of her simple, famous lines, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant – / Success in Circuit lies.” Humor and poetry are built in a similar

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38 Ibid., 1:30:41.
fashion, and both are born of the common human inclination for circularity, incongruity, and detached complexity.

**ii. The Simultaneous Birth of Humor and Poetry:**

*The Example of Titus Andronicus*

The notion of “silent laughter” suggests underlying humor rather than overt comedy. As such, tragedy often stands in the foreground of humorous poetry. Yet, even though Samuel Johnson famously wrote that comedy would be easier to define through a definition of tragedy, not every critic believes that tragedy and comedy are intimately connected. Vladimir Propp introduces his book *On the Comic and Laughter* with the following disclaimer: “I will define the comic without any reference to the tragic or the sublime.” In the following example, tragedy serves not as comedy’s shared genre, but rather as a backdrop for understanding a root connection between poetry and humor. The intensity—and perhaps, too, the near absurdity—of this play creates a space for both humor and poetry to emerge almost at the same time.

In Shakespeare’s plays, poetry—i.e., when characters speak in verse or lyrical, poetic language—usually has a strategic placement. If a character speaks in verse, it means something about his status, his truthfulness, or, in the case of Titus Andronicus, his philosophical and emotional depth. Although Titus manages a few lines of verse in the first acts of the play, his lines are both very serious and very unpoetic—that is, until

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40 Propp, 6.
his life is struck with injustice and gruesome tragedy. In the wake of unthinkable grimness, Titus learns two things: to speak poetry and to laugh.

Part myth and part tragedy, William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* flirts with the genre of comedy, too. Around Act III, just after Titus’s daughter Lavinia is raped and maimed, with hands and tongue chopped off, Titus expresses his outrage; and then, he laughs. In the subsequent acts, the once rather stiff, gullible, and literal-minded Titus takes on the role of a Shakespearean fool. After learning to laugh in Act III, Titus also learns how to read and speak poetry. Unable in the first two acts to see through Aaron’s Iago-like verbal riddles and deceptions, come Act IV, Titus learns to both interpret and fathom the gravity of his daughter’s situation, through a comparison to Ovid’s Philomel from the *Metamorphoses*. He then sends notice to the rapists that he has uncovered their crime, but his discovery is coded in a few lines from Horace (IV, ii, 22).41 He also delivers his most beautiful speeches in verse after Act II. Poetry is not only the language of Titus’s duplicity, but it is also the language of his empathy—a way to both understand and cope with his daughter’s plight.42 It is also the language of his apparent madness. Through this new facility with poetry, Titus skirts the boundary between comedy and tragedy, mingles with a clown, behaves as though he has lost his mind, and makes jokes. Even the tone of his revenge in Act V is darkly humorous.

42 Many of these connections—i.e., between poetry, humor, and revenge in *Titus Andronicus*—took shape in a reading group at Saint John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, led by Jeffrey Black. I am indebted to the other participants’ comments about the play, particularly Mr. Black’s.
The unexpectedly comic notes in *Titus Andronicus* expose a key problem with poetic humor—to which we have already alluded several times and which will continue to arise in this discussion: it often surrounds apparently grave and sorrowful topics. However, following Kierkegaard’s formulations, Titus’s laughter is especially problematic because it does not seem to fully eliminate his pain. By Act V, he suddenly kills Lavinia because he thinks her death will diminish his sorrow and annihilate her shame. Where laughter might have lightened his sorrow, it does not appear to have vanquished it. Acts IV and V are also driven by Titus’s quasi-comic, quasi-mad thirst for revenge. The famously gruesome scene in Act V, scene three—when Titus grinds Tamora’s sons (who were also his daughter’s attackers) into a paste for a piecrust and serves it to her for dinner—is grotesquely comic insofar as it is over-the-top in its violence. As such, Titus’s comic mode does not successfully relieve the tensions in the play. Rather, it threatens to tip the tragedy into the realm of the absurd.

Titus’s poetry is humorous, even though his story is not. Humor in *poetry* is not quite comic relief from suffering—even though it can lighten bleakness. Rather, humor in poetry is similar to the decision not to drown in one’s sorrow, the very decision that Titus makes in Act III when he asks his daughter how they should handle their grief:
Shall thy good uncle and thy brother Lucius
And thou and I sit round about some fountain,
Looking all downwards to behold our cheeks,
How they are stained like meadows not yet dry,
With miry slime left on them by a flood?
And in the fountain shall we gaze so long
Till the fresh taste be taken from that clearness
And made a brine pit with our bitter tears?
Or shall we cut away our hands like thine?
Or shall we bite our tongues in dumb shows
Pass the remainder of our hateful days?
What shall we do?
(III, I, 123-34)

Moments later, the laughter comes:

*Marcus*
Now is a time to storm. Why art thou still?

*Titus*
Ha, ha, ha!

*Marcus*
Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour.

*Titus*
Why? I have not another tear to shed.
Besides, this sorrow is an enemy
And would usurp upon my watery eyes
And make them blind with tributary tears.

(III, i, 264-70)

Titus’s response to Marcus contains at least one contradiction. Titus first explains that he is laughing because he has no more tears to shed; he physically cannot cry anymore. At the end of that same stanza, however, he changes his answer: “Besides,” he begins, “this sorrow is an enemy/ and would usurp upon my watery eyes/ And make them
blind with *tributary* tears [emphasis added].” In fact, he is laughing because he has *too many* tears to shed. Sorrow leads to a river of tears; but as a “tributary” stream, that river flows into a vaster body of water. Of course, *tributary* has a triple sense. It also means tears that pay *tribute*; and a third meaning could be tears that *contribute* in some way to the sorrow. Once a man of simple words, Titus is now punning.

He puns in the next scene, too, after cutting off his own hand in his last gullible submission to Aaron’s guidance. Titus embraces a tone of madness as he recommends to Lavinia her own suicide and, with six “plays” on the word *hand*, criticizes his brother’s more serious demeanor:

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What violent hands can she lay on her life?
Ah, wherefore dost thou urge the name of hands
To bid Aeneas tell the tale twice o’er
How Troy was burnt and he made miserable?
O handle not the theme, to talk of hands,
Lest we remember still that we have none.
Fie, fie, how franticly I square my talk,
As if we should forget we had no hands
If Marcus did not name the word of hands.
(III, ii, 23-33)
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In the midst of jokes about their mutilated bodies, Titus scolds himself, “Fie, fie, how franticly I square my talk.” The poetry of punning is a “frantic” way of patterning his language, which is itself a way of coping with the sorrow. In other words, sorrow leads to poetry, and poetry leads to humor. Returning to the first pun on “tributary,” we saw that Titus also contradicts his meaning when he seems to say, *I have no more tears, and yet I fear that I have too many tears, tears of a tributary nature.* This contradiction is meant to
explain why he laughed. But there is no logical reason for his laughter; it is a burst of humanity. As Shakespearean Jonathan Bate puts it, “dramatic decorum [of tragedy] dictates that you should rant…. But human nature does not obey dramatic decorum. What Titus says is much more true: ‘Ha, ha, ha!’”\textsuperscript{43} Titus’s contradiction also reveals something about the nature of his humor: humor helps him manage his sorrow and signals how profound his sorrow is, since he greets it with the complete opposite sensation, laughter. As tributary tears, Titus’s tears could very well flow into an ocean of tears. They also pay tribute to or even contribute to his sorrow. Through punning and humor, Titus has found a way to fathom life amidst tremendous loss. But his puns also reveal that he is not yet fully free of the pain. Titus exploits incongruities as his mode of humor; however, the humor serves as but a temporary release from a situation that, as we have said, he does not successfully rise above. He is a complex tragic figure because he gains a sense of humor yet never relinquishes his desire for revenge.

Nevertheless, Titus’s flickers of humor allow him to glimpse a broader and sweeter life amidst a litany of atrocities. Still, he remains beholden to some of the strictures of Aristotelian tragedy—even as the image of the fountain in the speech quoted earlier is a challenge to the purifying element of Aristotelian catharsis. In that speech, Titus describes a point after the initial cleansing, when the catharsis from a tragedy can turn sour and impure, like Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the illusory “panacea” of tragedy. Titus turns away from the fountain, because he doubts the purifying effects of tragedy. If

we linger in this sadness too long, he seems to say, will the purifying waters become polluted? Does self-cleansing eventually become a form of self-indulgence?

From this point of view, Titus’s humor—even though it shows his somewhat abrupt detachment from his tragic circumstances—is the purest option he has. Yet, since his violent and often duplicitous actions over the next several acts are fueled by his thirst for revenge, one wonders whether the fountain option might have had a positively transformative property after all. Might the fountain’s serenity have contained that as yet unfamiliar ingredient, forgiveness? Although it does not cure his sorrow, Titus’s newly gained sense of humor broadens his understanding of life, at least in bursts and patches. In the first two acts, he was single-mindedly a servant to Rome, even at the expense of being a father to Rome and to his many children. In Acts III and IV, he became aware of his paternity and embraced his role as Lavinia’s father. In Act V, however, a reversion to Roman decorum prompts him to kill Lavinia publically. Then follows the grand spectacle of quick murders all around, including his own. The play Titus Andronicus is therefore still technically a tragedy. Yet, although it does not cross the line fully into comedy, humor is the mechanism through which the play’s hero gains both philosophical insight and a talent for poetry. Even though he is not purely a comic figure, humor is one of Titus’s only levers for growth.

Yet Titus’s newly found sense of humor is confusing to reconcile with the fact that his play is not a comedy: it does not end in happiness for all. Speaking to these issues, John Morreall objects to the overly rigid classification systems in western philosophy’s use of terms like humor and comedy. He writes:
It is because of these rationalistic cravings in existentialism that the absurdity of life is treated as tragic rather than comic. If Western thinkers had no presumption that the world should be completely rational, then finding their lives full of incongruities and absurdities would not automatically be cause for disillusionment or despair. Indeed, without rationalistic assumptions we might come to view the universe as one gigantic comedy. . . But in Western culture we have been led to think that all things can be brought under the dominion of reason, and so absurdity can only be disturbing.\footnote{Morreall, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought,” 252.}

Calling \textit{Titus Andronicus} a comedy instead of a tragedy would not resolve Morreall’s quandary. The differences between words like \textit{comedy}, \textit{humor}, and \textit{wit} are not important in and of themselves—the terms can sometimes interchange without a loss of precision. Rather, Morreall insists on a problem of perspective, which may have less to do with rational rigidities in western thought and more to do with the basic problem of trying to divide life into good and bad, difficult and pleasurable dual-entities. In this sense, even though the words humor and comedy are roughly synonyms, humor is able to slip beneath the frustrating binary in Morreall’s complaint more readily than comedy, which is, structurally and culturally, about culminations in outward, conventional happiness.

Because its definition is broader and not tied to specific literary genres, the word \textit{humor} actually undermines the comedy-tragedy binary more than it reinforces it. In his essay, “The Frames of Comic Freedom,” Umberto Eco comments on the difference between \textit{humor} and \textit{comic}. Eco notes, “If there is a possibility of transgression, it lies in humor rather than in comic.”\footnote{Umberto Eco, “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’” in \textit{Carnival/ Carnival} Thomas A. Sebeok, ed. (Berlin: Mouton Pubs, 1984) 8.} In a spin on Aristotle, Eco adds that a superior laughter is
pity without fear, and so it makes us smile as opposed to cringe.\textsuperscript{46} Humor is, he says, “halfway between tragedy and comedy.”\textsuperscript{47} Humor is a power for Titus because it allows him to transgress decorum in ways that did not cross his mind in the first two acts of the play. Therefore, in a tragic context, humor, as both Eco and Kierkegaard intimate, is a way to manage tragedy without indulging in its pain.

In our definition thus far, humorous poetry approaches an articulation of the ambiguous, liminal state between sorrow and cheer. As we saw in \textit{Titus Andronicus}, humor is the seed of his growth into both feigned and real madness, into fatherhood, into wit, and into eloquence. Humor allows him to use poetry towards productive, duplicitous, honest, riddling, and beautiful ends. Although his journey is not wholly transformative, the gift of a sense of humor grants Titus the flexibility and creativity with which to go on living—until the humor is not pure enough, not broad enough to sustain such a wounded life any longer.

Nevertheless, because Titus develops a sense of humor at the very same moment that he learns how to speak in beautiful language—to speak “square,” as he puts it—humor and poetry have a simultaneous birth in his eponymous play. Profound suffering, humor, and poetic language seem to come from the same place, a place of incongruities, mixed sensations, and intensified yet lightened (because broadened) human experience.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 7.
iii. Beyond Funniness: The Counter-Example of Billy Collins

The example from Shakespeare shows that humor and poetry come from a common place in human experience, and Titus’s tragic circumstances highlight similarities between comic and tragic themes. The poetry that will later be analyzed in this dissertation also springs from grave or somber themes. Yet, unlike Titus Andronicus, this lyric poetry we will examine bubbles above the pain of personal tragedy. In fact, as we will try to show, the subtle but intrinsic humor of this poetry is proof that the speaker has become detached from and therefore more broadminded about her sorrow. The “tributary” successfully flows into the vaster ocean and blinds the speaker, just as Titus feared it would; but this ultimately has a broadening, positive effect. It is does not self-contaminate, as he feared; it wipes out the suffering and leaves only the giddy, wry, and often unconventional view of a bigger experience.

By contrast, what we might call funniness in poetry is less connected to the vicissitudes of suffering. Funniness in poetry is a matter of conversational coherence. A poem’s funniness, for example, is immediately apparent to a reader and is born of a clearly discernable humorous tone. Unlike humor in what we are calling a humorous poem, the structure of funny poems is usually coherent, rational, and smooth. Of course, most people would see no reason to draw a distinction between a humorous poem and a funny poem; but when The Poetry Foundation created The Mark Twain Poetry Award, which recognizes an American poet’s contribution to humor, the creators of the award probably did not have what we have been calling “humorous” poetry in mind; they likely had funny poetry in mind. Matthew Rohrer writes, “The Award is given in the belief that humorous poetry can also be seriously good poetry, and in the hope that American poetry
will in time produce its own Mark Twain.” From the Foundation President he quotes these words, “‘Billy Collins [a recent recipient of the award] has brought laughter back to a melancholy art. He shows us that good poetry need not always be somber poetry.’” Roher adds, “What sad situation are we in that we need to be told this?”

The funny poem contains overt, accessible humor. Sometimes funny poems achieve this levity in sweet or even poignant ways. Of course, sometimes a humorous poem is also a funny poem. But some funny poems, while they make us laugh, do not *baffle* us. They do not make us work to figure out the poem’s riddle. Their humor does not force us to confront and accept the poem’s incongruous break from our expectations.

Humor and funniness can therefore be distinguished as two different kinds of levity in poetry. There is the levity that we recognize right away, because it makes us laugh. And then there is levity that is *intrinsic* to the poem’s structure. In contrast to poetic humor, funny poetry might be bawdy, or it might contain overt plays on words, or, like Ogden Nash’s poetry, it might be characterized by evenly rhymed wit and a quasi-limerick structure. Consider Billy Collins as a representative example of a funny poet. Not only is he a recent winner of the Mark Twain Award, but his funniness is also one of the main sources of his popularity.

Billy Collins likes to directly address, even solicit his reader. The opening poem in his collection *The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems* is “You, Reader,” which has the unmistakable fragrance of *Leaves of Grass* in its many affectionate appeals to the reader. But the beginning of this poem is a joke about the jealous separation between

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speaker and reader: “I wonder how you are going to feel/ when you find out/ that I wrote this instead of you.” Of course, the statement is incongruously funny because, upon opening the book, the reader must already know who wrote the poem. Furthermore, the poem makes fun of the competitiveness of apparent separation. This turns into a sweet joke, since the poem becomes instead a profession of the speaker’s growing intimacy with the reader. Eventually, too, Collins contemplates pairing opposite things. For example, as the poem describes several still-life images around the room, the speaker wonders “about the shakers of salt and pepper/ that were standing side by side on a placemat.” Collins considers, “I wonder if they had become friends/ after all these years.” The connection this bears on the false separation between reader and speaker is then made overt: “…like you and I/ who manage to be known and unknown/ to each other at the same time.”

Like a stand-up comedian, Collins hooks the reader by exposing, in a teasing way, the terms of their relationship. As Collins’s poem evolves, his speaker wonders what it would mean for two separate things, or even two apparent opposites, to harmonize. On the level of content and tone, Collins’s themes resemble qualities we have already listed for humorous poems. Structurally, however, his poems do not perform “actions” that force the reader to work out incongruities. Rather, his poems record the stream of consciousness in the speaker’s mind, and Collins’s speakers usually contemplate sweetly funny situations. His poem treats the profound theme of apparent separation, but it

foregrounds the humor. Conversely, a humorous poem lets seriousness rise to the surface, while levity permeates the core.

In another joke about the alignment between speaker and reader, Collins begins the poem “Eastern Standard Time” this way: “Poetry speaks to all people, it is said, but here I would like to address/ only those in my own time zone.” Sometimes, Collins identifies his listener, or his indirect listener, as in the poem “Lanyard.” Here, the speaker claims to find himself in the “L” section of the dictionary, and the word he comes across that he would like to dedicate to his mother (his indirect listener) is “lanyard.” Of course, the speaker plays on the incongruity of the fact that he did not choose the word “love” from the “L” section of the dictionary to send to his mother in gratitude for all she has done for him. Instead, he makes her a “two-tone” lanyard. Like Collins’s speaker, the reader, too, is sent to the dictionary to recall what a “lanyard” is. (It is a woven neck-cord.) As a string of rope designed for items that one does not want to lose, like a lifeguard’s whistle or an important key, Collins finds both humor and sweetness in the word’s meaning. A lanyard hangs on to important things: it is a mundane, odd-sounding—and therefore incongruous—way of describing love.

Although they poke fun at clichés, Collins’s poems are not mocking or belittling. They contain sarcasm and irony, but they are rarely mean. Collins’s speakers self-deprecate or else they illustrate funny situations. Nearly always, however, they are affectionate towards the reader. In the poem “The Drive,” Collins describes hearing someone else, during a long car ride, say critical things about the reader, who Collins’s

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The funny poet, then, at least in Collins’s gentle vein, protects the reader, meditates fondly on the reader, and even cares deeply for the reader. The overt humor in his poetry could be seen as a kind of gift to the reader—a gift of entertainment, of comfort, and of cheer.

Collins’s connections to his readers go deeper still. In the poem “On Not Finding You at Home,” Collins’s speaker confesses his motivation: “It is just me thinking about being you.” The entire impetus for the poem is, again, as with Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” an attempt to commune with, even to become the reader. Here we return to the image of the salt-and-pepper shakers and to Collins’s daydream (perhaps the daydream of all love poets) of fusing two separate entities together. In addition, however, because Collins’s poems are funny, the reader is engaged in a more intimate way—not necessarily because he is moved, but because he is actively, immediately entertained and uplifted.

Collins’s speakers sometimes express playful worry that the reader might feel he has slipped into cliché. In the poem “Gold,” Collins wishes to describe the golden light in Florida, but his speaker is cautious about seeming overly romantic. (Perhaps his speaker jokingly fears the critical eye of a Hulme or a Pound.) After beginning with a few only slightly clichéd descriptions of what the light looks like, he qualifies, “but the last thing I want to do/ is risk losing your confidence/ by appearing to lay it on too thick [emphasis added].” In a series of poems about sonnets, Collins gently pokes fun at the Petrarchan love blazon and at sonnet history in general. He also adds his own twist to the sonnet form. In “American Sonnet,” Collins exceeds the fourteen-line “limit” and ends the poem

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51 Ibid., 58.
52 Ibid.
telling Petrarch to go back to bed where he and Laura can actually touch one another.

Here again, Collins’s speaker craves intimacy with the listener. His Laura will not be an abstract idea of love scattered in the stars;\textsuperscript{54} she will be a warm body in one’s bed.

In a few cases, Collins not only makes light of poetic clichés, but he also seems to revere the cliché. For example, in one poem, he writes about “The American poets gazing out/ at the pink and blue ribbons of sunrise”; and later in the same poem, he writes, “The miners are down in their mines.” Both quotations are references to famous lines from Emily Dickinson’s poetry: “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose/ A Ribbon at a time” and “The Miner’s lamp – sufficient be –/ To Nullify the Mine” (F204, F442). The expressions are clichéd only because Dickinson had already made them famous. Collins’s speaker derives humor from the obvious nature of his allusions, but he also seems to find beauty in the references. The American poets describe the sun this way, he seems to say, because it is a good way to describe it. Collins makes much of the clichés surrounding individual poets, too. For example, one of his poems is titled, “Lines Composed Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey.”

In another poem, this time directly about Emily Dickinson, called “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes,” Collins weaves in many well-known lines from Dickinson’s poetry and parodies Victorian-era clichés: “The complexity of women’s undergarments/ in nineteenth-century America/ is not to be waved off,/ and I proceeded like a polar explorer/ through clips, clasps, moorings, catches, straps, and whalebone stays,/ sailing

\textsuperscript{54} Nancy J. Vickers’s “Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhyme” in \textit{Critical Inquiry} 8.2, 1981 argues that Petrarchan sonnets “scatter” the body parts of the idealized woman. Her essay charted a way of reading a woman’s image depicted in poetry as a type of fracturing.
toward the iceberg of her nakedness."\textsuperscript{55} At first glance, this poem might seem a little bit too silly or even slightly in poor taste. Collins uses the metaphor of undressing to satirize the effort of peeling off the many layers of cliché surrounding Dickinson’s persona. In this sense, humor is his manner of objecting to the popular image of a mysterious poet. His poem never reveals anything new or particularly insightful about Dickinson. Their intimacy consists of speaking “in sudden dashes” on a “Sabbath afternoon” as a “carriage [passed] the house” and as “a fly [buzzed] in a windowpane.”\textsuperscript{56} In the end, Collins’s poem is an indirect celebration of Dickinson’s playfulness and levity. After removing all of the surface impressions, an intimate engagement with Dickinson turns out to be a little funny.

In his reference to the “iceberg of her nakedness,” apart from jabbing at clichés of Victorian sexual repression, Collins also shows, perhaps unwittingly, that the power underneath the surface layers of Dickinson’s poetry is as imposing, frozen, and devastating as an iceberg. Collins can get away with this because his tone suggests that he has intuited something very intimate in Dickinson’s poetics: her personality is irrelevant; it does not contain the heartbeat of her poems. Rather, her poems are alive because they are playful and mischievous just like his tribute to her.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Dickinson’s definition of poetry: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know \textit{that} is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know \textit{that} is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?” (L342a).
Like Dickinson, Collins is playful about death. In his poem, “Horoscopes for the Dead,” he writes of reading the horoscope of someone who has passed away: “I am reminded that today/ will not be a wildly romantic time for you.” Or in “Memento Mori,” he pines, incongruously, “So many reminders of my mortality…except you,/ sign over the door of this bar in Cocoa Beach/ proclaiming that it was established —/though established does not sound right – in 1996.”

This section has outlined three preliminary qualifications for poetic humor. 1) In the section called “Silent Laughter,” we saw that, based on theoretical precedents in literary criticism, humor has a gradual effect on a reader of a poem, whose laughter may be delayed or internal and therefore silent. While most humor, as William F. Fry has argued, is a matter of interpersonal relationships, we argue here that humor in poetry is a partial exception—in the sense that the interpersonal connection between the speaker and reader is mediated by the poem. As a result, humor in a poem can be less immediate and subtler than in other genres; again, the laughter is usually delayed or entirely silent. 2) The example from Titus Andronicus made a case for the potentially universal elements of poetic humor—humor and poetic language emerge at the same time and seem to inform each other. The play’s tragic plot points further illustrated the thematic closeness of humor and tragedy and how their topics and effects often overlap.

58 Collins, title poem in Horoscopes for the Dead, 27.
3) Even though many of his jokes are derived from puns or from situational incongruities, Collins maintains witty, conversational coherence in nearly every poem. His humor is plain to most readers. By contrast, the effect of a humorous poem is both subtler and more far-reaching. It is subtler because the reader has to tease out the ambiguities in order to recognize the presence of humor. And it is more far-reaching because, once the humor is recognized, it challenges a conventional view of the poem’s subject.

The funniness in Collins’s poems is usually sweet and uplifting; Collins’s poems (although occasionally parodies) are not funny at the expense of others, and his speakers are sometimes affectionate towards the reader. At most, the speaker is self-deprecating, but the tone of his poems is neither bitter nor competitive. Still, a humorous poem is a more difficult art form. As such, it is also, potentially, a more rigorous agent of contemplation than a funny poem. Humor in poetry has the potential to reach for something that is both giddier and temporarily more terrifying than funniness.
Chapter 1

Emily Dickinson and Death: The Humorous Element in Apparent Tragedy

It’s easy to invent a Life –
God does it – every Day –
Creation – but the Gambol
Of His Authority –
It’s easy to efface it –
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity –

The Perished Patterns murmur –
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed – inserting Here – a Sun –
There – leaving out a Man –
(F747)²

I. Metaphorical Death

Tension and elasticity. As mentioned in the introduction, these are Henri Bergson’s words for the mechanism of humor. In his foundational essay *Le rire*, Bergson posits a mutually dependent relationship between “tension and elasticity: the mutually complementary forces that life puts in play.”² So, too, Emily Dickinson’s death poetry exploits the same

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¹ A version of this chapter is published in the Spring 2013 issue of *Studies in American Humor* under the title “Emily Dickinson’s Joke about Death.”
² Unless otherwise specified, all quoted Dickinson poems are transcriptions from the Ralph W. Franklin edited *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), coded F followed by the poem number in that edition; all letters are from Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward’s *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), coded L followed by the letter number.
principle, only in her case the pairing is the tension of pain or grief and the detachedness of a cosmic vision. The tension of this duality in Dickinson’s poetry reveals the speaker’s profound experiences of pain on the one hand and her understanding of the limited nature of pain on the other.\footnote{Dana Luciano’s book \textit{Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America} (New York: New York University Press, 2007) describes grieving practices during the Civil War, noting the ways in which grief expanded notions of time. An implication of the book is that the apparent endlessness of mourning flowed into experiences of vastness.} Emily Dickinson’s joke about death involves the sudden dissipation of sorrow’s heaviness; the paradox collides, and the tension vanishes.

This “joke” occurs in a variety of ways in Dickinson’s poetry, as we’ll see, but it is always scarcely detectable, always subtly embedded. If readers derive pleasure from Dickinson’s poetry, it may be because of the sense of levity with which they are ultimately left. Yet, distracted by the ostensibly bleak subject matters, most readers would not go so far as to call their enjoyment of these poems an enjoyment of levity. For example, the poem quoted above will not likely seem humorous after a first reading. On the contrary, it might seem rather grim. As this study seeks to show, however, the surface bleakness in many Dickinson “death” poems often shrouds their humorous core. Another Dickinson poem begins ominously, “We grow accustomed to the Dark –/ When Light is put away” (F428). If the word “dark” persuades us that the poem will have a bleak tone, then we might not notice where the speaker is headed with her metaphor of darkness and light.
By the fourth stanza she describes those who brave this darkness. The adventurou
ness of their escapade comes off more comedic than romantic, however:

The Bravest – grope a little –
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead.

The bravery required to cope with the loss of light is incongruously paired with the everyday, ungraceful challenge of having to find one’s way in the dark. Just when we are sure that one of her poems is solemn in tone, Emily Dickinson slips in some cartoonish image (like bumping one’s head on a tree) or some incongruous claim.

A common joke in her poetry is that the word “death” does not mean death. Dickinson’s word “death” typically means change, the transformation of an identity, or the initiation of a newer, broader level of awareness. By contrast, physical death is rarely ever referred to as “death” in her poems; instead, it is frequently given the euphemisms “immortality,” “eternity,” or “resurrection.” Dickinson calls these junctures in life “deaths” because an old way of life is wiped out in the process, and often painfully. As Roland Hagenbüchle has succinctly put it, “Loss, for [Dickinson], becomes instead the very precondition of gain.”2 Or, as Garrison Keillor has framed the same idea, Dickinson’s poetry contains “the idea that one gains life by giving up life.”3 Later Keillor quipped, “Had [Dickinson] turned her mind to it…she could have written prose comedy.”4

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4 Ibid., 26:00.
The humor in Dickinson’s death poetry comes from the juxtaposition of profound experience with light detachment, from the incongruous match of the solemn name “death” to describe the beneficial experience of growth. There is further humor in the almost imperceptible defiance of the reader’s expectations. If we expect the sorrowful tone that comes with separation, then we are surprised when the poem is light instead. If we expect absence, then we are somewhat confused to find presence.

Is it needless to say that the popular stereotype of Emily Dickinson tells quite a different and far more humorless story? Dickinson’s unusual lifestyle has been interpreted by distant fans and devoted scholars alike as fearful, repressed, and deeply sorrowful. A day spent with Dickinson’s letters, however, reveals a more cheerful and more complex picture. As Keillor has joked of her famous reclusiveness, “A person can hardly be called shy who is withdrawing into a room in order to create thousands of poems and write thousands of letters.” When you do that, Keillor added, “You’re busy! You’re busy!”

Dickinson’s friends were familiar with the humorous element in her poetry. In an 1891 correspondence to possible editor of Dickinson’s poetry, Emily Dickinson’s sister-in-law Susan wrote, “I have a little article in mind, with illustrations of her (Emily’s) own, showing her witty humorous side which has all but been left out of her vol. [i.e., the 1890 volume edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd]”; “Writings by Susan Dickinson: Correspondence with William Hayes Ward,” Emilydickinson.org, Web (accessed 7.29.12).

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5 Ibid., 17:39.
6 Ibid., 18:00.
In Dickinson’s poetry, cheer and mischief statistically outshine bleaker topics. The word *despair* appears only six times in the letters and 31 times in the poems, whereas derivatives of the word *delight* appear 108 times in Dickinson’s letters and about 55 times in her poetry. Mentions of the word *pain* are comparatively fewer, too: they can be found in only 30 places in her letters and a little over 50 times in her poems. Sometimes the word *pain* is paired with the word *delight*, as in the poem, “Wonder – is not precisely knowing,” in which she writes, “Whether Adult Delight be Pain/ Or of itself a new misgiving –/ This is the Gnat that mangles men” (F1347). In other words, Dickinson seldom frames difficult experiences in wholly negative terms.

*Death* is a popular word with 102 references, but even this topic is outpaced by *delight.* These statistics, easily gathered from concordances, are not important data in and of themselves. But they affirm a truth about Dickinson’s philosophy of life that is often missed: her interests, however profound and checkered with suffering, nearly always leaned towards positive experiences of growth. As Keillor points out, since our culture is particularly sensitive to visual images, we are oversensitive to the apparently serious expression in Dickinson’s lone authenticated daguerreotype. We hastily stretch this apparent solemnity to account, in tone, for her entire body of work.

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8 See Roger Lundin’s *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* on Dickinson’s refusal to believe in an absolute connection between sin and death, 29; or Adrienne Rich in “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” on her diverse philosophical perspectives on death: *Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 121; Rich writes, “No one since the Seventeenth Century had reflected more variously and more probingly upon death and dying” (121).

9 Keillor, 18:38.
Yet, it is difficult to reconcile the popular image of morbidity with the hilarity of her letters and the wit of her poetry. Furthermore, Dickinson was passionate—even exuberant—about her interests in life. For instance, her love of literature likely contributed to her playful uses of the word death. *Antony and Cleopatra* was one of Emily Dickinson’s favorite plays, and so it is probably not an accident that her flexible definition of death resembles Cleopatra’s associations with the word. Cleopatra’s term “death” will therefore be compared to Dickinson’s own lighthearted, broadminded, and at the same time deeply serious view of death. In maintaining a balance of gravity and levity, Dickinson’s special brand of humor both respects death’s solemnity and celebrates its relative insignificance.

Emily Dickinson’s letters chart her broadening view of death. In 1858, she wrote to her friends who had not replied to her letters in some time:

Good-night! I can’t stay any longer in a world of death. Austin [Emily Dickinson’s brother] is ill of fever. I buried my garden last week—our man, Dick, lost a little girl through scarlet fever. I thought perhaps that you were dead, and not knowing the sexton’s address, interrogate the daisies (L195).

Dickinson turns this list of the dead and the ill into a joke about her friends’ neglect to reply to her letters. A paraphrase of her meaning might go something like this: *Because I haven’t heard from you, I’ve gone to look for you in the grassy graveyard* (that is probably what she means by “interrogate the daisies”). Her joke lightens the otherwise sad nature of her list—*my brother is sick, winter is coming, the man who works for us had a daughter who died*; but it also elucidates her philosophy of death. For Dickinson,
death is the absence of personal contact. It means not seeing or hearing from someone, as was the case with these friends who did respond to her letters. The implication is that sorrow comes from the illusion that someone has completely vanished from one’s acquaintance. In a letter to her cousin John Graves, playing on the pun of his name, Dickinson draws a gravestone on the back of the envelope (L137; see Figure 1).

Figure 1

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10 Martha Nell Smith lists a number of possible satirical interpretations of this sketch in her essay “The Poet as Cartoonist” in Comic Power in Emily Dickinson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993) 69.

11 All facsimiles of Dickinson’s sketches and manuscripts are printed here courtesy of the Amherst College Special Collections at the Robert Frost Library.
In a matching poem, Dickinson’s speaker deadpans:

We do not play on Graves
Because there is'nt Room
Besides – it is'nt even – it slants
And People come (F599).

Although, in this poem, Dickinson’s speaker explains the impracticality of playing on graves, Dickinson’s letter to John Graves freely “plays” on his name. The speaker plays on the word “play,” too, since she somewhat mischievously admonishes any “play on Graves” (i.e., jokes about death). Of course, the physical image is so silly that we eventually catch the speaker’s wink. Outwardly, the word “grave” was no more than a pun on her cousin’s name, and a gravestone no more than a piece of stone in the ground. Inwardly, death was Dickinson’s way of speaking metaphorically about radical changes in awareness, and graves were metaphorical markers of those experiences.

Humorist Constance Rourke predicted a shift in American humor from inter-personal repartee to inward meditation. Rourke explains her idea this way: “The comic sense was bound at last to break that tie holding the poet within the bondage of social preoccupation.” When she came out with her book *American Humor* in the 1930s, Rourke may have been the first critic to identify Emily Dickinson as a comic poet. Since that time, a small handful of articles and only one full-length study (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith’s *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*) discuss the matter. Meanwhile, although scholars consistently acknowledge Dickinson’s wit and playfulness with language, few see humor as a central, not to mention defining, element of her work.

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12 Rourke, 65.
Thus, it was significant that Rourke included Dickinson at all in her overview of American humor.\(^{13}\) Rourke was one of the first to recognize the poet’s range. For the most part, she sees Dickinson’s humor as a sign of her creative power, writing, “Humor is [Dickinson’s] usual means of declaring independence.”\(^ {14}\) Yet, as examples of Dickinson’s humor, she includes clever one-liners, such as “Faith is a fine invention for gentlemen who see/ But microscopes are prudent in an emergency” (F202). Although witty to be sure, these isolated quips and caustic puns show the side of Dickinson that Dorothy Parker would later make popular (and to which she would also add more than a touch of cynicism). But Dickinson’s humor is not always so facile. Reflecting incongruities in her speakers’ internal experiences, the wit and the jokes are embedded in the poem’s structure and verbal nuances. Rourke’s study seems equipped to grasp this more meditative aspect of Dickinson’s work, since it states later on in *American Humor*, “With [the epical scope] went that tendency toward the conscious, the self-aware, toward the inner view, the inner fantasy, which belonged to the American comic sense”; or her comment, “American humor has stepped outside the real world into that of fantasy.”\(^ {15}\) Nevertheless, Rourke does not link Dickinson’s humor to her well-drawn theory of the humor of American inwardness.

\(^{13}\) The longest treatment of Dickinson’s humor is the 1993 *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, a collection of three essays by Dickinson scholars Suzanne Juhasz, Martha Nell Smith, and Cristanne Miller. While each essay is distinctive, the book’s overall argument is redolent of Rourke’s position. To paraphrase the thesis of the book as a whole, Dickinson’s humor is a performance; it is itself a self-defense mechanism, one that the book thinks she would have needed in her socio-cultural and historical circumstances. Their contribution is a nuanced treatment of important new findings in scholarship and archival work on Dickinson.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 67.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 162 & 156.
Still, Rourke’s points about inwardness could elucidate Dickinson’s meditative humor. In his notes on humor, Reinhold Niebuhr provides a helpful distinction: “There is evidence that the most insufferable forms of tyranny (as in the concentration camps, for instance) could not be ameliorated by laughter.” (One notable exception to Niebuhr’s theory comes to mind: Roberto Benigni’s Life is Beautiful (1997), a film about a concentration camp, is also a film filled with humor.)

Dickinson’s humor comes from using outward, worldly examples of (usually blameless) death as metaphors for internal experiences. In contrast to suffering as a result of outward tyranny, as a lever of self-reflection, humor does ameliorate personal experience in her poetry. In Niebuhr’s words, “Humour is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself.” If one makes a joke about an earthquake, for example, and it is meant to be an incongruous metaphor for stomach rumblings, this joke has the potential to be funny. But if this joke about the earthquake is meant to be a metaphor for a deep and painful rift in a relationship, then the joke is less likely to seem funny. Dickinson’s inward experiences were not as gentle as stomach rumblings, but they were still internal. This is evident enough from the fact that she withdrew into deeper and deeper seclusion over the course of her life. Her chief subject became her own soul, her own inner life.

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16 I take the term “meditative” from Louis Martz’s The Poetry of Meditation, which surveys poetic structures that were used as (or that drew on) practices of religious meditation: (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).


18 Ibid., 140.
II. Five Dickinson “Death” Poems

There were plenty of choices for a selection of Dickinson’s poetry about death. These five poems were selected because they survey the range of humorous devices employed in her death poetry. Four out of the five “death” poems that will be analyzed here were written during the Civil War.¹⁹ Dickinson’s metaphorical “deaths” directly reflected the American experience of rapid, widespread physical deaths. Yet, in addition to their profound and sometimes moving descriptions of loss, these “death” poems nevertheless contain passages that undermine the straight pathos of loss. To begin, consider a well-known poem that is sometimes read at funerals:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – (F372)

¹⁹ R.W. Franklin dates all but one of these five poems to either 1862 or 1863. “A Chilly Peace Infests the Grass” is the one exception. He dates this poem to 1878.
Martha Nell Smith has written about Dickinson’s humor as a mode of cartooning. For a list of Dickinson’s cartoons, Smith refers primarily to satirical drawings and illustrations in her poetry and letters.\textsuperscript{20} However, the term “cartooning” can also be applied to Dickinson’s verbal images. This poem alone contains at least three such “cartoonish” moments. First, in the line “the Feet, mechanical, go round,” the speaker points out, almost scientifically, how the body moves automatically, without natural human agility and ease. Another such image comes with the line “The Nerves sit ceremonious—like Tombs,” which asks us to visualize nerves seated like people at a funeral ceremony. A third image is of a “stiff Heart” playing the role of a curious mind asking theological questions. “Feet” “Nerves” and “Heart” are all body parts, detached here through metonym, presumably to stand in for a human being. As isolated parts of a whole, they are comical to visualize moving around without the coherence of the human form. Bergson explains that the mechanization of human beings produces humor. He writes, “Where matter thus succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of the body, an effect that is comic.”\textsuperscript{21} The images of disembodied feet, civilized nerves sitting very solemnly, or a ponderous heart are, of course, physically impossible and therefore all the more cartoonish.

