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Noel A. Black
Lake Forest College

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My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun: The Paradox of Emily Dickinson's Poetry¹

By Noel A. Black

Emily Dickinson's poetry has often been deemed cryptic and even incomprehensible. Her poems are short, with little punctuation, and are often charged with destructive language and imagery. Dickinson's poem 754, "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun" has eluded critics for many years and has been interpreted to be everything from a "Frontier Romance," to an expression of spirituality. The most common stumbling block in this poem is discerning the narrator: who or what does the gun represent and who is the master? Or as Raymond Tripp asks, what is "the nature and agent of the change, and the significance of the gun imagery in which it is reported?" (Tripp 1989). The result is that critics are unable to come to any concrete decisions over the poem's intent. What I suggest is that "My Life" is a poem about poetry told in the voice of a destructive metonymical pen. The poem thus reflects the powerful and violent forces which Dickinson herself could not control in her poetry. The poet is trapped in a paradox of destruction of her poetic subject and the immortality of her own poem.

First, to establish a concrete basis for any conclusion I will give a brief recapitulation of some of the more popular interpretations of "My Life." Second, I will give a stanza by stanza analysis showing both how the "Gun" is the metonymical pen of the poet, and how the poet sees her craft as paradoxically destructive.

One of the more popular and most widely accepted interpretations of "My Life" defines it as a "Frontier Romance." The Loaded Gun is seen as the submissive female who is carried off romantically by the Owner who then takes her along to hunt and roam through the woods. John Pickard notes that, "their relationship is not entirely one-sided, for he needs her destructive power. Without her the hunter is incomplete, but now his slightest touch causes her to explode and command mountains for him" (Pickard 1967). This reading lends itself to the themes of dependency and conflict in love relationships. The "Frontier Romance" was a popular theme in the nineteenth century and James Fennimore Cooper's "Leather Stocking Tales" is an example of this genre. Albert Gelpi, in his essay "Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman Poet in

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America," describes the "Frontier Romance" in these terms: "The pioneer claims his manhood by measuring himself against the unfathomed, unfathomable immensity of his elemental world, whose 'otherness' he experiences at times as the inhuman, at times as the feminine, at times as the divine—most often all three at once" (Gubar 1979). Although "My Life" does have this general theme, it does not seem that the poet's primary intention was to describe a love story as there is far too much bitter and violent language.

A similar, but more sexually charged interpretation of "My Life" argues that Dickinson has an inner desire to be controlled. The gun is viewed as a phallic symbol that discharges when she is being manipulated by her "Master." Richard B. Sewall cites Dr. John Cody who gives a Freudian interpretation: "'My Life' points to hypothetical aggressions, compulsions, and frustrations, any one of which would be sufficient to account for the disintegration of a personality or, more simply, the crack-up of a mind" (Sewall 1974). This reading lends itself to the idea that Dickinson was nothing more than a sexually repressed spinster whose only emotional outlet was poetry. It is plausible, but this angle seeks to reveal the mentality of the woman Emily Dickinson, not the narrator or the poem itself. By psycho-analyzing the poet through her poems, the reader is removed wholly from the experience.

Another reading of "My Life" describes the poem as a "spiritual awakening." Like the others, this argument establishes the gun as the narrator being swept away by a dominant force. God is the Master in this argument and the gun/narrator does not become useful or live until he "identifies" her and carries her away. Raymond P. Tripp states: "In Christian terms 'The Owner' would be one aspect of the trinity, most likely Christ.... Traditions aside, however, a greater life, that is, a greater 'I' has claimed the service of a smaller 'I' for its own purposes—and needs" (1989). The gun then protects the master and begins to have a life of its own except it realizes that it does not have the "power to die." This interpretation carries the popular idea that Dickinson struggled with the power and salvation of God and her own desire to be free and independent, but that she does eventually accept him. Once again, I would disagree with this argument because it does not give serious consideration to the violent hunting and volcano imagery.

