

12-1-1987

Dickinson against the Sublime

Gary Lee Stonum

Case Western Reserve University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Stonum, Gary Lee (1987) "Dickinson against the Sublime," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 19: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol19/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

DICKINSON AGAINST THE SUBLIME

Gary Lee Stonum

Dickinson's poetry both continues and revises what we have come to call the romantic sublime, a literary mode first effectively theorized by Kant and then practiced in rather diverse forms by a number of English and American writers. The variety, variability, and conceptual elusiveness of the sublime are considerably more evident in literary history than its identity, but for the sake of brevity let me exaggerate the extent to which a distinctly romantic sublime operates according to stable precepts and forms a reasonably coherent poetic tradition. Viewed from the schematic perspective this simplification affords, Dickinson's work perpetuates the romantic sublime or draws upon it in several different ways:

1. By exhibiting the sublime's characteristic preference for loftiness, force, and intensity over measure or balance;
2. By depicting such intensities not mainly as properties of the sublime object or of the rhetorical grandeur of its representation but as episodes, the encounters of a mind with some mighty alterity that both threatens and solicits;
3. By staging such episodes as largely interior dramas, ones that reflect more directly on the qualities of the encountering mind than those of the encountered object; and
4. Most of all, by locating the interior drama in the poet's own mind, thus reinforcing and helping to legitimize a general romantic tendency to make poetic subjectivity a principal literary topic. Indeed, sometimes the poet's aptitude for experiencing the sublime seems to be a prerequisite for achieving it artistically.¹

On the other hand, Dickinson's work also stands against the sublime in the sense of across from it or at a distance from at least one of its most cherished ideals. The esthetics of the sublime contributed significantly to a generally heroic conception of poetic selfhood, and such ideas stand behind much of the renewed critical attention the sublime has been receiving. Harold Bloom's theory of poetry is explicitly underwritten by such conceptions, for instance, as is the widespread critical concern about mastery, power, and rivalry he has helped inspire.

Dickinson is notably wary about any aggrandizement of the poetic self, however, and about heroic or idealizing notions of such euphemisms for that self as genius or imagination. She certainly entertains the notion of a sublime aggrandizement—witness such verses as “This was a poet”—and she is no stranger to psychic or spiritual mastery as a fundamental aspect of human affairs—witness most of the marriage poems. Moreover, she often links both heroic selfhood and masterly triumph to the sense of elevation and empowerment that, since Longinus, has been the primary enticement of the sublime. Yet unlike most of her romantic predecessors and contemporaries, Dickinson holds a predominantly affective theory of poetry.² She tends to define poetic value in terms of the reader's response, a response that in principle is independent of the author's intention and need owe very little to an authorial self at all.

University of Dayton Review, Vol. 19, No. 1 [1987], Art. 5
A Word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

(J 1261) ³

Hence also her famous declaration to 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? (*Letters*,
II, 473–474).

The at least notional priority of readerly affect may seem strange in a writer so notoriously ambivalent about seeking publication, but Dickinson seems to have based her working esthetics primarily on her own experiences as a reader, apparently seeking in her own writing to do for others as others had done for her. The result is a peculiarly hesitant or deferred sublime: rather than basing her own poetic authority on the achievement of a sublime elevation or empowerment she seeks to stimulate such effects in the minds of her readers without directly prescribing or commanding them.

I have already made a series of sweeping claims that I cannot hope to substantiate in the time allotted. In the larger study from which this paper is drawn I attempt to do some justice to such topics as the varying relations different Dickinson poems have to the theory and practice of the sublime; the characteristic Dickinsonian rhetoric of stimulus; the response she makes to earlier poets, especially Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the radical tradition she represented to Dickinson; and the tangled questions of mastery, heroism, and rivalry. Here I will try only to flesh out my claims by reading a single poem. “Of bronze and blaze” conveniently thematizes the larger argument, for it begins with a generally orthodox episode of the romantic sublime and then curiously, even somewhat awkwardly, transforms the usual significance of that episode by extending it into an imagined futurity.

Of Bronze—and Blaze—
The North—Tonight—
So adequate—it forms—
So distant—to alarms—
So preconcerted with itself—
An Unconcern so sovereign
To Universe, or me—
Infects my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty—
Till I take vaster attitudes—
And strut upon my stem—
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
For Arrogance of them—
My Splendors, are Menagerie—
But their Competeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I, am long ago,

Stonum: Dickinson against the Sublime
An Island in dishonored Grass—
Whom none but Daisies, know

(J 290).