\textsuperscript{20} Smith, 101.
Since the feet are referred to as *mechanical*, it is also possible to read this image as a simple description of the *feet* (or hands) of a watch or clock. This would help explain the image four lines later, “quartz contentment,” like the quartz movement inside of a watch.\(^{22}\) “Quartz” refers to many things in the poem, including a play on the third person of the verb “courts.” In their formative book *Understanding Poetry*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren offer this reading of the word:

> The line, "A quartz contentment like a stone," is particularly interesting. The comparison involves two things. First, we see an extension of the common association of stoniness with the numbness of grief, as in such phrases as "stony-eyed" or "heart like a stone," etc. But why does the poet use "quartz"? There are several reasons. The name of the stone helps to particularize the figure and prevent the effect of a cliche. Moreover, quartz is a very hard stone. And, for one who knows that quartz is a crystal, a "quartz contentment" is a contentment crystallized, as it were, out of the pain. This brings us to the second general aspect involved by the comparison. This aspect is ironical. The contentment arising after the shock of great pain is a contentment because of the inability to respond any longer, rather than the ability to respond satisfactorily and agreeably.\(^{23}\)

Although Brooks and Warren do not mention the conductor properties of quartz, their analysis rests on the word’s importance in the poem. Moreover, their notion that, as phrased above, “a ‘quartz contentment’ is a contentment crystallized, as it were, out of the pain,” supports the often-missed sense that this poem is about *release* from pain, not purgatories of pain (even though Brooks and Warren contend that it is not a happy

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\(^{22}\) The conductor properties of quartz were not scientifically proven until the late nineteenth century, and they were not used clocks and watches until the twentieth century. However, quartz was used in lithic traditions and in prehistoric structures that are thought to have measured time. For millennia, quartz has been associated with dynamic properties in geology.

release). Dickinson scholar Sharon Cameron has pointed out the redundancy of the poem’s similes: quartz is not like a stone; “quartz is a stone.”24 “The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs,” tacks on a simile at the end as well, almost gratuitously.25 These redundant similes underscore the similarity between death and feelings of physical numbness; yet, at the same time, their redundancy makes light of such clichéd analogies. The numbness of the imagery, adumbrated by the lack of any real difference between the two elements compared in the similes, is so pervasive that it seems mechanized, giving the impression that this atmosphere of death, too, is part of the mechanization of life. Like the feet of a clock, death keeps pace with neutral, impersonal exactness. Like a clock, death is neither sentimental nor callous; it is just a mechanism.26

The image of a “quartz contentment” is semantically parallel to the phrase from the opening line, “formal feeling.” However, the feeling is “formal” not because it is austere, but because it is detached and impersonal—and perhaps even positive. It could be a formal feeling because it is forming something in the speaker; it is a creative, growth-oriented feeling.

24 Sharon Cameron, Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) 15.

25 A similar repetition appears in Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal”; he writes, “No motion has she no, no force;/ She neither hears nor sees;/ Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course;/ With rocks, and stones, and trees.” (Pace David Ruderman.)

26 Among few remaining memorabilia from Dickinson’s life is a beautiful pocket watch, exhibited in Richard Sewall’s two-volume biography, The Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 375.
Further along in the poem, the speaker refers to time directly: “This is the Hour of Lead—/ Remembered, if outlived.” Here, the indirect, if anachronistic, presence of the clock image nevertheless finds a sly double use for the word “lead”—the heaviness of pain or grief, but also, a metal material quite like the lead or steel with which we make the hour hands of clocks. Thus, the embedded, perhaps unwitting clock image in this poem operates on two levels: first, it is a metaphor for a pain-numbed state—suffering man is compared to a man-made machine, a clock. Second, it suggests that the record of time lies within each human being. However, because the opening words, “after great pain,” prompt readers to feel an empathetic concern for the subject described, readers would likely not laugh at this image at first glance. Apart from the cartoonish personified body parts in these images—— nerves sitting ceremoniously like parishioners at a funeral, a stiff heart ruminating over theological questions like Hamlet, or disembodied feet shuffling around robotically— the numbness of pain would not seem funny.

The “Feet,” referenced in the second stanza, are the feet of time, working their way through life “regardless,” as Dickinson says, of our pain. “Letting go,” the famous final two words of this poem, do not just refer to the letting go of the dying and of those mourning the dead; they are the letting go implied in any surrender. What is funny, then, is not the pain, the grief, or the surrender to the “formal feeling,” but the layering of the imagery such that we are forced to unwind the poem (like a clock), only to discover that what we thought was an image of devastated man was, from one perspective, only a mechanical device. Only time.
The famous image of a “chill” from “After great pain” is echoed in one of Dickinson’s definitions of poetry, as recorded by Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way” (L342a)? The surprising intensity of these images has a slightly humorous after-effect. Dickinson conveys that what lies underneath language is chilling, but somehow impressively chilling. Both metaphors in her description evoke the numbing or deadening of the body: no warm blood in the body—or no scalp, as the case may be. What she liked about poetry, then, was its transformative power. Extreme coldness implies that real poetry effectively removes the reader’s life force. The metaphor of violent, sudden, or chilling death incongruously implies a wiping out of sensation in order to make way for new awareness. There is humor, not morbidity, in Dickinson’s choice of metaphors, since what she ultimately communicates in that choice is their opposites: not cold and dead bodies but invigorated inner lives.

In contrast to the detached tone of “After great pain,” one is struck by the dainty tone of this next poem, even though its topic is explicitly death. This is the staccato-rhythm “Because I could not stop for death”:
Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

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

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

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

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

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –
(F479)

The poem tells the story of a romantic carriage ride. It is a funny coincidence that one of Nietzsche’s critiques of poetry contains the very same metaphor. Of “Thought in poetry” he jokes dryly, “The poet conducts his thoughts along festively, in the carriage of rhythm: usually because they are incapable of walking on foot [emphasis added].”

27 In My Emily Dickinon Susan Howe cites Robert Browning’s “The Last Ride Together” as a possible source for this poem. See also Cynthia Griffin Wolf’s biography of Emily Dickinson and its reference to the romantic grotesque. (Pace Rosemary Winslow.)
Although Dickinson’s poem does not use rhythm as a crutch *per se*, what has often been called her imitation Protestant hymn meter is employed here almost hypnotically. One wonders if the rhythm in this poem about a carriage contains its own self-mocking joke about repetitive lyric rhythm in general. Or perhaps, quite simply, her rhythm playfully and innocently imitates the pronounced motions of a carriage ride.

Often thought of as a date with death, the poem repeatedly alludes to death’s gentility.\(^29\) In stanzas one and two, death is described as *kind* and *civil*, respectively. Then, in the fourth stanza, death, the courtier, may or may not leave the speaker at a graveyard. The speaker creates this narrative ambiguity through a shift in pronoun. Prior to the fourth stanza, the speaker had communicated in the first person plural (*we*), to refer to both herself and her companion, Death. Come the fourth stanza, however, Death the courtier may no longer be a part of that group—of *we*—, having become *He* again.

\(^{29}\) Daneen Wardop’s book *Emily Dickinson’s Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge* (University of Iowa Press, 1996) underlines the gothic influence in Dickinson’s work, and this poem would be an example of that influence. However, Wardrop argues that the gothic is an element of Dickinson’s fear and hesitation and probably overstates this point. She helpfully shows how the element of hesitation and uncertainty in Dickinson’s work is that which “resists closure” (xii) and that “gothicism introduces a way of knowing that critiques rationalism”; yet her argument omits the openness and arch humor in Dickinson’s poetry—the voice that, rather than indulge it, makes light of gothic fear. At the other extreme, Ronald Wallace takes issue with the critical tendency to celebrate Dickinson’s “dark” poems, but he misses the sense in which her seemingly dark poems can also be her light, humorous poems: “These critics...who would assure her a place in the highest ranks of American literature, prefer the dark Dickinson to the lighter one, reserving their highest praise for her tragic sense, for her poems of anguish, pain, despair, grief, agony, and death. A comic poet is, it seems, by definition a minor poet, while a tragic poet aspires, at least, to being a major poet” in *God Be With the Clown: Humor in American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984) 79.
The poem’s humor lies both in the frivolity of the individual details—a slow, romantic carriage ride, the delicate *gossamer* and *tulle tippet*, the fact that these fabrics are too cold for the chilly graveyard, and in the incongruity of the ending. At the end of the poem, the poetic speaker seems to reflect on this experience from the vantage point of a few centuries later. Death, as confirmed by the poem’s last word, *eternity*, had no finality after all. *Civil* and *gallant* death left the speaker at the gravesite, as though he were leaving her off at a bus stop from where she could travel on to another destination. Not being able to “stop” for death therefore suggests that Dickinson’s “death” is not a *full* stop. This particular carriage ride is significant because it “marks the day” when the speaker first understood that death was a civil, gallant, and accommodating escort, not a terminus.

These incongruities were captured in a recent comic strip of the poem posted on an esoteric website (see Figure 2).  

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**Figure 2**

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BECAUSE I COULDN'T STOP FOR DEATH
THt CARR~~~~E H~E
HE KINDLY STOPPED FOR ME

THE CARRIAGE HELD BUT JUST OURSELVES

HYAH!
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The comic strip depicts the Dickinson persona stealing a carriage from a Grim Reaper-type “Death” figure. The “joke” here is also (although perhaps unwittingly) an astute reading of the poem. The speaker’s retrospective position from centuries later proves that she has removed “Death” from her journey. The “horses’ heads” were pointed to some future point all along.

If this poem has a “joke,” it is contained in the incongruous use of the word death to indicate eternal life. This dysphemism should not be surprising. As mentioned, Dickinson frequently puts this idea the other way around, and uses “immortality” as a euphemism for death. The poem’s structural incongruity lies in the almost imperceptible interweaving of light topics with grave ones. The speaker peers back into an earlier lifetime when carriages would have been a common form of travel, when wedding gowns would have been made of gossamer and tulle. She speaks of this moment when ignorance turned to understanding almost matter-of-factly, as though, from the perspective of two centuries later, the whole moment was merely a sweet part of her innocence and ignorance.

In their proposed exercises on this poem in *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren ask readers, “Are we to take it that the lady has died? Or is the poem about an awareness?”31 One wonders if the answer is not “yes” to both questions. Death, whether physical or metaphorical, affords the speaker this new awareness. Giving her escort the name Death merely underlines the daunting uncertainties of the journey. In spite of Death’s gentility, the journey to the cold graveyard has a harrowing quality. But the

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Speaker’s awareness of an expanded life makes that temporary chill all part of the “joke”, i.e., the incongruity that something seemingly gloomy is fondly remembered from the broader vantage point of a new awareness.

In several poems, Dickinson juxtaposes death with the learning that comes after death. Here is one in which the reader must work through the ambiguities in the margins until the humor comes into focus. Emily Dickinson’s original manuscripts prove the extent to which she valued poetic ambiguities as tools for clarifying her meaning. They also show how ambiguities were springboards for her humor. Dickinson scribbled multiple options for words and phrases in this poem on the original manuscript, without making a decision about which option worked best. Note in particular the penultimate line. (See Figure 3.)

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32 This poem was on display in 2011 at The Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts, and was curated by Special Collections Librarian Michael Kelly.
A chill breeze infests
the grass
the sun respectful
lies.
Not any trace
of industry
these shadows
scrutinize.

Whose Allis go
no more astra.
For service or
for bliss.
But all mankind
deliver here
from whatsoever sea.

So will you
do another.

Honor - welcome! Though
A Chilly Peace infests
   (lonesome)
   (warning)
the Grass
the Sun respectful
lies—

not any trance
of industry
these shadows
   (the)
scrutinize—

Whose Allies go
no more astray
   (abroad)
For service or
   (honor)
   (welcome)
For Glee—

But all mankind
   (though)
deliver here
   (cruise softly here)
   (row [softly here])
   (sail [softly here])
   (do anchor [here])
From whatsoever Sea—

Dickinson could not “decide” if the poem should read all mankind/ deliver here, row softly here, cruise softly here, sail softly here or do anchor here. Her indecision reveals something about the poem’s meaning. If this is a poem about death, as the first stanza suggests, then each choice in its penultimate line would seem to offer one option for what the afterlife would be like. Perhaps the first choice, “deliver here,” reflects a Protestant-based belief in salvation and deliverance. “Do anchor here,” conveys a more

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33 This poem was transcribed from a facsimile of Dickinson’s original manuscript, courtesy of the Amherst College Special Collections.
empirical approach to thinking about the expiration of a body, now anchored permanently in the ground. “Row softly here,” suggests a sort of purgatory situation, at least in the sense that the one who has died is steering himself forward, perhaps towards future learning. The line “cruise softly here” suggests movement, but movement free of work—a more blissful eternity.

Dickinson’s “joke” is that she retains these ambiguities in what becomes, as far as we know from her extant manuscripts, her ultimate draft of the poem. The allusions to death at the start of the poem seem minor next to this longer list of options for the afterlife. Judging the poem visually alone, the afterlife appears to be more important than the “chilly peace” of death at the poem’s start, simply because it takes more words to list all of the possibilities.

In other poems, the speaker’s wry tone is the key to the poem’s humor, even while the poem at first seems shockingly disaffected, as in “It’s easy to invent a Life”:

It’s easy to invent a Life—
God does it—every Day—
Creation—but the Gambol
Of His Authority—
It’s easy to efface it—
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity—

The Perished Patterns murmur—
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed—inserting Here—a Sun—
There—leaving out a Man—
(F747)
“It’s easy to invent a life” offers a vision of death that seems at first almost callous in its detachedness. Although the poem tells us that man’s life can be quickly effaced, “Man” is finally juxtaposed to “Sun.” Dickinson does not say, inserting Here – a Tree –/ There – leaving out a Man. Instead, man is to be replaced with something greater than himself— a “Sun.” The fact that the sun is left standing in the poem, even after man has been wiped out, adds a subtle optimism to a seemingly pessimistic view of life.

Furthermore, Dickinson’s dry litotes at the start of the poem— “It’s easy to invent a Life –/ God does it – every Day”— downplays the grandeur of creation on the one hand (she seems to say, what’s so impressive about creating life? Anyone can do it). On the other hand, this poem ascribes omnipotence to God through the inference that all of this is his whim, his “Gambol.” None of this is derived from “spontaneity.”

“After great pain a formal feeling comes” describes the surrender that comes after suffering, but not necessarily surrender to bleakness and despair; “Because I could not stop for death” is a romantic reminiscence of death from the perspective of eternal life; “A chilly peace infests the grass” offers multiple options for the afterlife; and “It’s easy to invent a Life” wryly dismisses death as inconsequential in the scheme of things, yet the poem sets death on par with the equally marvelous inconsequence of life. Which is it, then, this theme of death? Is it hugely transformative, or is it no more than a dot on the horizon?
In another well-known poem about death, Dickinson’s speaker jokes about the concurrence of gravity and frivolity in experiences of death. Moreover, she does so through a direct allusion to John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

I died for Beauty – but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room –

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
“For Beauty”, I replied –
“And I – for Truth – Themselves are One –
We Bretheren, are”, He said –

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night –
We talked between the Rooms –
Until the Moss had reached our lips –
And covered up – Our names –
(F448)

Unlike the position of the speaker in Keats’s poem, Dickinson’s poetic speaker is already in her grave.\(^{34}\) In addition, Keats’s “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty” is the culminating (and controversial) morale of his poem. But Dickinson begins with this pairing: “I died for Beauty – but was scarce/ Adjusted in the Tomb/ When one who died for Truth, was lain/ In an adjoining Room.” Her echo of Keats is both homage to his ode and a teasing parody of the ode’s message. In Dickinson’s poem, the lover of beauty and the lover of truth are neighbors who discover a friendship in the afterlife. Dickinson’s speaker places her characters directly in their “urns” as it were. Martyrs of “beauty” and “truth” are not immortalized in artistic depictions on an urn; rather, they converse “Until the Moss had

\(^{34}\) In addition to echoing Keats, this poem may echo tropes in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry, namely Sonnets from the Portuguese. Barrett Browning was one of Dickinson’s favorite poets and a probably source for the passionate tone in many Dickinson poems.
reached our lips/ And covered up— Our names [emphasis added].” Champions of beauty and truth are good friends and they “die” together; however, their memorial simply sinks back into the earth. The poem does not romanticize death nor does it seem to put much stock in immortality through art—if one dies for beauty or truth in Dickinson’s poem, one is not celebrated as a hero in the town square. But the poem does not paint a lonely picture of death either. These two neighbors, seemingly buried into everlasting solitude, instead find the companionship of a kindred friend. Dickinson’s picture of death is “as Kinsmen, met at Night” who “talked between the Rooms.” The atmosphere of the tombs is not somber; it is lively and edifying.
III. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra:  
A Source for Dickinson’s Flexible Understanding of Death

Let us go. Come.  
Our separation so abides and flies  
That thou, residing here, goes yet with me,  
And I, hence fleeting, here remain with thee.  
Away!  
*(Antony and Cleopatra, I, iii, 123-127)*

What were Emily Dickinson’s precedents for writing about *death* in playful, flexible, and sometimes even cheerful ways? In addition to several cultural and spiritual precedents, one likely literary source is Shakespeare. Dickinson loved to read Shakespeare, and *Antony and Cleopatra* was one of her favorite plays. It was the first book she read after a period of recovery from a long and painful eye-treatment in Cambridge, Massachusetts that had prohibited extensive reading.

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36 Several scholars report that *Antony and Cleopatra* was Dickinson’s favorite play; Páraic Finnerty’s 2006 book *Emily Dickinson’s Shakespeare* contains a chapter on her interest in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Finnerty conjectures that “Cleopatra was [Dickinson’s] female prototype of elusiveness and seductiveness”: (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006) 7. But the most intricate study of Dickinson’s interest in *Antony and Cleopatra* is Judith Farr’s 1990 essay “Emily Dickinson’s ‘Engulfing’ Play: *Antony and Cleopatra*” in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 9.2 (Autumn, 1990) 231-250. Farr argues that the play’s central binary, Egypt vs. Rome, reflected Emily Dickinson’s own double-sided life. As Farr puts it, Rome stood in for the Puritan austerity of her life, while Egypt represented the “voluptuousness” of her imagination; Farr calls this pairing the “magical oscillation between indulgence and abstinence” (231-33).

The freedom with which Shakespeare’s Cleopatra speaks and acts in contradictions might have intrigued Emily Dickinson. Dickinson also probably enjoyed Cleopatra’s imperial qualities, since, in her poems’ queen personae, she esteems the majesty of regal figures. In addition, Dickinson would no doubt have admired the wit with which Cleopatra expresses each whim. Cleopatra’s ability to change, to transform, to “die,” as it were, and at the same time stay focused on a single goal, would have probably reminded Dickinson of parallel patterns in her own life.

Possibly, too, Dickinson noticed how the word “death” is employed comically in *Antony and Cleopatra*. What Dickinson calls in one poem “the privilege to die” (F588), Shakespeare’s Cleopatra had expressed already when she called out, “make death proud to take us” (IV, xv, 102). Death is a welcome rite of passage for Cleopatra. Judith Farr elucidates Dickinson and Cleopatra’s shared definition of death this way:

The Dickinson who wrote that “death” was “to [her] the Nile”; “To escape enchantment one must always flee”…(Letters, II, 453; II, 454…) had learned some of the lessons that this tragedy teaches—sometimes even in similar language. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, mourning Antony, finds death the sum of all mysteries and joys and “the Dead” themselves, as Dickinson writes, “exhilarants…Lures—Keepers of that great Romance still to us foreclosed” (Letters, III, 919).

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38 Dickinson also has a joke about Shakespeare. In several letters, she singles Shakespeare out by writing “Shakespeare remains.” The phrase is repeated enough that one wonders if it is not a pun: Shakespeare is more lasting than any other writer; at the same time, he is nothing but “remains”—he is of the past and dead.

In contrast to Cleopatra, physical separation is illusory to Antony—or so he argues in the passage quoted at the start of this section—*I am with you, even though I am not with you physically*. Much humor in Emily Dickinson’s poetry comes from the same logical problem presented in Antony’s lines: death is apparent separation, and yet there is no real separation at all; it is only an *apparent* fact. In a letter to her friend, the recent widower Otis P. Lord, Dickinson references this very problem in the play: “Antony’s remark to a friend, ‘since Cleopatra died’ is said to be the saddest ever lain in Language—That engulfing ‘Since’” (L791). Dickinson’s words of empathy contain a sly joke. As the play unfolds, Antony is convinced of the *illusion* of Cleopatra’s death in Act IV. When Antony mourns her, she is not yet physically dead. What is especially sad, then, is the illusion of separation, not the fact of death. As Dickinson wrote of her own father’s death, “If only we knew he knew, perhaps we would stop crying” (L414).

During Antony’s death scene alone, Cleopatra expresses several contrasting opinions about death. Her mercurial position on nearly everything probably causes most readers to regard her as a destructive force in the play. Indeed, Cleopatra is sometimes listed alongside other famously flawed or domineering Shakespearean women, such as Lady Macbeth, the empress Tamora from *Titus Andronicus*, the commanding Titania, or the headstrong Goneril. There are a few reasons to align her with this list of women; yet, Cleopatra also has something in common with Shakespeare’s fools. Like the Fool in *King Lear*, for example, Cleopatra is determined to shock Antony with everything she says and does. For example, when she wants to find out what Antony’s mood is, she gives one of her servants these instructions:
See where he is, who's with him, what he does.
I did not send you. If you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick. Quick and return.
(I, iii, 3-6)

From the perspective of everyday human relationships, Cleopatra’s behavior would seem manipulative. However, in the partial role of a fool-type character, her function is to stretch and challenge the worldview of the king—in this case, Antony. Although Cleopatra is involved in the play’s political plot-points, she is ultimately more detached about their outcome than Antony is. Cleopatra even refers to herself as the fool. When Antony is reluctant to go back to Rome, Cleopatra advises him to go anyway. At the same time, she pretends to protest his departure. She refers to this changeability as her “unpitied folly”; Antony refers to it as her “idleness.” Both terms are allusions to a fool (I, iv, 118). Like the fool, those who are “idle” are detached from the main action.

But Cleopatra’s greatest resemblance to a Shakespearean fool lies in the sense that both are comic figures. Cleopatra’s humor emerges from her incongruous behavior and contradictory statements in general, but it is perhaps most interesting in her musings about death. Cleopatra’s first reaction to the news that Antony’s wife Fulvia has died is, “Can Fulvia die” (I, iii, 70)? Her meaning is two-fold. One sense is can Fulvia’s death actually remove her presence from Antony’s life? The other possible meaning: does Fulvia have what it takes to die? Does she have this special skill? The second meaning is developed over the course of the play. For Cleopatra, death is an elegant, remarkable, powerful, and self-honoring skill. But how can this be?

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40 In their notes to the Folger edition, editors Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine gloss Antony’s complaint about Cleopatra’s “idleness” (note 122) as a synonym for “foolishness,” 32.
Antony’s closest servant, Enobarbus, explains Cleopatra’s ability to “die” this way:

Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly. I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying (I, ii, 155-160).

Enobarbus finds vitality in Cleopatra’s ability to die. Although it could easily be played as coded lewdness, Enobarbus’s description later becomes quite admiring. He describes Cleopatra’s passions as “made of nothing but the finest part of pure love,” and notes, “This cannot be cunning in her; if it be, she makes a shower of rain as well as Jove” (I, ii, 165-67). Cleopatra’s ability to die is what likens her to Jove—to a God whose passions and tempers transcend human levels of emotion.

Following the pattern of this line of innuendo in most Shakespeare plays, Cleopatra’s ability to die also has sexual resonances. Yet, the word “death” more broadly conveys her fundamental mutability: knowing how to die is also her way of knowing how to live. Cleopatra’s deaths signify the reinvention of identity, flexibility, and unpredictability. As Enobarbus implies, more than just moodiness, Cleopatra’s Protean temperament is changeable enough to constitute real transformation, not simply caprice. Could this be why, after a dispute with an angry Antony in Act III, Cleopatra announces, “it is my birthday” (III, xiii, 225)? The announcement seems strange, especially since Antony has just flung an insult at her about her age. In addition to calling vainly for a celebration of herself, announcing a “birthday”—a new birth, as it were—allows
Cleopatra to grasp at a fresh identity. Perhaps this metaphorical “birth” day follows a metaphorical death.

Seen as a fool type character, in addition to a character of complex self-involvement, Cleopatra’s speeches are good examples of poetic humor. She speaks in ambiguities, woven into short, compact, elliptical sentences, quite like many Dickinson poems. Moreover, nearly everything she does and says baffles logic, or else it contradicts what she did or said a moment earlier. The strange serenity with which she orchestrates her own suicide stands in contrast to her passionate questions to a messenger from Rome about whether or not Antony is alive. Her life is full of fluctuations and humiliations—many metaphorical deaths, as it were. Physical death, in turn, is a planned ritual. It is more predictable and calmer than any of Cleopatra’s other dramatic “deaths” over the course of the play. Cleopatra’s definition of death, as a literary source for Dickinson, establishes a precedent for playful treatments of apparently tragic themes. Cleopatra templates this riddle about death, which Dickinson later reinterprets.
IV. “Life is So Strong a Vision”

Dickinson’s speakers’ frequently detached attitudes towards death unsurprisingly resemble Cleopatra’s relative indifference to her own death. For Dickinson, life is the point of interest; it is life that exhilarates. In the following poem, Dickinson’s speaker humorously wonders whether or not she is alive.

I am alive – I guess –
The Branches on my Hand
Are full of Morning Glory –
And at my finger’s end –

The Carmine – tingles warm –
And if I hold a Glass
Across my mouth – it blurs it –
Physician’s – proof of Breath –

I am alive – because
I am not in a Room –
The Parlor – commonly – it is –
So Visitors may come –

And lean – and view it sidewise –
And add “How cold – it grew” –
And “Was it conscious – when it stepped
In Immortality”?

I am alive – because
I do not own a House –
Entitled to myself – precise –
And fitting no one else –

And marked my Girlhood’s name –
So Visitors may know
Which Door is mine – and not mistake –
And try another Key –

How good – to be alive!
How infinite – to be
Alive – two-fold – The Birth I had –
And this – besides, in Thee!

(F605)
In “I am alive – I guess,” the speaker gathers basic empirical evidence that she is living. She is not in a coffin on display in a parlor, her breath blurs a mirror, there is blood at her fingertips, and she does not have a “house” (one of Dickinson’s euphemisms for a gravestone) all to herself and marked with her name. However, once the speaker has verified that she is physically living, she celebrates this fact. In a final twist, the last lines reveal that she has had two births, and thus, by default, a kind of “death” of one life in order to make way for the other.

Many Dickinson death poems are playful, mischievous, or circuitous ways to celebrate life. Humor is their bridge between death and life, cheer and sorrow. Dickinson also has many poems and letters in which she celebrates life directly. In a letter to her friend Maria Whitney, she begins with a joke: “Your sweet self-reprehension makes us look within, which is so wild a place we are soon dismayed.” The letter continues, “You speak of ‘disillusion.’ That is one of the few subjects on which I am an infidel. Life is so strong a vision, not one of it shall fail” (L860). A poem with a similar message begins wittily, “I think to live may be a bliss/ For those who dare to try” (F757). Later in the poem Dickinson rejects the possibility of fear or gloom: “No dull alarm…/ No Goblin – on the Bloom…/ But Certainties of Sun – / Midsummer – in the Mind.” But this “awareness”—the awareness that life could be blissful—is something that must be realized, worked out, arrived at—one must “dare to try” to live. The final lines of the poem reveal a little more about the hidden “joke” in this picture of life:
In Dickinson’s poetry, in order to truly appreciate the blissfulness of life, an inversion must occur. In order for the speaker to relish life, the speaker’s “life” must be proven to have been a “mistake.” Life on one level of awareness must be nullified, must die before a new version of life may be a bliss. In its metaphorical guise, Dickinson’s “death” is the junction point where apparent loss makes way for fuller life. Death is but the faltering of logic; it is but a joke mimicking separation. Dickinson’s death poems incongruously pair the theme of apparent loss with a cheerful undertone. Such is the mutual foil of tension and elasticity. Beneath the tensions of hard sorrow lies an elastic tissue of soft humor.
I. Two Types of Empsonian Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a popular trope in literary criticism, probably because it implies complexity, verbal complexity and complexity of ideas. Both humor and ambiguity can be expressed through punning, abrupt shifts in the text, elision, compression, and unconventional uses of grammar; indeed, in many respects, poetic humor is a form of poetic ambiguity. Humor can also be expressed through what we will refer to here as philosophical ambiguities, adapted from British literary critic William Empson’s use of the term. Based on their shared qualities, humor and ambiguity not only play a similar role in a poem, but they also have a similar effect on the reader. Pinning down some of the features that humor and ambiguity share will allow us to formulate some truths about poetic language in general and humorous poetic language in particular that are in need of articulation.¹

¹ Here I refer again to the dearth of theoretical work on humor in poetry, especially on more subtle forms of humor, such as philosophical humor.
It might seem obvious to observe that ambiguity is at the root of most poetic play. However, it took one twentieth-century English scholar with a wily style to shed light on this truth that seemed to be at the tip of everyone’s tongue. Empson’s book is more than just a taxonomy of ambiguities: his original method appears to be one of the first to insist on the importance of what poems do, i.e., what their actions are.¹

Although Empson names seven types of ambiguity in his book (and he notes that even his seven-part classification system is not exhaustive), more broadly, his book is really only concerned with one of two main umbrella species of ambiguity.² 1) There are ambiguities that help poetry become clearer and more precise, 2) and there are ambiguities that make a poem more opaque. Unsurprisingly, Empson favors the former variety and disparages the latter. For instance, William Wordsworth, a case study of this chapter, “was not an ambiguous poet,” according to Empson; his ideas were seemingly complex, but his own style and the whole movement of literature he inspired sought out conversational simplicity.³ Empson praises this: he felt that poets should not seek out ambiguities as avenues to complexity; ambiguities should be organic in poetry, not contrived.

¹ Unlike explication de texte, Empson’s method closely analyzes how words perform in a poem, but he generally resists interpretation. In this sense, although he leaves plenty of room for a reader to engage freely with the poem, he tries to show how the poem is built and where its points of complexity are located. While there may not be a “correct” way to interpret a poem in Empson’s view, there is a correct way to navigate one.
² William Empson discusses these two different species of ambiguities at length in the fifth chapter of Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York: New Directions, 1947) 155-175.
³ Ibid., 151.
Empson’s stance, although in line with the critical interests of his time, was an unusual one, and it can be better appreciated after some brief background on the aims of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. His study of poetic ambiguity served as a way to discuss multiple, potentially irreconcilable meanings all at once. Ambiguity was his term for speaking about what one might call the *geological layers* of a poem—its shifting tectonic plates, its subtle eruptions of irony, or its nearly self-deconstructive contradictions. His analysis probes very carefully beneath the poem’s epidermis. But he does not probe any deeper, because then he would have to interpret the poem’s meaning, which does not interest him as much.

*Seven Types* has remained both captivating and frustrating to scholars of English Literature for nearly eighty years perhaps because of its slipperiness. The frustrating part of Empson’s book is that it is difficult to cut out his methodology and reapply it elsewhere. This frustration is also a crucial aspect of his achievement. Because poetic language performs actions and does not convey meanings *per se*, if imitated, Empson’s style of analysis would not really serve to resolve any “problem” in a text.

But how does humor fit into Empson’s study of ambiguities? Although his own style is often playful and sardonic, his book is, of course, not focused on humor. However, it provides a platform from which to raise the following questions: does humor help clarify ambiguity, and does ambiguity help us recognize humor? Empson also

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4 John Haffenden describes how thoroughly *Seven Types* bewildered readers when it was first released. The main criticism was that, as Haffenden explains, “[the book] did not yield a universally applicable system of classification, at the time of its first publication the book provoked much outrage with its very suggestion, and indeed the amply persuasive demonstration, that poetic effects could be elucidated through the scrutiny of diction, tropes, grammar, and syntax; that a poem is a compound of analyzable meaning”: *William Empson, Volume I: Among the Mandarins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 276.
introduces the notion of the reader’s having a *correct feeling* about the poem. In what circumstances is *humor* the *correct feeling* to have about a poetic ambiguity?\(^5\) When is humor the correct response to ambiguity? *Mood, correct feeling, and poetic actions* are three pillars of Empson’s philosophy of fruitful poetic analysis. They are also three areas important to the reception of humor. Through an examination of these three tenets in Empson’s theory, we will attempt to develop what we might call *hermeneutical awareness* about how to approach a poem from the perspective of its humor.

Humor can be a way to test whether a poetic ambiguity is elucidating or confusing. Of course, it might seem counterintuitive to suggest that something comedy-based like humor could play a role in verifying the *seriousness* of an ambiguity. Nevertheless, as we have already begun to see, humor in poetry embraces gravity and levity together. Empson celebrates this paradox indirectly, through his playful and jocular style, but other scholars have theorized directly about this very problem in poetry.

Returning to Empson’s two umbrella types of ambiguity, clarifying ambiguities and opaque ambiguities, many critics from Empson’s era commented on the modern trend towards opacity in poetry or towards *ambiguity for ambiguity’s sake*.\(^6\) Among the books that came out on this topic in the years directly following the release of Empson’s *Seven Types*, Cleanth Brooks’s *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* offers some insights into the

\(^5\) I will be drawing on the American New Directions paperback edition of William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. It includes prefaces to both the second and third editions of Empson’s book, which was published for the first time in England in 1930.

role humor plays in defining these two species of poetic ambiguities. In his chapter called “Metaphor and the Tradition,” Brooks compares unintelligible ambiguities in poetry to an inside joke between the poet and himself. Brooks writes:

The reader brought up on nineteenth-century poetry may quite understandably conclude that the poet is writing with his tongue and cheek [author’s expression], indulging in a private joke at the expense of the reader. For such a reader, the only apparent alternative is to conclude that the poet is incompetent, his own dupe.  

Unlike Empson, Brooks does not limit his examples of unintelligible imagery to what the former calls “bad poetry.” In fact, he includes such illustrious names as T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats, and Allen Tate (to whom his book is dedicated) in his list of authors of inscrutable lines of poetry. Like Empson, Brooks is concerned for the reader of these poems. He asks, “Is it fair to expect the reader to grasp it at all?” (By “it” he means the confusing line of poetry.) Where does Brooks’s question take him? It does not take him to the importance of clarity in poetic imagery, as one might suspect. Rather, it takes him to the importance of levity.

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8 In Chapter 1 of *Seven Types*, Empson defends his choice to write only about “good” poems, explaining that it is not self-indulgent to write about poems that one likes, it is simply more reliable; he writes, “It is more self-centred, therefore, and so less reliable, to write about the poems you have thought bad than about the poems you have thought good.” 8. His choice does seem logical. After all, most scholars choose to write about the poems that they like. His defense here, however, is also an illustration of how his approach is not scientific. He explains (a bit facetiously) in this chapter that he cannot possibly find or analyze every poem ever written, so he could never hope to have accurate data about the correct number of good poems vs. the correct number of bad poems.
9 Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*; these names are mentioned in the “metaphor” chapter on page 3.
10 Ibid., 2.
Brooks compares levity to what the English Romantic poets called “fancy” and suggests that the authors of the *Lyrical Ballads* thought, wrongly, that only fancy belonged to the realm of playfulness.\(^\text{11}\) Like T.E. Hulme, Brooks chides Wordsworth and Coleridge for not recognizing that *levity* is an aspect of poetic gravity, too. He writes, “These Romantic critics neglect the possibility that levity itself may sometimes be used to *intensify* seriousness [author’s emphasis].”\(^\text{12}\) In his next chapter titled, “Wit and High Seriousness,” Brooks argues that wit is not only an attribute of seriousness, but it is also a means to it.\(^\text{13}\) Butting his position against Matthew Arnold who believes (according to Brooks) that only a straight, irony-free sincerity can produce real seriousness in poetry, Brooks offers an interesting definition of wit:

> Wit is not merely an acute perception of analogies; it is a lively awareness of the fact that the obvious attitude toward a given situation is not the only possible attitude. Because wit, for us, is still associated with levity, it may be well to state it in its most serious terms. The witty poet’s glancing at other attitudes is not necessarily merely “play”—an attempt to puzzle us or to show off his acuteness of perception; it is possible to describe it as merely his refusal to blind himself to a multiplicity which exists.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 14; to clarify, I recognize Brooks’s definition of wit as a way to talk about wit, not humor.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 37-38.
Brooks claims that wit embraces opposing truths, and that it is this embrace of complexity that makes the poem more serious.\textsuperscript{15} When Empson defines \textit{wit} in his book \textit{Structure of Complex Words}, he does so through Alexander Pope’s employment of the device in the \textit{Essay on Criticism}.\textsuperscript{16} For Empson “wit as joke” is only one variety of \textit{wit}, a word he spends fifteen pages unraveling.\textsuperscript{17} He offers three functions of \textit{wit}: “a. mocking, b. acting as judge, c. giving aesthetic pleasure or expressing new truths.”\textsuperscript{18} It is noteworthy that inspiring laughter seems to have no part in the many functions of \textit{wit}, even though we know that Pope’s poem, Empson’s case study here, is often quite funny. (It is interesting, incidentally, that Empson’s option “c” casually invokes a contemporary literary debate with the word “or.”) In this respect, Empson’s list of the functions of \textit{wit} adumbrates Brooks’s point: \textit{wit}, although playful in style and light in tone, achieves serious things in a poem.