Another obscure reading by Jeanne Holland argues that the poem is a feminist rebuttal of Genesis and the "misnaming" of Eve. She feels that the gun/narrator associates herself with Eve and that there is a "re-figuration" of the gun/Eve into the master/Adam in the fourth stanza. Holland states that, "as Adam's giving birth to woman and subsequent (mis)naming (sic) of her is essential to move the Genesis narrative forward, the Owner's mistake is equally necessary to engender a diachronic narrative, moving it into the present" (1987). Holland goes on to remark that, "to live in language means to die in

language. Emily Dickinson accepted the terms of this exchange when she picked up her pen and struggled to find her voice in relation to her precursor's" (1987). Her argument is convincing, although weakly supported by a few references to Dickinson's description of herself as "Eve, alias Mrs. Adam."

In her book *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, Joanne Dobson argues that "My Life" cannot be wholly comprehended, and was not meant to be. She states: "It is my contention, however, that reading this poem to determine its meaning becomes something in the nature of an exercise in futility...; the meaning of this poem is irrecoverable" (1989). Dobson flounders helplessly, as many have with this poem. She denies any interpretation whatsoever and states: "the most helpful way to read the poem is not to try to understand its meaning, but rather to determine the significance of the impediments to comprehension" (1989). I would say that this interpretation takes the "easy way out," failing to engage any of the elliptical and metaphorical language which makes this poem so powerful.

The last and perhaps the most convincing argument for "My Life" is given by Robert Weisbuch in his book, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*. Weisbuch feels this is a poem about poetic practice. He asserts that the gun is the poet, loaded with destructive forces of nature (1972). This argument is based on the fact that the underlying themes of love and religion cannot be understood without establishing the narrator as the poet who is "controlled by an external cause and thus denies his own responsibility." Weisbuch also feels that "My Life" is a poem "which warns against the delusion of achieving self-realization through subservience" (1972). Weisbuch sees "My Life" as a "riddle to be solved. It wittily suggests a specific idea which it does not mention directly" (1972). The primary way in which I would differ from Weisbuch is that I do not feel the poem is narrated by the poet specifically, but rather by the poet's "pen" or voice. But this poem truly is a "riddle to be solved," and a difficult one at that!

Many of these interpretations of "My Life" make valid arguments, but to me they are all rendered unconvincing by their failure to establish a believable correlation between the gun and the owner/master.

I propose that the gun is the pen or poetic voice of the poet and the owner/master is the poet. Therefore, it is the pen that is narrating the poem and the action described is a symbolic description of the art of writing poetry. With this established, the poem's direct meanings become readily apparent.

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
 In Corners - till a Day
 The Owner passed - identified -
 And carried Me away.

The life being referred to is the personified life of the pen/gun. The fact that it is "Loaded" refers both to the fact that it is unused and that it has potential to do harm and damage through language. The pen is loaded with language which can only be released if the owner/poet exerts his will upon it. Dickinson recognizes the power of her own poetic voice in letter 656 to Louise Norcross:

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrest it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because "unloaded," but that touched 'goes off?'" (Weisbuch 1972).

This passage reveals Dickinson's association of the pencil and language to a potentially dangerous and corrupting fire-arm which, when "an earnest letter" is put to use, "goes off." For this reason, Dickinson associates the poet's pen or voice to a gun; she recognizes the power it can exert on its subject.

The pen/gun is both passive and dependent upon the owner for animation or life. Its life "had stood," signifies immobility or incapability of individual action. These words also have a tone of potential energy waiting to be released. But this all ends when the "Owner passed - identified/ And carried Me away." The poet/owner takes up the pen/gun metaphorically in order to begin the task of writing. The poet/owner is also dependent on the pen/gun in order to accomplish the task of writing.

And now We roam in sovereign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him -
The Mountains straight reply -

This stanza suggests the vocation of poetry writing. "We" is the key word in the first line that shows the unity and cooperation between the pen/voice and poet as they roam through "Sovereign Woods," indicating a connection with nature in the poetic subject. The second line also demonstrates that the pen and the poet are searching for the meaning of the natural. The verb "hunt" indicates searching and writing. However, it carries a negative connotation as well, one of intention to kill a symbol of life and beauty. The poem begins to change for her, becoming more violent. For this to be a part of

Dickinson's poetics is perplexing, but, by looking at her other poems of vocation, Dickinson's own awareness of the destructive implications of her poetry are very apparent.