The mark of the Dickinson sublime is what she calls “Tremendousness,” an experience of intense, often disruptive force (J 962). “Of bronze and blaze” includes two different instances of such force, the insouciant blaze of the aurora borealis and the splendors of the poem itself (or of the poet). The two correspond to what often gets theoretically distinguished as the natural and the rhetorical sublime. Notice that here the origin or source in both instances tends to disappear into the responses it elicits. The emphasis on subjective responses rather than objective qualities is a frequent romantic trait that Dickinson takes to a noteworthy extreme. As several critics have pointed out, Dickinson’s style regularly foregrounds perceptual and affective metonyms over more objective names for the external object at hand, to the point that in many of her poems the objective stimulus appears elided or periphrastically displaced by the subject’s response to it.⁴ Here the natural object is easily enough identified, but its force is as much manifested in the relation to the perceiving self as in the aurora’s objective properties. Remoteness and autonomy, relations that more properly might be called a supreme absence of relatedness, signify at least as intensely as color or shape.

Moreover, the intensity of these relational qualities owes as much to Dickinson’s free response as to the object’s compelling presence. One confirmation of this is that elsewhere she responds quite differently to the same kind of self-contained distance from herself. In “As imperceptibly as grief,” for instance, Dickinson also emphasizes nature’s remoteness and independence. In that poem, however, nature’s distance from the self anticipates its escape into “the Beautiful,” Dickinson’s one use of this word in a sense recalling the pervasive 18th-century contrast between the sublime and the beautiful (J 1540). For her the beautiful seems a zone of wistful contemplation, where subject and object may regard one another without shock or rivalry. By contrast, in “Of bronze and blaze” the same remoteness in the object elicits powerful and explicitly imitative, competitive responses.

An initial clue that the poem not only represents but also reflects upon the sublime is that the object’s chief characteristic is invulnerability to the shock of the sublime moment: “So distant—to alarms.” The object possesses a characteristically sublime sovereignty, but this characteristic appears not as power or authority over others but as “Unconcern.” Not only is the aurora affectively indifferent to the existence of “Universe” or “me,” but as a thing perfectly “adequate” to and “preconcerted with itself” it manifests itself as an absolute self-contained monad. In short, the aurora is a pure esthetic form and thus potentially a model not only for the speaker but for her poem. Disconcerted or threatened by such an object and by her implicit inferiority to it, a poet of the sublime may be expected to reassert her authority by identifying the object’s force as a hitherto unrecognized or undeveloped aspect of her own powers.

True to this expectation, Dickinson at first responds to the object in precisely the manner described by theorists of the romantic sublime from Kant to Weiskel and Hertz. The infection and taint that initially challenge her simple soul are overcome by the defensive step of taking vaster attitudes, identifying with and appropriating to herself the aurora’s sublimity. In other words, the potentially malign infection takes hold, tainting her previous simplicity, and in the last few lines of the first stanza she specifically emulates the aurora’s sovereignty. Yet her own arrogance and disdain are not quite its unconcern, for they manifest a haughty aloofness to men and oxygen that nonetheless entails a form of relatedness to them or even secretly

depends upon them for a recognition of her powers.

In one sense, the natural sublime is complete by the end of the poem's first stanza, for the speaker certainly experiences elevation and empowerment. In another sense, it remains incomplete or faulty, for she has still failed to measure up to the aurora's absolute majesty. Such incompleteness is fairly common in romantic poetry.

The second stanza both continues the first in another key and also envisages other, potentially different moments of sublimity when the splendors of Dickinson's arrogance and of her poem entertain the centuries. As a continuation of the first stanza it falls back from the earlier arrogance, a lowering already anticipatorily confessed in the image of the speaker as a flower earthbound by its stem. Oxygen seems to be needed, after all. The vaunting splendors may now prove no more than menagerie, a vain and probably illusory show. The menagerie further compares poorly to the aurora's heavenly display and the speaker's disdain of men by its humbly feminine domesticity. (The English word derives from a French term for housekeeping.)

Unlike the patently imitative arrogance, however, the show belongs fully to the speaker ("*My Splendors*"). More important, the show is "Competeless." The word may partly be taken as an expression of pride that, like disdain of men, needs what it scorns: My shows are better than competing shows (but must be compared to them for this to be recognized). However, the neologism's precise form suggests also that Dickinson's shows simply do not compete. Without concern for rivals or peers, they are of themselves and "dwell Extent among," as another poem of the sublime has it (J 1137). In other words, although the speaker's subjectivity has failed to attain the aurora's unconcern, the text has achieved it.

It has done more. As the natural sublime gives way to an imagined rhetorical sublimity, the splendors of the poem exceed those of the aurora by being constitutively open to the centuries and indeed designed with them in mind. Up to this point in the poem the only forms of relatedness imagined have been monadlike sovereignty and a structure of rivalrous disdain or emulation. The text is open to futurity, however, in a way that transcends these alternatives of unconcern or competition. The crucial lines refer to the speaker's death. One may read them as a disingenuous expression of modesty, the kind that not so secretly vaunts the author by imagining how honored her works will be when she herself has been forgotten. As it happens, Dickinson's great contemporary Whitman also imagines the afterlife of his poetry as leaves of grass, a coincidence that reinforces the seeming weakness of these lines, which compare unfavorably in pathos or power both to Whitman's comparable poems and to the first stanza of her own. Even on the poem's own terms, the image of an island in dishonored grass suggests a suspiciously false modesty. The grass is dishonored by this bare spot where once a flower strutted, but grass does not usually grow as high as daisies and it cannot flower, so the absence imagistically dishonors a public whose feeble capacities include neither loftiness nor bloom. Even when forgotten, in other words, the daisy's attitude remains vaster than the grass that survives her.