\textsuperscript{15} Brooks addresses the role of opposition in poetry in his essay “The Language of Paradox,” the leading essay in his book, \textit{The Well Wrought Urn}. In this essay, he argues that paradox is elemental to poetry; that it is not a scientific, but rather a poetic and organic occurrence. He also shows in this essay how paradox leads to precision, not to indecision (just as Empson has outlined ambiguities that make the poem’s meaning more clear and precise and ambiguities that don’t.) Brooks, \textit{The Well Wrought Urn} (Cornwall, NY: The Cornwall Press, 1947) 3-20.

\textsuperscript{16} Empson’s response to Pope comprises the whole of Chapter 3 in \textit{Structure of Complex Words}. Dickinson’s puns are prevalent and diverse, but the effect of her \textit{wit} in these moments does not put her intelligence on display, as it might in an eighteenth-century British pun. Rather, it causes some pause in the reader and then a delayed appreciation of the subtle riddle. If her puns are alienating, they are alienating because they are not always apparent right away, not because they convey a tone of superiority in the speaker. For example, in the poem “We play at past,” the speaker coins the word “Gem-tactics” to describe the process of coming to gain an appreciation for fine gems, her metaphor for the refined qualities of the soul. Her play on words is light and playful—it is confusing only in the sense that the poem’s metaphor is difficult to grasp, not because the pun in itself is steeped in erudition.

\textsuperscript{17} Empson, \textit{Structure of Complex Words}, 88; Empson’s definitions of “\textit{wit}” also resemble the typology for “\textit{wit}” in Fowler’s chart.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 86.
Here we return to the two umbrella types of ambiguity that Empson describes in *Seven Types*.\(^\text{19}\) Ambiguity for ambiguity’s sake, a habit of modern poets, Empson claims, is problematic perhaps because, in these instances, the ambiguity indulges the poet’s fancy. By contrast, meaningful ambiguities exploit the riddling effects of language in order to say something very clear, just as the seeming levity of Brooks’s “wit” can reveal new depths of poetic gravity. As we have said, Empson is less impressed with ambiguity for ambiguity’s sake, because he thinks it makes a poem vaguer than it needs to be. For example, he offers this critique of the overly vague conceit:

> Later English poetry is full of subdued conceits and ambiguities, in the sense that a reader has to know what the pun which establishes a connection would have been if it had been made, or has to be accustomed to conceits in poetry, so that, though a conceit has not actually been worked out, he can feel it as fundamental material, as the justification of an apparent disorder. . . . Later nineteenth-century poetry carried this delicacy to such a degree that is can reasonably be called decadent, because its effects depended on a tradition that its example was destroying.\(^\text{20}\)

He explains what he means by destructive ambiguities in his final chapter, when he notes that poets should not endeavor to consciously employ them. Elucidating poetic ambiguities are the ones that arise in spite of the poet’s attempts to make his meaning clear:

\(^{19}\) Empson, *Seven Types*, 25-26; he first outlines the difference between a vague ambiguity and a clarifying ambiguity in Chapter 1; one of his definitions follows an analysis of a Thomas Nash poem.

\(^{20}\) Empson, *Seven Types*, 165.
An ambiguity, then, is not satisfying in itself, nor is it, considered as a device on its own, a thing to be attempted; it must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation. On the other hand, it is a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are more likely to justify. Thus the practice of ‘trying not to be ambiguous’ has a great deal to be said for it, and I suppose was followed by most of the poets I have considered. It is likely to lead to results more direct, more communicable, and hence more durable; it is a necessary safeguard against being ambiguous without proper occasion, and it leads to more serious ambiguities when such occasions arise [emphasis added].

In a similar vein, Empson’s *Seven Types* appraises ambiguities that are immediately apparent to readers. For Empson, a more serious analysis might involve resolving those ambiguities, which is not his principle aim. Surface meaning, for Empson, is inherent meaning. Here is how he broadly defines such an ambiguity; note its similarities to incongruity-based humor:

21 Ibid., 235.

22 In the introductory article to the collection of essays, *William Empson: The Critical Achievement*, editor Christopher Norris attempts to position Empson in the New Critical conversation. One of Norris’s chief aims in the article, “Empson as Literary Theorist,” seems to be to celebrate Empson’s religious skepticism. As such, he presents Empson as a kind of outlaw New Critic—if a New Critic at all—who incites disapproval in Ransom, Wimsatt, and Brooks. Norris does well to show that Empson was very much concerned with the role of the poet and the reader in a poem, which was a deviation from a strict New Critical philosophy; however, Norris overstates the extent to which the New Critical School was opposed to Empson point blank. New Criticism was but a burgeoning theory when Empson first published *Seven Types*, and Empson seems to have been so independent in his journey as a critic (notwithstanding his close ties to I.A. Richards) that it does not seem likely he would have taken the trouble to deliberately position himself against a given school of criticism (although the book *Argufying* gathers his various publications in which he does express views about burgeoning literary theories; William Empson, *Argufying*, John Haffenden, editor (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987). My sense is that, since his method lacked any overt message or precepts, it was difficult for others to protest it on an ideological basis (though Norris does show that they tried). Nevertheless, Norris helpfully describes each of Empson’s many theoretical tendencies. He also helpfully shows that readers will always have great difficulty getting a straight answer about a poem out of Empson. These comments are summarized from Norris’s discussion on pages 4-5, 51-52, and 112-120. *William Empson: The Critical Achievement*, Christopher Norris and Nigel Mapp, editors (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
‘Ambiguity’ itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings.\textsuperscript{23}

The repetition of the word “mean” in this quotation effectively cancels out the role of meaning in this style of poetic analysis. Empsonian ambiguities, while not resolution-based, nevertheless serve the reader by providing interest, insight, and surprise, where a single possibility would have left out these layers.\textsuperscript{24} In all of these respects, Empson’s clarifying ambiguities have a great deal in common with poetic humor.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 5-6.
\textsuperscript{24} Vered Shemtov’s Spring 2001 article, “Metrical Hybridization: Prosodic Ambiguities As a Form of Social Dialogue” in Poetics Today, in describing a Bakhtinian “double voice” in poetry, suggests that poetic ambiguities can be rhetorically built; they are a matter of multiple speakers in a poem (Dickinson is one of his examples). Shemtov is among a recent coterie of scholars claiming that Bakhtin mistakenly neglected the genre of poetry in his work on heteroglossia.
II. The Role of Ambiguity in Poetic Theory

Within literary studies, the term ambiguity has several meanings, many of which stem from either New Critical or deconstructionist methodologies.\textsuperscript{25} Fabian Gudas of \textit{The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics} uses Empson as a springboard for their definition of ambiguity. According to Gudas, for Empson, ambiguity means “any verbal nuance.”\textsuperscript{26} Gudas also quotes Empson’s statement that his chapters progress in “logical disorder.”\textsuperscript{27} We saw earlier that Empson enjoys the creative play involved in poetic analysis. Here we see him making a joke about the logical incoherence of his method.\textsuperscript{28}

Gudas’s claim that ambiguity for Empson means “any verbal nuance” is perhaps only true of the ambiguities in the first umbrella group—ambiguities that are clarifying and expressive. Like Empson, the \textit{Princeton Encyclopedia} writes less favorably about the second umbrella group of ambiguity, ambiguity for ambiguity’s sake. Here is how Gudas describes this second group:

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} This is another clue that Empson does not wish to emphasize reason and rationality, but rather \textit{correct feeling}. Though this feeling does not mean emotion, it seems clear that it does not mean sequential logic either. Empson’s meandering method of analysis also thwarts the logical coherence of his argument. In this sense, humor and ambiguity are alike in that they are born of breaks in the logical sequence. Empson’s ambiguities deviate, elude, or digress from the logic of resolution and congruity.
In a century of discord and alienation, human uncertainty and ambivalence, some readers have developed a taste for the opaque and inscrutable, the labyrinth and the abyss. They delight in opportunities for “creative” reading; they study the interplay, or “free play,” of possible meanings previously unsuspected, or at least unvalued, in the masterpieces of the past. And some poets, particularly since Rimbaud, are composing “enigma” texts, poems deliberately written to frustrate the expectations of traditional readers for clarity and coherence. Because of the nature of language and the complexities and unpredictability of human experience, clarity and coherence, it is said, are illusions. Lit[erature] can provide no answers; at best, it can only raise questions. The relations between a ‘poetics of ambiguity’ and a “poetics of indeterminacy” remain to be worked out.  

Ambiguity has taken on different meanings for different theoretical schools as well. In the early 1980s, for example, a small semantic debate about the term ambiguity circled through Poetics Today. J. Hillis Miller claimed that structuralist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s definition of ambiguity was too logical.  

Rimmon-Kenan’s retort was that Miller was describing unreadability, not ambiguity. The theorists appeared to diverge on what they thought the term ambiguity should accomplish. Miller criticized Rimmon-Kenan’s suggestion that ambiguity should culminate in a resolvable reading. Rimmon-Kenan corrected Miller’s finding, claiming that what Miller thought was ambiguity was in fact the poststructuralist tenet of undecidability. Both theorists thought that the word ambiguity should belong to the methodological school with which they were aligned. In Rimmon-Kenan’s case, that was structuralism; in Miller’s case, it was

American deconstruction. Similarly, Gudas (the writer of the ambiguity entry in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*) favors an Empsonian or quasi-New Critical definition of ambiguity. For a poststructuralist version, Gudas recommends, with less aplomb, looking at the work of Marjorie Perloff. This recommendation nevertheless comes after his concession that Empson’s largely New Critical methodology of close reading contains flashes of a deconstructionist approach.

We might suspect that a deconstructionist definition of ambiguity would push us towards the more opaque forms of ambiguity—the ambiguities for ambiguity’s sake—that Empson himself sought to avoid. However, in practice, deconstruction can also be a humorous exercise. For example, in Derrida’s essays “Aphorism and Counter-time” and “Che cos’è la poésia?” he playfully puns on phrases like *knowing by heart* in the latter case and Juliet’s famous question, “What’s in a name?” in the former case. The ambiguities and multiple possible meanings in these expressions provide the basis for his analysis. The essays also offer a surprisingly light and sometimes humorous discussion of the verbal and social riddles embedded in language.

Thus, when ambiguities result in humor or play, do we forgive their opacity? Does the presence of humor indicate that the ambiguities do not take “themselves” too seriously? Does humor tell us that we are dealing with a clarifying ambiguity, or does humor merely make the ambiguity’s vagueness more acceptable? The debate over what

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32 Gudas notes that deconstruction was “anticipated in Empson’s seventh type,” 41.
constitutes ambiguity in literature is also a debate about what will be accessible and agreeable to a reader. One school of critics feels that ambiguities are inherent to language and cannot be resolved. Another school believes they are openings in the text that are ripe for analysis.

Empson seems to partake of both philosophies and of neither at the same time. He treats ambiguities as openings on which to build his analysis, yet he does not analyze ambiguities in order to resolve them. However, both of the approaches mentioned, the deconstructionist approach and the formalist approach, seek a resolution of some kind (even if it is a resolution in irresolution). Empson’s approach is so unusual because it attempts neither to pin down a clear definition of ambiguity nor to disambiguate its effects. Rather, his aim seems to be to fully appraise those effects—those poetic actions.

Like deconstructionists, Empson’s linguistic interests were based not only in etymological studies, but also in mere intuition about language. For Empson, a word means something in a contextual sense and the structure of that word also has complex roots. In addition, he believed that other more indirect and subtler meanings could ramify from a single word.  

This is when language is effective connotatively and suggestively, not through explicit play, such as “pun[s], double syntax, or dubiety of feeling,” but through a laden quality in language, such as in the single phrase from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 that Empson dwells on in his opening chapter: Bare ruined choirs.

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35 Empson, *Seven Types*, 2.
While Empson shares with Derrida a relish for nuance and quirks in the language, he is not a strict deconstructionist for the same reason that he is not a strict New Critic: he is much too invested in the consciousness of the reader to adhere to any methodology that treats the text as something autonomous to itself.\(^{36}\) The poetic experience belongs to the reader; Empson merely suggests that there are highly disciplined ways of reading—ways that require thoroughness and simplicity, as well as a willingness to forsake any theoretical approach at a moment’s notice, if it does not help to establish a *correct feeling* about the poem.\(^{37}\) Like deconstructionists, however, Empson admits that sometimes a *correct feeling* can come from awkward paradox—opposing elements that will not harmonize or resolve so easily. These moments in poetry are particularly interesting to him. They are also potential openings for humor.

\(^{36}\) Empson’s use of the term *consciousness* is explained in more detail in the penultimate section of this chapter.

\(^{37}\) Christopher Norris also explores this point in his introduction to *William Empson: The Critical Tradition*. 
III. Humor and Mood in Poetry

Unlike commonly held definitions of irony, wit, or satire, we saw in the Introduction and in Chapter 1 that poetic humor is not punchline-oriented, that it does not necessarily always lead to laughter, and that it is subtler than funniness. This section takes a closer look at what is involved in *discovering* the humor in a poem.\(^{38,39}\) Here we will focus on an analysis of what Empson calls William Wordsworth’s “joke”—or, what he also calls the effects of *philosophical ambiguities.*\(^{40}\) Although verbal ambiguities are frequent sources of poetic humor, philosophical ambiguities are more playful—at least in the sense that in “playing” with perspectives, convictions, and visions of life, they “play” on a higher level. Through his detailed work on Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” Empson shows how some philosophical ambiguities successfully dissolve opposition. The result of their dissolution is the poem’s incongruously lighter *mood.* Empson, who hardly ever directly compliments the poetry

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\(^{38}\) In the Introduction Chapter, Henry Fowler’s typology of comic modes listed “discovery” as the aim or motive of humor.

\(^{39}\) The previous chapter surveyed some of the work that has been done on humor in poetry. In most cases, however, when scholars write about humor in poetry, overtly comic poets like Ogden Nash (see Bo Pettersson’s article in the October, 2004 issue of the *Journal of Literary Semantics*, “Exploring Common Ground: Sensus Communis, Humor and the Comic Interpretation of Poetry”), Billy Collins, a case study from the Introduction (there has been recent scholarship on Collins’s humor, too; see, for example, the June 2009 article in *The New Criterion* titled, “You Betcha!” by William Logan), or even, to step back a few centuries, the 18\(^{th}\)-century English neoclassical poets (a large field of study has been devoted exclusively to their employment of irony and wit) are commonly selected for analysis. Although we saw that a few critics notice Dickinson’s humor (Constance Rourke is one of the earliest scholars to mention Dickinson’s humor; Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, Martha Nell Smith, and other present-day Dickinson scholars have since pursued work on Dickinson’s humor), Dickinson is an uncommon, though worthy, candidate for a study of humor in poetry.

\(^{40}\) Empson, *Seven Types*, 151.
he analyzes, puts it this way: “It is not sufficient to say that these lines convey with great beauty the mood intended.” Here are the lines:

For I have learnt
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things.

In the analysis that follows, Empson demonstrates both his respect for philosophical ambiguities as well as his possible misinterpretation of them. What Empson loves about Wordsworth’s lines is also what he finds philosophically suspect in them: he contends that their ambiguities undermine Wordsworth’s pantheistic beliefs. Yet, while Empson enjoys what we might call the poem’s “humorous” (albeit not funny, per se) mood, he misunderstands its effectiveness—even though he outlines that effectiveness himself. Where Empson’s third type of ambiguity focused on humorous verbal ambiguities, such as jokes and puns (e.g.; “Where Bentley late tempestuous wont to

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41 Ibid., 152.
42 “Tintern Abbey,” quoted in Seven Types, 151-152.
43 Ibid., 152-54.
In troubled waters, but now sleeps in port”), his philosophical ambiguities (a subset of the fourth type) melt away binaries of any kind, including passionately held beliefs. Paradoxically here, the melting away is the belief; in Wordsworth’s example, it is the sign of everything in the poem becoming “deeply interfused.” From here, we will build on Empson’s definitions, and even dwell a bit longer on the philosophical success of such far-reaching ambiguities—“success” in the sense that they diminish opposition in poetry. The ridge-less space left behind is what we would call humorous.

What we are calling humor describes the poem’s mood, which is a shift within the poem or an effect of its actions. Tone and mood are the difference between subject and effect. If the subject matter of a poem is death, for example, then its tone might be gloomy. But if the poem’s effects are ultimately elevating, then its mood will not be gloomy. The difference between the poem’s tone and the poem’s mood is also measured in the reader’s response. Tone can be gleaned from the poem’s surface subject matter, imagery, sound patterns, and rhythm and rhyme. By contrast, mood is the pH balance, as it were, of the poem’s contents. Thus, tone describes what the language denotes and

\[44\] From Pope’s Dunciad, iv, quoted in Seven Types, 109.

\[45\] This chapter addresses both overlapping and conflicting tenets in three modern critical methodologies, when it comes to an analysis of humor in poetry—the New Critical method, deconstruction, and the Reader Response method of literary analysis. These three methodologies will be used not so much as models for how to analyze humor in poetry, but as vocabularies for thinking about the problems that arise when we try to locate humorous passages.

\[46\] Later in this chapter, through William Empson’s definition of mood, we will see that the reader’s feelings have very little to do with an emotional response; in this sense, Empson’s interest in the reader’s feeling is not a wholesale violation of the affective fallacy. Empson’s “ambiguity of the first type” is largely devoted to spelling out what Empson means by feeling. Empson’s definition of feeling tells us that it is something more substantial than ‘sensation,’ a word that, conversely for Empson, has an emotional tint. Empson defines them against each
even connotes. Mood describes what the poem actually does—again, it describes actions and effects.

Here are Empson’s two definitions of mood: “The main use of the Mood symbol is to explain how a word can express a Feeling which seems to have nothing to do with the Sense concurrent with it.” In other words, how can a poem about death, for example, make us feel uplifted and not downtrodden, as the “Sense” might suggest that it should? And, in an earlier definition, he writes: “[Moods] are a mixed class giving the hints of the speaker about his own relations to the person addressed, or the person described, or persons normally in the situation described…. A Mood is not a Sense but a sentence, and it tends to give the speaker’s personal judgment.” Here, he conveys more plainly that mood communicates the philosophical intention of the speaker, which transcends the poem’s literal meaning.

In the examples from Emily Dickinson reviewed in Chapter One, humor emerged through both subtle and abrupt shifts in mood. Recall the poem, “It’s easy to invent a life.” In this poem, the speaker’s wry and sudden jumps from an image of creation to an image of destruction heightened the reader’s investment in the subject matter on the one hand and dismissed that investment with quick detachment on the other. Thus, through incongruity and surprise, these Dickinson poems challenge conventional feelings about how descriptions of death should resonate with a reader. But while neither satirical nor

other. A clarifying and expressive ambiguity provides an opening for the reader to begin to engage with the poem, a point of entry for teasing out this correct feeling.

47 Empson, Structure of Complex Words, 19.
48 Ibid., 17.
meant to convey ridiculousness, Emily Dickinson’s death poems are uplifting through mood.

More so than comedy, wit, or irony, the word humor best describes this effect of mood because, etymologically, humor means mood. Our modern definition of humor comes from its common usage in the English Renaissance to describe the four humors—blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy. The Oxford English Dictionary claims that the word humor came to mean “whim or caprice” in the Sixteenth Century. It was not until 1682, however, that humor became a term to describe the funny effects of mood swings.49 Note this intriguing use of the word “humourous” more than fifty years prior in John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 19:

Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vows, and in devotion.
As humourous is my contrition
As my profane love, and as soon forgot:
As riddlingly distempered, cold and hot,
As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today
In prayers and flattering speeches I court God:
Tomorrow I quake with true fear of his rod.
So my devout fits come and go away
Like a fantastic ague: save that here
Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.50

[Emphasis added.]

50 John Donne, John Donne’s Poetry, Donald R. Dickson, editor (New York and London: A Norton Critical Edition, 2007) 144-145; the sonnets were first published posthumously in 1633, but many of them may have been written as early as 1609, or thereabouts (see Donald R. Dickson’s introduction in the Norton Critical Edition).
The word “humourous” in line five seems to mean moody—i.e., containing one or more of the *four humors*. And yet, this is a poem about the melding of two opposites. In tone, it conjoins levity and gravity—gravity in the speaker’s despair over his own inconstancy, and levity in the neurotic silliness of his self-deprecation. The speaker describes himself as “riddlingly” distempered. The mention of a riddle seems apt, since, despite the speaker’s insistence that his focus is fractured, the poem reveals a deepening of focus, from *not viewing heaven yesterday* in line nine to *quaking with true fear* in line eleven—fear that, as we learn in the finale, characterizes his best days. “Riddlingly” describes both the frenetic quality of that jostling and the playful complexity of what he is experiencing. The answer to the “riddle” lies in the opening lines: “Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:/ Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot:/ A constant habit.” In other words, this struggle of opposites, paradoxically, actually promotes unity. Furthermore, despite the speaker’s purported *shaking with fear*, the poem’s mood, adumbrated by the repetition of conjunctions and transition words (*as, and*), staccato word choices, and enjambments at the caesura, is playfully nervous. The speaker desires to quell inner turmoil with a more directed inner turmoil, his cherished fear of God. Nevertheless, the poem reads not as a solemn, terrified confession, but as an endearing and somewhat frantic effort to sustain a focus on God.

Through the speaker’s self-deprecating use of the word *humourous*, Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 19” highlights an important attribute of poetic humor. Evolved from its root meanings *mood, whim,* or *caprice,* humor carries with it a Protean force. From the poem’s opening line, “contraries meet in one,” the speaker describes the high voltage of inner change as a current fast enough to blend opposing sensations. Even though its
etymology has since evolved, humor has retained the essence of its root meaning: the mercurial ability, through a change in mood, to embrace two opposites as one.

Through his definition of mood as a matter of the communication between speaker and listener, through his method of showing that ambiguity must be unraveled just like broadminded humor is unraveled, and through his focus on the poem’s modes of action—its effects rather than its meanings—Empson illustrates key similarities between what ambiguity achieves in a poem and what humor achieves.

Furthermore, Empson’s interest in the reader’s correct feeling underlines similarities between humor and ambiguity. Correct feeling is a reaction from the reader, just as humor is a reaction. Correct feeling is Empson’s term for the proof that an ambiguity has been treated judiciously, without influences external to the poem or hasty resolutions imposed by the reader. Humor—as something registered in the reader—is one such correct feeling.

Circling back, what is the connection between correct feeling and mood and therefore between mood and humor? In 1930, when Seven Types was first published in England, inviting readers to cultivate a correct feeling about a poem was a somewhat controversial appeal. Empson was writing his book in the wake of a debate about how scientific an approach to literary analysis should be. In addition, privileging feeling seems antithetical to what would become popularly known as the New Critics’ affective fallacy.

52 John Crowe Ransom’s 1938 book The World’s Body, published on the heels of Empson’s Seven Types, contains a chapter called, “A Psychologist Looks At Poetry,” in which Ransom
Responding to a poem with feeling returns us to Wordsworth who stated in the *Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads*, “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and is a preamble to Robert Frost’s maxim, “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader.” However, Empson does not give the word feeling such an emotional inflection. Unlike Wordsworth, he is concerned with the reader’s correct feeling, not the writer’s. And unlike Frost, Empson is a true New Critic in the sense that, following the intensional fallacy, tears for the writer are of no matter to him. Rather, it is the New Critics’s affective fallacy that conflicts with Empson’s philosophy because the reader’s engagement with the poem is so valuable to him. He does not invite readers to impose their own emotional impressions onto a poem; he suggests instead that the poem can only be understood through the reader’s correct engagement. Although Empson does not encourage readers to personalize their experience of a poem, the reader’s impressions constitute a large part of what he finds valuable in poetic analysis.


In *Structure of Complex Words*, in his chapter “Feelings in Words,” Empson clarifies that “feeling” means the same thing for him as “sense.” This may seem to contradict an earlier point from Empson; yet, his meaning seems to be that a poem’s feeling—as derived from its mood—is as real and factual as its sense, its apparent subject and tone. Although Empson discusses these poetic phenomena with symbols and equations, the importance he ascribes to a term like mood shows that he is interested not so much in how the math adds up, but in what the reader actually takes away from the poem. Towards the end of *Seven Types*, Empson clarifies that he is not engaged in a scientific approach to literary analysis. On the contrary, as noted above, he implies that the best mechanism for understanding a poem is intuition or earnest common sense.

However, some critics seem to have missed this point in Empson. For example, in an essay called “Empson and the Meaning of Words,” Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe argue that *reason* and *rationality* are, for Empson, the basis of poetry. They write:

Empson consistently valued the capabilities of *reason* more than *emotive* but finally non-argumentative symbolic understandings of what is at stake in moments of controversy…. Empson seems committed to an idea of a shared human *rationality* which underpins even what may turn out to be conflicting interpretations [emphases added].

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54 As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the word “sense” is very important to Empson’s objectives in *Structure of Complex Words*. Even the word *feeling* comes to mean something like ‘sense.’ He explains, “The main thing needed, it seems to me, is to give symbols of their own to some elements often called ‘feelings’ in a word, which are not Emotions or even necessarily connected with emotions,” 15. And later he writes, “Roughly speaking, then, the Emotion in a word is what is left in the way of ‘feelings’ when these other feelings have been cut out,” 19. Feelings are, in fact, the logical bits.

Durant and MacCabe helpfully review how Empson was in search of some underlying pulse in a poem, one that was discoverable no matter the methodological approach. But what they call reason and rationality is in fact what Empson calls feeling. This might seem like a small semantic difference; however, Empson’s whole chapter in *Structure of Complex Words*, “Feelings in Words,” explains the special importance of the word feeling. It is not, he suggests, a matter of correct logic or adequate deductive powers. Rather, it is a matter of orienting one’s consciousness in the correct manner—perhaps similar to what Kierkegaard espoused when he wrote of developing a consciousness for comedy. Both Empson’s words consciousness and feeling imply that a reader should be open to whatever the poem contains.56

The topic of feelings returns us, once again, to Empson’s discussion of Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*. Empson introduces the chapter with the disclaimer that not all readers will become convinced of the poem’s pantheistic message; this is a matter of “taste,” he suggests. Yet he dwells on the poem’s phrase “deeply interfused” and, either unwittingly or purposefully, demonstrates an aesthetic interfusion of parts in this poem:

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56 Of consciousness, in the final chapter of *Seven Types*, Empson admits that he is not attaching a psychological sense to the word consciousness. He writes, “[A] machinery of reassurance, I suppose, is sought for in my use of phrases like ‘outside the focus of consciousness,’ without very definite support from psychological theory,” 244.

57 Ibid., 151.
It is not certain what is *more deeply interfused* than what. It is not certain whether the *music of humanity* is the same as the *presence*, they are separated by the word *and* and a full stop. We may notice, too, that the word *in* seems to distinguish, though but faintly, the *mind of man* from the *light*, the *ocean*, the *air* and the *sky*; this tends to separate the *motion* and the *spirit* form from the *presence* and the *something*; but they may, again, all be identical with the music. Wordsworth may then have felt a *something far more deeply interfused* than the *presence* that *disturbed* him; we seem here to have Godrevealing himself in particular to the mystic, but being in a more fundamental sense immanent in his whole creation…[author’s emphases]

The passage continues for another two pages until Empson has posited the “interfusion” of nearly every word in that section of the poem. As a system of belief, an agnostic Empson finds Wordsworth’s pantheism too preachy. Yet, as an aesthetic principle, Wordsworth’s interfusions knock down all differentiations even, Empson explains, the confusion surrounding the lack of differentiation about whether God or the *mind of man* is responsible for these interfusions; that differentiation, too, is blurred. Closing his analysis of the “fourth type,” Empson is both skeptical and convinced. Accusing Wordsworth of too much shuffling, he admits: “By considering the example [of Wordsworth] in this chapter, I have shown that I regard the shuffling as a deeply-rooted necessity.” The example of Wordsworth’s “shuffling” templates what occurs in a humorous poem. Philosophical ambiguity is a melding force in a poem. When it is presented in poetry as an incongruity, the poem must make its way through the dissolution of dyads.

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58 Ibid., 152-53.
59 Ibid., 154.
IV. Poetic Actions

The discovery of the poem’s humor is an outcome of the reader’s broader awareness of the poem’s beauty, a beauty which, as mentioned, has more to do with what the poem does—what its actions are—than what it means. Louis Menand wrote of the era of New England poets of which Dickinson is a part (though not a subject of his book) that, at that time in literature, “actions become more important than beliefs.” Perhaps he meant that movement and activity, both in the world and in literature, was more revealing than the often-changing religious and political positions espoused by these figures.

Similarly, as we saw with the example from Wordsworth, Empsonian ambiguities obscure meaning and belief, yet they achieve movement and change within a poem. In one of his most famous essays, a reading of William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94 called “They That Have Power,” Empson’s tone is less jocular than in Seven Types, yet his topic is more directly about the “joke” of some poetic actions. In this instance he refers to that joke as “grave irony.” The “joke” is merely the bewildering shift at the sonnet’s octave:

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They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

It is difficult to paraphrase a solid message from this poem because it has no
particular, consistent characters. Instead it has these shifts, from the third person plural to
the third person singular, from a vague entity of power to a flower. Empson inserts
characters into this poem by comparing the poem’s shift to the power dynamics between
Hal and Falstaff in Henry IV and between Duke Angelo and Isabella in Measure for
Measure. In fact, he uses the Hal-Falstaff relationship to explain the octave and the
Angelo-Isabella relationship to explain the sestet (these plays contain language similar to
some of the lines in this sonnet).

Intermittently throughout the chapter, Empson draws on other sonnets of
Shakespeare, yet he hardly analyzes the language in Sonnet 94 at all. In quoting the poem
at the top of this section, we have seen more of the language in this sonnet than he
includes in his entire essay. This style is quite a change from his method in Seven Types,
which is to dwell on linguistic ambiguities in short poems for pages on end. For Sonnet
94, Empson proceeds this way because he does not wish to interpret the poem. He writes,
“The mere number of interpretations is amusingly too great…. Taking the simplest
In other words, the poem is rife—even overwhelmed—with poetic actions. Empson chooses the word “amusingly” to describe this large number of movements of thought perhaps because, while they make definite interpretation impossible, they enrich the poem; and they no doubt contribute to the play of “grave irony,” which Empson singled out as the poem’s characteristic feature. The essay is remarkable in part because, in distancing itself so completely from close textual analysis of the poem in question, it becomes a meditation on the sonnet’s bewildering actions, rather than a study of its verbal meanings.

_Some Versions of Pastoral_ was published in 1935, five years after _Seven Types_, by which time Empson had encountered the sobering critiques of his colleagues. He had difficulty finding work in his field, and he had dealt with rivalries and misunderstandings among his colleagues that hampered his professional security. It is perhaps for these reasons—or for reasons related to burgeoning world events—that _Some Versions of Pastoral_ dwells on power relationships between human beings.

Nevertheless, “They That Have Power” shows Empson at his most dexterous, navigating the shifting tectonic plates—though not much of the language—in just fourteen lines of poetry. However, unlike _Seven Types_ in which a slightly younger Empson self-deprecates, makes jokes about the poetry, indulges in silly puns, and

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62 Ibid.

63 Many years later, in 1974, Empson’s disillusionment with the academy became both more pointed and more detached. In a university address of 1974, now titled, “Professor Empson’s Reply on Behalf of the Honorary Graduates,” (University of Sheffield Gazette, number 54, November 1974, quoted in *Argufying*, 93), Empson complains that universities no longer make “bold appointments” and that he was a “bold appointment” when the University of Sheffield hired him.
employs a number of tricks to keep his reader entertained, *Some Versions of Pastoral* is not a light book—at least as it compares to *Seven Types*. The style of analysis is not as playful. Yet the poetic action that inspires this chapter is what Empson calls “grave irony.” In other words, while the poem seems to be giving advice to someone throughout its fourteen lines, the advice giver and the advice receiver repeatedly change, as does the nature of the advice. Without characters or any clearly stated problem, the poem nevertheless has a compelling coherence because of the “humorous” action at its center. The austerity of any moral lesson is undermined through ambiguities, which makes the poem lighter than its themes.

In showing that ambiguities are a matter of what the poem is doing—what its modes of action are, as well as sources of what is pleasing about a poem, Empson unwittingly connects ambiguity with something like humor. With words like *stone*, *fester*, and so forth, there is no logical reason for the poem’s levity, hence the inexplicable mood of humor. In emphasizing the importance of the reader’s *correct feeling* and of the poem’s mood, Empson shows how ambiguities matter because they offer ways for the reader to engage more intimately with what the poem is doing.

In Empson’s conclusion to *Seven Types*, he writes, “It is not surprising…that this age should need, if not really an explanation of any one sort of poetry, still the general assurance which comes of a belief that all sorts of poetry may be conceived as explicable.”\(^{64}\) Empson’s book on ambiguity offers a method for engaging in *correct

\(^{64}\) Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 256.
processes of discovery. The term *correct* implies the discovery of that which is *inherent* to the poem. Although Empson’s book flouts the *affective fallacy* and makes much of a reader’s response, it does not invite the reader to interpret freely with his imagination—i.e., the *poem’s actions* should take precedence. It is especially Empson’s emphasis on the *poem’s actions* that reveals, as it does so fully in “They That Have Power,” the sub-verbal wash of humor in a poem—the mood of levity, in spite of opposed subject matters, that relieves the tension of bewilderment from the poem’s ambiguities.
V. Dickinson and Empson’s Shared Philosophy of Poetry:

More on Poetic Actions

William Empson and Emily Dickinson unwittingly share some core ideals in their philosophies of poetry, one of which is the belief that apparent opposites co-exist harmoniously. Another is the idea, as we have just explored, that poems do not mean things, they do things. As Empson puts it in his book *Structure of Complex Words*, “My question is how a [poetic effect] gets there [emphasis added],” i.e., not so much what the poetic effect is.\(^{65}\) In the final chapter of *Seven Types*, Empson discusses at some length what he calls “modes of action” in a poem. The object of analysis, he writes, is “to show the modes of action of poetical effect.”\(^{66}\) In these instances, ambiguities do not alienate the reader because they seem to follow the course of whatever the poem is doing. Or, as Empson puts it, “The author may safely insist on the obvious because the reader feels willing that the process should be complete. Indeed, it is then as arrogant in the author to hint at subtlety as to explain it fully.”\(^{67}\) In other words, the author should not try to create ambiguities. For Empson, ambiguities should come into being organically or not at all.

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\(^{66}\) Empson, *Seven Types*, 251.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 251; the importance of the reader in “completing” the action of the poem will be explored more fully later in the chapter.
Emily Dickinson also stresses the importance of poetic actions in several poems. Of course, in terms of historical chronology, it might seem incoherent to link William Empson and Emily Dickinson, as Empson was born twenty years after Dickinson’s death. In addition, Empson’s focus was mainly English poets, and, for a variety of reasons related to his training and taste, he might not have been inclined to study this as yet underappreciated New England poet. (There is no mention of her in Empson’s major books and little mention of any other American poet for that matter.)\textsuperscript{68} Furthermore, Dickinson received lukewarm reviews from the New Critics of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{69} If Empson had looked to the opinions of his American (or, in some cases, English) colleagues before perusing Dickinson’s (at that point) heavily edited poems, he might not have been in a rush to get to know this unorthodox poet, Emily Dickinson. After all, Empson was adventurous in his interests for a scholar of his era, so the fact that he does not mention Dickinson’s poetry speaks to Dickinson’s tenuous popularity in the 1930s: even Empson might not have felt inclined to examine her work closely. But perhaps, more to the point, Dickinson’s poems do not seem to need an Empson. In debating the question of what

\textsuperscript{68} At one point in \textit{Seven Types}, Empson mentions Gertrude Stein, but not in a complimentary way, and apart from T.S. Eliot, few American poets appear in his books, 7.\textsuperscript{69} Caesar R. Black and Carlton F. Wells’s collection of essays in \textit{The Recognition of Emily Dickinson} record the poet’s reception from the late-19th Century to 1960 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964). The essays from the 1930s are dominated by New Critical and burgeoning modernist voices. In a clear and elegant essay, Allen Tate praises Dickinson wholesale; Yvor Winters, however, a critic that Empson might have consulted, does not speak so favorably of Dickinson, and R.P. Blackmur is quite tentative about her style. In later essays, George F. Whicher lightly defends Dickinson’s learnedness (which had been contested) as well as the precedents for her powerful innovations in poetic forms. Finally, in a 1960 essay, Archibald MacLeish writes, with unequivocal admiration, about Dickinson—and it was about 1960 when her poems were widely circulated more or less as she had written them. (MacLeish would have drawn on, probably, Thomas Johnson’s 1951 edition of the poems; the 1930s critics were likely consulting an early, “doctored” Todd-Higginson edition or a Martha Dickinson Bianchi edition.)
poetry is, many of Dickinson’s poems offer their own set of refined but cryptic tools for self-analysis. For example, Dickinson’s poem “To Pile Like Thunder to Its Close,” like Empson’s analyses, shows poetry in action. (It also contains a flicker of detached humor):

To pile like Thunder to its close  
Then crumble grand away  
While Everything created hid  
This would be Poetry—

Or Love—the two coeval come—  
We both and neither prove—  
Experience either and consume—  
For None see God and live—

(F1353)

It is well known that Dickinson’s ambiguities resemble, and are thought to herald, ambiguities in modernist poetry. As such, her ambiguities might seem more opaque than necessary, prefiguring the opacity of some modernist and post-modernist American poets. (Since they were Dickinson devotees, Hart Crane and Marianne Moore come especially to mind.) However, her apparent opacities, such as ellipses and deviations

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70 Scholars of American Literature frequently cite Emily Dickinson as a major forerunner of literary modernism. For example in its chapter on Dickinson, *The Columbia History of American Poetry* calls Dickinson and Whitman “fraternal twins” both of whom, though in different ways, pioneered important innovations in form that twentieth-century modernists would later take further; *The Columbia History of American Poetry: From Puritans to Our Time*, Jay Parini, editor (New York: MJF Books, 1993), 121-172. In more focused ways, too, Dickinson scholars continue to emphasize the proto-modernist strains in her work. Also, Joshua Weiner’s article “Zero to the Bone,” which is anthologized in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, links Thelonious Monk with Emily Dickinson, and claims that the two artists are part of the same modernist movement. “Zero to the Bone” in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz, editors (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2008). David Porter’s *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, referenced in Chapter 1, is the best-known treatment of modernist elements in Dickinson’s style.
from correct grammar, once teased out in this poem, actually clarify what her poem is doing. Consider, for instance, the conditional verb in the first stanza, “This would be poetry.” Dickinson’s poem resists the present tense of the verb to be, is, as if to suggest that poetry cannot be classified in a definitive way. The conditional verb is not only more ambiguous, but it also implies a striving: poetry can happen if the conditions are right. The enjambment into the next stanza—“Or Love—the two coeval come—” deepens the ambiguity on the one hand (there are suddenly two subjects in this poem—1) this would be poetry; 2) this would be love). On the other hand, in making the poem’s subject ambiguous, the definition of poetry has been expanded, since poetry and love now share a definition. However, one does not get the simple sense that poetry and love are born together and always come together, since Dickinson employs “or” as her transitional conjunction. She does not say “poetry and love.” Is it poetry, or is it love, one wonders? Or, is it both, if the two run parallel?