Poem 516, "Beauty - be not caused - it is," states that if you "chase" beauty "it ceases," but you "chase it not, it abides." Dickinson feels that her poetry is a paradox. By chasing beauty with words you destroy it. This paradox is similarly reflected in poem 862, "Split the Lark - and you'll find the Music." This poem encourages the "Sceptic" to kill the Lark and try to find the beauty of its song, but all you will have is "Gush after Gush, reserved for you/ Scarlet Experiment." In other words, to find the origin of beauty in the Lark's song one must kill the bird, but in doing so the bird and the song will die. If we go back to stanza two of "My Life," we see that Dickinson is aware of the fact that she is "hunting" this natural subject with the possibility of destroying it in the process of writing about it.

"And every time I speak for Him -/ The Mountains straight reply -" the pen has been personified as speaking for the Poet through writing and the pen is writing about the mountains, once again the subject of nature. When the pen/gun "speaks," the mountains "reply." This implies that the poetry is echoing nature, but it must receive the destructive force and resonance of the poetic gunshot. Therefore, the pen/gun harms its majestic silence and beauty. It does not appear that Dickinson is pleased with these violent aspects of her poetry, but she recognizes them and feels compelled to participate in the act regardless. The second stanza can be compared with a similar vocational poem that demonstrates the price of poetry:

Perception of an object costs
 Precise the Object's loss -
 Perception in itself a Gain
 Replying to its Price -
 The Object Absolute - is nought -
 Perception sets it fair
 And then upbraids a Perfectness
 That situates so far

This poem complements Dickinson's awareness of the paradoxical nature of her own poetry perfectly. Once an object is perceived, as in a poem, it is lost. Like the "Mountain's straight reply," the perception is a gain of understanding, but it is cancelled by the price of its reply: the loss of perfection, or death.

As we see in the next stanza of "My Life," the seemingly "cordial light" of poetry is destructive:

And do I smile, such cordial light
 Upon the Valley glow -
 It is as a Vesuvian face
 Had let its pleasure through -

The smile refers to the false external beauty poetry confers upon nature. The "cordial light" illuminating the dark valley is from the "Vesuvian" explosion of the written word upon the poet's page. Once again, it is destructive even though it is a "pleasure." Her language is charged with energy that explodes with the force of Vesuvius. Dickinson is so keenly aware of this, as she writes in letter 233: "Vesuvius don't talk - Etna don't - one of them - said a syllable - a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever" (Weisbuch 1972). Like Vesuvius destroying the entire city of Pompeii, Dickinson sees her poetry having the same potential.

And when at Night - Our good Day done -
 I guard My Master's Head -
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
 Deep Pillow - to have shared.

Many critics are perplexed by this fourth stanza because the pen/gun seems to become independent of the "Master." It takes on a will that is independent of its poet/owner. In this stanza the poet subtly refers to an actual feather pen "guarding" the head of the paper on which the poet and the pen have been "roaming" during this "good Day." Instead of the gun acquiring its own will, the imagery reflects the inanimate state of "guarding" or "resting" on the page. This explanation accounts for the second two lines of the stanza and the "Eider-Duck" reference. The pen expresses its gratification for being used as the poetic voice instead of continuing as just another feather in the Eider-Duck. This interpretation breaks from the view that the gun is physically guarding the head of the poet, but it accounts for the confusion caused in an argument such as Weisbuch's where the poet is the narrator and the reader is left confused. The fourth stanza turns the poem into a very perplexing riddle. By looking at the variant writing of Dickinson's poem 161, the image of the feather pen becomes obvious as a poetic device

for Dickinson:

A feather from the Whippowil
 That everlasting sings -
 Whose Galleries are sunrise -
 Whose Stanzas, are the Springs -

Whose Emerald Nest - the ages spin -
 With mellow - murmuring Thread -
 Whose Beryl Egg, what School-Boys hunt -
 In "Recess," Overhead.

This poem, similarly, alludes to the art of poetry writing. The pen is a "feather from the Whippowil," that holds "everlasting" creative power. The feather "sings" poetry whose "Galleries," and "Stanzas" are about nature. Dickinson insinuates that a poem is an "Emerald Nest," hiding the treasure of the "Beryl Egg" which "School-boys hunt for." The poem, like "My Life," is a clear riddle. Looking back now at the fourth stanza it is clear that the narrator feels it better to be a quill pen "guarding" the poems of its poet/master than to be just another feather in the "Eider-Duck's" breast.