"Daisy" is one of Dickinson's coy nicknames for herself, used as such in several poems and a number of letters.⁵ Here it echoes and specifies the earlier reference to the speaker's stem. The daisies that, unlike the grass, still know and acknowledge Dickinson after her death are thus selves like or even identical to her own. They are

perhaps future poets or superior souls challenged by her splendors as she was challenged by the aurora, their fate then being to identify and identify with her and in effect to honor her. But they are not the only persons on whom the menagerie is bestowed, and if anything they would seem the readers most likely to repeat Dickinson's only partly successful emulation and incorporation of auroral unconcern. More important, the poem does not envisage their response as the usual or even the appropriate one. The poem is directed toward a wider, inherently unpredictable, and presumably more diverse audience. The poem promises to entertain that audience, affecting it but not necessarily dominating it and certainly not obliging it to undergo in its turn another round of infection by majesty and rivalrous identification with it. Such a response is possible and even legitimate but by no means requisite.

The imagined textual affect thus supersedes the aurora's natural sublime by including it and also going beyond it. The poem's competelessness emulates the object's unconcern and also goes beyond its isolation from anything beyond itself. Actually, like most sublime operations when viewed with detachment and suspicion, this one requires repressing an awareness that would otherwise be apparent and presumably painful. The idealizing interpretation I have given conveniently forgets that the aurora too is open to earthbound viewers and will presumably remain so in centuries to come. My reading thus collaborates with the poem in enforcing an arguably suspect distinction between the aurora and the menagerie that works to the latter's advantage.

Even without an idealizing reading, however, the poem unmistakably extends the structure of the romantic sublime beyond the discrete encounter with the aurora, making the subjectivity of future readers an explicit part of its reach. The guiding purpose it thus suggests for her poetry as a whole is of stimulating the reader's mind without necessarily determining it. More particularly Dickinson's poems aim to provoke in the reader an empowerment that need not require submission to the authority of Dickinson's text or identification with her poetic self. The reaction is the same, incidentally, that Dickinson herself seems to have experienced in response to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry.⁶

The broad literary project I have sketched here distinguishes Dickinson's work as different in degree though not in kind from a sublime more firmly centered in the poet's heroic subjectivity. All texts are by definition open to a diversity of responses and interpretations. Moreover, unlike Dickinson's poems, most romantic poetry was put into public circulation, so materially and socially it requires at least as much as hers do the solicitation of a readerly affect for completion. On the other hand, the romantic model of subjectivity is more restricted to the heroics of the sublime. The reader is usually invited to be like the poet, to emulate as much as possible the poetic's heroic stature or (as explicitly in "Song of Myself") to do that first before going on to some loftier but usually unspecified greatness. The crucial thing about the affect that would complete Dickinson's poem, however, is that it does not oblige the reader to become a daisy.

Case Western Reserve University

- ¹ These attributes partly summarize and generalize from aspects of the romantic sublime studied more closely by Weiskel, Hertz, Bloom, and Ende.
- ² Eberwein (73–77) offers a brief, pioneering discussion of this.
- ³ Dickinson's poems are cited according to their number in the three-volume Johnson edition.
- ⁴ On Dickinson's metonymic style, see Hagenbuchle. Leyda was the first to notice the "omitted center" typical of many of Dickinson's poems (1: xxi).
- ⁵ See, for instance, the famous "Master" letters.
- ⁶ See especially "I think I was enchanted" (J 593). Diehl notes the distinctive absence of anxiety in this poem, attributing it however to a woman poet responding to feminine rather than masculine power (185–187).

WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *Agon: Toward a Theory of Revisionism*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982.
- . *A Map of Misreading*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975.
- . *Poetry and Repression*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955.
- Diehl, Joanne Feit. "Women Poets and the Sublime." *The American Sublime*. Ed. Mary Arensberg. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1986. 173-214.
- Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1985.
- Ende, Stuart. *Keats and the Sublime*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976.
- Hagenbuchle, Roland. "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson." *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20 (1974): 33-56.
- Hertz, Neil. "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime." *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*. Ed. Geoffrey Hartman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978. 62-85.
- . "A Reading of Longinus." *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1983): 579-596.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Trans. James C. Meredith. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952.
- [Longinus]. *Longinus on the Sublime*. Trans. W. Rhys Roberts. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1899.
- Leyda, Jay. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960.
- Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976.