As we have just seen, this is the sort of question that Empson might devote twenty pages to teasing out, though not with the intention of fully answering it. Repeatedly in his books, the ambiguity appears to be answered with ambiguity. Yet this is not in order to leave things more “muddled” than when one first approached the poem (“muddled” is a favorite Empson word). It is in order to bring us around to a more correct feeling about the poem, the existence of which he posits firmly, as though it were the only truth that could be arrived at in poetic analysis.

Consider the morale of this particular Dickinson poem—“For None see God and live.” The puzzle for the reader comes not in accepting this morale as a sound conclusion, but in figuring out how it matches up with what was said before, how the poem’s actions
fit this conclusion—how the poem gets there. In order to put the pieces together, we would have to move backwards through the poem. Upon returning to the first stanza, we have our answer. However, the answer comes in the form of a demonstration of an effect. This is what poetry does, the poem seems to say; it does not seem to say, this is what poetry means.

The dynamic opening image of thunder crumbling as a mountain would after a dynamite explosion, for instance, compares poetry to an active, physical event. Poetry is not ethereal and intangible in this image; it is quick to build and quick to destroy. It is high-speed action. Though deconstructionist elements are present here, this shared philosophy is not purely deconstructionist. While Empson does not usually seek to resolve a poem’s meaning, any response to these ambiguities is a kind of resolution in itself for Empson. One relevant example is his idea that ambiguities can be resolved through what he calls comedy. 71

The line “we both and neither prove,” even while it seems to imply undecidability and irresolution, acknowledges some gain for the reader—gain in the sense that the reader is actively engaging with the poem’s ambiguities. In other words, the equivocal nature of most ambiguities is at the core of what poetry does, of what “would be Poetry.” Empson more fully explains this effect in his description of the ambiguity of the first type:

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71 Ibid., 203; here is the full quote: “It does not often matter which of the two ‘opposites’ is taken, because the sentence already contains a paradox which includes both of them. For these and similar reasons, poetry has a surprising amount of equilibrium; bowdlerization, for instance, is often comically helpless to alter the spirit of a passage.”
There is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which [meaning] to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.\textsuperscript{72}

The difficulty seems to be part of the appeal for Empson. Pervasive ambiguity does not prove \textit{undecidability} in Empson’s book; rather, it prompts the reader’s engagement. This engagement is what Empson calls a \textit{correct feeling} about the poem and what Dickinson calls “consume”—meaning both, in a trademark pun, decimation by fire and eating, destruction and completion. The line “We both and Neither prove” also seems to describe the two-part mission of Empson’s \textit{Seven Types}. Empson’s primary mission is to unravel the multiple meanings in a poem—to prove the ambiguities. His secondary mission appears to contest any need for further “proof” about a poem—any further interpretation or declaration of meaning. The movement of the ambiguities, like the movement of thunder piling then crumbling, is meaning and beauty enough.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 3.
Chapter 3

Ambiguity and Humor in Dickinson’s Original Manuscripts

I. Compression and Multiplicity as Causes of Humor

When you are holding a variety of things in your mind . . . the only way of applying all your criteria is to apply them simultaneously; the only way of forcing the reader to grasp your total meaning is to arrange that he can only feel satisfied if he is bearing all the elements in mind at the moment of conviction; the only way of not giving something heterogeneous is to give something which is at every point a compound.

-William Empson from Seven Types of Ambiguity

[Dickinson’s] humor privileges questions over answers, freedom of choice over choice. Humor, then, is part of the poet’s unsettling ‘compound vision,’ which leaves the reader dangling between high seriousness and witty playfulness.¹

-Roland Hagenbüchle from The Emily Dickinson Handbook

This chapter discusses the ways in which ambiguities help produce humor within the style and structure of a poem—its sentence structure as well as its overall form and visual appearance on the page. Two of Empson’s terms for describing ambiguities—*compression* and *multiplicity*—will therefore be analyzed within the context of a particularly

playful area of Emily Dickinson’s poetics, her original manuscripts.\(^1\) In her fair copies, word variants written out in the margins create a multiplicity of meanings and sometimes convey irresolution.\(^2\)

The formal qualities of Dickinson’s poetry have always been a matter of special curiosity for critics—even for early critics who did not approve of her deviations from convention. Of this trait in Dickinson, Archibald MacLeish wrote admiringly, “There is literature which seems to exist outside its forms or in spite of them. Emily Dickinson’s poetry is an example…. Like the brushstrokes of a beautifully inked Chinese character, they are, but are not, pictures of the reality expressed.”\(^3\) In the 1960s when he wrote this essay, it is uncertain how much MacLeish knew about the pictorial elements in Dickinson’s manuscripts and whether he knew how fitting his statement really was. Her manuscripts started to receive special critical attention only in the 1980s. However, many of these earlier critics at least intuited that process was key to Dickinson’s compositions. F.O. Matthiessen noted, “[Dickinson’s] process was almost wholly instinctive.”\(^4\)

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\(^2\) Guide at the Emily Dickinson Museum, Francesca Hawthorne, noted Dickinson’s playfulness in scraps like the house-shaped envelope flap and the chocolate wrapper, 8/17/2011. Kristin Kreider and Martha Nell Smith have also implied that some of these playful drafts function like “shaped” poems.


Over the last twenty years, Dickinson scholars have become more interested in the form and presentation of these manuscripts. They have posited arguments about what the manuscripts and their unusual markings can tell us about Dickinson’s stance towards publication, what they reveal about her use of space on the page, what they might suggest about her playful incorporation of drawings and illustrations, and what they might further prove about the proto-modernist nature of her poetics.

Yet, apart from Martha Nell Smith’s work on Dickinson’s “cartooning” tendencies in her correspondences, Dickinson’s insistence on multiple variants in fair copies of her manuscripts has not yet been analyzed from the perspective of their humor. Because this chapter’s central aim is to show how ambiguity leads to humor in Dickinson’s poetry, it will not perform a comprehensive survey of the scholarship on Dickinson’s manuscripts, even though that scholarship has been substantial. However, it will draw on helpful descriptions of Dickinson’s compositional style, as explored in select past scholarship on her manuscripts. From there, it will perform an analysis of the humor in this unique and unorthodox poetic style.

5 Sharon Cameron, Martha Nell Smith, Kristin Kreider, Paul Crumbley, David Porter, and Marta Werner, among others, have contributed an important first and second wave of analytical work on Dickinson’s manuscripts. Martha Nell Smith has directly addressed the satirical humor in some of her letters and in some drafts of poems. My approach here attempts to isolate the humor in her fair copies only. The reason for this choice is because, in these manuscripts, it seems clear that Dickinson intended her “playful” compositional practice to become a part of the poem’s complete effect. As such, I will not perform a comprehensive literature review of the extensive scholarship on Dickinson’s manuscripts. The angle I am taking builds on the work of a few scholars, whom I will mention; however, because I approach the manuscripts from the perspective of the intersection of ambiguity and humor, and from the broader perspective of philosophies of humor, a further assessment is not relevant to this chapter.

6 As already noted, Martha Nell Smith’s work on Dickinson’s cartooning is the principal exception, and her discoveries will be reviewed at some length towards the end of this chapter.
Multiple variants present on the page all at the same time necessarily ambiguate meaning. The most relevant ambiguities to this particular kind of poetic play are ambiguities that either condense or expand the confines of a poem. One of these ambiguities, what Empson terms the “phenomenon of compression,” is present in most of Dickinson’s poetry, just as it serves as a basis for most of Empson’s types—it is a mainstay of poetry that is rich in stylistic ambiguities. Emily Dickinson’s work is well known for its pared-down style. Her poems omit punctuation, transition words, verbs, pronouns, and sometimes referents all together. Sometimes her variants intensify the compact nature of the poem, complementing a passive verb, for example, with an active one, perhaps because some combination of passive and active voice is closer to the intended meaning (e.g., is appears as a common variant for be). Thus, compression is probably one of the most frequently described stylistic traits in Dickinson’s poetry. Her first editor, Thomas Higginson, called it condensation. He writes of Dickinson’s poetry, “Nothing in literature, I am sure, so condenses into a few words that gorgeous atom of life and fire.” He continues, “She almost always grasped whatever she sought, but with some fracture of grammar and dictionary on the way.”

Even more than her frequent use of compression, multiplicity plays an important role in Dickinson’s fair copy manuscripts. Empson has three definitions in Seven Types that help clarify Dickinson’s method of including multiple, and often antithetical, options in her manuscript drafts. In one case, he describes this idea from the perspective of cognition: “Where two things thought of as incompatible, but desired intensely by

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7 William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, 33.
different systems of judgment, are spoken simultaneously by words applying to both.”

Later in the book, he puts it like this: “The condition for the third type of ambiguity is that two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously.” Finally, in the quotation cited at the start of this chapter, he situates this phenomenon in the mind of the poet:

> When you are holding a variety of things in your mind . . . the only way of applying all your criteria is to apply them simultaneously; the only way of forcing the reader to grasp your total meaning is to arrange that he can only feel satisfied if he is bearing all the elements in mind at the moment of conviction; the only way of not giving something heterogeneous is to give something which is at every point a compound.⁹

The key word in all three quotations is *simultaneously*. Dickinson’s meticulous practice of including ambiguous variants in her manuscript drafts reveals richness in the expanded options that she derived from simultaneity. Empson credits this practice to a mind able to grasp multiple, even seemingly opposed, meanings all at once.

At the same time, Dickinson’s poetry achieves similar expansiveness simply by paring itself down—by way of ellipses, abbreviations, and playful euphemisms. The ambiguities created by compression also open her poems up to myriad interpretations: compression, too, expands the possibilities for meaning.

While both are sources of ambiguity, compression and multiplicity would seem to have opposing objectives. Compression would appear to be born of minimalism, lack of ornamentation, and a desire to reduce the language to its simplest form, whereas multiplicity connotes fullness of meaning, overflowing possibilities, and lengthy detours.

⁹ Empson, *Seven Types*, 226, 102, and 238-39, respectively.
Yet consider how the use of compression in the following poem actually creates multiple possibilities for interpretation:

I can wade Grief –
Whole Pools of it –
I’m used to that –
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet –
And I tip – drunken –
Let no Pebble – smile –
‘Twas the New Liquor –
That was all!

Power is only Pain –
Stranded – thro’ Discipline,
Till Weights – will hang –
Give Balm – to Giants –
And they’ll wilt, like Men –
Give Himmaleh –
They’ll carry – Him!
(F312)

Using dashes to signal ellipsis, Dickinson moves through some poems with scarcely a verb in sight. “I can wade grief” has several pivot verbs; compressed here instead are the transitions between metaphors. One wonders, how does the speaker go from joy and drunkenness to assertions about power and pain? In a final image, the poem verbally compresses the Himalayas, an entire mountain range, into a single Himmaleh. A compressed use of the word conjures an image of a single mountain. More importantly, it concentrates—or condenses, as Higginson wrote—the collective power of a mountain range into a unified, compressed form. Just as her multiple variants create a more

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10 The singular coinage, “Himmaleh,” also appears in Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance.”
inclusive, broadened, and more complex vision of life, her compressed syntax and abbreviated expressions *distill* her meanings down to an essence. “Distill” is a favorite term of Dickinson’s. She wrote of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “This Was Poet –/It is That/ *Distills* amazing sense/ From Ordinary Meanings” [emphasis added] (F446). The verb *distills* here refers not only to the process of isolating the essence or most concentrated meaning, but also to shrinking down “ordinary things” into a more compacted form.

Paul Crumbley attributes this compressed effect to Dickinson’s use of dashes, and he helpfully names her practice of incorporating variants in her manuscript drafts a style “requiring inclusion.”\(^{11}\) At the same time, he reads Dickinson’s dashes as evidence of “disjunction” in poetry.\(^{12}\) Although he means “disjunction” in a positive sense, as in creating openings for freedom, he also defines it as the opposite of unity. In focusing on the dashes as abrasive rebellions from social and poetic conventions, Crumbley misses the way in which Dickinson’s dashes link ideas that would otherwise appear more separate had she left a full sentence intact. Is it an accident, for example, that a dash follows the phrases in “I can wade grief” *Give balm* – and *they’ll carry* –? In these instances, the dash seems to visually perform what the phrases describe: reaching out.

Indeed, apparent fracture in Dickinson’s poetry is more often than not a step towards connection. Consider Dickinson’s proclivity for compound ideas, i.e., multiplicity, which is actually supported by her use of compressed syntax. Compatibly, Empson’s study shows that compression and multiplicity produce similar effects of


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 15.
ambiguity. As noted, the “phenomenon of compression” is one way that Empson defines ambiguity across all types.\(^\text{13}\) Later, in his description of the ambiguity of the seventh type, he describes the inclusion of contradictions, opposition, and multiple meanings (which occur simultaneously in the same poem—for example, through multiple variants written out in the margins) this way:

> Even when there is a more serious difference between the two meanings, it often does not matter which of two ‘opposites’ is taken, because the sentence already contains a paradox which includes both of them. For these and similar reasons, poetry has a surprising amount of equilibrium; bowdlerisation, for instance, is often comically helpless to alter the spirit of a passage.\(^\text{14}\)

Empson claims here that compression and multiplicity necessarily converge: all ambiguities stem from some form or other of compression; multiplicity is a type of ambiguity; therefore, it is possible for compression to work alongside multiplicity in a poem to create interesting ambiguities. Empson’s use of the term *bowdlerization* could mean, in a more widespread sense, the act of clipping out seemingly relevant or necessary bits of text. So, too, Dickinson’s famous euphemisms and abbreviations are playful, teasing forms of *bowdlerization*, because they leave out conventional associations with words and make the reader work to fill in the blanks. While it creates a humorous effect, Empson implies that *bowdlerization* does not really achieve its aim in poetry—if its aim is to successfully obfuscate meaning—because the reader is usually able to figure out what has been left out. Empson’s point that the recourse to compression of various kinds

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 31.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 203.
creates a humorous effect is also true of Dickinson’s poetry. In this example, humor is
t born of the fact that we can always fill in meanings. Where compression leads to riddle or
mystery, readers can always connect and reunite meanings; the disjunction is rarely ever
permanent.

As we begin the exploration into compression and multiplicity in Dickinson’s
manuscripts, here is a brief introduction to her compositional practices. The contents of
Dickinson’s marginalia are sometimes coy, sometimes practical, and occasionally
subversive to the meaning she appears to espouse in the body of the poem. In her fair
copy manuscripts, plus signs indicate possible word variants, i.e., new possibilities for
word choices and phrases in addition to the words and phrases included in the body of the
poem. See in Figure 1, for example, the exuberance with which she writes in an
exclamation point next to the word ribs in her variants for the poem “I like to see it lap
the miles.” Her first variant in this poem enriches the title, prompting us to read, “I like to
hear it lap the miles.”
Through the inclusion of this variant, she mischievously gives away the answer to her riddle-poem. In other words, if the speaker can deduce all of this from just hearing the object, then perhaps we are closer to figuring out that this poem is about a train.

Dickinson’s father was instrumental in bringing the railroad to Amherst, Massachusetts. The Amherst by train station is less than a five-minute walk from the...
Dickinson Homestead doorstep. After touring Emily Dickinson’s room, it is clear that she would have had a view of the Amherst train tracks from several windows, unencumbered in those days by dense forests. She would have been able to both see and hear the arriving trains. In 1862, the year this poem was probably written, Dickinson’s eyesight was going through dramatic and painful changes. When she could not see the train, she could perhaps hear it and remember having seen it. Thus, the variants in the margin of her poem reflect her probable experience of watching or hearing a train over the course of many years.

Note her variant for the following lines:

And then a Quarry pare
To fit it’s +sides
+Ribs!

The addition of ribs is a personifying touch. It varies the use of the word sides, which appeared a line earlier: “And supercilious peer/ In Shanties – by the sides of Roads [emphasis added].” But more than this, it suggests a human (or animal) effort to break through nature. The exclamation point next to her variant (Ribs!) reveals her exuberant delight at this possibility, a delight that remains contained only because, like the sides pared in the quarry, it remains outside of the main tunnel of action, outside of the main body of the poem.

With her playful aside, Dickinson at once identifies with the machine’s struggle and pokes fun at the train’s deceptive life force: its motion implies animal energy. And yet, it is a metal instrument, a locomotive. This tentative, half-hearted celebration of the train is underscored in Dickinson’s choice of adjectives throughout the poem. She
protests that the train itself is “complaining.../ In horrid – hooting stanza.” Horrid for Dickinson does not quite mean horrible. It means here, at most, annoying. She probably chose the word for its alliterative force. At the same time, the hyperbolic word choice is characteristic of her equivocal humor. As a devourer of nature, the machine is a horrible annoyance to the speaker. Yet she begins the poem with the words “I like.” Through the single variant of the word “ribs,” accompanied by a rare exclamation point (rare to Dickinson’s marginalia at least), in riddle form, the poem compares the train to a horse, a man, and a horse again. But the subtle comparison to a man or an animal, contained off-handedly in the words “ribs” and written in on the side of the page no less, humorously forces the poem in two directions at once. On the one hand, as mentioned, man and the train share the endeavor of shaping nature to their needs; on the other hand, like man, the train is as fallible, as innocent, and as persistent as primordial man who once gave up a rib.

Dickinson’s play in the margins of her train poem further lightens an already jocular riddle; yet, it also reveals the weightier side of her subject matter. Why is it that she cannot call this train a train in the poem? Of course, the poem’s riddle structure keeps her from naming her train. But more than this, naming the train would instantly mechanize it. As a horse-like, man-like, or star-like object, the train stays vital in the poem. At the same time, her exclamation point is not only her shared exuberance over the train’s speed, but also the revelation of her joke. The train’s motion resembles a human quality of livingness. Yet, as machine, a train can only mimic humanity, never become it.
II. Some background on Dickinson’s manuscripts

When Dickinson’s first editors encountered her bound fascicles and sets, they had in mind speedy publication, not strict loyalty to a practice that they did not understand. In his book *The Principles of Textual Criticism*, James Thorpe explains that when multiple variants of a poem are available, readers are naturally inclined to choose between them. Thorpe then cites Dickinson as an example of an author who could not “make up [her] own mind” about which options to choose. In order to do so adequately as a scholar of Dickinson’s poetry, Thorpe jokes that the person must be a “seer.”

While most Dickinson critics could never live up to Thorpe’s lofty qualification, one solution to this quandary would be to approach the problem of choosing among options in Dickinson’s poetry with a different set of lenses—not the lens of a seer, *per se*, but perhaps the (attempted) lens of a Socrates—someone who depends on seeming irresolution, and even seeming illogic, in order to work through the tension of opposition. Thorpe explains that logic is the basis for all textual analysis, since it is a practice requiring scholars to make sound, logical choices. However, when we cannot make such “choices” in Dickinson’s poetry, the basic principles of dialectic might provide a way to understand how Dickinson’s multiple, sometimes illogically paired variants nevertheless sit harmoniously together within the same poem.

Thorpe concludes that, in his words, “the ideal of textual criticism is to present the text that the author intended.” In Dickinson’s case, it is particularly difficult to find out her precise intentions. We only know that she did not ask

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16 Ibid., 107.
readers to *choose* amongst her many options. As MacLeish has put it, “There is nothing more paradoxical in the whole history of poetry, to my way of thinking, than Emily Dickinson’s commitment of that live voice to a private box full of pages and snippets tied together with little loops of thread.” Yet, MacLeish also believed that “[Dickinson] knew what her verses were, for she knew everything that concerned her.” For MacLeish, her compositional style was not a matter of irony, it was an element of her candor. In other words, Dickinson’s poetry emerged in a deliberate yet spontaneous fashion, without contrived play.

Dickinson scholar Sharon Cameron asks the following question about the multiple variants in these manuscripts: “What if we are to see the variants interlineated in a poem as posing alternatives to given words which…are part of the poem? What if what Dickinson has to teach us is the multiplicity of meanings that, properly understood, resist exclusion?” Later in Cameron’s essay on the manuscripts, she puts it more strongly: “Not only is no choice required [of a reader or an editor], but a choice would in fact be a mistake.” In a final note, referring to what she calls “the felt ladenness of the…alternatives,” Cameron suggests that Dickinson “disallows” readers from selecting among her options. Here Cameron’s claim is overly forceful, since every Dickinson editor has had to choose between the alternatives, usually selecting the word that appears

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17 Ibid., 109.
18 MacLeish, 308.
19 Ibid., 309.
20 Ibid.
21 Sharon Cameron, “Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles” in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, 144. See also Cameron’s 1993 book *Choosing Not Choosing*, which was the first lengthy study of Dickinson’s manuscript practices (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
22 Ibid., 145.
23 Ibid.
in the line proper; even readers of the manuscripts find themselves inclined to choose one word over another. More importantly, the reason these alternatives create ambiguities is precisely because Emily Dickinson did not instruct readers in any way. Instead, she engaged in these unusual practices without leaving explicit directions for how she intended others to navigate her poetry. Yet Cameron rightly wishes us to see that, precisely because editors have chosen which word they thought best, an accurate edition of Dickinson’s poems does not yet exist in print. Cameron’s argument is based on the fact that published versions of Dickinson’s poems traditionally did not include this intriguing marginalia. Still, Dickinson’s *fair copy* drafts retained these variants in the margins; and her practice of organizing these fair copy drafts has been called a method of self-publication.

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24 Kreider notes that, as these later manuscripts are not included in Franklin’s facsimile editions, they have not yet been adequately studied. She implies that, in many such cases, the drafts we have for later poems may well be *fair copies*, too, 69.

25 There were many early editors of Dickinson’s poetry. In this chapter, I will mention only Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, the first editors of the poems. For later editors, R.W. Franklin is the most significant, since he put together the most complete and accurate version of the poems (the number of poems, thanks to Franklin’s compilation, is now up to 1,789), and since he is responsible for reassembling the fascicles and sets. Thomas H. Johnson is also a significant editor; Franklin built on Johnson’s considerable work, and Johnson’s 1955 collection of Dickinson’s poems and letters was an earnest and impressive attempt to produce a version that reflected the way the poet had originally written them. Johnson also put together the first variorum edition, out of which Franklin’s later variorum edition grew. For more details, see Franklin’s *The Editing of Emily Dickinson* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).
Shortly after Dickinson’s death, carefully bound packets containing poems copied into organized sequences were discovered in the Dickinson home. These bound packets of poems, which were later called Dickinson’s *fascicles* and *sets*, are sometimes thought of as the poet’s method of self-publication.²⁶ In these fascicles and sets, about eight hundred poems are written out in elegant handwriting and ordered according to the poet’s specifications. For nearly a century, Dickinson’s intended sequence, which had been dismantled posthumously by her first editors, was a mystery to scholars. Finally, in the 1980s, Dickinson editor R.W. Franklin underwent the arduous task of collating thousands of manuscripts. Among his editorial conclusions, Franklin wondered if this sequence was for the poet’s own benefit—i.e., a classification system for her poems that helped her keep them in a logical order.²⁷ However, mainly, his study seems to have left him with unanswered questions about what purpose the sequence was meant to serve.²⁸ David Porter also remains confused about Dickinson’s intentions noting, “the body of

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²⁶ Todd and Higginson named these packets *fascicles*; Elizabeth Petrino is one of several scholars to see this unique method of organization as a kind of self-publication: see her essay, “‘This Was – A Poet’: Emily Dickinson and Nineteenth-Century Publishing Standards” in *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women’s Verse in America, 1820-1885* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998) 20. Franklin has expressed something similar in the introduction to his *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*.
²⁷ Eleanor Elson Heginbotham’s *Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson: Dwelling in Possibility* (Ohio State University Press, 2003) argues for a sense of purpose behind the order and organization of the fascicles. For example, she reads individual fascicles as containing specific themes, such as Fascicle 21, which, Heginbotham argues, contains a statement about Dickinson’s aesthetic philosophy. Dorothy Oberhaus’s *Emily’s Dickinson’s Fascicles: Method and Meaning* (Penn State University Press, 1995) argues that the fascicles as a whole represent different stages in a conversion to Roman Catholicism. Meanwhile others, notably Franklin and Porter, do not read meaning into the careful ordering and compiling of these fascicles. Heginbotham has compiled a collection of critical essays on the fascicle debate, which will come out this year.
[Dickinson’s] poems refuses to organize a reader’s experience of it”; and of the variants he writes, “The meaning slips seriously out of focus as the variants pile up.”29 Other scholars—notably Sharon Cameron, Martha Nell Smith, and Marta Werner—contend that Dickinson intended to illustrate a specific progression with this sequence and that she purposely retained multiple meanings for individual words, not as possible edits, but as permanent features of each poem’s final draft.30

In reassembling the manuscripts, Franklin researched the editorial practices of Dickinson’s first editors, and he also tried to match punctures, stains, and creases in the paper to see which poems belonged in which fascicles. Franklin admits, however, that even this careful system of ordering may not be able to recreate the exact order of the fascicles in every case.31 From the facsimile versions which he reassembled, it is clear that these fair copies, carefully sewn together with a needle and thread by Dickinson herself as though they were books in a series, retain multiple options for word choices. Markings that for other poets might only appear in polished drafts were retained in Dickinson’s fair copies. For Dickinson, variants and the multiplicity they invite were part of the finished product.

Apart from Franklin’s facsimile editions, published editions of Dickinson’s poems have rarely reflected these practices. The first edition was edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd and printed in 1890, four years after Dickinson’s death. Edition after edition followed, and there have been upwards of thirty to date. Like

29 Porter, 86 and 92.
30 See Cameron and Smith’s essays in The Emily Dickinson Handbook; see Marta Werner’s Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995).
the first Higginson and Todd edition, these editions contained poems that had often been heavily edited. Not only were selections made from Dickinson’s many options, but also the grammar was sometimes corrected, or a rhyme was altered to fit convention. Sometimes even a metaphor was changed. As Martha Nell Smith notes in her essay on Dickinson’s manuscripts, “editing is always interpretation.” And this was certainly true of early editions of Dickinson’s poems.

The process of making Dickinson’s original compositions easily accessible to the public was slow at first, but it has steadily improved. Even though there are still obstacles (both at the bookstore and at the archive) to seeing the original layout with variants and all, Franklin’s facsimile version of the manuscripts and the Dickinson Electronic Archive have increased the availability of manuscript versions of the poems. Still, one wonders if the gradualism of Dickinson’s publication history, which kept accurate versions of her poems remote from readers for so long, is in keeping with the poet’s recondite personal history. Dickinson biographer Richard Sewell has wondered whether modern readers had to work their way through T.S. Eliot and William Faulkner before they could begin to wrap their minds around an Emily Dickinson. Perhaps Sewell is implying that it was fine to keep these poems at bay, as the world was not yet ready for them? Unlike Whitman, who passionately sought out publication and who managed every detail of a public form of publication—even to the point of writing his own reviews of *Leaves of Grass*, the few poems of Dickinson’s published during her lifetime were often sent to

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newspapers by friends without the poet’s permission.\textsuperscript{35} Perhaps, too, the publishing world has simply just been scratching its head about how it would or could, from a technological perspective, publish Dickinson’s self-annotated poems in a reader-friendly version.

Apart from publishing facsimiles of her handwriting—what Martha Nell Smith calls “scriptural poetic forms”—the only way to convey Dickinson’s multiple options simultaneously would be to create some sort of three-dimensional pop-up book.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, Mike Kelly, curator of the Emily Dickinson archives at the Special Collections Library at Amherst College, has tried to do something quite similar. He designed an interactive poetry board for the Emily Dickinson Museum, which features sliding panels that reveal each of the multiple variants in a Dickinson poem. It allows a reader to try out each of the options separately. (However, they are not present on the board simultaneously, as they are in the fair copies.)\textsuperscript{37} The board functions like an interactive variorum edition. This curator’s creative idea is a first step in a new form of book technology that would be equipped to convey, in print version, Dickinson’s unique compositional style. The next step would be a book in which the layout on the page included all of the variants, not as afterthoughts in a variorum edition, but as prominent features of the poems—the way they appear in Dickinson’s drafts. Of course, if a pop-up book of Dickinson’s poems

\textsuperscript{35} In Susan Dickinson’s obituary of Emily Dickinson, she uses the phrase “love turned to larceny” to describe friends of Dickinson publishing poems without her permission, in \textit{The Springfield Republic}, May 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1886.
\textsuperscript{36} Smith, \textit{Handbook}, 118.
\textsuperscript{37} In August 2011, this board, exhibited in the Emily Dickinson Museum, presented the poem “A Chilly Peace Infests the Grass,” which was commented on in Chapter 1. According to the Emily Dickinson Museum, Mike Kelly, director of the Emily Dickinson Special Collections, designed the exhibit.
were to be published, it would no longer look like a solemn booklet of lyrics about grief. Rather, it would look like a book full of playful poems—poems that are perhaps more humorous than sad.  

III. Humor in Fascicle 33

In the case of Dickinson’s variant word options, where minutiae at the sentence level are often left unexplained due to the compressed syntax, the variant options, as we have seen, magnify the importance of multiplicity in her poetry. Because of her minimalist syntax, the language is not usually flowery elsewhere, so these moments of multiplicity and antithesis have heightened importance, and they invite the reader to grant them a special focus. Responding to this invitation, this chapter’s analyses will focus on one section of her fair copy manuscripts called Fascicle 33. While the poems may not seem humorous at first, the variant word choices string a narrative of levity through an otherwise seemingly bleak sixteen-poem fascicle. Compression and multiplicity are the muscles of contraction and release within the individual poems. Compression stretches tensions in one direction, and multiplicity, created through variant word choices in the margins, deflates those tensions to an opposite effect. As a result, an underlying quiet humor is sprinkled throughout the fascicle and along the sides of the margins. A “joke” is woven into the fascicle’s themes, and that joke is encoded and delivered through

38 Quite often, when Dickinson’s humor is recognized at all, it is associated with children’s poetry. In most cases, as we have already seen, this assessment limits the scope of her humor. Yet there is a sense in which her manuscript practices reflect the uninhibited, natural, and spontaneous thinking that psychologists ascribe to children’s humor. See Paul H. McGhee’s *Humor: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979).
Dickinson’s variants, written in by hand in the footers or margins of the manuscript pages. The “joke” lies in the fact that, while Fascicle 33 is ostensibly about sad themes, the variants in the margins complicate or entirely overthrow the poem’s deceptively glum subjects. We have seen this basic reversal at play in the “death” poetry reviewed in Chapter 1. In Fascicle 33, however, the contrasting elements are liminally placed as if outside of the poem, yet they are observed and absorbed as part of one and the same text.

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1862 is sometimes thought of as Dickinson’s *annus mirabilis*, but 1863 was her most prolific year. By Franklin’s revised count, she wrote 295 poems in 1863, a sixth of her total production spanning more than thirty years. (Recall Bergson’s paradigm of *tension* and *elasticity*.) Of course, 1863 also marked the intensification of the Civil War as well as the deterioration of Dickinson’s eyesight. Not surprisingly, and as mentioned in Chapter 1, many of Dickinson’s poems about death and grief were written during the Civil War. Fascicle 33, composed in 1863, juxtaposes outward struggle (for example, the suffering that came with war) and inward rapture. Through this juxtaposition, the speaker contemplates themes of defeat, privacy, grief, and despair. However, there is also a quality of giddiness underlying these poems. The variants written out in the footers and margins emphasize and sometimes uncover their fundamental warmth.

In a few poems in Fascicle 33, the variants behave like pacers or intensifiers of the meaning already expressed. Consider “The Way I Read a Letter’s This” (F700) in which the second and third variants listed at the bottom of the page (+ slily + softly) perform the meaning of their matching word, which is *slowly*. In other words, the
addition of these two variants forces the reader to pause on the word *slowly*, and enrich that slow action with both *slyness* and softness.
The Way I read a Letter’s – +this –
’Tis first – I lock the Door –
And push it with my fingers – next –
For transport it be sure –

And then I go the furthest off
To counteract a knock –
Then draw my little Letter forth
And +slowly pick the lock –

Then – glancing narrow, at the Wall –
And narrow at the +floor
For firm Conviction of a Mouse
Not Exorcised before –

Peruse how infinite I am
To no one that You – know –
And sigh for lack of Heaven – but not
The Heaven God bestow –

+ so + sily + softly + door +

In addition to their emphasis on pacing, the variants in this poem gently
complicate the meaning in the body of the poem. The last variant (door) rhymes with its
matching word, floor. In turn, floor also rhymes with the first mention of door in the
opening stanza. In this context, including door as a variant for floor might seem
redundant. Glancing narrow, at the Wall/ And narrow at the floor is equivalent to
glancing at two parts of a door. However, the speaker has already complicated the private
space of this reading through the metaphor of the lock. In the second line of the poem she
“lock[s] the door.” Then, in the second stanza, she slowly (sily, softly) “pick[s] the
lock,” which appears to be her metaphor for opening the letter. There are two “lockable”
spaces in this poem, the enclosed room and the enclosed letter. The speaker carefully
monitors her privacy so that she may be alone with her letter: complete seclusion from
the outside world affords her more complete engagement with the inner world. The letter teaches, “how infinite I am/ To no one that You – know.” There must then be two doors in this poem: one is the boundary to the outside world, and the other provides an opening to the speaker’s inner world. However, and here is the speaker’s joke, the second door is a hidden door, connected through rhyme and through only a coded marking to the floor of the speaker’s room. While glancing below at the floor, she is simultaneously looking towards the opening of her inner door and towards an opportunity for an inward-focused perusal. The four variant words written out below read as a summary of this inner, hidden door: so slily softly door. Of course, there is further humor in the fact that a mouse is the main threat to the reader’s privacy.

Since the speaker describes a communion with some internal force, the letter is perhaps not from any one person in particular, but from a vaster source. The line “To no one that You – know” conveys the broadness of her audience. The contradictory final two lines capture the speaker’s sense of immersion in a vaster Elysium, but also her “sigh” that the immersion is not yet total. In other words, the speaker’s enraptured experience is a taste of “the Heaven God bestow[s],” but it is at the same time an awareness that this feeling is lacking. She expresses a lingering tinge of fear that her rapture might be interrupted, perhaps by the sudden opening of a door.

Among other possible meanings, a door in Emily Dickinson’s poetry is often a metaphor for the complexity, mystery, and promise of the spiritual threshold. In several poems, the speaker begins at this threshold and ends in a state of outward solitude, but inward union. Consider the following courtship scenario in “Again his voice is at the door,” a poem from an earlier fascicle:
Again – his voice is at the door –
I feel the old Degree –
I hear him ask the servant
For such an one – as me –

I take a flower – as I go –
My face to justify –
He never saw me – in this life –
I might surprise his eye!

I cross the Hall with mingled steps –
I – silent – pass the door –
I look on all this world contains –
Just his face – nothing more!

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We walk – I leave my Dog – at home –
A tender – thoughtful Moon –
Goes with us – just a little way –
And – then – we are alone –

Alone – if Angels are "alone" –
First time they try the sky!
Alone – if those "veiled faces" – be –
We cannot count – on High!

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(F274)

In this poem, the alternative word choices included in the fair copy clarify the word choices in the body of the poem. Towards the end of the poem, there is a curious insertion above the line, “We Cannot – Count –/ On High.” The insertion invites us to read the preceding line in two ways: 1) “Alone – if those ‘veiled faces’ – be –/ that murmur so –/ On High” and 2) “that chant so far –/ On High.” This addition to the text intensifies the focus on the “‘veiled faces’” and on the sounds they are making. By
contrast, the line written out in larger print, “We Cannot Count,” redirects the focus to the speaker and her readers— or to the speaker and her companion in the poem. Again, reading the three options as options functioning in harmony helps to explain the overall meaning. The “veiled faces” are invisible to the speaker. Yet, even though she cannot see them, she appears to be able to hear them; and, apart from these voices, she and the suitor are alone. She therefore has some sense of what it means to be alone, and she guesses that both angels and invisible beings are also alone in this special sense, but they cannot be counted, i.e., they cannot be seen or distinguished as separate, countable individuals. Their enraptured state, a state to which she refers ecstatically as this state of being alone, cannot be proven visually; it can only be faintly heard. Unlike loneliness, this word alone, when broken into two syllables, reads al/one or all one. As the closure at the end of this poem implies, alone is a state of unity, not solitude.

Returning to Fascicle 33, the poem’s speaker deepens her theme of two separate ways of living—one outward and the other inward. The first poem began with the speaker’s comic nervousness about the disturbance of a mouse. By the middle of the fascicle the speaker is weighing what appear to be romantic considerations in the poem, “I Cannot Live with You —/ It would be Life”: 
I cannot live with You –
It would be Life –
And Life is over there –
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the key to –
Putting up
Our Life – His Porcelain –
Like a Cup –

Discarded of the Housewife –
Quaint – or Broke –
A newer Sévres pleases –
Old Ones crack –

I could not die – with You –
For One must wait
To shut the Other’s Gaze down –
You – could not –

And I – Could I stand by
And see You – freeze –
Without my Right of Frost –
Death’s privilege?

Nor could I rise – with You –
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus’ –
That New Grace

Glow plain – and foreign
On my homesick eye –
Except that You than He
Shone closer by –

They’d judge Us – How –
For You – served Heaven – You know,
Or sought to –
I could not –

Because You saturated sight –
And I had no more eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

And were You lost, I would be –
Though my name
Rang loudest
On the heavenly fame –

And were You – saved –
And I – condemned to be
Where You were not
That self – were Hell to me –

So we must meet apart –
You there – I – here –
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are – and Prayer –
And that White Sustenance –
Despair –
(F706)

The final stanza of “I cannot live with You –/ It would be Life” is deceptively bleak at first glance. However, the poem itself places these strained notes of separation within the context of a church cupboard. A life exists behind the shelf (the word shelf, incidentally, shows up in other poems as a euphemism for “self” or soul; see “It dropped so low in my regard,” in which the speaker describes her soul as a “silver shelf” (F785)); the sexton is responsible for organizing these paired lives as though they were pieces of household porcelain.

As in so many of her poems of longing, Dickinson’s anguished surface nearly distracts us from a comical image: the speaker identifies herself with a teacup. Sevres, presumably the name of the brand of porcelain, as a homophone of the verb to sever, suggests that the cracked pieces of china with which the speaker identifies are yet more whole than the new kind, which has the principle of division in its very name—to sever. In addition, life existing behind the shelf has a certain magical inference, not necessarily a tragic or repressed one. The humor is drier but slightly clearer in the next section. The
speaker writes, “I could not die – with You –/ For One must wait/ To shut the Other’s Gaze down.” These lines have a tender and mournful surface tone. The speaker cannot “die” with the listener because two physical deaths are rarely simultaneous. The simplicity of her reasoning in these lines about death stands in contrast to her further explanation, noted elliptically, “You – could not.” What is it that the listener cannot do? The addressee cannot shut down the speaker’s gaze—perhaps because her gaze is too ecstatically focused on something else. With this explanation in mind, we are in a better position to fathom why the speaker cannot live with the addressee and, more pertinently, the significance of the variants included at the very end of this poem.
Because the saturated sight
And I had no more rest
For sorrow and straitness
As Paradise and Consequence.

And over the sets, I moved on,
Though my name
Rang tenderly
On the hearing ears.

And over I - heard,
And I - condemned it - it
When the sun was
That day were hell to me.

So we must meet apart
The when - I here.
With near the floor open
That Ocean art - And pray
And that white substance
Ossuary + irsac - privilege.
Towards the end of the poem we know that despair is described as “white sustenance” and that it is compared to the ocean. The variants for the word sustenance are “privilege” and “exercise.” Written out at the bottom of the manuscript, they support this reading and even take it further: despair is not only sustenance, it is also a privilege and an exercise. Such a notion of despair—ultimately constructive even as it annihilates hope—is consistent with Dickinson’s consideration of the topic elsewhere in her writing.

In the poem, “The Difference Between Despair and Fear,” Dickinson compares despair to the effects after a shipwreck: “The Mind is smooth —/ No motion —” (F576). In another poem about despair Dickinson describes the feeling this way: “Despair’s advantage is achieved/ By suffering – Despair —/ To be assisted by Reverse/ One must Reverse have bore” (F854). In yet another poem, “No Man can compass a Despair,” Dickinson suggests that despair’s predominant feature is not bleakness but rather immeasurability (F714). Moreover, the despairing person is unaware that it is “the Angel/ That pilot Him along.” Despair leads to broader understanding—to some experience, however apparently desolate, of infinitude.

Similarly, in a poem towards the end of Fascicle 33, Dickinson includes just two variants, both for the same word: the adjective describing Infinity. In “I could suffice for Him/ I knew,” the phrase in the body of the poem is surveyed Infinity; at the end of the poem the variants are delayed and deferred. The speaker’s choices reveal her dubiousness about merging with infinity. Infinity is surveyed and studied, but in studying it, it is also delayed and deferred. Here, the variants emphasize the “Hesitating Fractions” between the two characters in the poem. The poem then unfolds quite like the narrative in “Again his voice is at the door.” The speaker first expresses hesitation about this internal
romance with a person who is directly compared to God in the second stanza of this poem: “’Twas face to face with God.” Then, the universe—“the Sun”, “the furthest star”—all seem to vanish. The speaker is left with the wholly negating and yet broadening experience of vastness.

By contrast, the speaker’s decision not to live with the beloved in “I cannot live with you—It would be Life,” seems to be because it would detract from her focus on something vaster and more religiously-focused. Yet, at the same time, the despair of their apparent separation nourished her spiritual aims. In “I cannot live with you – It would be Life,” the speaker plays on a verbal trick implicit in the word despair’s prefix, when broken off from the suffix, pair. Broken into two distinct syllables, des/pair reads as the absence of a pair, as opposed to the absence of hope. It wipes out the binary entirely such that there is no separation between self and other. There is no two, no pair. There is only an ocean of white sustenance. To have survived such an experience, Dickinson’s speaker surmises, is to have received an exercise as well as a privilege.

In the penultimate poem in Fascicle 33, Dickinson’s speaker again juxtaposes intimacy with the pain of separation:
The Answer of the Sea

The Motion of the Moon.
Literally, it may be said, unless
Canto 1. Do else with Mind.
+ 30.30. 30.30.

But, now the Tragic.
A Tragic of the
A Hearer, rather would suffice.
And the other.

The left me Boundaries
Of Pain.
Capable as the Sea.
Between Eternity and Time.
Thus Conscience, and Mrs.
+ Sire! + Content.
Even though this poem ends with the topic of pain, the variants, written out at the bottom of the page, highlight a different theme. The austere title *Sire* from line one is softened with the variant *sweet*; *suffice* is qualified with the positive, more cheerful adjective *content*. Thus, in spite of its focus on pain, this poem culminates in sweetness. There are clues pointing to a cheerful undertone throughout the poem. *Boundaries of pain*, however extreme, are nevertheless boundaries; they have limits and endings. The contrast in each poem between worldly experiences of time and pain on the one hand and infinity, eternity, and grace on the other is presented with Dickinson’s characteristically bleak surface tone.

Dickinson’s variants in Fascicle 33 teach us where to look again in each poem. They privilege certain sections of the poem, and sometimes they even interpret the poem for us. By placing these variants at the end of the poem, seemingly as an afterthought, the reader is forced to digest the tone of suffering first. Following this initial impression, the incongruity of the variants ends each poem with unexpected warmth.

It could be argued that the fundamental warmth in Dickinson’s poetry is the reason many readers enjoy her poetry. Even though they might not be aware of this cheerful quality right away, readers probably detect a sense of welcome in the mood of her poems. Her optimism slips into these poems *slily, softly, and slowly.* Dickinson’s manipulations of variant word choices are jokes, not because they will always make us laugh, but because they expose the poems’ incongruities. Sometimes sentimentality is

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40 Magdalena Zapedowska’s recent article on “Dickinson’s Delight,” in the latest issue of the *Emily Dickinson Journal*, argues that many Dickinson poems celebrate the poet’s personal happiness, which Zapedowska sees as a self-contained happiness. Differing slightly, the argument here contends that this cheerful quality was in fact generous and outreaching, not self-contained— as evidenced, quite simply, in the devoted reception to her poetry.
discarded in the process, but antithetical ideas do harmonize in her poetry, and it is precisely this surprising harmony that leads to humor.

As noted earlier, variants in Dickinson’s poetry also reveal her meticulous practice of organizing multiplicity. As a subset of ambiguity, multiplicity may destabilize a single meaning in the poem—but only initially. Multiplicity in Dickinson’s work is not pastiche; it does not clutter the text with many competing ideas. Rather, her multiple options for words appear to have been carefully arranged to expand the definitions of words or to place a word in seeming antithesis to its opposite and then marry these opposites through their simultaneity in the text.

Bakhtin made the following observations about multiplicity in medieval manuscripts:

> Here we find on the same page strictly pious illustrations of the hagiographical text as well as free designs not connected with the story. The free designs represent chimeras…comic devils, jugglers performing acrobatic tricks, masquerade figures, and parodical scenes. . . . All these pictures are shown on the same page, which, like medieval man’s consciousness, contains both aspects of life and the world. . . . a similar coexistence of the pious and the grotesque.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{41}\) Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 96.
In a different context, Virgil Nemoianu has described multiplicity this way:

By its nature, aesthetic writing incorporates complexity and multiplicity, ‘over-determination,’ multidimensionality, the dialectics of harmony and contradctoriness, the coexistence of displeasure with the pleasures and hopes of beauty.42

Dickinson’s manuscripts visually demonstrate literature’s organic multiplicity. Through the presentation of her variants, penned carefully into the margins with systematic codification, many Dickinson poems contain a second, partially detached speaker, commenting from the sidelines—quite like the fool does in a medieval court or in a Shakespeare play (as we have already touched upon and will touch upon again in the final chapter). The overarching joke in Dickinson’s manuscript pages lies in what she may or may not be saying about poetry through her practice of leaving in multiple variants for words. The “drama” of the poems’ content is not bleak through and through, and so the poems cannot sustain somberness. Through editorial play in her final drafts of poems, Dickinson draws our attention to an essentially humorous feature of poetic consciousness, one that is always present, whether or not it always remains on the published page.

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IV. Levels of Humor in Dickinson’s Manuscripts

Retaining variants in the margins of her poems is a quietly subversive gesture: in the fair copy manuscripts that we have seen, Dickinson’s poetry exceeds the boundaries of conventional forms. Yet her unorthodox manner of self-publication suggests a soft revolution in poetic technique rather than an assertive, public aesthetic statement. To that end, the subversive gesture is playful rather than contentious; the technique is both innovative and gently parodic.

Martha Nell Smith, whose scholarship is often centered on Dickinson’s manuscripts, has written about the poet’s humor in relation to her handwriting and drafting methods. Smith addresses the subversive character of Dickinson’s manuscripts through what she calls visual “cartooning.” Smith’s essay “The Poet as Cartoonist” is a study of some of the sketches Dickinson included in the margins of letters and poems. Smith is particularly interested in Dickinson’s cutouts from an illustrated Charles Dickens novel, as they suggest that she is mocking the exaggerated sentimentality in Dickens’s story. She also analyzes her sketch of a smoking chimney above an embossing of the United States Capital—and other visual references in letters and poems. Her study emphasizes the satirical notes in Dickinson’s wit as well as Dickinson’s penchant for mocking sentimentality. Smith concludes that these satirical sketches reveal a political strain in Dickinson’s humor.

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43 Smith, “Poet as Cartoonist” in Comic Power in Emily Dickinson.
44 Ibid., 76.
Although the numerous references in her letters to reading the newspaper and popular journals confirm her awareness of current events, political satire is an infrequent cause of Dickinson’s humor. Yet Smith’s thesis on “cartooning” is an apt way to describe a visual element of Dickinson’s humor, both as it appears in her manuscripts and as it works in her imagery. For example, recall the cartoonish imagery from some of the poems we analyzed in Chapter 1: *the feet mechanical go round; nerves sit ceremonious like tombs; the stiff heart questions*. If we stop and visualize some of her metonyms, their cartoonish quality stands out.

“Cartooning” is one level of humor in Dickinson’s manuscripts. Through visual digressions in the margins and verbal multiplicity, Dickinson parodies aesthetic containment. Another level of humor in the manuscripts comes from the effect of the delayed endings that the variants inspire. Just when a poem seems to end on a passionate, conclusive note, one is drawn further into the margins. This is a common practice of Dickinson’s in general—to end the poem with a question or to end a poem twice. Her variants in the margins support this resistance to closure.

A third level of humor in the manuscripts lies in their broader implications for poetic composition. Modernist Jerome McGann has written about nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual experimentation in poetry, from Stéphane Mallarmé’s use of space on the page to Ezra Pound’s intricate publishing criteria to William Morris’s use of ornamentation in book dressing.\(^{45}\) In each case, play was an aspect of both aesthetic and intellectual principle. In his study of the overlaps between humor and play, William F. Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
Fry writes of a balance of spontaneity and thoughtfulness.\textsuperscript{46} The striking element in Dickinson’s proto-modernist compositional play is their effect of planned spontaneity. The variants seem to read as afterthoughts or, at least, secondary thoughts, yet they are recorded as final poetry.

Dickinson’s poetics seeks to retain the element of play—of fresh thought and spontaneity—in its final form. The margins explode the tensions of fixity on the page. This returns us once again to Bergson’s \textit{tension} and \textit{elasticity}. If compression, both the natural compression of language and the aesthetic compressions of poetic convention, is this source of tension, then her strategic flourishes in the margins, her expression of multiplicity, are her levers of elasticity.

Chapter 4

Bees, Wine, and Butterflies:
Smallness, Sweetness, and Spirit in the Humorous Poem

I. Dickinson’s God-Focused Play

Dickinson is a rare example of a poet-philosopher who personally practiced her theories
of God, art, and truth as a way of life. Roger Lundin frames the point this way: “What
distinguished [Dickinson] from the other major writers of her day was the degree to which she
lived out the distinctions established in the romantic theories of society and the self. She
embodied what they imagined.”¹ Moreover, because her way of life so wholly cohered with her
philosophies, it seems natural to characterize Dickinson as a mystic who falls into Cleanth
Brooks’s category of “mystical” poets, including, for Brooks, Shelley, Blake, and Emerson.²

However, this is not the popular view of Dickinson. A wide range of interpretations for what
Dickinson means by “mind,” what she means by “soul” or “spirit,” or whether, as with the
German word “geist,” these two words share, on some level, the same meaning, has left doubt
among many scholars about the positive centrality of spiritual concerns in Dickinson’s poetry.
The uncertainty seems, generally, to rest on how serious she may or may not be about a given

¹ Lundin, 91.
² Cleanth Brooks, “The Primacy of the Reader” in Community, Religion, and Literature
grievance, point of ecstasy, or note of sadness: her tone on this topic comes off as equivocal to many.

Some of the confusion likely arises from the fact that Dickinson communicated her spiritual ideas with arch litotes at one moment, and mock-dramatic hyperbole the next. Yet the use of humor to express religious ideas reveals her delight in the topic more so than her skepticism. She felt intimate enough with complex spiritual ideas to engage with them freely and in a spirit of play. When seen as working together, both her humor and spirituality appear as intrinsic to her poetics as her love of ellipsis, metonym, or her favored punctuation mark, the dash. Her playful style is a foil for the seriousness with which she treated religious topics in other respects: her one-pointed focus on an essence and her own soul’s relation to that essence is the gravity underlying her humor. Everything else in her poetry, including the words themselves, is treated with levity. Everything else is play.

Dickinson’s special blend of humor and gravity is one of her proto-modernist traits. David Porter’s 1981 book *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* includes many helpful illustrations of her modernist style, rightly noting that her break with convention was not mainly (if at all) for aesthetic reasons. On the whole, however, Porter misconstrues Dickinson’s reasons for breaking with nineteenth-century conventions. The resulting effects of her poetry are, he asserts several times over the course of his chapter titled “Dickinson and American Modernism,” confusion and nihilism, which he gives as explanations for her equivocations, antitheses, and ruminations on death. Porter reads

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1 David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, 240.
Dickinson’s favored words like “nothing” and “nobody” literally, ignoring their frequently playful contexts.

It is therefore important to remember that Dickinson is not quite a modernist. Although her poems seem to absorb the activities of the world, such as the Civil War, her experiences are not reflections of the modern condition. To illustrate the difference between Dickinson’s play and modernist play, compare, for instance, a simple reference to mermaids in a Dickinson poem with the famous quip about mermaids in T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Eliot’s speaker sulks, “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me.”\(^2\) Dickinson encounters mermaids when she goes on a walk with her dog to the ocean in the poem “I started early/ Took my dog,” but, even though they do not sing, Dickinson’s mermaids are interested in her speaker: “The Mermaids in the Basement/ Came out to look at me” (F656).

Both scenarios can be read in a humorous vein, but Dickinson’s pre- World War I speaker does not feel isolated and insignificant in the fast-moving, destructive modern world. Rather, her poem about mermaids and the ocean conveys the daunting yet delightful magnificence of being immersed in the sea. Eliot’s speaker would like the mermaids, however dangerous their siren song, to notice him. In Dickinson’s case, the mermaids are interested in the speaker. Compared to the sea, Dickinson’s speaker feels herself to be as tiny as a “mouse.” The experience of being submerged by the sea has erotic and frightening (since the speaker appears to be drowning), as well as baptismal inflections. But all ends well: her courageous venture forward, in spite of her self-perceived smallness, eventually causes the sea to recede and bow to this speaker, who has

been made more majestic through her willingness to step into the unknown. She began
the poem with her dog, but her dog inexplicably disappears, as do the mermaids, and the
underwater town that she visits contains “no one.” The speaker is left “alone” with the
sea, i.e., *all*-one with the sea.

Virgil Nemoianu writes of literary play, “One way of looking at literature is to
regard as *theologia ludens* – God–science at play – the sweetly palatable mode of dealing
with ultimate existential interrogations.”³ Humor softens philosophical rigidity, and since
it is at base an experience of the reader, humor is the proof that the philosophical or
theological idea was “sweetly palatable” to the reader. In Dickinson’s case, we see that it
often was for the writer, too. Characters in her poems, such as wine-intoxicated bees and
mysterious butterflies, exemplify the seamless interplay of humor and spirituality in her
work. Both the disciplined, organized bee and the seemingly wayward butterfly model
behaviors that Dickinson finds spiritually laudable. Yet, as mere insects, they model these
behaviors with cuteness rather than austerity, diminutiveness rather than intimidation, and
natural unsayability rather than sermonizings. As one scholar of spiritual literature puts it,
“Mystic poets love to establish a communication across the widest possible gulf: between
physically finite creatures and [God].”⁴ Dickinson’s nectar-intoxicated bee and whimsical
butterfly are key players in her own Edenic vision of the soul. Conveniently, she could
observe the delicate truths they enact in her own backyard.

³ Virgil Nemoianu, “Literary Play and Religious Referentiality” in *Play, Literature, and
12.
⁴ Mohan Lai Sharma, “Of Spinning Weaving, and Mystical Poetry” in *Asian Studies Center*,
II. The Bee and the Poet-Seeker

What does the bee, which appears over 180 times in her letters and poems combined, symbolize for Dickinson? Mentioned more than any other insect and almost as frequently as another beloved object, the flower, which is mentioned 186 times in the letters alone, the bee is celebrated mainly for its one-pointed devotion to the flower, which typifies beauty, perfection, and sweetness. Moreover, the pun on its name would not have escaped Dickinson. Bee is a homonym for “be,” as in the verb to be. Both sonically and behaviorally, the bee embodies the essence of being for Dickinson. As its very name suggests, it epitomizes existence.

In an early poem, Dickinson places the bee at the top of a hierarchy. Freely renovating the Christian invocation of the Trinity, In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, she recites: “In the name of the Bee –/ And of the Butterfly –/ And of the Breeze – Amen!” (F23) We are immediately directed to the following correspondences: the Bee is God, the Butterfly Jesus, and the Breeze the Holy Ghost.

5 Judith Farr’s book The Gardens of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) is the most comprehensive study of Dickinson’s engagement with flowers, both in her garden and in her poetry.
6 Mary Jo Salter’s essay “Puns and Accordions: Emily Dickinson and the Unsaid” (The Yale Review, Volume 79.2) offers a thorough treatment of Dickinson’s inventive uses of puns. Salter’s substantial evidence reminds readers that almost no pun would have escaped Dickinson, and she cites David Porter who in his book Dickinson: The Modern Idiom notes that Dickinson often chose words as much for their sounds as for their meanings.
7 Helen Vendler offers an analysis of this poem in her recent book Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries, adding that Dickinson recasts this blessing from Matthew 28:19 using alliteration, not theology, as her guiding principle; of course, she acknowledges, too, that each chosen symbol complements its Christian equivalent in important ways (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of HUP, 2007), 27-28.
8 Vendler suggests that the butterfly symbolizes psyche or the soul; however, more will be said in this chapter about the butterfly’s transformative nature, too. Vendler shares the view that “Bee” is meant to invoke “Being.”
Nature was Dickinson’s most cherished library, and here she substitutes characters from nature for characters in a religious tradition that she respects but that she seeks to make new. In addition to delighting in her grade school studies of botany (in particular she enjoyed Almira Hart Lincoln’s *Familiar Lectures on Botany*), Dickinson spent close time with books by the local Amherst geologist and lecturer, Edward Hitchcock who, counter to Darwinian naturalism, which burgeoned in the coming decades, was known to pair scientific study with divine purpose.⁹ The frontispiece of this book depicts a butterfly emerging from a cocoon.¹⁰ As Biographer Roger Lundin puts it, “[Hitchcock] reinforced her inclination to read nature as a text possessing an abundance of spiritual meanings.”¹¹

In the previous chapter, we analyzed the humor in Dickinson’s manuscripts, especially as it relates to her comments in the margins of her poems. A particularly playful use of variants appears in a draft of the poem, “Bees are Black – with Gilt

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⁹ Lundin comments at some length on the full-scale differences between Hitchcock and Darwin, and he mentions commentary from several other historians. He also includes a witty quip from Dickinson: when a visitor came to her complaining that someone thought he was “the Redeemer,” Dickinson replied, ‘But we thought Darwin had thrown “the redeemer” away,’ 34. ¹⁰ Ibid., 32-34. ¹¹ Ibid, 33; Lundin’s book debunks many of the psychological theories about Dickinson’s lifestyle and choice of subject matter in her poetry. Instead, he reviews the spiritual history of her culture and, with healthy skepticism, reflects on Dickinson’s unique response to that lineage.
Bees are Black – with Gilt Surcingles –
Buccaneers of Buzz –
Ride abroad in ostentation
And subsist on Fuzz –

Fuzz ordained – not Fuzz contingent –
Marrons of the Hill.
Jugs – a Universe’s fracture +
Could not jar or spill.

[Emphasis added.]

+ rapture
Nearly all of Dickinson’s insect poems are humorous, and this poem about a bee is no exception. In an original draft, Dickinson indicates a plus mark next to the word “fracture,” which corresponds to a plus sign at the bottom of the page next to the word “rapture”: the alternative word choice rhymes with the word it is meant to replace, but with no other word in the poem. Linked through rhyme, “rapture,” then, is an element of “fracture” as opposed to a substitution for it. One obvious reading here is that the “Universe’s fracture” is itself a kind of rapture or fascination with the unflappable nature of bees: creatures who find a way to feed on nectar no matter what else is going on in the world. Another way to understand this choice is to see the words as synonyms: that which causes fracture equally causes rapture. This option reveals a core paradox in Dickinson’s poetics. The pain of change or of a rift of some kind, a subject she takes up frequently, is not necessarily debilitating. In fact, pain is very often evidence of growth—sometimes it is even a prelude to ecstasy. About Dickinson’s poetics in general, Roland Hagenbüchle has commented that, for this poet, “the fractured universe at the same time allows for the inroad to the divine.”

The humor in “Bees are black with gilt surcingles” lies in the poet’s choice of subject: a small, common bee whose mere sipping of nectar somehow transcends the motions of the universe; a creature with “fuzz” and “buzz” is nevertheless elevated to a station of importance. There is further humor in Dickinson’s variant word choice, rapture, since it implies that the universe is captivated by the habits of bees. This is

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12 David Porter on sound in Dickinson’s manuscripts: “variants demonstrate how important sound was to Dickinson,” 85. Porter is referring to poems in which the variants don’t necessarily rhyme, but they emulate the same sounds, even though the variants are not synonyms.

where humor and philosophy intersect: although Dickinson selects a playful subject
matter, the bee also symbolizes closeness to truth and closeness to inner sweetness, since
the bee is closest to the flower’s nectar. The poem proposes that all the rotations of the
universe cannot deter the bee.

The variant *rapture* only appears in one of two drafts of the poem. The second
draft, included in a letter to Dickinson’s friend Elizabeth Holland, omits the variant
“rapture” and also eliminates the capital “F” in “fracture,” but the same message is
apparent in an introduction she included with this draft of the poem. Dickinson writes to
her friend, “I must show you a Bee, that is eating a Lilac at the Window. There – there –
he is gone! How glad his family will be to see him!” Accompanied by these words, the
poem itself reads like an effort to share more with her friend about the bee she has just
seen, extending to her praise of the bee’s unflappable focus: the movements of the
universe will not cause it to “jar or spill” its precious honey.

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14 The bee is frequently a symbol of closeness to truth in both eastern and western poetic
traditions, and we will look at examples of insects and their relationship to spiritual knowing in
poetry from Jalaluddin Rumi to Walt Whitman. In “Summum Bonum” Robert Browning begins
his poem with the line, “All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee.”
15 A widespread association with the word “rapture” comes from Christianity, and perhaps
Dickinson is making a joke about “The Rapture” of the 1840s, or even about Adventist belief.
Her use of the word cannot be purely mocking, however, since she employs it elsewhere in her
poetry with sincerity and intensity. In another letter to Mrs. Holland Dickinson includes this
loaded sentence about *rapture* and connects the idea to her philosophy of death: “Meeting is well
worth parting. How kind in some to die, adding *impatience* to the rapture of our thought of
Heaven!”—in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, editor. (Cambridge, MA:
Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Franklin dates both drafts to 1877, 1245-46.
17 Ibid., 1246.
As shown, playing with cosmic truths is a favored use of humor for Dickinson, and she mischievously employs it elsewhere in her manuscript edits. For example, a short poem on the topic of bliss includes strikingly different word variants:

Bliss is the *Sceptre* of the Child  
The lever of the man  
The sacred stealth of boy and girl –  
Indict it, if we can.

[Emphasis added.] (F1583)

In the poem “Bliss is the *Plaything* of the Child,” Dickinson writes in the word “sceptre” as an alternative for *plaything*. (Note above that, in the Franklin edition, he selects “sceptre” over “plaything.”) The pairing of *sceptre* and *plaything* grants both power and danger to child’s play. Moreover, it triangulates the comparison: we are invited to see *bliss, plaything,* and *sceptre* functioning in a three-part metaphor. Bliss is both an empowering and perfunctory feature of innocence. As the child’s *sceptre*, bliss would seem to protect children, perhaps from the diminished innocence of adulthood—and perhaps, like a sceptre, bliss is even a threat to those who do not possess it. Perhaps, too, the similar sounds and spellings of the words *sceptre* and *specter* would not have escaped Dickinson: nearly homophones, the association invites the distant impression of a ghost, and the *bliss* described in this poem presumably vanishes when innocence vanishes. As the child’s *plaything*, bliss is something delightful, but perhaps, like a toy, it is also something that the child takes for granted, or even abuses.
In the first series of critical essays on Dickinson, many critics saw an incomplete genius in the poet, and they also frequently mistook her position towards God. Some early New Critics came closer to the mark. It is worth noting here, for example, that R.P. Blackmur calls her a “mystical poet” and, unintentionally perhaps, acknowledges something mischievous in her humor when he compares her to Robert Herrick.\(^{18}\) Dickinson is both deeply reverent and shockingly irreverent, sometimes within the same poem, which makes her difficult to classify in terms of conventional religious belief. Yet her seemingly irreverent tone could be an important aspect of her devotion. The Transcendentalist gesture of total inclusiveness swept all things sullied and purified into the same pool. Whitman effuses this message; but Dickinson also conveys it, albeit more subtly. In her case, however, high and low are sometimes connected through her meditations on vastness and smallness, God and the insect, for example. In Dickinson’s case, humor is the connecting agent.

In some well-known theories of humor, the spiritual principle of joining divine and mundane themes, the loftiness of philosophy with the minutia of nature, is unwittingly invoked. Notable among them is Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on “Carnival Ambivalence” and “Folk Humor and Carnival Laughter.” Bakhtin ties laughter to conquering fear, and notes that laughter represented a shared “social consciousness”; in laughter was contained both the recognition of social structures that were authoritarian and the subversion of those structures.\(^{19}\) With his lens pointed (as usual) on the Middles

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Ages, he writes, “We have said that medieval laughter defeated something which was more terrifying than the earth itself. All unearthly objects were transformed into earth itself.” Bakhtin demonstrates how laughter can bring down sacred ideas to the level of the profane. On one level, his assessment suggests the corruption of what is sacred; but, as a whole, his theory actually reveals a special social power in humor, one that transforms sacred ideas from austere, abstract, and fear-inducing concepts into more intimate, knowable realities.

Bakhtin elaborates on the transcendent powers of laughter in a curious aside on what he calls “ambivalent laughter.” By “ambivalent,” Bakhtin seems to mean neutral—laughter that is neither positive nor negative. Ambivalent laughter is contrasted with satire, which has a clear agenda, usually mockery. Ambivalent laughter, however, is likened to talk—part of a flowing stream of non-particular utterances. Ambivalent laughter positions the one who is laughing at a point in common with “the whole world.” This position is granted, in Bakhtin’s words, “the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to [the whole world].” Thus, ambivalent laughter is neutral because it is not subjective; it places the one who is laughing in a position of universality. It is perhaps for this reason that Bakhtin adds, “laughter penetrates the highest forms of religious cult and thought.” Bakhtin’s laughter is a common denominator among all belief systems and ideologies.

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20 Ibid., 210.
21 Ibid., 201.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 202.
Northrop Frye addresses similar questions in his work on comedy. In showing the importance of the retreat from an austere, urbane setting to an earthy, pastoral one, Frye posits that comedy is not only freed in these pastoral settings, but that it also leads to spiritual renewal. This contrast is similar to the famous shift in Sonnet 94, which Empson analyzed in his book *Some Versions of Pastoral*, and which we reviewed in an earlier chapter: the poem shifts from what seem like concerns of the court to a discussion of flowers and weeds, from urbane to pastoral. Drawing mainly from classical and Shakespearean plays, Frye illustrates how the subversion of an order results not in violent rebellion and rejection of society, but in pastoral insulation from society. Importantly, this societal change nurtures, and is nurtured by, engagement with the spirit or soul. The new “society” is what Frye calls “redeemed,” and it comes with fresh religious ideals and practices.

In a letter to her cousin and friend John Graves, Dickinson records the following observations, written on a Sunday, conveying the extent to which pastoral concerns replaced church for her:
It is Sunday – now – John – and all have gone to church – the wagons have done passing, and I have come out in the new grass to listen to the anthems.

Three or four hens have followed me and we sit side by side – and while they crow and whisper, I’ll tell you what I see today, and what I would that you saw –

You remember the crumbling wall that divides us from Mr Sweetser – and the crumbling elms and evergreens – and other crumbling things – that spring, and fade, and cast their bloom within a simple twelvemonth – well – they are here, and skies on me fairer far than Italy, in blue eye look down – up – see! – away – a league from here, on the way to Heaven! And here are Robins – just got home – and giddy Crows – and Jays – and will you trust me – as I live, here’s a bumblebee – not such as summer brings – John – earnest, manly bees, but a kind of a Cockney, dressed in jaunty clothes. Much that is gay – have I to show, if you were with me, John, upon this April grass – then there are sadder features – here and there, wings half gone to dust, that fluttered so, last year – a mouldering plume, an empty house, in which a bird resided. Where last year’s flies, their errand ran, last year’s crickets fell! We, too, are flying – fading, John – and the song “here lies,” soon upon lips that love us now – will have hummed and ended.

To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and next time, try the upper air – is no schoolboy’s theme!

It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal – when air and earth are full of lives that are gone – and done – and a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection! Congratulate me – John – Lad – and “here’s a health to you” – that we have each a pair of lives, and need not chary be, of the one “that now is” [Dickinson’s emphases] (L184).

This meditation on nature reads like a spontaneous sermon. Although other Transcendentalists (namely Emerson) write of such connections with nature, Dickinson does so with a teasing intimacy, anthropomorphizing creatures as she goes. The letter shows Dickinson’s progression from observations of plants, birds, and especially insects to broader ruminations on eternity, immortality, and death as its own form of renewal. Her sentiments, as she describes them, move from “gay” to “sad” to “jolly.”
Cheerfulness, livingness, and beauty are the main themes. In another letter to her cousin John, she instructs simply, “Dear John –/ Be happy –/ Emily” (L160).

It is not surprising to discover pastoral elements, such as an appreciation for nature, bees, flowers, and butterflies, in the work of a Transcendental-era poet like Dickinson. In the preface to the first edition of her poems in 1890, Dickinson’s literary correspondent and posthumous editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson famously described her style as “poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed.”

He uses pastoral imagery to describe her unorthodox style. As we have said, the shift or striking contrast in Dickinson’s poetry is this juxtaposition of broad cosmic themes (a Universe’s fracture/rapture) and mundane, pastoral, and seemingly insignificant ones (a bee). It is the harmonious fracture in her work that promotes unity between small things and vast concepts, and that, through incongruity and sweetness, creates a humorous mood in many of her poems. In Dickinson editor Emily Frago’s words, “This merging of the minor and the vast is a key trait of Dickinson.”

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Roger Lundin draws important parallels between her poetic style and her unique style of religious worship: Dickinson eventually excused herself from formal, public religion all together; just as, though equivocal about it, she avoided public distribution of her poetry. Yet, while Lundin firmly establishes the connection between Dickinson’s spiritual growth and her poetic technique, most studies, including his, do not pause for long on the ubiquity of humor in Dickinson’s spiritual writings. Dickinson’s bee is a microcosm for her joint focus on both poetry and God, which she may have understood as a single focus. For this reason, Dickinson’s bee poems best illustrate her unique blend of jocularity and spiritual sensitivity.

Dickinson frequently exploits the similarity between the bee and the poet, since both species strive steadfastly for an essence. Yet, this comparison has a certain humorous ring to it: bees are rounder and fuzzier than poets; the clichéd poet is more languorous and withdrawn than the bee. Positioned analogously next to a bee, the poet becomes both more endearing and more industrious than one might imagine; the bee becomes more soulful and beauty-driven. After all, the only thing that really connects a bee and a poet is the passionate drive to tap into something outside of itself. Hence, the similarity between the poet and the bee is, at its core, their ontological striving.

27 Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*; Lundin weaves Dickinson’s religious self-fashioning (he calls her “one of the most brilliantly enigmatic religious thinkers this country has ever known”) into his narrative of the development of her poetic originality; the two, poetic originality and religious brilliance, it seems clear from his study, are inseparably linked, 6.
Even though Dickinson creates her own unique, teasing literature of bees, she took cryptic note of Emerson’s interest in bees as well. In an 1883 letter to a friend, she writes, as an aside on another topic, “Emerson’s intimacy with his ‘Bee’ only immortalized him” (L823). Of course, bees symbolize immortality— or so it was thought by Napoleon who made the bee a symbol of his empire, and so, too, Dickinson playfully supposes in her quip about Emerson.\(^\text{28}\) Dickinson would have appreciated the bee’s connection to the magnificence of empire, since spiritual know-how is crowned in her poetry with high-seated personae, such as royalty and the occasional emperor. (The Queen Bee, as a combination of two of her most ubiquitous personae, the Bee and the Queen, is an implied persona in its own right.)

In his book called *Dancing Bees*, the entomologist Karl Van Frisch explains the lore about the immortality of bees this way: “Botanists call [the sugar solution glistening at the end of each flower petal] nectar—[and] not without reason. This was the name given by the ancient Greeks to the drink of the gods. Not only did it have a wonderful scent, but it made men immortal.”\(^\text{29}\) Von Frisch’s *Dancing Bees* conjures in its title the ecstatic delight of Dickinson’s bees. Moreover, the bee’s dance, as Von Frisch discovered, is its method of communicating with other bees. Their scarcely perceptible, intricately patterned, gestural language seems to have at least a few things in common with Dickinson’s evocative but never explicit poetry. Even though it was not yet known in the 1800s that bees communicated through dance (Von Frisch discovered this in the

\(^{28}\) For more on Plath’s bees, see “On Bee Poems” from the University of Illinois on-line: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/beepoems.htm

1950s), Dickinson was compelled enough by their mysterious behavior to mention them again and again in her writing. “Emerson’s ‘Bee’” likely describes his focus on divine essence.

In many letters, Dickinson compares her friends to bees and expresses the wish that she herself were a bee, herein linking, again, the aims of a poet with the industry of a bee (L133). In other letters, mentioning bees is a way to drop clues about her philosophy of death. She sends her nephew Gilbert a poem called “The Bumble Bee’s Religion,” in which she calls the bee a “little Hearse-like Figure/ Unto itself a Dirge/ To a delusive Lilac/ The vanity divulge” (L712). Since the bee is its own dirge, it is responsible for its own death. As we learn as children, having spent its sting, the bee dies. According to Thomas Johnson, the editor of her letters, Dickinson apparently helped Gilbert along with this part of the riddle by enclosing a dead bee with the letter. She scolds the flower here for attracting the bee in the first place, but this is her teasing mode, since the nectar the bee attains, as the legends go, is the source of its immortality; the flower, the provider of that sweetness. The bee’s body goes, but the wine or nectar remains. There is perhaps a prophetic sadness to this letter, since her nephew died of typhoid fever two years later at eight years old. Yet the letter is comforting, too, because it means that, from Dickinson’s point of view, though she mourned the departed, their essence remained. This broader understanding of death is encoded in the strange joke of enclosing a dead bee with the letter.
In another letter more directly related to her spiritual understanding of bees, she advises a friend this way: “Maggie said you asked should you ‘eat’ the flower. Please consult the bees – they are the only authority on Etruscan matters” (L478). By “Etruscan,” what does Dickinson have in mind? Perhaps she had read about Etruscan sarcophagi and is referring to their funereal traditions. Perhaps she likes the pastoral, rustic resonance of the word (sometimes, as many scholars have commented, Dickinson chooses words mainly for their sounds). Given the context, however, it seems more likely that she is invoking the famed piety of Etruscans, and perhaps also the early Etruscan tradition of believing the afterlife to be a happy state. Also notable, one art historian writes of their habit of representing ecstatic dances and other delights in their artwork. Deeply thoughtful about death, the early Etruscans nevertheless appeared to have celebrated it with joy, or so the smiling, life-size couples mounted on their sarcophagi imply. Yet, in invoking the bee as an “expert” in cultural, historical, or religious matters, Dickinson’s deadpan choice of metaphor makes light of the topic at the same time, with humor. As symbols of immortality, bees also gleefully expire, unburdened with human ruminations about the afterlife. As experts on the flower, so, too, bees stand in metaphorically for skilled experts at getting to the source and focusing on nothing but that. As Indian fifteenth-century to sixteenth-century poet Kabir wrote, “the bee of the heart stays deep inside the flower/ And cares for no other thing.”

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The bee symbolizes concentrated spiritual focus in Dickinson’s poetry because of its industrious work habits, because of its smallness, and because it is drawn to life’s inner nectar, which is described elsewhere in her poetry as wine. In terms of the bee’s smallness, it is not so much that Dickinson values life in miniature; rather, she values the concentration of enclosure, and finds that life’s broadness can be distilled within these smaller parameters. Not surprisingly, *distillation* was a key word for Dickinson, appearing in several poems and alluded to in many others. Her well-known poem written in homage to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, spells out this technique: “This was a Poet –/ It is That/ Distills amazing sense/ From Ordinary Meanings –/ And Attar so immense/ From familiar species/ That perished by the Door”(F446). (One might imagine the “familiar species” is a dooryard lilac or a rose.) The process of distilling something to its essence was Dickinson’s method of poetic composition and philosophical reflection alike. She

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32 In *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, Farr explains this feature of lilacs and speculates on the placement of flowers around the Dickinson Homestead (no detailed descriptions of the layout of Emily Dickinson’s garden were ever provided), 238.
was able to contemplate the vastness of life through a microscopic look at its concentrated essence, writing elsewhere, “Essential Oils –are wrung—/ The Attar from the Rose”(F772).33

Bees perform a similar process of distillation, feeding on roses to gather nectar, which they transform into sweetness. Much eastern poetry tends to invoke the bee as an unequivocal symbol of sweetness. In the Persian tradition, insects are harmoniously juxtaposed to topics of spiritual awakening. Recall that Kabir wrote of “the bee of the heart that stays deep inside the flower,/ and cares for no other thing.”34 From 13th-century Persia, Rumi muses, “This we have now/ is not imagination….This we are now/ created the body, cell by cell,/ like bees building a honeycomb.”35 For Dickinson, bees in themselves are not especially interesting. In the case of the fly, the bee, and the butterfly, it is their work, their focus, their growth-patterns, and their general behavior that she finds not only interesting, but also helpful for describing spiritual processes. Tipping her hat to the more everyday insect species, in “A Toad, can die of Light,” Dickinson chooses the gnat as ambassador, a creature left marginalized in nature’s beauty pageant: “Why swagger, then,” she asks human beings, adding, “The gnat’s supremacy is large as thine.” The gnat or the midge’s (a small fly) life is as important on some level as a human being’s because both species can die, and Dickinson wants us to be aware of death’s equalizing force. Death humbles all creatures alike. Dickinson’s poem about a gnat,

33 Lundin remarks that Dickinson is probably echoing Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s use of this image in his “Letter to a Young Contributor” in the April 1862 Atlantic Monthly, the essay that prompted Dickinson to begin a correspondence with him.
however, suggests something different in the next stanza. Although the gnat dies like every other animal, the gnat may not be capable of living his life as fully in an internal sense as some other creatures. Death is one thing, she seems to say, but she continues, “Life – is a different Thing –/ So measure Wine –/ Naked of Flask – Naked of Cask –/ Bare Rhine –/ Which Ruby’s mine?” Her metaphor for the physical body is the flask or cask. The lines “Naked of Flask – Naked of Cask –/ Bare Rhine” imply that what is left is the essence of a being, the wine. Rhine is one of her code words for wine probably for at least three reasons: 1) she likes that it rhymes with wine, 2) there are vineyards in the Rhine valley, and 3) perhaps most importantly, it is a region that produced several self-fashioned medieval saints, notably Hildegard of Bingen, figures with whom Dickinson might have identified. Death makes us equal, she seems to say; but when we strip away the outer layer of the mortal body and are left with nothing but the soul inside, degrees of potency will vary.

Divine intoxication, referenced through the recurrence of wine imagery in her poetry, is a well-known trope in mystical literature. Dickinson researcher Jay Leyda mentions that Dickinson would have read the following line from Emerson’s essay “Nature”: “The intellect inebriated by nectar,” again linking the activities of bees with the poet’s intoxication.36 Consider, for example, the following poem:

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A Drunkard cannot meet a Cork
Without a Revery –
And so encountering a Fly
This January Day
Jamaicas of Remembrance stir
That send me reeling in –
The moderate drinker of Delight
Does not deserve the Spring –
Of Juleps, part are in the Jug
And more are in the Joy –
Your connoissaeur in Liquors consults the Bumble Bee. 37

In “A Drunkard cannot meet a Cork,” Dickinson compares the fly, a “moderate drinker of Delight” in line seven, to the bee, who is more knowledgeable about alcoholic beverages than even the “connoissaeur of Liquors” (perhaps the speaker). The fly we imagine as slightly tipsy when the speaker spots him, whereas the bee’s mastery of delight is a smooth intoxication, as though the bee really knows how to hold his liquor. The fly is linked to “Jamaicas,” Dickinson’s toponym for rum and a harsher substance than the sweet syrup of the bee’s “Julep” referenced in line nine. The word Julep comes from the Persian word “Gulab” meaning rose water. How fitting for the bee, since it feeds on the nectar of roses and stores that nectar in its stomach (which Dickinson refers to as a “jug” in another poem, too). When bees store up this nectar, they are able to hold it in their stomach sacks, and then share it with other bees; in other words, they are not self-indulgent drunkards; their partaking of the “jug” and of the “delight” appears to spread

37 Magdalena Zapedowska’s essay “Dickinson’s Delight” drew my attention to this poem. Whereas this reading focuses in humor and drunkenness, her helpful reading focuses on the poem’s message of delight.
the joy of what they discovered in this nectar with others. It is not a self-contained delight.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is thought to have borrowed an eastern mystic’s wine metaphor in his own poetry. He had read Hafez, and his editors believe that these lines of poetry echo those of the Persian poet. The poem is called “Bacchus”: “Pour the wine! Pour the wine!/ In spider wise/ Will again geometrize/ Will in bee and gnat keep time.” The presence of three insects in Emerson’s poem presents divine intoxication as an organized, patterned feature of life, as constant and as harmonious with nature as the organized activities of insects. Emerson has a few other poems about bees. In “The Humble-Bee,” he elevates his subject with this exclamation: “Insect lover of the sun/ Joy of thy dominion!” And in another poem he refers playfully to the bee as a “tawny hummer.”

Emily Dickinson probably never met Emerson, even though he visited her brother- and sister-in-law’s house next door (many writers passed through her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson’s lively salon). But thanks to the gift of his poems from a man she called her teacher, Benjamin Newton, Emily had read Emerson and probably heard about his visit from her brother- or sister-in-law. She may even have taken special notice of his interest in eastern philosophy and eastern poetry, but this cannot be certain. Her employment of the word “julep,” however, even though she might not have known that the word had a Persian root, at least reveals the aptness of these recurring metaphors—

38 Von Frisch, 13-14.
40 Emerson, Complete Works, Volume IX, 38.
41 Emerson, Complete Works, Volume V, 154.
bees, nectar, and drunkenness—for painting a picture in poetry of closeness to God. (In another poem, she writes about the inadequacy of a man-made cocktail next to the bee’s nectar: “As impotent would be/ As make of Our imperfect Mints,/ The Julep – of the bee” (F564)). At the same time, as extensive linguistic scholarship on Dickinson has shown, she seemed to play with the etymological reaches of her words—as part of the levity and fun of language—and plumb their linguistic inferences as far as possible.
IV. Humor in Insect Poetry

As we have seen, Dickinson’s choice of an insect to describe one-pointed contemplation on God is not a random one. Insects, however unexpectedly, play spiritually symbolic roles in much great literature. Of course, in some instances, insects herald pestilence, disease, terror, or simply annoyance. In other instances, however, they embody quiet, unspoken qualities, or even the hushed iridescence of magical realms. In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Queen Titania’s entire train is made up of insects. Not only do her fairies have insect names (Cobweb and Moth), but also, her world is ornamented with insects. When commanding her fairies to create an opulent, comfortable setting for her lover Bottom, Titania recommends they rob the insects: “The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,/ And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,/ And light them at the fiery glow-worm’s eyes,/ To have my love to bed and to arise;/ And pluck the wings from painted butterflies,/ To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eye” (III.ii). While Titania’s lair is perhaps not a domain of penetrating spiritual questions, it operates with the knowledge that insects carry precious cargo. *To adorn one’s lover with the very best, go raid the insects*, or so Titania seems to command. Another example from Shakespeare’s hall of spirit-world personalities is Ariel, who famously sings of his

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42 For a detailed list of literary insects, see Pearl Faulkner Eddy’s “Insects in English Poetry” in the *The Scientific Monthly* 33.1 (July, 1931), 53-73; Eddy mentions Dickinson’s bees in several places.
43 Shakespeare, 233.
promised freedom, “Where the bee sucks, there suck I” (V.i). Perhaps he means something like freedom will taste as sweet as living at the heart of a flower.

The insect plays a role in religious literature, too. In one of John Donne’s sermons, he complains of the interrupting fly and other ambient distractions: “I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in and invite God and His angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and His angels, for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door.” In addition to irritating the speaker, the fly in this moment also introduces humor, since its worldly presence stands in stark contrast to the serene quiet of religious meditation.

The fly is the more annoying insect that wishes to feed on the nectar of truth, but has neither the ingenuity of the bee nor the grace of the butterfly. (Dickinson exploits the humor in these situations, especially in her fly poems; at the same time, as will be analyzed, she concedes that the fly conveys majesty—at the very least through the incongruity of its presence.) Donne’s poem “The Flea” celebrates another common poetic trope of the insect. Donne compares the flea that “suck’d me first, and now sucks thee” to the potential innocence of sexual intercourse. Why is it sin, he wonders, if it’s not much more than being bitten by the same flea? If the flea can come into our blood, is sexual union equally innocuous? The poem is also layered with allusions to the Crucifixion and the Eucharist, all through the unifying bite of a flea.

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As popular lore would have it, at the time of his death, Saint Francis of Assisi observed a fly and concentrated on it in his final moments. Whether or not this story is true, it has probably become legend because there is something both entertaining and spiritually instructive about the incongruous presence of an insect at a holy scene. The insect, especially a less attractive one like a fly, seems to clash with what we associate with a holy atmosphere—stillness, beauty, and transcendence of the worldly mire in which the fly resides. Yet the humorous absurdity of the fly’s entrance broadens understandings of divine presence. For someone like Saint Francis, a lover of all animals, the appearance of a fly at the moment of death, although somehow fitting, is also incongruously emblematic of his achievement. G.K. Chesterton notes that, for a figure like Saint Francis, nature was never a “background”: “Saint Francis was a man who did not want to see the wood for the trees. He wanted to see each tree as a separate and almost a sacred thing.”

Similarly, for Dickinson, the name Transcendentalist is somewhat a misfit—at least in the sense that she seemed to delight most especially in divine immanence, as embodied in tiny bumblebee. So, too, Dickinson’s lurking fly is not simply an annoyance or a curiosity in the background, but a captivating part of the foreground, full of instruction and interest.

Dickinson’s delight in insects led the way for a sustained fascination with the insect species in American poetry. Modern American poets, from Dickinson’s era to the present, have drawn on a wide range of insects in their work. Dickinson’s contemporary Walt Whitman wrote a short poem called “The Noiseless, Patient Spider,” in which he

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meditates on that particular creature’s grace. One is tempted to compare Whitman’s admiring, delicate praise to Robert Frost’s more ambivalent poem, “Design,” which closes with the skeptical lines, “But what design of darkness to appall? –/ If design govern in a thing so small.” Frost is not sure that the divine plan extends to the minute workings of nature, such as the behavioral patterns of insects, or if, indeed, it is present anywhere at all.

In contrast to Frost, Dickinson has two well-known meditations on spiders, “The Spider Holds a Silver Ball” and “A Spider Sewed at Night,” both of which characterize the spider’s behavior as precious, delicate, spiritually instructive, and venturing towards immortality. She also has a poem about a spider known as her “outhouse” poem, where she describes herself, “Alone and in a Circumstance/ Reluctant to be told/ A spider on my reticence/ Assiduously crawled” (F1174). The spider seems to take over the outhouse, this liminal space between civilization and nature. The spider then not only weaves more agilely and gracefully than humans, but it is also more “at Home,” as Dickinson puts it, in the spaces reserved for human refuse. The poem’s humor, derived from the dainty way in which she sketches an outhouse, functions like the spider: it bridges the graceful and the natural, the elegant and the profane.

For Dickinson’s twentieth-century descendants, the insect was probably invoked, not so much for its grace and whimsy, but more so for its post-apocalyptic insidiousness—it’s ability to survive in an ever-changing, ever-destructive world. Insects connote desolation in T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land. The line—“or in memories draped by the beneficent spider”—is one of the places in which real existence cannot be found, at
least for the poem’s final pair of interlocutors. A few lines earlier, while water is craved, the sound of the cicada conjures the unwelcome sensation of the desert.\textsuperscript{47} The contemporary poet and essayist Adrianne Rich compares herself to an insect twice in her famous poem, “Diving into the Wreck,” and, notably, she compares herself to an insect in her essay about Emily Dickinson, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson.” Rich situates herself “hovering like an insect against the screens of an existence which inhabited Amherst, Massachusetts between 1830 and 1886 [the years of Dickinson’s birth and death]”; and, “here I become, again, an insect, vibrating at the frames of windows, clinging to panes of glass, trying to connect.”\textsuperscript{48} Her simile conveys the distorted vision of a critic or reader peering in decades later on an earlier historical moment. It also captures the somewhat annoying yet silent patience of a creature in deep, fascinated focus that does not have the ability to come any closer.

More along the lines of Donne’s flea, Yusef Komunyakaa composed the irreverent “Ode to the Maggot,” in which the maggot equalizes all men: “You cast spells on beggars & kings,” he writes. He also compares the maggot’s behavior to what it is that a poem does: he tells the maggot, “Yes, you/ Go to the root of all things….No law or creed can outlaw you/ As you take every living thing apart.”\textsuperscript{49} In choosing the genre of the ode, Komunyakaa praises the maggot’s indiscriminate eating habits. On the one hand,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{47} T.S. Eliot, \textit{The Waste Land} in \textit{Collected Poems and Plays—1909-1950}, 48-49; Mike Manglitz cited a few insect moments in modern poetry in a \textit{20\textsuperscript{th}}-Century Poetry seminar at Catholic University, Spring 2009; one of his references, as I recall, was to the spider moment in \textit{The Waste Land}.
\textsuperscript{48} Rich, 99 and 101.
\end{footnotesize}
his ode celebrates poetry’s democratic potential; on the other hand, it offers a crude picture of the invasive, perhaps even parasitic nature of poetry. Komunyakaa’s implied comparison of an insect to a poem seems of a piece with Dickinson’s fascination with the deeply focused and penetrating characteristics of bees, butterflies (as we will see), and sometimes, with concessions, flies. Only, Dickinson’s tone is generally lighter than those in the twentieth-century examples.

The bee is probably the most popular insect in poetry. In addition to Ariel’s pronouncement about bees, there are several notable modern examples. Sylvia Plath wrote an entire series of poems about bees with the intention of celebrating their ingenuity, as well as their sting. (Plath’s picture draws more on bees as symbols of dominance in the modern era than it does on their love of flowers.) Marianne Moore, who loved to write about animals, includes this pertinent line about a bee in her poem “Elephants”: “With the Socrates of/ animals as with Sophocles the Bee, on whose / tombstone a hive was incised, sweetness tinctures/ his gravity.”50 Her line reminds one of Dickinson’s twofold representations of the bee: while it delivered sweetness, the bee necessarily also understood gravity.

V. A Few Words on Dickinson’s Fly

Although Dickinson seldom compares herself to the bee, she humorously compares herself to a fly in several poems. In this epistolary poem, “Bee! I’m expecting you,” her fly addresses the bee, longing for its return.

Bee! I'm expecting you!
Was saying Yesterday
To Somebody you know
That you were due –

The Frogs got Home last Week –
Are settled, and at work –
Birds, mostly back –
The Clover warm and thick –

You'll get my Letter by
The seventeenth; Reply
Or better, be with me –
Yours, Fly.

(F983)

The signature line is most revealing— “or better, be with me [emphasis added]”— as it reminds us of that other attribute of the bee. As already noted, since its name is a homonym of the verb to be, the bee epitomizes existence; it carries in its jugs the essence of being. Meanwhile, the poor fly can only long for the bee or long to be like it. The bee is a sort of guide to the fly. Dickinson suggests this guide-like quality of the bee in her short poem about a Prairie:
To Make a Prairie
It takes a clover and a bee
Just one clover and a bee, and reverie.
The reverie alone will do if bees are few.
(F1779)

The final line, a few beats longer than the other lines, contains humor in its rhythm as a rushed, second-best solution to the quandary of a bee shortage. In another poem, Dickinson conveys a similar message, but she connects it to religion more explicitly:

‘Faith’ is a fine invention
For Gentlemen who see!
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency!”
(F202)

In its steady attention to detail, the bee of the former poem is akin to the microscope of the latter. The bee, like the microscope, models the desired behavior, which can be instructive for those whose “reverie alone” does not help them to see.

But in the poem, “I heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,” Dickinson once again identifies with the fly:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portions of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –
(F465)

In its blue uncertain, stumbling buzz, this fly has a drunken awkwardness. However, in the final stanza, some important pronouns have been omitted. Who did the windows fail? Was it the speaker or the fly? Windows failing connotes a fly cruising straight into the glass pane of a window and falling to its death. But it also paints a picture of the fading out of life for this speaker. Notably, Dickinson’s speaker does not use the word death at the end of this poem. In one sense, then, it is not physical death that she experiences but rather the loss of a former kind of vision. The line “I could not see to see” could also, again, refer to the fly. Flies are said to have weak eyesight, but they are able to track motion. For several months towards the end of the Civil War, Dickinson went to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she was treated for changes in her eyesight that went largely unexplained by physicians. The fly’s appearance between the light and the dying speaker heralds its seeming fusion with the speaker in the poem’s final image: the speaker, like the fly, is resigned to her fate and waits for that last onset.

There is further humor, of course, in the fact that a great King was expected, and a fly showed up instead. Death—the King, as it were—never makes an entrance; instead
vision changes; a part of the self is transformed. Ronald Wallace asks, “Is [the fly] God? If so, the poem is very bleak, suggesting that God is a fly. Is it the devil? Possibly. The devil is sometimes called the lord of the flies.”\(^{51}\) Wallace isolates the central “joke” in this poem; his conclusion, however, is hasty. As we saw with the biographical descriptions of Saint Francis, the fly, for a thinker like Dickinson, could never be a background entity. Rather, its appearance constitutes a reminder that everything in nature, whether high or low, exists in the foreground. This was not a “bleak” conclusion for Dickinson. Rather, it was a simple truth about all of nature, framed in an unexpected, comical context.

More so than the industrious bee or the elegant butterfly, the fly is at risk of being marginalized or even exiled. The poem “Size Circumscribes” is often referenced in relation to Dickinson’s compact, elliptical style of composition. However, the poem is full of tricks, one of which is its challenge to dualistic notions of size. The verb circumscribes implies a kind of circular writing, the “success in circuit” that Dickinson advises in her poem about the importance of telling a “slant” truth. “Petty” means

unimportant here; but, from its French root, it also means small; the reader is invited to wonder, for what is there no room, big things, small things, or merely insignificant things? The gnat’s appearance complicates the meaning further: it is the insignificant things that must be excised in order to fill out one’s “intrinsic” size (even if one is a giant, that intrinsic size is what she calls “gianture”). The word giant contains, in jumbled letters, the word gnat. Visually and sonically, giant does tolerate gnat. But just as the reader is tempted to casually swat away the gnat in order to follow the speaker’s advice, the poem’s final line comparing calumnies to flies suggests that insects are at least as devastating as slanderous remarks. Either insults are less harmful than one might think (and that sense of levity is certainly characteristic of Dickinson) or seemingly insignificant things, like flies, are more marking to our lives than we might have supposed. At the very least, the words accent each other. (At the same time, sonically, both words connote an implied linking word, lies. Is “intrinsic size” more truthful with or without the addition of a gnat, a calumny, or a fly?) The verb in the penultimate line changes the poem’s tone very slightly. The giant “ignores” the possibility that such an insect might even crowd his space. One sense of the verb ignore is to possess no knowledge of; another meaning is a sort of conscious denial or avoidance of something. Both senses of the word imply that calumnies and flies are unexpected, space-altering presences. As in the poem “I heard a fly buzz,” flies shift alertness away from the main-stage drama, and however annoyingly or painfully, jolt perspective into a broader sphere. Thus, here again, the fly is an undesired presence, but a presence that might be more helpful than it seems.
VI. Dickinson’s Butterfly and the Mystery of Humor

Like the fly, Dickinson’s speakers, in both her letters and her poems, often seek out warmth, sweetness, and light. Also like the fly, her speakers sometimes find themselves awkward, unattractive, annoying, or unskilled. Of all these creatures, Dickinson seems to be most impressed with the butterfly. The fly fumbles towards the light, the bee agilely works its way towards the nectar, but the butterfly is a transformed creature. Like swans, butterflies both change and beautify their forms.

In her book on Emily Dickinson’s gardens and flowers, Judith Farr notes the potentially aggressive side of bees— at least in terms of how Dickinson sometimes, albeit playfully, portrays them. In a few poems, Dickinson jokingly portrays their unbending desire to secure the flower’s nectar at the expense of the flower, which is but an innocent victim of that desire.52 Dickinson’s butterfly, however, is a more whimsical friend to the flower, floating near and also above it. Of the butterfly, Farr observes, “The butterfly is a traditional icon of the soul in Western Art.”53 Although bees were a reliable presence among Dickinson’s flowers, Farr adds, “Butterflies had an important place in the hierarchy of Dickinson’s literary garden, their fine radiance seeming heavenly to her.”54 Farr mentions an arch little poem in which Dickinson compares the butterfly’s transformation from a chrysalis state to putting on an assumption gown:

The Butterfly’s Assumption Gown
In Chrysoprase Apartments hung
This afternoon put on.

53 Ibid., 281.
54 Ibid., 145.
Dickinson goes on to muse:

How condescending to descend  
And be of Buttercups the friend  
In a New England Town.

(F1329)

The butterfly flutters above the realm of flowers and bees yet condescends to “descend” to their level.

Perhaps because the butterfly embodies something even more enchanting for Dickinson than the bee, she frequently writes of its disappearance into other realms. The bee’s mission is very clear to Dickinson: it seeks the flower because it seeks the flower’s nectar, and, as we have seen, she both playfully and admiringly makes much of its steady work and focus. The butterfly, however, seems to be “Repairing Everywhere –/ Without Design/…In Purposeless Circumference” (F610). The butterfly’s mission appears to be less mundane and less work-oriented than the bee’s industry. Several poems dwell on the mystery surrounding the butterfly’s disappearance. In the poem just mentioned, while the bee “worked” and the flower “zealous blew,” the butterfly “To Nowhere – seemed to go,” and then vanished: “And Afternoon – and Butterfly –/ Extinguished – in the Sea.” The butterfly delicately merges with a vaster entity, the sea.

Other poems echo this precise image. In two very different versions of the same poem, Dickinson describes the disappearance of two butterflies. Both poems begin the same way, with the line two butterflies went out at noon.

**Version 1**

Two Butterflies went out at Noon –  
And waltzed above a Farm –
Then stepped straight through the Firmament
And rested on a Beam –

And then – together bore away
Upon a shining Sea –
Though never yet, in any Port –
Their coming mentioned – be –

If spoken by the distant Bird –
If met in Ether Sea
By Frigate, or by Merchantman –
No notice – was – to me

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Version 2

Two Butterflies went out at Noon
And waltzed opon a Farm
And then espied Circumference
And caught a ride with him –
Then lost themselves and found themselves
In eddies of the sun
Till Gravitation missed them –
And Both were wrecked in Noon –
To all surviving Butterflies
Be this Fatuity
Example – and monition
To entomology –

(F571; dated 1863)

Noon is one of Dickinson’s favorite terms for closeness to the light, since the sun is strongest at noontime. June is another code word for that closeness, and she frequently

55 This is a transcription of the manuscript facsimile (Figure 1) dated to around 1862; see “Fascicle 25” in The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, R.W. Franklin, ed., 567.
situates her bees in the month of June. In the earlier poem, dated roughly to 1862, the butterflies step straight through the “firmament.” But in the poem written just one year later, they step “upon circumference.” Afterwards, the story changes radically from one version to the next: in both scenarios, the butterflies disappear entirely. In the 1863 version, the speaker explains how they vanish: “then lost themselves and found themselves/ In eddies of the sun/ Till gravitation missed them –/ And Both were wrecked in Noon.” In short, the butterflies dissolve themselves in the light. At the end of the poem, the speaker includes a mock warning to other insects, but this is her teasing mode: “To all surviving Butterflies/ Be this Fatuity/ Example – and monition/ To entomology.”

These two different endings underscore Dickinson’s love of blending apparent opposites. The older version of the poem is slightly more mysterious, and even more ominous in tone. The newer 1863 version is funnier and lighter. Also noteworthy, the older version ends with the word “me,” whereas the newer version closes with the word “entomology.” Thus, in her revision of this poem, “me” is traded in for a mock-scientific invocation of the insect species, focused creatures unburdened by the human mind. Yet, characteristic of Dickinson, it is possible to see these two versions of the same poem are working together. If the two poems are read as a single, continuous story with two beginnings, the final word “me” works alongside the final word of the second version, “entomology.” In other words, a single human existence (me) merges with entomology, the species symbolizing, for Dickinson, one-pointed devotion. Dickinson’s butterfly is the most advanced representative of this species because of its ability to disappear, to submerge its being in something vaster, and yet remain light as air.
VII. Smallness as a Source of Humor

We have seen that humor and religious themes are closely tied in Dickinson’s work. One reason for this is that humor deflates the solemnity of religious truths; moreover—and this was perhaps Dickinson’s particular interest in religious humor—humor revivifies those truths. Literary historian Ronald Wallace phrases it this way: “Comedy enables Dickinson to ridicule and affirm religious ideas simultaneously.”

Religious humor is also an aspect of Dickinson’s prescient contribution to Ezra Pound’s twentieth-century invitation for newness and freshness in poetry. Since Dickinson’s philosophical play is reflected in both her subject matter and in the formal elements of her poetry, one might say that she fulfilled Pound’s wish in two respects. Yet her philosophical innovation is often missed perhaps for the same reason that her humor is often missed: both are without qualm. Dickinson’s philosophical insight and her humor share a detached, surface insouciance. Her incongruous mix of religious awe, deep reverence for nature, and light, detached wit turns out this special brand of spiritual humor.

Yet Dickinson’s feelings about God were never indifferent. The spectrum of emotions she conveys, from mock-anger to passion to skepticism, suggests a desire to become more intimate with God. In one poem she jokes:

Of Course – I prayed –
And did God care?

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56 Wallace, 90.
He cared as much as on the Air –
A Bird had stamped her foot –
cried ‘Give Me.’

(F581)

In another poem, she writes:

God is indeed a Jealous God –
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play.

(F1751)

One need not read these poems as examples of the speaker’s literal exasperation with God’s antagonism or indifference (“jealous God” is playfully, too, a reference to the book of Exodus, referring to the incident of the golden calf). Irreverence served Dickinson as a mode of both innovation and intimacy with spiritual subjects. Although she loved to read the Bible and loved to incorporate its language, with little modification, into her own writing, in a letter to Thomas Higginson, Dickinson humorously lists the book of Revelations as one of the delightful contemporary novels she is reading (L261). In a famous poem, she further explains, “The Bible in an Antique Volume—Written By Faded Men.” And then she proceeds to marquis key players in the story, like a cast list in an exciting drama: “Satan – the Brigadier,” “Judas – the Great Defaulter,” “David – the Troubadour.” Her poem announces the need for a new producer of these stories. They should be exciting for people, not dull or critical, she seems to say: the poem closes, “Orpheu’s Sermon captivated –/ It did not condemn” (F1577). Dickinson teasingly opts for a reinvigoration of these stories. As a final player in her story, Orpheus, God of poetry and song, can bring that needed spark to these stories. In other words, poetry can be,
perhaps she would even say *should be*, spiritually instructive—insofar as poetry bring life to the story of man’s journey to God.

Shia Wolosky suggests that a similar religious innovation occurs on a linguistic level in Dickinson’s poetry: “In a persistent mystical paradox, negating language serves as ultimate assertion,” adding, “for a poet, a hierarchy which places silence over language is severely compromising.” 57 In lieu of the word “compromising,” we might say, it is at least playfully unexpected or even incongruously humorous. Poetic language was Dickinson’s way of dancing along the boundaries of the unsayable.

Both Dickinson’s spiritual profundity and her humor convey a “personality” to readers, one that they are often drawn to and, as Wolosky suggested, one with whom they feel intimate. Adrienne Rich speaks to this problem in the following way: “More than any other poet, Emily Dickinson seemed to tell me that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological, was inseparable from the universal, that there was a range for psychological poetry beyond mere self-expression.” 58 Rich articulates the very paradigm we have been teasing out over the course of this chapter: smallness and vastness,

insignificance and significance are fully connected. Yet Rich does not continue to the 
next step; i.e., Dickinson’s poetry not only links the personal and the universal, the small 
and the vast, but it also celebrates how the personal is the smallest, most expendable level 
of all.

In fact, Dickinson’s inner life is personal in the same way that Jonathan 
Edwards’s “Personal Narrative” is the harrowing, often passionate story of his inner life, 
et at the same time, it is has broader resonances.\(^59\) Self-focus was Dickinson’s portal to a 
broader focus. For example, note the way she employed the word “alone.” As we saw in 
the previous chapter, in her poem, “Again, his voice is at the door,” Dickinson writes 
rapturously of being *al-one*. Of course at this point in the poem she is in the company of 
both her divine suitor and a coterie of angels.\(^60\) Emerson’s essay “Nature” begins in 
distinguishing solitude from alone-ness:

> To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber 
as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though 
nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the 
stars. . . . One might think the atmosphere was made transparent by 
design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of 
the sublime.\(^61\)

\(^{59}\) Wolosky makes a strong case that Edwards was a direct spiritual influence as well as a cultural 
fluence on Dickinson. Moreover, she clearly maps out how Edwards, Emerson, and Dickinson 
are all part of the same lineage; she calls this a tradition of “theo-linguistic thought,” noting, 
“Edwards asserted the need to experience the ideas themselves, rather than mere words, which 
remain inadequate substitutes. But he also recognized, and masterfully exploited, the role of 
words as rhetorical tools in arousing the affections” 27-32.

\(^{60}\) See Mary Jo Salter on Dickinson’s puns. (This poem was mentioned in the first draft of 
Chapter 3.)

\(^{61}\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: 
For Emerson, in order to see “all” with the transparent eyeball one has to become nothing: “All mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”\(^6^2\) Both Emerson and Dickinson explore how being *nothing* does not mean being lonely, solitary, or autonomous; it implies, rather, a communion with everything. This is why Dickinson can proudly exclaim in a famous poem, “I’m Nobody! Who are You?” Rather, Dickinson’s seclusion provided space for her to be alone, to withdraw her public self, to become *nothing* in the public sphere.

In her *New Republic* essay that discusses the tendency of Dickinson and other poets of her rank to use themselves as platforms from which to transcend themselves, the poet and Dickinson scholar Mary Jo Salter writes frankly:

> Is there a mature adult who honestly believes that he or she comes first? Even more to the point, has there ever been a mature, great poet of any stripe who did not seek access to something greater than him- or herself? And what if our desire *is* God? If that form of desire is to be disallowed, then the achievement of all sorts of women writers who put themselves second after God—writers from the twelfth-century Heloise to the twentieth-century Flannery O'Connor—dissolves into nothingness.\(^6^3\)

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 12. This passage is also quoted in Farr’s *Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, 30.

Salter quotes T.S. Eliot’s famous precept that the mature poet’s mind is a refined mechanism for receiving information, one that eventually supplants the personality and the emotions. Eliot adds, “And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.” 64 Eliot is recommending something that most poets already want for themselves—the escape or freedom from the personality, lest it interfere with the art. Although she seems to have lived this proposition as a reality, Dickinson’s life and work present a puzzling exception to Eliot’s theory. Problematic from a New Critical point of view, many of Dickinson’s poems are dedicated to this transcendence of the personality, but she uses herself as the subject of her poems.

Although it is rarely done, it is possible to read Emily Dickinson’s entire corpus of poetry as an epic story of personal transformation from “somebody” to this grand personage, nobody. In this sense, we would be reading her work as Louis Martz reads Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw, as a process of meditation in stages. Like Donne’s Holy Sonnets, there is an inferred sequence over time in Dickinson’s poetry, and the speaker’s relationship to herself gradually changes. There are many characters in this sequential story. Returning the focus to her divinized insect characters, in particular the bee, the butterfly, and the fly, we see that sometimes these insect personae stand in for Dickinson’s speaker, sometimes they are listeners, and sometimes they are merely subjects. In her poem about keeping “the Sabbath” at home, Dickinson continues,

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comparing herself to a winged creature, like a bee or a butterfly: “Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –/ I, just wear my wings.” The importance of wings, in particular insect wings, also appears in her letters. For example, in a short note to her friend Samuel Bowles, explaining, “Dawn and Dew my Bearers be,” she signs her name “Butterfly” (L1013).65

In selecting subjects partly for their smallness, Dickinson packed piercing spiritual and philosophical truths within the down blanket of humor and child-like play. Couched in apparent silliness, many of her bee poems reach for an independent vision of God. Virgil Nemoianu puts it this way: “The chaotic playfulness of laughter may create a medium in and through which hazy outlines of a superior order can be glimpsed.” He continues, “Play is perhaps the one utopian and much-yearned-for site where complete freedom and complete order can ecstatically embrace and triumphantly rest in at the same time.”66

In his essay, “The Comic,” Ralph Waldo Emerson defines humor as an effort to create wholeness out of “halfness,” unity out of duality. Emerson’s “comic” is not the achievement of wholeness; it is a liminal point between halfness and something beyond humor. Of the humorist’s delight in small, seemingly insignificant creatures, he writes:

The perpetual game of humor is to look with considerate goodnature at every object in existence, aloof as a man might look

65 In Gardens, Judith Farr cites this letter in her section on the butterfly, 145.
66 Nemoianu, 15.
at a mouse, comparing it with the external Whole; enjoying the figure which each self-satisfied particular creature cuts in the unrespecting All, and dismissing it with a benison. Separate any object, as a particular bodily man, a horse, a turnip, a flour-barrel, an umbrella, from the connection of things, and contemplate it alone, standing there in absolute nature, it becomes at once comic; no useful, no respectable qualities can rescue it from the ludicrous.67

Emerson’s schema is the broadest way to understand the humor in minute entities. In other words, there is nothing “wrong” in creating these “ludicrous” pictures. Rather, through a focus on and a delight in nature’s smallest creatures, Dickinson exposes them to endearing ridiculousness and then reconnects them to the broader unity Emerson has in mind. The tension of their apparent separateness from the whole is lightened through humor.

As paired topoi, humor and spirituality form a point of intersection where Dickinson’s seemingly antithetical perspectives on life can converge and harmonize. This is not quite paradox, since, for Dickinson, the opposition is nearly dissolved. Paradox, what Dickinson calls in another poem, “internal difference” is “where the meanings are” (F320). In other words, “meaning” lies in the tension of opposition, the poem’s incongruous action or central juxtaposition of vast and small themes.

Chapter 5
Poet-Riddler and Fool: Sensible Madness in the Humorous Poem

Lear
When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?

Fool
I have used it, nuncle, e’er since thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers…
[Sings] Then they for joy did weep
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep,
And go the fools among.¹
(I, iv, 166-169)

I. The Poet as Fool

Poetry is the fool’s language. Generally, fools do not speak in complete, linear sentences; they speak in riddles. As we examine further whether poetic humor is germane to all poetry, universally, or whether it is only present in certain kinds of poetry, the fool’s role in literature may provide helpful exempla. Not all poetic speakers are fools, but all fools, in some way or other, are poetic speakers—at least insofar as they are riddlers. We will look at this issue closely through several critical and philosophical lenses, and through Dickinson’s poet-fool speakers and their riddling wordplay. But, first of all, we will define the fool archetype through the example of one of the most poetic fools in literature, the fool in King Lear.

The remarkable thing about the fool in King Lear is not his ability to make us laugh—although he jokes often, his riddling is not immediately funny per se. Rather, it is the fact that he speaks his mind to Lear. Yet, unlike Kent and Cordelia who are banished

for speaking frankly, Lear keeps the fool near. What is it about the fool and the fool’s poetry that Lear finds not threatening, but entertaining, even sustaining? The lines quoted above give us a clue. The fool’s sorrowful singing is presented as the opposite of joyful weeping. Goneril and Regan’s *weeping for joy* drives the tragedy forward. By contrast, the fool’s empathetic sorrow causes him to sing and to shift from using prose to using poetry, as demonstrated in the opening quotation. Singing from a place of sorrow is, from the fool’s perspective, more comic than tragic, since it is the opposite of weeping. Thus, the fool’s song (his poetry) is essentially comic. When difficult truths are presented in the form of poetry, the listener (in this case Lear) can tolerate them—he can even enjoy them.

Although we might think of the fool as a recurring character in many Shakespeare plays, there are actually just a few Shakespearean fools. In *Hamlet*, the fool is dead, and perhaps we are to infer from this that the society’s moral conscience has died with him: Hamlet’s own fool-like streak is perhaps his lone—if sometimes fleeting—source of moral courage.¹ Many Shakespearean comedies contain fool-like characters; yet, although their speeches are often rich with riddles, these characters veer more towards the ridiculous. The wisest, saddest, and most philosophically challenging of Shakespeare’s fools is the character named “fool” in *King Lear*.

Lear’s fool enters the play as though in a dream. Lear calls for him four times before he appears (I, iv, 43-75), he becomes Lear’s onstage companion for just two acts, and then he vanishes inexplicably in Act III—or else, he simply has no more lines (the Quarto and the Folio editions record his exit differently). Lear mentions him for the last time moments before his own

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¹ Well-known theories of fool personae in literature include Bakhtin’s descriptions of the medieval fool in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin’s fool or clown is also a moral arbiter of his society: “The medieval clown was...the herald of...truth” (93); and the fool in Propp’s Russian folktales is he who possesses “moral virtues” (87).
heart cracks—“And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life” (V, iii, 304). When present on stage, the fool’s every word is designed to scold, baffle, or amuse Lear.

This fool’s poetry is humorous in the sense that it always turns on an incongruity or an inversion, most prevalently, the paradigm of everything and nothing. The fool’s rhetoric of “nothing” is a popular opening for philosophical inquiry in this play perhaps because of its pervasiveness. The fool’s “nothing,” reprised from Cordelia’s “Nothing, my lord” in Act I, is both negative in the sense that it indicates destitution, positive in the sense that it implies renovation, lewd in the sense, as many editors surmise, that it has sexual undertones, and redolent of many theological traditions in which the experience of nothingness is a prelude to transcendence. The fool checks Lear with the following “nothing” riddles, all in one scene: “Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?”; “Thou has pared thy wit o’both sides and left nothing i’the middle”; “Thou art an O without a figure”; “I am better than thou art now. I am a fool, thou art nothing” (I, iv, 128-185). “Nothing” is also a mantra of fools in general. The full-fledged fool has no binding ties to society, no possessions, no ambitions, and, sometimes, no recourse to conventional wisdom. He has nothing.

The fool’s attachment to nothing is also a source of his humor. As riddler, one of the fool’s roles is to exploit poetry’s comic potential, no matter how grave the subject matter. The fool is in a good position to do this because he is in but not of society. He has nothing to lose. Lear’s loss of sanity further connects him to the fool. As Lear’s own mind goes, he latches onto the fool’s company, tolerating even direct insults. Lear almost never reacts negatively to the fool’s chiding and prodding. As already noted, when Kent speaks up, he is banished. When

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2 Some critics have speculated that Lear is speaking about Cordelia in this line, or that he is thinking of both Cordelia and the fool simultaneously; see Foakes’s note on page 390.
Cordelia refuses to speak, she is disowned. But the fool both speaks frankly and keeps silence with impunity. Perhaps the fool transcends punishment (at least, from Lear) because, as mentioned, he already has nothing to lose. Or perhaps it is his mode of speaking in poetic riddles that allows him to say whatever he wants.

The “fool” persona is also a philosophically, spiritually, and socially unconventional force in a poem. Through a fool’s benevolent detachedness, humor results, transforming gravity into levity. Thus, when we are discussing the riddler, we will be concerned with how a fool-like disposition expresses itself in language. The riddler’s wordplay has been a concern of this dissertation all along in that the fool’s effect on language has been an implied theme in each chapter. Fools in literature are usually experts in two things: wisdom (under the mask of folly) and wordplay. Towards the end of this chapter, we will explore, through Emily Dickinson’s wordplay, how both elements—wisdom as folly and wordplay—are intrinsic to humorous poetry. All along we have been speaking about the elevating, even self-ameliorating functions of humorous poetry. A discussion of the fool helps to bring the truth-revealing elements of poetic humor into relief, since the fool’s opaque, riddling humor often signals his transcendence. Dickinson’s poetry epitomizes a special kind of oblique and elliptical verbal play. Humor resolves and clarifies the meaning in these difficult poems by relieving the tension of bafflement. Humor succeeds where mind fails; the mind, in a baffled state, cannot always grasp the riddle’s answer.
II. The Fool as Comic Being

Pour bien lire, il suffit de posséder la partie intellectuelle de l'art du comédien, mais pour bien jouer, il faut être comédien de toute son âme et dans toute sa personne. Ainsi la création poétique exige un certain oubli de soi.

To read well, it is enough to possess the intellectual part of the comedian's art, but to play well, one must be a comedian with all one's soul and in every part of one's self. Thus, poetic creation demands a certain forgetfulness of self.  

What is the connection between a comic being, such as a fool, and comic modes of language, such as riddles? Specifically, why is poetic humor the fool’s chosen mode of expression? What can be achieved in poetic humor that cannot be achieved in other forms of humor? Henri Bergson’s description of the being that immerses his entire soul and every part of himself into humor is similar to the fool-like being. Bergson’s turn-of-the-century essay on laughter articulates a modern, post-Aristotelian concern with the social-competitiveness of many forms of laughter, i.e., the more the mechanical age takes over, the more we laugh, cruelly, at the gracelessness of fellow man. As Bergson puts it, “We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing.” At the very end of the essay, however, Bergson’s passages on poetic uses of language suggest that another, more ascendant kind of humor also exists. Consider the following eloquent commentary:

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3 Bergson, Le rire, 80. The translations from this edition of Bergson’s essay are my own.
There are other, subtler methods in use, among poets for instance, which perhaps unconsciously lead to the same end. By a certain arrangement of rhythm, rhyme and assonance, it is possible to lull the imagination, to rock it to and fro between like and like with a regular see-saw motion, and thus prepare it submissively to accept the vision suggested.  

In this passage, Bergson cites *ambiguous* language as a cause of laughter. He writes, “A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.” Although bitterness still underlies Bergson’s overall discussion of laughter, with respect to this second feature of his analysis, he hints at an ecstatic quality to laughter, what he calls, “special madness that is peculiar to dreams.” In other words, where cognitive logic breaks down, there might still be a non-rational logic to language.

Since the fool, generally speaking, transcends a conventional social order, we may look to Bergson’s claims about the transcendent properties of verbal humor to understand our fool better. Reinhold Niebuhr has said, “The sense of humo[r] grows…with the capacity of self-transcendence.” Of course, transcendent humor comprises a very small portion of Bergson’s study. Bergson begins his famous essay on laughter with a discussion of the body, and most of his study, *Le rire*, is thereafter concerned with physical humor—most humor comes from the interference of gross matter with natural human grace. In Bergson’s assessment, the innate gracefulness of the human spirit trips over the physical rigidity of the world, and this clash

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5 Ibid., 32.
6 Ibid., 48.
7 Bergson, 90.
between the supple spirit and its recalcitrant material surroundings produces laughter. Midway through his book, however, when he begins to discuss language, his argument shifts.

The shift is noteworthy. In order to describe the humor produced by or on account of words, Bergson returns to a discussion of the soul. Similar to William Empson’s theory, explored in Chapter 2, that poetic actions are more interesting than overall meanings in a poem, Bergson stresses that language itself—its structure, syntax, and placement of individual words—is the source of this more benevolent form of humor.

In this way, Bergson explains the means by which a riddler creates humor. In the quotation introducing this section, Bergson had described the wholly comic human being as an elevated personality, one who exists outside of himself. This person is then the true master of Bergson’s later discussion of word-based humor. Here is our bridge between Bergson’s description of the riddler’s verbal craft and his contention that language-based humor is a matter of the soul. It is also our bridge between the riddler-poet and the fool. Many types of humor encourage competitiveness and Schadenfreude. Bergson shows, however, that poetic humor can be a more harmonious, more spiritually helpful kind of humor.
III. The Fool as Riddler

Sometimes fools are laughed at, sometimes they tell jokes about others, and sometimes both. In a few cases, the fool is the moral conscience of a society, even as he resides on the fringes of that society. In those instances, when the fool becomes riddler, his riddles expose the true folly of those around him. In other words, the fool embodies inverted reality—the fool, who seems wayward and mad, is in fact most sane. The fool’s riddles are his means of conveying his understanding of the world, however upside-down that understanding may seem to others. For example, one is reminded of the canonized Dickinson poem “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” in which her speaker seems to recommend riddling and circuitous methods of truth-telling:

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

(F1263)

As “slant” ways of speaking, some riddles succeed in conveying mind-blowing truths through their circuitry and gradualism, to use Dickinson’s words. Circuitry and gradualism are also structural mechanisms of humor. Mark Twain outlines the following criteria for American humor: “Slurring of the point”; “Dropping of a studied remark”; the
pause; wandering around in absurdities and incongruities. Each of these techniques is
designed to create the impression of lack of technique. Twain’s formula for humor
requires that delivery appear haphazard, completely natural, and utterly spontaneous,
even though it has been meticulously planned. What impresses Twain about this method
is the speaker’s artful (but apparently artless) circuitry. Twain announces his discovery in
grand terms: “To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and
sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the
basis of American art.” He notes earlier, “This is art—fine and beautiful, and only a
master can compass it; but a machine could tell the other story.”

Many poetic riddles work in this manner. Like Twain’s storyteller, the riddler seems to be
a little off track, but he is actually in complete control of his direction. Riddles invite readers to
solve a carefully structured mystery. Sometimes, too, they are organized as a series of
complementary inversions. Consider, for instance, a riddle-filled speech from the fool in King
Lear:

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9 Mark Twain, How to Tell a Story and Other Essays (Hartford, CT: The American Publishing
Company, 1901),

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10 Ibid.
Fool
This is a brave night to cool a courtezan. I'll speak a prophecy ere I go:
  When priests are more in word than matter;
  When brewers mar their malt with water;
  When nobles are their tailors' tutors;
  No heretics burn'd but wenches' suitors;
  When every case in law is right;
  No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
  When slanders do not live in tongues;
  Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
  When usurers tell their gold i' the field;
  And bawds and whores do churches build;
  Then shall the realm of Albion
  Come to great confusion:
  Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
  That going shall be used with feet.
This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time.

(III, ii, 79-96)

The fool’s list of inversions—some seemingly positive, others seemingly negative—is presented in riddle form. Through the genre of the riddle, Lear’s fool connects sacred and profane themes.

This is crystallized in his often repeated self-insult about foolery: “Here’s grace and a codpiece—that’s a wise man and a fool” (III, ii, 40-41.) Here, the fool does not offer either grace or a codpiece; he offers both. He embodies both elevated behaviors and earthy ones. In his divestment of any social or moral convention, Lear’s fool is both sage and buffoon.
In his writings on the “Holy Fool,” Hans Urs Von Balthasar describes a very high yet very low figure. At one point he defines folly as “both the highest level of grace and the lowest level of animality.”

Here is his picture of the “real fool”:

The classical hero without his gods may still be ‘beautiful,’ but he is no longer glorious and soon seems boring. But there is a gleam of unconscious, unintended sanctity about the real fool. He is unprotected man, essentially transcendent, open to what is above him. In the post-Christian era ‘classical man’ in his beauty is always somewhat melancholy. The real fool never is. Since he is never quite ‘in his right mind,’ never quite ‘all there,’ he lacks the ponderousness that would tie him down to earth. He stands nearest to the saint, often nearer than the morally successful man preoccupied with his perfection. The Russians knew that the fool belongs to God, has his own guardian angel, and is worthy of veneration. And yet the fool is not the saint. He is not in any danger from purism or exclusiveness.

Von Balthasar’s real fool resembles Bergson’s description of the figure that is open to comedy with his entire being. Both figures “forget” themselves, and become empty cups for the experience of something transcendent. Von Balthasar’s point that “he is never quite ‘in his right mind’” tells us something about Lear and his fool’s mutual sympathy. As Lear’s own sanity goes, he seeks out the fool, whose whole mode of experience subverts conventional notions of sanity. Yet the fool is not necessarily a sinister companion to the insane. As someone who is “never [melancholy],” Von Balthasar ascribes a wholly comic, giddy energy to the fool. The fool is not weighed down by self-focused sadness.

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12 Von Balthasar, 143.
As embodied levity, the fool is in position to float above everyday reason and sanity. He is also in the perfect extra-societal position to become a riddler-poet. Von Balthasar provides the example of the Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi whose “ecstatic leap beyond reason gave birth to poetic inspiration.” What do poetry and “leap[s] beyond reason” have in common? As one example, Lear’s fool’s riddle-filled speech describes the fundamental topsy-turvy-ness of the world. From the fool’s perspective, conventional reality is upside down. Just as the chained beings in Plato’s allegory of the cave in The Republic view their reality from an illusory, backward position, struggling to turn around and look directly at the light, Dickinson’s lightning truth is “too bright for our infirm delight” and must “dazzle gradually.” For Von Balthasar the unconventional position of the fool is supra-mental: “Folly is also everything that lies above the mind.” He explains that, in cases like Don Quixote, for example, buffoonery is merely a surface layer of self. Underneath is a sturdier, transcendent mode of reason, “the interior supernatural rationality” of the fool.

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13 Ibid., 146.
14 Ibid., 166.
15 Ibid., 177.
IV. Divinest Sense

The fool’s love of inversions stems from a confidence in his own deeper sanity: in conjuring up a flipped reality, he conjures up a truer one. Von Balthasar frames the issue this way:

One can even ask oneself ‘which is the madder, the man who’s mad because he can’t help it, or the man who’s mad by choice.’ . . . [the fool's] reason is so foolish, and yet his foolishness is so sensible.¹⁶

Dickinson’s poem “Much Madness is divinest Sense” expresses this very paradox. Like the fool, Dickinson’s speaker lectures proudly from a state of social self-exile:

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
‘Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you’re straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –

(F620)

Dickinson’s speaker may as well be describing a Socrates—someone whose apparent madness is in fact the very proof of his “divinest Sense.” Her poem is also a cautionary maxim for a reader. Playing on the word “demur,” the speaker sends a two-sided message: If you protest, then you’ll be handled with a chain; and/or, if you hesitate, then

¹⁶ Ibid.
you'll be handled with a chain. As Lear’s fool rhapsodized, the topsy-turvy-ness of the world traps us at every turn: if you engage, you will be persecuted, and if you fail to engage, you will be persecuted. The word “demur” also connotes, through its Old French and Latin roots, maturity or ripeness. Thus, those who are seemingly mad are, from another point of view, in fact most mature. To handle something with a chain conjures the image of a slave with a chain about the neck. It also conjures the martyr’s noose. A third possible sense—possible insofar as the poem invites us to invert appearances and realities—is that the chain is a sign of honor or high priesthood, like the chain that the Pharaoh gifts Joseph in Genesis 41:42. To be handled with a chain could, then, mean both to persecute and to mark someone with a special divine sense.

The tone of “Much Madness” is serious and cautionary as well as light and detached. Dickinson’s inverted principle of “Much Madness” reappears in many theories of humor. For example, Umberto Eco argues that humor is fundamentally transgressive. More generally, the whole genre of comedy is transgressive in the sense that it is “outside” of society; i.e., it frequently moves to a remoter setting. In Northrop Frye’s “Mythos of Spring,” comedy is “a formula” through which one type of society, usually an austere society, transforms into another type of society, usually a pastoral one. Frye’s formula reveals structural parallels between what we have said about humor so far and the ordering of events in a comedy. More broadly, renouncing society in favor of a remoter, more innocent lifestyle also suggests a structural similarity between linguistic incongruities and societal transformations. For example, Frye argues that comic endings

must come with what he calls a “twist in the plot,” just as riddles surprise the reader’s expectations. Frye continues, “Humor is intimately connected with the theme of the absurd or irrational law that the action of comedy moves toward breaking…. Fundamentally, [it is] a movement from illusion to reality.”

The illusion-reality dichotomy is also central to Dickinson’s “Much Madness is divinest Sense.” Furthermore, this theme resembles an element of Von Balthasar’s thesis, i.e., the pivot from conventional sanity to truer sanity is a fundamentally spiritual one. Frye likens his “fifth phase of comedy” to a deepening of religious principles. He writes that in comedy the “redeemed society” is “an order which takes an increasingly religious cast and seems to be drawing away from the human experience altogether.” This pastoral retreat occurs for the fool on an individual basis, too. Just as Frye’s study of comedies charts a retreat from the city into the wilderness, the Fool retreats from conventional reason into unbridled folly. Von Balthasar describes this as mental ascendance: “the ecstatic flight of spirit from body, of mind from the world up to God.” As demonstrated in Von Balthasar’s literary illustrations, it is not that the mind is simply supplanted by folly; folly appears to replace the mind with a higher form of knowing, i.e., a divinest sense.

19 Ibid., 147.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 162.
22 Von Balthasar, 168.
**Sense**

In “Much Madness” Dickinson essentially describes a fool. Although we might infer, simply from the way that it sounds, that “divinest Sense” is something wonderful and wise, our understanding of the fool-like persona would be helped by a fuller understanding of what *divinest sense* means.

We will begin with the word *sense*. In Dickinson’s poem, “divinest sense” is granted to an outsider, to one among a minority. Sense is one of many multifaceted words in this short poem. Other words like demur (*to hesitate, to cow, or to protest*) and assent (*to consent or to ascend*) layer the poem with suggestive ambiguities, as each word can be drilled for additional meanings. Thus, both the subject matter and word choices in this poem contain indirect statements about philosophical humor: the inverse of what seems is. Hamlet’s famous retort to Gertrude’s question about why he mourns so long for his father’s death plays on this difference between seeming and being. Gertrude advises her son, “Thou know’st ‘tis common, all that lives must die,/ Passing through nature to eternity.” When Hamlet replies, “Ay, madam, it is common,” Gertrude then asks, “Why seems it so particular with thee?” Hamlet replies, “‘Seems,’ madam? Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’” (I, ii, 75-6).

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23 In “The Emily Dickinson Lexicon,” an on-line version of Noah Webster’s Dictionary, the dictionary Dickinson was known to have consulted, with ten definitions of the word “sense,” it appears to have had as many facets of meaning in the Nineteenth Century as it does today: [http://edl.byu.edu/webster/s/87](http://edl.byu.edu/webster/s/87) (accessed Winter 2013).

24 In “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought” John Morreall argues that humor and philosophy achieve the same thing. He writes, “Both humor and philosophy foster imagination and mental flexibility. The best humor gets us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways, and so does the best philosophy,” 257.

In “Much Madness” the speaker’s confidence in a *divinest sense* allows her to avoid a Hamlet-type melancholy, just as Von Balthasar surmised that the fool’s giddy self-forgetfulness allowed him to skip beyond melancholy. Dickinson’s speaker does not bemoan misunderstanding; rather, she explains that alienation and apparent insanity sometimes come with *divinest sense*. Her matter-of-factness contributes to the poem’s detached humor. Her tone is that of offering advice about human realities that are as elemental as the weather. Yet the word *sense* has a terse, penetrating sound. As a word that appears to mean real insight, its placement in the poem suggests that it deserves animated consideration.

“Sense” is an important key word in much of Dickinson’s poetry. There seems to be a joke built into its meaning. On the one hand, it connotes practicality or good judgment in everyday settings, as in *common sense*. On the other hand, one of its Latin roots, meaning wisdom, and its proximity to words like “divinest” show that Dickinson’s *sense* refers to deeper levels of understanding. In his book *The Structure of Complex Words*, William Empson devotes a long chapter to the word *sense* in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. He captures the paradox of the word with the following summation: “Sense appears to be the opposite of soul, and the ‘mystery’ is that they can be connected at all [Empson’s emphasis].”

> Sense is a key word in Dickinson’s poetry probably because of its paradoxical connotation. It means both mundane, helpful, logical reasoning and transcendent knowing.

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26 William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, 293.
I take the term “key word” from C.S. Lewis’s book by that title, in which yet another whole chapter is devoted to the word *sense*. Lewis aims to bridge the dichotomy falsely separating the “introspective” meaning of *sense* from the “aesthesis” meaning.\(^{27}\)

Beginning with the root *sentire*, Lewis’s etymological study keeps returning to a basic definition of *sense* as “to know at firsthand.”\(^{28}\) Or, when he discusses common sense, *sense* comes to mean judgment; when he comments on *sensibilis*, sense becomes “able to feel, able to be aware.”\(^{29}\) Lewis concludes that the linguistic evolution of *sense* helpfully bridged its “introspective” meaning and its “aesthesis” meaning. In other words, to be *sensible* now means both having the wisdom of good sense—of a certain level of awareness—and having the basic physical awareness of touch, sound, taste, sight, and smell.

Lewis’s culminating view unwittingly supports the definition of *sense* in many Dickinson poems. For Dickinson, *sense* often refers to both physical and internal (mental or spiritual) awareness. Consider the poem “I felt a funeral in my brain”:


\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 156-157.
I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –

(F340)

Like many of the “death” poems analyzed in Chapter 1, “I felt a funeral in my brain” derives its humor from the odd images evoked: mourners treading across a brain, mourners seated inside a brain with an accompanying drum service, mourners, in boots of lead, creaking across a soul. The brain, the mind, and knowing are beaten down in this poem, but sense breaks through. Sense seems to refer to an internal awareness, yet it is described as a physical occurrence. In order for sense to break through, the brain, the mind, and knowing must undergo the maddening thump of a funeral procession. Sense is ushered in at the expense of apparent sanity.
Acquiring *sense* is only one of the occurrences in this poem, one that is established in the first stanza. Afterwards, the poetic speaker both ascends and then descends to other levels. *Sense* is the beginning point. After *sense breaks through*, the mind goes numb, the soul is stomped upon, sound is overpowering, the speaker merges with the vastness and with silence, reason is dislodged, and the speaker comes down to earth, hitting multiple inter-levels as she descends. The culmination is that she *finishes knowing*, which has a double meaning: she both attains full knowledge (*finishes* as in completes her knowledge), and she ceases to know anything.

In another poem (probably written in 1865), a poem that seems to be a continuation of these themes, Dickinson intensifies the physical metaphor, and derives oblique humor from the chilling, almost parodied Gothic effect:
I've dropped my Brain – My Soul is numb –
The Veins that used to run
Stop palsied – ‘tis Paralysis
Done perfecter in stone –

Vitality is Carved and cool –
My nerve in marble lies –
A Breathing Woman
Yesterday – endowed with Paradise.

Not dumb – I had a sort that moved –
A Sense that smote and stirred –
Instincts for a Dance – a caper part –
An Aptitude for Bird –

Who wrought Carrera in me
And chiseled all my tune
Were it a witchcraft – were it Death –
I've still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere – Motion – Breath –
Though Centuries beyond,
And every limit a Decade –
I'll shiver satisfied.

(F1088)

A more incendiary form of “sense,” the inciting word is described here as “a Sense that smote and stirred,” (one has the indirect impression of a volcano, which was a common image and metaphor in Dickinson’s poetry). One of many poems that plays on the speaker’s apparent physical death, here the speaker links the word “sense” both to the part of her that dies and to the part that is enlivened, elevated, that has “Instincts for a Dance – the caper part/ And Aptitude for Bird.” Dickinson’s choice of the word “caper” underscores both the gleefulness of this leap into sense as well as the playful mischief of what sense implies.
In “I felt a funeral in my brain,” the breakthrough of Sense with a capital “S” triggers both an ascent and a descent, both the higher awareness implied in *divinest sense* and a worldly life lived outside of conventional reason implied in “Madness.” In “I’ve dropped my brain,” the speaker is more resigned, having fully yielded her mental faculties. *Sense* with a capital “s” deadens, but it also enlivens. *Sense smotes* and *stirs* but inevitably leads her to her final word, “satisfied.” Elsewhere, Dickinson uses the word *sense* to describe poetry. In a poem mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Dickinson writes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “This was a Poet —/ It is That/ Distills amazing sense/ From Ordinary Meanings” (F446). Here, *sense* is not capitalized; it is an object here and not a process. *Amazing sense* is merely the product of the poet’s brew.

*Divinest*

In each of these poems, *sense* bears some connection to truth. The accompaniment of the word *divine* implies a loftier connotation of sense, as in the *uncommon sense* of the soul. Moreover, the word *divine*, in one of its verb meanings, implies searching, investigating, discovering, which are also activities associated with riddles. Just as we examined some etymology-derived perspectives on *sense*, the word divine deserves an even more in-depth analysis, since it gives expression to both the seeking quality of a riddle and to a spiritual element in poetic humor.

A philosophical though perhaps indirect forebear of Lewis’s method of drilling deeply into what he calls *key words*, eighteenth-century Italian historical philologist Giambattista Vico’s *The New Science* is interspersed with etymological studies. Vico was a major influence on James Joyce, probably because Vico appreciated the suggestiveness
of language as well as the historical narratives contained within individual words. Vico also inspired Edward Said, perhaps, too, because of his many-layered understanding of the power of language in relation to history. A brief interlude on Vico is relevant here because he establishes a practice of etymological analysis, which sheds light on the method in Dickinson’s word-based riddles.\footnote{Other well-known philological work on Dickinson includes Steven Monte’s “Dickinson’s Searching Philology” in \textit{The Emily Dickinson Journal} 12.2 (Fall 2003) 21-51.} It is especially worth pausing on his elaborate study of the word \textit{divine}.

At the start of a central chapter in his book, Vico explains the root meaning of the word “divine”; at the chapter’s end, he describes etymologies as records of history.\footnote{Giambattista Vico, \textit{The New Science}, Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968) 106.} For Vico, etymologies chart the development of human institutions as well as the history of human thinking and valuing. Vico also states that his science starts at the point when human beings began to think \textit{humanly}.\footnote{Ibid., 100, paragraph 338.} For Vico, thinking humanly began when a more primitive man first called out to God.\footnote{Ibid., 100-102.} Since Vico interweaves a discussion of the development of language with a discussion of man’s first acknowledgment of the supernatural, one wonders what etymologies and awareness of the divine have in common.

The word “divinity,” Vico says, “from \textit{divinari}, to divine, which is to understand what is hidden \textit{from} men—the future—or what is hidden \textit{in} them—their consciousness,” is both the realm of God and the mechanism for understanding history as something that is not determined by man. Divinity is both the hidden element \textit{and} the act of trying to uncover that hidden element.
It is *both* divine providence (what is determined by God) *and* the human acknowledgement of
the divine through divination of the unknown.

It is also worth pausing on the comparison made in this quote. “To divine” is the act of
understanding both what is hidden *from* and what is hidden *in* men. Vico draws a parallel
between the *future* and *man’s consciousness*, since these are both realms beyond man’s knowing.
The flexibility of the etymology of *divinari* allows him to invoke two meanings of hidden. The
first meaning implies what cannot be known because it has not happened yet—what cannot be
known in time (the future). The second meaning implies that there are layers of the self that
cannot be *readily* known (man’s consciousness). Vico stresses a parallel between the *future* and
*man’s consciousness*: they are alike because both are hidden, but both are hidden because both
are rooted in the divine.

In this way, Vico demonstrates that etymologies not only chart an evolution, but they also
retain evidence of their own history. As we have just seen with a word like *divine*, the word’s
etymology both reveals what it *is* (it is hidden) and what it *does* (it tries to find out what is
hidden). As something that is hidden *from* men, the word *divine* implies a force at work beyond
man’s control. As something that is hidden *in* men, the word divine seems to be intimately
connected to what it means to be human. To repeat, the divine is what is hidden; the divine is
also what is revealed through the tool of divination; it both conceals and reveals itself.
Vico’s *divine* is a matter of logic (or science) and equally a matter of religion. Similarly, Lewis and Empson’s *sense* incongruously links basic human sensation and transcendent knowing. Vico introduces the notion of “certain divine proofs,” proofs that “omnipotence affords,” proofs that affirm the progress of human institutions. These “divine proofs” are “confirmed” for man by “logical proofs.” In other words, his science seeks to explain the divine basis of all human institutions in reason-based terms, or through logical proofs, so that men can begin to understand them. The reader, he thinks, will derive a *divine pleasure* from knowing that the logical proofs, confirming the origin and design of human institutions, match up with the divine proofs. For Vico, the reader’s pleasure is *divine* because the reader understands the role of the divine in human affairs and also because the reader has derived pleasure from *divining* or uncovering the role of the divine in manmade things.

Vico seems to rely on this pun on the word *divine* throughout his book, since he actively invites his reader to keep in mind the word’s many root meanings. Elsewhere in the book, Vico spells out the etymologies of words as a way to correct mis-readings of history. In one example, Vico seeks to show that several Greek gods were more virtuous than they are often thought to be. He justifies Eros’s nobility, for example, by showing that his name is connected to the word *heroes*. Later on in that section, Vico connects the swan’s song to the verbs *canere* and *canere*, which he says, “mean[] *divinari*, to foretell.” Here, then, is yet another meaning of what it means to divine: not to uncover what is already there but to announce what is coming—to sing prophetically. Divination is thus also a kind of song, a kind of poetry.

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34 Ibid., 102-103, paragraphs 343-344.
35 Ibid., 103, paragraph 346.
36 Ibid., 172, paragraph 508.
37 Ibid, 173, paragraph 512. In addition, Vico includes many examples of etymological histories in “Book II: Poetic Wisdom.”
V. Dickinson and Riddle

Following Vico’s etymology-based example, just as they embed, code, and hide meaning, riddles can also uncover the layers of meaning within a single word. Historical, semantic, auditory, homophonic, visual, and everyday usage connotations are all possible avenues for a riddle. In her word-based riddles, Dickinson capitalizes on nearly all of these varieties of verbal innuendo. Vico’s approach to philology provides a theoretical framework for mining the layers of meaning in Dickinson’s phrase *divinest sense*. Since *to divine* means, first of all, to inquire and to seek, *divinest sense* is a verbal riddle built to convey the mystery of the soul.

Dickinson is well known for her riddle poems, poems in which she evocatively describes but does not name her subjects. Famous examples include “It sifts from leaden sieves” (her poem about snow), “I like to hear it lap the miles” (her poem about a train), and “A narrow fellow in the grass” (her poem about a snake). Sometimes she includes a riddle-like structure even when the “answer” or subject matter is more abstract. An example of this is “My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun.” In this poem, one has to pick apart her clues not in order to discover her subject, but in order to identify for what the gun and the owner of the gun are metaphors.38

These are examples in which the entire poem is structured like a riddle. However, Dickinson’s playfulness with key words shows her exploitation of riddling meanings in individual words, too. We saw how the word *sense* functions as a key word in several Dickinson poems, and how its paradoxical meaning contains a subtle and incongruous joke, one that pairs

38 This point was extrapolated from Alexander Mosko’s reading of the poem in a “Form and Value in Poetry” seminar, Catholic University, April 2012.
mundane practicality with loftier searching. Dickinson’s method embraces a word’s etymology as well as its sound, texture, and appearance. We can try out her method briefly first on the word *humor*. As a word-sound, humor connotes in its prefix, *hum*, “humanity,” “humiliation,” and “humming”; in its suffix, *mor*, it resembles “death” and “sea” etymologically, and “more” and “mercurial” sonically. Its formal etymology stems from the word “humour,” as in the four humours. *Umor* in Latin means bodily fluid, so the root of the word sea, *mor*, is contained within it. Currently, with its many meanings and significances, the word *humor* seems to have absorbed each of these root meanings and implied connotations.

Consider now Dickinson’s own use of the word *noon*. In *King Lear*, the fool’s last spoken word is *noon*. The word comes in response to Lear’s faltering sense of time. Lear tells him, “We’ll go to supper i’the morning,” and the fool retorts, “And I’ll go to bed at noon” (III, vi, 81-82). R.A. Foakes glosses the line as a proverb meaning, “‘I’ll play the fool, too.’” Yet the word *noon* has additional resonances, especially as it is the last note of the fool’s exit line. In speaking these words, the fool is either mocking Lear or compassionately identifying with him. Either way, his “bedtime” ending comes at the highest point of the sun, the *noon*time. His peak is fullest light.

*Noon* is also a palindrome. Its ending mirrors its beginning—they are the same. As the fullest point of light, noon is a fulfillment of daytime. It seeks to progress no further than itself. Reinhold Niebuhr has described humor as a similarly self-culminating mirror: “Humo[r] is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself.”

Emily Dickinson’s use of the word noon exploits each of

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40 Niebuhr, 140.
these significances. She euphemistically inserts \textit{noon} in the place of other nouns connoting peaks of light, circularity, joy, and fulfillment. Here are just a few brief examples of the verbal riddle that she derives from the word \textit{noon}.

Dickinson sometimes finds as much use in the sounds of words as she does in their literal meanings. In a few poems, her speaker enjoys the implied rhyme of \textit{noon} and \textit{June}, which she uses almost interchangeably. In addition to their rhyming sound, both words refer to a time when the sun is at its strongest and nearest. \textit{Noon}, then, comes to mean the pinnacle or, simply, the presence of light. In “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” Dickinson describes the entombed as “Untouched by Morning –/ And untouched by noon” (F124). Here, \textit{noon} simply means light and the passage of time. In the poem “Before I got my eye put out,” Dickinson’s speaker conveys the ecstasy of a broader vision with the lines, “As much of noon, as I could take—/ Between my finite eyes” (F336). \textit{Noon} again here means the fullest point of light. Dickinson’s employment of the word (about 92 times in her poems and about 50 times in her letters) shows her delight in the round potential of the word to take on, euphemistically, many additional meanings. In a poem mentioned in Chapter 1, “I think to Live –May Be a Bliss,” Dickinson includes \textit{noon} as a word variant for \textit{Midsummer}. Thus, \textit{noon}, \textit{June}, \textit{midsummer}, and the frequent reappearance of the \textit{bee} in her poetry (as discussed in Chapter 4) are all synonyms for the arrival of full sunlight, fullest clarity, and warmth. Just as Vico explored every angle of the word \textit{divine}, and Lewis and Empson considered all the resonances of \textit{sense}, Dickinson enjoys every facet of the word \textit{noon}—how it

\footnote{In her book \textit{Lyric Time}, Sharon Cameron connects Dickinson’s “noon” and “midsummer” to immortality, 1-2.}
sounds, what it rhymes with, what it looks like, as well as what it symbolizes metaphorically.

Dickinson’s mining of individual words suggests a deeper potential for poetic humor than we might initially appreciate when we first scan a poem. Even though, of all the theories of humor, the Incongruity Theory has been most helpful in defining verbal and poetic forms of humor, there is something about playing with words that remains to be articulated. We have seen, for example, that sometimes words are equivocal in meaning, either because of their etymologies—Jorge Luis Borges points out that the etymology of the verb “to tease” is “to wound with a sword”\textsuperscript{42}— or because their meaning evokes two oppositional states. Consider Dickinson’s inventive placements of the word purple in her poetry, a word that one of her influences, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, also employed in suggestive ways. In addition to its spiritual significances, Dickinson’s purple, as a blend of scarlet and navy, combines warmth and coldness, life and death.

Dickinson is also sometimes mischievous in her use of opposition words. In 1862, she wrote to Higginson that publishing her poetry was as far from her mind “as Firmament from Fin.” Yet, in an 1861 poem, “What would I give to see his face,” Dickinson uses the phrase “firmamental seas” (F266). In other words, the firmament and the fishes in the sea were one and the same, in her view, all along; thus, the ambiguity surrounding her publishing ambitions for her poetry remains. Her sly conjoining of opposites also shows that firmament and fin have similar sounds, and that firmament contains fin in letters. As units of language, they are inherently connected.

Dickinson’s letters are infused with a subtle wordplay that is especially evident when one compares her letters to occurrences of riddle-words in her poetry. In another letter to Higginson, Dickinson describes herself as “small like the Wren,” and her eyes “like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves” (L268). Dickinson’s self-portrait contains riddles that lead to further ambiguity about her appearance, such as, for example, the wren simile. In one poem Dickinson compares “a Wren’s Peruke” to something grander and bolder than a Duke’s “bonnet” (“A Mien to Move a Queen,” F254). So, when she solicits Higginson in an earlier letter, “I could not weigh myself—Myself—/My size felt small—to me” (L261), we must be not believe for a moment that she thinks smallness and inferiority have anything in common. But she allows the ambiguity, perhaps because it flatters a reader who might be distracted by her other deceptive “smalllinesses,” such as her femininity and her anonymity. A joke in another poem lectures archly, “The Giant tolerates no Gnat” (F707). Except, of course, it would not have escaped her that gnat and giant are nearly anagrams. Giant does tolerate gnat; the word giant contains the word gnat in letters.

Scholars, especially Mary Jo Salter, David Porter, Cristanne Miller, and Paul Crumbly, have begun to analyze this strain in Dickinson’s verbal playfulness. Others have used her wordplay as a way to understand her riddles. For instance, Anthony Hecht’s 1978 article, “The Riddles of Emily Dickinson,” argues that her “religious seriousness” accounts for her riddles.43 Paul Anderson’s 1966 article in the Georgia Review, “The Metaphysical Mirth of Emily Dickinson,” addresses the meditative aspect of Dickinson’s riddles more directly.44 Anderson and Judith Banzer Farr are among several critics who have linked Dickinson to the meditative

tradition of the metaphysical poets. Anderson uses that foundation to reveal the inherent playfulness of Dickinson’s humorous hyperbole, and to argue that her humor, always “tragicomic,” was in fact more detached in tone than the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets.45 Finally, Dolores Dyer Lucas finds that verbal ambiguity, in addition to wry detachedness, is a main source of Dickinson’s riddling humor: “Some would have that this is, in essence, a measure of her greatness: a conscious and controlled exploitation of ambiguity.”46

The combination of Dickinson’s arch, detached, and broad view of her subjects with the close-lensed, tireless unpacking of the semantic value in individual words positions her speakers as fool-like figures. Through wordplay, her speakers entertain because they are themselves disinterested players. However, as we have seen in these examples from Dickinson, subtlety is key to a successful verbal riddle. The language appears loose, detached, and free, but there is a controlled awareness of its every nook and cranny. As W.H. Auden puts it, “As with the clown, the speaker appears to be the slave of language, but in reality is its master.”47 The fool’s method is soft, gradual humor. Similarly, Dickinson’s riddles slowly reveal their intricate layers. The fool’s poetic humor delivers slow enjoyment rather than an explosion of laughter.

45 Anderson, 77.
VI. The Fool’s Kindness

Von Balthasar has shown that, while the fool often exists in a realm of tragedy and sadness, the content of his expression is always joy.\textsuperscript{48} His poetry seeks to elevate. In the following poem, Dickinson explores the generous element in the fool’s seemingly mad, broadminded view of life:

A little Madness in the Spring
Is Wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown –
Who ponders this tremendous scene –
This whole Experiment of Green –
As if it were his own!

(F1356)

In edited versions of this poem “as if it were his own” is the last line. In a draft version, however, the poet has multiple options that convey a sort of after-thought joke of their own, namely the variant “fair Apocalypse” to replace \textit{sudden legacy}, or, as in Franklin’s edited version, “whole experiment.” The phrase “fair Apocalypse” does not make it into edited collections, but the poet’s inclusion of these words in this draft expands the implications of what it means to be a clown.\textsuperscript{49} In her oxymoronic “fair Apocalypse,” an embrace of the world is the same as an annihilation of the world; i.e., “much madness” is required in order to fully embrace spring. Since the clown revels in the “madness” of the spring, he exemplifies Dickinson’s being of “divinest sense.”

\textsuperscript{48} This is explored in Von Balthasar’s analysis of Wolgram, 163.

\textsuperscript{49} In the \textit{Variorum}, Franklin gives a narrative account of Dickinson’s inclusion of variants over the course of three “versions” of this poem, 1176-1177.
The clown (or fool), whose vocation includes the mastery of humor and play, is especially well equipped to fathom the simultaneity of a disorienting spring after a harsh winter. The clown is equipped to see that what he is observing is as warranted as a legacy, as curious as an experiment, and as explosive as an Apocalypse—all at the same time. In his essay on Lear’s fool, a chapter which compares a king’s regrettable folly to a fool’s happy madness, Empson summarizes the purpose of Shakespeare’s forty-seven mentions of the word “fool” this way: “All throughout the play . . . the idea of renunciation is examined in the light of the complex idea of folly.”

Folly and loss are set in opposition, as it were. Having nothing, the fool observes the beauty of the world “as if it were his own”—as if he had everything. By contrast, Lear feels his material and familial losses acutely, and perhaps never recovers from them.

Nevertheless, the fool’s presence in most tragic settings is the presence of compassion. Despite his occasionally dark tone, Lear’s fool’s poetic formulations make Lear laugh, or else they puzzle Lear. In either scenario, they render some service to Lear. Any utterance from a fool-like figure is therefore an utterance of positive play, designed to beneficially challenge an audience. (Here again, is the example from Von Balthasar: “The all-pervasive quality of Wolfgram’s poem is joy.”

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50 Empson, “Fool in Lear” in Structure of Complex Words, 125.
51 Von Balthasar, 163.
How does the fool’s inherent kindness impact the substance of his poetry, i.e., his riddles? Riddles are the means through which the fool expresses his compassion for humanity. Bergson has stressed that humanness is the inherently comic element; all things human are somehow humorous. The riddle is a communication in language that makes light of human fallibility. In making fallibility lighter, the fool automatically raises it up and forgives its seeming heaviness. But this must happen circuitously, obliquely, lest it seem patronizing or overwhelming; and it must also challenge the receiver in some way. This is the essence of the fool’s kindness. Through verbal play, he lifts sad ideas into the realm of humor.

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52 Bergson, Quadranges Edition, 2.
Conclusion

On Bafflement

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy, don't know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it, puzzles scholars –
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown –
Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
Blushes, if any see –
Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
And asks a Vane, the way –
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
Strong Hallelujahs roll –
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul –

(F373)
I. What is Poetic Humor (Reprised)?

*What is poetic humor?* This was the question with which we began, and we return to it here with at least a sense of its implications. Our inquiry here has been an examination into the more bewildering pleasures of poetry—not the tear-giving pleasure of its tragic or “serious” elements, but the mind-bending, sometimes delayed pleasure of its incongruities and subtle paradoxes. Borrowing the phrase from the Dickinson poem “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” poetic humor *dazzles gradually*; and following Kierkegaard’s theory, one must work at a poem to develop a “consciousness” for its humor. Where most studies of poetry’s power approach it from the perspective of its gravitas, here we have approached it from the suspicion of its intrinsic levity.

In the introduction to this dissertation, we defined humor as a prism of perspectives. Bafflement is another way to characterize this prism. Bafflement also captures the essence of the *humorous turn* in a poem. Like Dickinson’s description in the poem above of a baffled faith that “slips – and laughs, and rallies,” caught in the poem’s turn, one’s faith might be prompted to *slip* in confusion, *laugh* along with the essential humor of this game, or *rally*. In Dickinson’s contemporary Noah Webster’s Dictionary there are several fascinating definitions for *rally*: “To collect; to unite; as things scattered,” and “To treat with good humor and pleasantry, or with slight contempt or satire, according to the nature of the case.”¹ Rallying is

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the regrouping process in the final stage of bafflement, after confusion has scattered understanding. It both unifies perception and, as these definitions support, it is a gesture of good humor. We might also be reminded of Emerson’s notion of humor as a halfway point, a point on a trajectory from separateness to harmony.

In the final section of this study, we reflect on the structure of the humorous turn as well as the apparent paradox of it. Eating ice in the winter is something of a paradox. Yet the streets of St. Petersburg, Russia in February are lined with busy ice cream shops. Humor as the eventual aftermath of pain, death, or tragedy of any kind seems paradoxical to say the least. When we are suffering, we expect tears not laughter; and when we are cold, we expect that we will want something warm to drink not something frozen. As our many examples from literature have illustrated, however, there is sometimes an incongruous turn during human experiences of pleasure and pain. In Plato’s Philebus, Socrates describes comedy as a “mixture of pleasure and pain.”\(^2\) In fact, the humorous turn occurs at the apex of pain. Yet, rather than respond to pain with tears or with expressions of agony, one inexplicably responds with laughter (consider the example of Titus Andronicus who laughs at the nadir point of tragedy). Or, like Dickinson’s speakers, one goes through a series of stages, which lead to eventual detachment—as expressed in the title of her poem “After great pain [emphasis added],” the speaker experiences “First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go” (F372).

\(^1\) “Webster” in The Emily Dickinson Lexicon, edl.byu.edu.  
\(^2\) Plato quoted in Morreall, The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor, 10.
Bafflement is the sequence of effects in a poem containing ambiguity first, humor second, and harmony third. Bafflement encompasses some of the key issues with which we have been dealing all along. As a broader pattern within some humorous poems, bafflement illustrates the changing weather of mood in the poem; yet bafflement also reveals continuity beneath the poem’s shifts in perspective, argument, or tone. So, too, as a complex series of reactions, bafflement ties together pleasure and pain, frustration with one’s failure to understand, and the delighted acceptance of confusion.

Bafflement is thus an experience of both pleasant and temporarily unpleasant sensations. It contains both the discomfort of failure to understand and the relief that comes with the acceptance of ignorance. Here is how Henry James describes (with arch humor) the bafflement of one of his main characters, Olive Chancellor, towards the end of The Bostonians:

> From Olive’s condition during these lamentable weeks there is a certain propriety – a delicacy enjoined by the respect for misfortune – in averting our head. She neither ate nor slept; she could scarcely speak without bursting into tears; she felt so implacably, insidiously baffled.³

Henry James uses the word “baffled” to indicate tragic surprise or confusion. Note, too, the physical side of that distress: Olive Chancellor can neither eat nor sleep. With respect to its physical stress, there is rigorousness implied in the word bafflement; bafflement mystifies, but it also strains and stretches. Citing again Webster’s 1844 dictionary (which Dickinson is well

known to have consulted), *baffle* means, “To make or play the fool with” as well as “Eluding by shifts, and turns, or by stratagem; defeating; confounding. A baffling wind, among seamen, is one that frequently shifts from one point to another.” These definitions convey not only the humor and play associated with Dickinson’s contemporary definitions of the word *baffles*, but also what the word implies about the pacing of emotions, the interruption of logical thoughts, and the force of bewilderment. These definitions support the sense that bafflement is a part of the poem’s structure, containing shifts, juxtapositions, or surprises.

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II. Body and Soul

A ready paradox for the humorous *turn* in poetry is that of body and soul. We will look at several examples of poems in which experiences of physical suffering are transposed onto metaphysical scenarios such that, suddenly, they no longer seem strenuous. Or, conversely, experiences of spiritual transformation are expressed through metaphors of the body such that they seem cartoonish.

Thus, reviewing a few of the varieties of humor that we have encountered in this study, such as this cartoonish humor which imagines physically impossible situations, humor that makes light of physical death, and humor that reverses the pleasure-giving element of tragedy, it is remarkable how much humor in poetry surrounds the body.\(^5\) Consider the following Dickinson poem, which concerns themes from the first chapter on humor and death:

\(^5\) Bakhtin’s theory of the *grotesque body* raises a similar set of issues, only it does so from a socio-political perspective. Here, again, our study is limited to the internal dimensions of the lyric—to colloquy within a single soul.
Do People moulder equally,
They bury, in the Grave?
I do believe a species
As positively live

As I, who testify it
Deny that I – am dead –
And fill my Lungs, for Witness –
From Tanks – above my Head –

I say to you, said Jesus,
That there be standing here –
A sort that shall not taste of Death –
If Jesus was sincere –

I need no further Argue –
The statement of the Lord
Is not a controvertible –
He told me, Death was dead –
(F390)

In this poem, the speaker begins with a question about death; but her question is not
about the fate of the soul after death, it is about the fate of the body. The speaker then
appreciates her own livingness through the organs of her body—in this case, it is her “lungs,”
which derive oxygen from something above the speaker’s “head.” Then, the speaker shifts her
inquiry to theological verifications. Each stanza moves towards a fuller degree of certainty: the
first stanza is a physical question, the second stanza verifies the question with empirical
evidence yet at the same time reaches beyond the “head”; the third stanza quotes Jesus, and
the fourth stanza closes the discussion with evidence, not from what Jesus said proverbially,
but from what he told the speaker directly. The poem moves from physical uncertainty to
metaphysical certainty, from limitation of body to immortality of soul.
This poem typifies Dickinson’s tendency to begin theological inquiries with a humorous examination of the body. We saw in Chapter 4 that nature provided concrete exempla for Dickinson’s spiritual perspectives. Similarly, the body makes tangible the intangible fluctuations of the soul. Thus, rather than begin abstractly or with a sentimental approach to passionate feelings for life, Dickinson begins with the humorous limitations of the body. Indeed, the body-soul paradox is not a paradox at all for Dickinson. Through incongruous, humorous metaphors, she dissolves their essential differences: the experiences of the body record the journey of the soul.

Using strenuous external experience to describe internal change is a device common to many poets, not just Dickinson—although it is especially pervasive in her poetry. Consider the following statement from T.S. Eliot:

Those who object to the ‘artificiality’ of Milton or Dryden sometimes tell us to ‘look into our hearts and write.’ But that is not looking deep enough. . . . One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts.⁶

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Eliot’s anti-sentimentalist joke about the art of poetry is, unwittingly, a more technical version of Dickinson’s stance on poetry. While not often connected in literary histories, Dickinson and Eliot bookend a lineage of what Louis Menand calls “metaphysical” thinking, a half century-long movement that was concentrated around Harvard University and surrounding areas in New England.\(^7\)

In a similarly unsentimental vein, Dickinson rarely writes about hearts, and when she does it is also with unromantic archness. Recall her reference to “the stiff Heart” in “After great pain,” or her poem “The heart is the capital of the mind,” or her poem, “A poor torn heart, a tattered heart,” which Martha Nell Smith has analyzed as a parody of sentimental passages in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*.\(^8\) In addition, she writes of the soul, as we saw above, as though it is a physical part of her body, undermining the Cartesian duality of interiority and exteriority. Recall Dickinson’s definition of poetry, as explained to Thomas Higginson: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way” (L342a)?

Poetry was a physical—even physically transformative—experience for Dickinson. On the one hand, Dickinson’s choice of image is teasingly metaphorical: she emphasizes the power of poetry by incongruously celebrating physically strenuous or seemingly life-crushing experiences. On the other hand, her choice of imagery is not entirely metaphorical—in the sense that its “intention” is to be very concrete, very physical, and not in any way abstract. The

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\(^7\) Curiously, Dickinson goes unmentioned in Menand’s book, even though some of his assessments would seem to apply directly to her poetry.

\(^8\) See Martha Nell Smith, “The Poet as Cartoonist” in *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*. 
extreme nature of these physical conditions when placed in a favorable light is incongruously humorous, too.

Images of physical change—to the point of transfiguration—appear in countless Dickinson poems. The images have a violent force, yet it is precisely the shock of the violence that makes them humorous. Consider the following poem in which the image of the top of one’s head coming off plays a prominent role:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys –
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by Degrees –

Prepares your brittle nature
For the ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so – slow –

Your Breath – has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble cool –
Deals One imperial Thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked soul –

When Winds hold Forests in their Paws –
The Universe is still. (F477)

Nearly every verb in this poem is physical—*fumble, drop, stun, blow, straighten, bubble, deal*, and, of course, *scalp*, a verb to which we will return. Even the musical imagery is percussion-oriented; it is the music of hands on keys and hammers creating degrees of sound—all physical, gently pounding images. Similar to the three stages of bafflement to which we alluded earlier, the implied persona in this poem is *stunned by degrees*, i.e., in stages. The curious trick of the poem’s ending lies in its subtle blending of physical and metaphysical experience. The agent of transformation (He) *fumbles* at something seemingly
intangible—the soul. Yet he also prepares the subject’s “brittle nature”—which could be both body and soul—for “the imperial blow,” scalping not her head, as in Dickinson’s image of effective poetry—“If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry”—he scalps her naked (another physical image) soul. Physical and metaphysical anatomies are conjoined.

In another poem, Dickinson’s metaphor for removing the top of her head is more cartoonish:

If ever the lid gets off my head
And lets the brain away
The fellow will go where he belonged—
Without a hint from me,

And the world— if the world be looking on—
Will see how far from home
It is possible for sense to live
The soul there— all the time.

(F585)

This poem returns us to some of the themes from Chapter 5: the fleeing of “sense,” the mind and the soul as separable elements, and the positive madness that ensues. Comparing herself to a pot, the speaker in “If ever the lid gets off my head” implies that freedom follows when the lid gets off, as though something has reached a boiling point in the pot beneath. Yet, in “He fumbles at your soul,” the mind and the soul are fused into one. The “lid” in this latter poem is the surface layer of the soul. In “He fumbles at your soul,” the “lid’s” removal is not the result of a release of tension, like a pot boiling innocuously; it is the result of a violent scalping. The metaphors in “He fumbles” sit incongruously together: playful music, percussive music, slow music, and violent crescendo. As a ritualized martial gesture that is special to America, along
with everything else that it implies, more than other forms of murder, scalping connotes both
violent opposition and, strangely, a fatal introduction to a new territory. It signals death of
course, but death as a pioneer, an invader, a tribal enemy, or a new settler. In this respect, one
is reminded of the poem opening this chapter in which the speaker is beckoned and baffled
through the loss of all philosophy and sagacity (basically, the loss of one’s head) into another
world, another species.

The top of the head is sometimes invoked in a regal vein through Dickinson’s frequent
use of queen imagery. In those instances a “crown” is mentioned without the allusion to
violence. In her poem about letting go of her childhood, she writes of abandoning her girlhood
name, “They can put it with my Dolls,/ My childhood, and the string of spools,/ I’ve finished
threading – too” (F353). The poem continues:

Called to my Full – The Crescent dropped –
Existence’s whole Arc, filled up,
With one – small Diadem –

My second Rank – too small the first –
Crowned – Crowing on my Father’s breast –
A half unconscious Queen –
But this time – Adequate – Erect,
With Will to choose and to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown –
The speaker crosses the threshold into a new phase of life and is “half-unconscious” during the transition. The mind is partly surrendered. The speaker is both “crowned”—initiated into life—and “crowing” on the threshold of death. Rather than the violent wiping out of mind, mind fades out, but the speaker is more regal for it. Where the “lid” may have come off of this speaker’s head, she replaces it with “just a crown”—not mind, just the majesty of mind.

In her frequent treatments of this particular topic, each of Dickinson’s metaphors is slightly different and, as a result, the poems can have different tones. Yet all of these metaphors compare metaphysical experiences to physical ones. Poet Kay Ryan has casually observed this tendency in Dickinson’s poetry, commenting: “I revere Emily Dickinson’s ability to make abstractions utterly physical…. I mean, abstractions weren’t abstract for her.”

Dickinson’s employment of this trope stands out both for its technical simplicity and for its philosophical complexity. After Dickinson, the modernist poets frequently de-romanticized the body and weakened the physical-metaphysical binary. For instance, the quotation cited from Eliot shows him favoring real, bodily experiences of poetry over sentimental clichés of poetic inspiration. In his own poetry, Eliot has directly explored the physical side of humor. Consider, for example, the prose poem “Hysteria”:

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As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary discovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: “If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden . . .” I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.10

Eliot’s “Hysteria” concerns the physical process of laughter. The poem juxtaposes uncontrollable, hysterical laughter with the decorum of everyday civility, contained in the images of a cheerful tablecloth and the observance of afternoon tea. The poetic speaker concludes that if the physical eruption of laughter “could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected.” The laughter, which has an unknown cause, is threatening to consume the speaker and to shatter conventional life. The speaker attempts to resist the laughter’s infectiousness and focuses instead on its outward strangeness, as manifested in the body.

In this way, both Dickinson and Eliot explore the awkwardness of bafflement. In Dickinson’s case awkward bafflement leads to broader learning; in Eliot’s case it reveals heightened sensitivity. Eliot’s interest in these themes is also evident in his essay, “The Metaphysical Poets.” As an earlier tradition in which physical metaphors were sometimes successful in capturing the strain of bafflement—bafflement in the face of nature, bafflement in the face of science, or bafflement in the face of God. Metaphysical Poetry templated the concrete, albeit strained, physical metaphor, which Dickinson would later lighten and relate

more directly to the body.

In his essay, Eliot jokes about how bodily organs help him arrive at a distinction between what he calls an intellectual poet and a reflective poet. Here is his definition:

The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.¹¹

For the reflective poet, everything is synesthesia; everything inter-permeates and blends. If Eliot sees himself in alignment with the reflective tradition, as he seems to, then we might view his poem “Hysteria” as an uncomfortable, comic example of a poetic sensibility that is overpowered by observing laughter in someone else. In Eliot’s poem, the laughter is not autonomous to the person laughing; it begins to consume and overpower the speaker as well. Following Eliot’s explanation, the reflective poet was interested in recording, almost scientifically, the physical and mental processes he experienced: “The [metaphysical] poets in question have, like other poets, various faults. But they were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling.”¹²

¹¹ Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” 64.
¹² Ibid., 65.
A brief look at the metaphysical conceit will help further explore the paradoxical resistance to abstraction in “reflective” poetry. Although the metaphysical conceit stretches the mind to a more abstract place, the imagery is all the while grounded in physical or scientifically precise entities. Although commonly thought of as one of the more difficult and cerebral of tropes, the metaphysical conceit is also broad and emphatic, such that, through heightened tone and exaggeration, it is sometimes humorous, too. The metaphysical conceit also contains proto-deconstructionist elements, namely its antithetical pairings.

Samuel Johnson uses the verb to yoke in his somewhat humorous definition of the metaphysical conceit to describe what happens when unlikely opposites are conjoined in a poem. The strange metaphysical conceits that combine seemingly unrelated elements create what he calls discordia concors or a “combination of dissimilar images.” In each of his evaluations, Dr. Johnson emphasizes the difficulty of this conceit for readers, sometimes straining them to the point of bafflement.13 His censure, however, is the foundation for praise:

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their [the poets’] learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased [emphasis added].15

14 Ibid., 194.
15 Ibid.
Johnson’s choice of words—“yoked by violence together”—aptly exaggerates the reflective poet’s urge to fuse incongruities together. The metaphysical conceit can also follow the basic structure of bafflement: harmony through strain. As John D. Jump has argued, the metaphysical conceit invites a process of perception rather than just an aesthetic reaction; Jump writes:

By what was semantically a leap of faith the poet crosses the gap and proclaims the compatibility of incompatibles. For him it is a moment of triumph, the satisfaction of *a difficulté vaincue* [author’s emphasis]; for us, his readers, it can be a moment of revelation, an intimation of unsuspected harmony on the far side of disparity.\(^{16}\)

By way of an example, some of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* fit both Jump and Johnson’s descriptions, insofar as they contain striking “heterogeneous ideas [] yoked by violence together.” Donne’s “Holy Sonnet X,” for example, underlines the violence of discord with its use of physically abrasive command verbs:

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Holy Sonnet X

Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me; and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I like an usurp’d town t’another due,
Labor t’admit you, but oh, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain:
But am betroth’d unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor chaste except you ravish me.\(^{17}\)

Although Donne’s violent yearning here does not seem humorous right away, its humor is more evident when compared to Dickinson’s nineteenth-century version of this poem, “Me from Myself to Banish”:\(^{18}\)

\(^{17}\) Donne, John Donne’s Poetry, 140.

\(^{18}\) Critics have not formally cited this Dickinson poem as an echo of Donne; nevertheless, it seems to be a clear allusion to Donne’s poem. Elizabeth Petrino has done considerable work on allusions to 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\)-century literature in Dickinson’s work; however, she does not write about this particular connection between Dickinson and Donne. Judith Banzer Farr’s article, “‘Compound Manner’”: Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets,” in American Literature, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Jan. 1961), proves, through a close look at Dickinson’s underlinings in books from the Dickinson family library, that Dickinson was well-acquainted with the Metaphysical Poets. She cites Donne’s Holy Sonnet X, but compares it instead to Dickinson’s poem, “Immured in Heaven.”
Me from Myself – to banish –
Had I Art –
Invincible My Fortress
Unto All Heart –

But since Myself – assault Me –
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We’re Mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication –
Me – of Me – ?
(F709)

Donne’s “Holy Sonnet X” creates discordant imagery through the poem’s actions. Paradoxically, the poem uses physical, one- or two-syllable command verbs to describe spiritual desires: blow, break, bend, seek to mend, unchain, ravish, etc.

Dickinson’s poem addresses the same questions that we see raised in Donne’s sonnet—questions about how to forsake a lower part of the self and surrender it to a higher part of the self and borrows the very same imagery—images of a fortress, war, and the heart. Yet it is lighter in tone and more detached in its treatment of self-banishment. First, there is a touch of hopeful optimism contained in the final question. *Is there a solution to this quandary* (the speaker wonders), *and have I found the solution?* Her final question directly expresses the quandary of the Cartesian split. By the mid-Nineteenth Century, man’s war with himself was
almost an old-fashioned problem, so Dickinson can make light of it at the center of her poem with another question: “Abdication –/ Me –of Me –?”

Another key difference in the two poems is their treatment of the word heart. Neither speaker treats it with delicacy, per se, but Dickinson uses the word to stand in for some universal entity. “Heart” in her poem does not refer to a single organ inside herself. Donne’s “heart” represents his own individual source of passion, but Dickinson’s is a source of broader warmth from which half of her “self” is blocked off. With sparer imagery than we get in Donne’s version of this soliloquy, Dickinson’s poem on the one hand reveals the silliness of man’s internal conflicts; on the other hand it distills that conflict down to its essence. Dickinson’s speaker saves space by not relishing the pain, despair, passion, desire for God, or any emotion for that matter. Instead, the speaker, in a seemingly detached way, presents the problem with which she is faced, and asks a question about it.

Essentially, Dickinson and Donne’s speakers are faced with the same problem: having to express a spiritual conundrum through the metaphor of a physical process. Employing a metaphor of the body is both speakers’ way of translating an otherwise abstract idea into something tangible. One is reminded of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, whose “pound of flesh,” as Portia explains, cannot be physically extracted without fatally wounding Antonio. Yet, as a metaphor, Shylock’s “pound of flesh” communicates the visceral nature of the injustice he feels. Far from being an abstract entity, the money owed him becomes physical

19 It is worth noting that Dickinson’s poem was probably written during the Civil War. (In his edition of Dickinson’s poems, Ralph Franklin cites 1863 as this poem’s year of composition.) Though this poem clearly describes an internal phenomenon, it is possible to see how it could be read as a metaphor for the Civil War: the United States, a single “self” at war with the other part of that self. However, this latter reading becomes more challenging in light of Dickinson’s speaker’s question about subjugating consciousness.
and concrete through the paradoxical metaphor of calculable flesh.

Dickinson’s approach diverges from Donne’s in spatial scope. As we saw with their different uses of *heart*, Dickinson’s physical organs tend to exit the body and explore wide-reaching, external spaces. Consider the following poem in which the mind seems to exit the body once again and cascade into the public square (or into the bottom of a well, as some have suggested):\(^{20}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It dropped so low – in my Regard –} \\
\text{I heard it hit the Ground –} \\
\text{And go to pieces on the Stones} \\
\text{At bottom of my mind –}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yet blamed the Fate that flung it – less} \\
\text{Than I denounced Myself,} \\
\text{For entertaining Plated Wares} \\
\text{Opon my Silver Shelf –}
\end{align*}
\]

\(\text{(F785)}\)

*Denouncing* the self is the speaker’s conclusion, here, too. In this case, however, the speaker arrives at this conclusion through misjudgment of her own personal value. As we saw in an earlier chapter, the word “shelf” is a sort of euphemism for *soul* in Dickinson’s poetry. The poem’s mysterious “it” need not be given a more particular name, because the poem’s actions show the movement of “it” plummeting downward and shattering to pieces. Whatever “it” was, the speaker is glad “it” was destroyed; and yet we are surprised to discover that the destruction of “it” was welcome. “It” was some form of “plated wares,” too false for the “silver self.” The poem’s twist lies in the speaker’s decision to blame herself for not getting rid

\(^{20}\) *Pace* Kay Ryan.
of “it” in the first place. The violence of “its” destruction turns out to be less humiliating than the speaker’s inability to destroy “it” herself.

The force of crash, break, drop, banish, or even scalp in each of these poems invites the reader to visualize a human body contorted in uncomfortable—if not fatal—extremes. Extreme physical discomfort is both a stage of bafflement as well as an exaggerated, physically impossible metaphor for the adventures of the soul. In Dickinson’s poetry, it serves her speakers’ communications of poetic and metaphysical intensity as well as their cartoon-like modes. After all, scenes of impossible physics are precisely what cartoons depict, and Dickinson employs them in her poetry through metaphors that nevertheless depend on concreteness, not abstractions, for their force.
III. “Slips – and laughs, and rallies”: Ambiguity, Humor, and Harmony

In Chapter 5, we saw that a riddle combines ambiguous mysteries and humorous play. One term for this combination is bewilderment. Philosopher Lee Yearly calls Emily Dickinson a “great master[] of bewilderment.” Yet there is a sense in which both bafflement and bewilderment play a clarifying role in Dickinson’s poetry, just as her ambiguities sometimes play a clarifying role. Bafflement redirects the predicted flow of the poem (it is not an accident that Dickinson is well known for writing poems without conventional endings); bafflement is also a necessary point of upheaval on the road to harmony. In other words, bafflement crystallizes Bergson’s principle of tension and elasticity with which we have been working throughout this dissertation. Bafflement heightens the tension of apparent opposites (we have just explored this through the apparent opposition of body and soul), and then it succeeds in harmonizing these opposites by going above the mind’s ability to fathom their “interfusion” (to borrow Wordsworth’s term cited in Chapter 2).

Emily Dickinson absorbs this principle even on the level of her name. Dickinson inherited her first name from her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson. Yet the etymology of “Emily” is coincidentally emblematic of her stance towards apparent opposition. Emily, the female equivalent of Emil, means rival. The word rival, however, comes from the word rivuus or river. A rival was simply someone with whom one shared one’s river water.22 On one level

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22 Other etymological studies suggest that Emily comes from Emma, meaning nurse or caregiver. This, too, adds a relevant layer to Dickinson’s persona. See William Arthur, An Etymological Dictionary of Family and Christian Names (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, and Co., 1857).
her name means opposition. On a deeper level it means something fluid and without boundary: the gentle, tiny brook that quietly makes its way to the vaster sea. So, too, as explored in myriad ways over the course of this dissertation, opposition is but surface antithesis in her poetry. Harmony pervades underneath.

As an illustration of a gentler image of bafflement, one that more immediately suggests harmony, consider this early poem on the theme:

Baffled for just a day or two –
Embarrassed – not afraid –
Encounter in my garden
An unexpected Maid.

She beckons, and the woods start –
She nods, and all begin –
Surely, such a country
I was never in!
(F66)

Here bafflement is merely embarrassment; the speaker is “Embarrassed – not afraid.” Moreover, it lasts “for just a day or two.” This temporary discomfort affords the speaker an “unexpected” adventure. Like the poem opening this chapter, the word baffle is accompanied by the word beckon. Here again, bafflement is an invitation to an unknown territory. In “He fumbles at your soul” that invitation culminates in a seemingly violent initiation rite, a scalping. Violent or not, Dickinson’s aesthetics of bafflement is a progress of stages, and the stages culminate in a more unified way of seeing: no longer opposites, but harmony. In this poem, the speaker’s “embarrassment” seems to connote, once again, her self-effacement—a
fact of bafflement that runs the gamut of metaphors in Dickinson’s poetry from lids coming off of heads to scalping, as we have just reviewed. The discomfort of self-effacement is the precursor to the acceptance of some unknown principle, vision, or territory.

We have now examined two aspects of bafflement. First, the concrete, physical metaphors for its effect in poetry—bafflement appears to shock and unnerve the body as much as the intellect (as with Henry James’s character). This first element is important because it demonstrates again the sense in which pain and difficulty are, however incongruously, preliminary stages of humor and precursors to harmony. Second, bafflement is a superstructure\textsuperscript{23} that combines ambiguity and humor. We have already seen that the riddle uses ambiguity to humorous ends; what is the role of bafflement as we contemplate and seek to solve a riddle? For example, the main obstacle in the poem quoted above, the thing one must move beyond in order to “rally,” is the “Riddle.” As a mystery, the riddle undermines “Philosophy” and conventional “Sagacity”—notions we explored at some length in the previous chapter. The riddle is the gateway to a \textit{Species} whose invisible existence \textit{baffles} understanding.

The word \textit{species} is derived from the Latin \textit{specto} or \textit{spectare}, meaning vision or gaze. The “Species…beyond” thus also implies a type of vision.\textsuperscript{24} In effect, \textit{sagacity} and \textit{philosophy} are baffled by this other way of seeing, this new \textit{species}. The “solution” to the poem’s riddle lies in finding a connection between the pull of this broader vision and the final lines of the poem, which are quite different in tone. I.e., what does the \textit{beckoning}, \textit{baffling} magnetism of a \textit{species}, a way of seeing that is otherworldly, have to do with a \textit{tooth nibbling} at the soul? Are the \textit{species}

\textsuperscript{23} I am using the term “superstructure” in the architectural sense not the Marxist sense.
\textsuperscript{24} Juliana Chow’s presentation on Dickinson and Frost at the 2013 MLA Annual Convention explored additional implications of Dickinson’s play with \textit{spectare} derivative words.
and the *tooth* one and the same? Bafflement might be thought of as a kind of bridge between the beckoning of the new vision, the new species, and the nibbling at the soul. In other words, bafflement is triggered by the introduction of something completely new, uncertain, surprising, and it culminates in a physical metaphor for a metaphysical experience. The poem frames these stages of bafflement and, in the quotation included as the title to this chapter, it includes *laughter* as a central stage in the process of becoming baffled. Thus, again, bafflement, which appears to be a spontaneous, unsolicited response to a significant life riddle, begins with ambiguity or confusion (the initial riddle of the new vision or *species*); once contemplated, it is met with surrendering laughter, i.e., the admission of humor; and then it culminates in physical-metaphysical strain. Along the way, the implied speaker tries to explain the experience of bafflement through recourse to conventional religion (*gesture from the pulpit*, *strong hallelujahs*, etc.).

Where does harmony fit in, as we have suggested that it should? Is harmony somehow related to this culminating physical strain? How can that be? In poetry, bafflement is not ultimately negative. It does not signify obscurity, obfuscation, or misleading vagueness. Rather, bafflement charts a learning process in a poem, one that ends in harmony, whether or not it ends in understanding. In the Dickinson poem quoted at the top of this section, the tooth is a new “character” in the poem; it stands in metonymically for some external force. If the tooth seems somewhat crazed, this is not entirely off point, since the poem celebrates the loss of conventional sanity: “it baffles – Philosophy – don’t know…/ Sagacity – must go.” However, the crazed tooth is not the implied mind of a speaker or persona whose “faith slips – and laughs, and rallies”; it is the force working on the soul of that persona. In another poem about a tooth called “A tooth opon our peace [Dickinson’s spelling],” Dickinson writes that the tooth is there “to vitalize the
Grace” (F694). In this second poem, it is unclear whether the speaker aligns the tooth with heaven or with hell (she mentions both; one, presumably, is also aligned with “peace”). The important element seems to be, again, not whether the tooth is harmful or bad, but merely the fact that it vitalizes experience. As a metonym for violence or pain, it gives “peace” some definition and importance simply by standing in contrast to it.

After reviewing Dickinson’s stance on conventional sanity in Chapter 5, one can see how “nibbl[ing] at the soul” is a persistent torment that Dickinson might invite—and also how strangely humorous the image is. With the knowledge that the pain of this nibbling is positive in the end, not parasitic, Dickinson’s “choice” to end her poem this way nevertheless moves the poem to a more resigned, harmonious place. The species beckoned and received its desired prey; yet, the experience for the individual soul is not tragic or victimizing. As in so many Dickinson poems, this closing image resists harmonizing the poem according to expectation. If the poem’s message is that there exists life beyond death—and beyond our ability to fathom such a possibility—then one might anticipate the poem’s culmination in tranquil bliss. Instead, however, the closing image contains a picture of beneficial torment. Humor lies in the unexpected truth that harmony is threaded through all spiritually productive experience, whether or not that experience seems pleasant at first blush.

Over the course of this study, Emily Dickinson’s poetry has served as a representative case. Yet the question, to some degree, remains: is her poetry an important example because it consistently reveals the universal nature of humor in poetry, or because it marks the burgeoning of new possibilities for levity in poetry, possibilities that were later exploited in the modernist period? It has been necessary to draw on examples from Dickinson’s poetry as well as the poetry
of Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth, and Shelley. So, too, it has been useful to mention later examples and counter-examples, such as Eliot and Billy Collins. From this wide array of illustrations, we may conclude that the seed was planted for the profound sort of humor that we have been defining as early as Shakespeare (not to mention Chaucer, who was not cited here but who deserves—and surely has received—his own dissertation-length treatment) and was theorized as early as Plato.

Nevertheless, it now seems clear that humor in Dickinson’s poetry permeates every aspect of a poem and that it does so in new ways—i.e., we find it not only in incidental ambiguities, but also in the structure of the very form itself. We have surveyed her intrinsic humor through examples of her inconclusive endings, variants creating incongruous multiplicity, uses of humorous characters (such as insects) to embody vastness, sudden juxtapositions or shifts in imagery, and, as in “Me from myself to banish,” incongruous detachedness and lightness of tone. As a result, while poetry seems to have always contained the gravity-levity paradox, the very matter of poetry—both what it is and how it is built—possibly became both lighter and more condensed during Emily Dickinson’s short but prolific lifetime as a poet. The humorous “turn” became more pronounced. As Dickinson modeled it, a poem could be briefer, archer, and less final than the well-wrought forms of the previous five hundred years.

Bafflement highlights what is special about humor in poetry, as opposed to humor in other art forms. The three stages of bafflement that we have outlined necessitate a poetic structure, verbal elision, and verbal juxtaposition—bafflement depends on both looseness and precision of language. Surrealist visual art might baffle us, but it does not baffle according to the gradualism of Dickinson’s humorous aesthetic; i.e., it does not baffle in stages. Like music, a progression is required, which a painting could not quite
fulfill. But unlike music, verbal ambiguities are the triggers for bafflement. The aesthetics of bafflement is therefore the superstructure for Dickinson’s intrinsic poetic humor. We have possibly overstated at this point the underlying principle of incongruous humor, but it is the basis for bafflement, too: incongruous humor explodes apparent opposites, and the baffling harmony that results is answered with humor.
In Books II and III of Plato’s *Republic*, the comic poets, in addition to the tragic poets, are exiled from the pure city.\(^1\) But this is not the end of the story. In Book X, Socrates raises the issue again. He implies that his original argument against poetry was perhaps a bit too rigid. “We would at least be glad to admit it [into the city],” he allows, “for we are well aware of the charm it exercises.”\(^2\) He then invites arguments in defense of poetry, arguments proving that this “charm” has an optimistic force. Socrates cautions:

> If this defense isn’t made, we'll behave like people who have fallen in love with someone but who force themselves to stay away from him, because they realize that their passion isn’t beneficial. In the same way, because the love of this sort of poetry has been implanted in us by the upbringing we have received under our fine constitutions, we are well disposed to any proof that it is the best and truest thing.\(^3\)

Of course his challenge has already received groundbreaking responses, from Sir Philip Sidney in the Sixteenth Century to Percy Bysshe Shelley in the Nineteenth. This dissertation addressed one small but as yet virtually neglected piece of Socrates’s challenge. When the comic

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\(^1\) John Morreall mentions this moment, which he describes as Plato’s ban on “comedy of all kinds” in the “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought” in *Philosophy East & West* 39.3 (July 1989) 249-250.


\(^3\) Ibid., 607e, 279.
poets were exiled from the city, they were a threat because of the violence or baseness of their humor.¹ If their poetry demeaned or insulted others, or caused others to demean or insult, then it would not be welcome. Yet we have been exploring a type of poetic humor that operates like a balancing agent in a poem, tempering the pleasure we might take in sad topics and broadening the philosophical scope of comedic ones. To repeat once again Henri Bergson’s explanation, humor is born of a tension between those two extremes: “Tension and elasticity are mutually complementary forces that life puts together in play [Bergson’s emphases].”² Indirectly, this dissertation has argued that humor is both the source of poetry’s charm and a marker of its benevolence. In balancing extremes of pleasure and pain, humor in poetry stimulates dialectic—if only in the reader’s mind as he works out and unravels the poem’s fundamental optimism.

¹ Plato Republic, Book III, 388e, Socrates refers to the dangers of “violent laughter.”
² Henri Bergson, Le rire (Paris: Quadranges, 1938) 14: “Tension et élasticité, voilà deux forces complémentaires l’une de l’autre que la vie met en jeu” (my translation is quoted above).
Postscript

Compassion in Poetry: An Exception to Poetic Influence

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom registers one exception to the category called *askesis*—the solipsistic poet who has a balance of narcissism and cultural investment—with a short list of five American poets, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson. The only poets not susceptible to influence, he writes, are these because, “the power of the mind and the power of the eye endeavor to become one [in their poetry], which makes askesis impossible.”¹ In other words, the self and the self’s outward vision seek to merge, a process described most famously in Emerson’s essays “Nature” and “The Poet.” The poetic effort broadens beyond the poet’s personal history or individual associations.

Poetic influence is a great point of irony in the story of Emily Dickinson. She initiated a correspondence with a literary critic named Thomas Wentworth Higginson under the pretense of wanting to be his student (she signed her letters to him *Your Scholar, Your Pupil*, and sometimes, *Your Gnome*). She dutifully sent him poems to edit, but when he saw both that she ignored his suggestions and that she was the

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one guiding and orchestrating much of their correspondence, he was the first to admit: “She always persisted in regarding [me]—with very little ground for it—as a literary counselor and confidant.”

But if, all the while, it was she instructing him, how did she go about it? Her guidance appears to have come in the form of steady, incongruous humor about death—the very trope that we have just been teasing out. In one such letter Dickinson refers to the *cordiality of death* “who drills his welcome in” (L282). Here, her joke is of course that death by bullets is not cordial at all. As an officer in the Civil War, Higginson was near death quite often and left the war severely wounded. Dickinson consoled him with deceptively casual reminders of death. In another letter she writes about his possible demise this way:

Should you, before this reaches you, experience immortality, who will inform me of the exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid death, I entreat you, sir. It would bereave

-Your Gnome

(L280)

These brusque correspondences were Dickinson’s way of showing compassion for her friend’s losses, his own potential death in the Civil War, and, in other letters, for his grief over his daughter’s death. She mentions death, directly or indirectly, in nearly every letter to Higginson. In the mid-Nineteenth Century, it was a topic with which they were both inescapably familiar. In addressing it so daringly in her letters to him, she both claims an intimacy with a man

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she had not yet met in person, comforts him by confronting the issue, and perhaps even broadens his ideas about it, through her humor.

Yet the fact that she staged a relationship of tutelage—that she was the self-proclaimed “gnome” poet and he the established editor—suggests another dimension to Dickinson’s compassion. Dickinson first reached out to Higginson, a total stranger, after reading his call to young poets in The Atlantic Magazine titled “Letter to a Young Contributor.” When Higginson wrote the following lines of solicitation, he could never have known what kind of a response he would receive—right away—from Emily Dickinson:

> Human language may be polite and powerless in itself, uplifted with difficulty into expression by the high thoughts it utters, or it may in itself become so saturated with warm life and delicious association that every sentence shall palpitate and thrill with the mere fascination of the syllables.²

Higginson had perhaps not yet imagined the extent to which language could become “saturated with warm life”—nor had he probably fully considered the baffling nature of such language. Dickinson’s poetry is as fiery as it is cold, and her letters, too, offer that stifling yet enlivening blend. Her at times shocking humor about death, written to a poetry expert when he was grieving, was her gradual way of sharing both the mystery of and the key to her art form. If he could pause from his grief and recognize the magnanimity of her offerings, then he would appreciate the startling breadth and fierce compassion in her philosophy, the key to which is the mechanism of her daring humor.


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