To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
 None stir the second time -
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
 Or an emphatic Thumb.

On the fifth stanza, Robert Weisbuch makes this observation: "The foes are unspecified, like the life-gun and the master. We can consider them as night thoughts, repressed fears and memories . . . Whether we give the foes this psychological interpretation or not, the life-gun acts protectively and, as before, violently to prevent any challenge to its master" (1972). But, if we do specify the "foes" as Dickinson's poetic subjects, then the significance of this stanza changes dramatically. It is a transitional point in the poem where the riddle is fully presented to the reader. The poet leads us to believe the poem is linear and these are "night thoughts" of the gun. But the fifth stanza breaks with the first four stanzas and leaves the reader with the last eight lines which truly resound with the violence of Dickinson's style. The "foe" is the beauty of nature the poet beholds and it is also the "foe" to the pen/gun which acts on the will of the poet to kill these

objects of beauty.

This is Dickinson's poetic conflict. She knows the poet has the power to perceive nature, but in doing so, she kills. The "Yellow Eye" and the "Emphatic Thumb" conjure images of the Vesuvian shotgun blast and the poet's malign intent towards her subject.

The final stanza completes the riddle. It is the most perplexing and overanalyzed part of the poem. Some have said it is Dickinson's admission that she cannot be free without her lover. Others have said that the stanza is a confession of her dependency on God for immortality, and that her poetry is only as immortal as art (Regan). Indeed, it does read as a confession of dependency, but it seems that the pen/gun is dependent upon the master/poet for the power to kill. Just as a gun can only be fired by someone with free will, the same is true for the pen. It can only be used by a free living being, a mortal.

Though I than He - may longer live
 He longer must - than I -
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without - the power to die -

The "I" in this stanza is the pen or the poetic voice that is narrating. "He" is the poet/master. Looking at the first line it is then apparent that the pen and poems of the poet will "live" longer than the poet because they are inanimate objects not subject to physical death. The second line describes the dependency of the pen, for these objects can only come to life through the living will of the poet. The pen and the poem "have but the power to kill," or the "art to kill" in the variant reading (Johnson 1955). The pen/voice can exercise the destructive act of poetry writing, the "art to kill," but "Without - the power to die -." This suggests once again the dependency of the pen and the "non-mortal" state of its existence. Looking back at "A feather from a Whippowil" we see that Dickinson does feel that poetry, like the pen, is "everlasting," and that only the artist dies.

Dickinson recognizes the power of poetry and she sees that it can be destructive. Her weapon is the pen loaded with language. It takes the life of her subjects, twists them and examines them so thoroughly that they are no longer beautiful. This is exemplified in another of her poems about the art of writing poetry:

Essential Oils - are wrung -
 The Attar from the Rose
 Be not expressed by Suns - alone -
 It is The gift of Screws -

The General Rose - decay -
 But this - in Lady's Drawer
 Make Summer - When the Lady lie
 In Ceaseless Rosemary.

We see from this, one of Dickinson's best known poems on vocation, that the beauty is the "Attar" extracted from the rose. For her to have this beauty, to possess it and make it immortal, she must kill it. The poetry—"the gift of Screws," extracts its immortal fragrance and leaves the rose to "decay."

Paradox is central to Emily Dickinson's poetry. She knows that perception annihilates nature. Perhaps Dickinson sees nature as sacred and for this reason feels that her poetry is sacrilegious. In poem 812 she exerts the idea that poetry "As Trade had suddenly encroached Upon a Sacrament" (Wolff 1986).

"My Life" is widely misunderstood and some feel that its elusiveness in itself renders the poem ineffective. Cynthia Griffin Wolff states that, "one must question whether a poem that presents such difficulties can be considered fully successful. Virtually all readers acknowledge the vigor of this verse . . . If these qualities were accompanied by a greater measure of accessibility, the work would be a full successful endeavor" (1986). Regardless of whether or not the critics find this poem effective, Dickinson obviously intended for it to be cryptic. She masks the lethal power of her poetry under a beautiful and delicate manipulation of the English language, quite aware that it might be "over the heads" of "School-Boys" looking for hidden meanings. As Dickinson stated herself:

A Word dropped careless on a Page
 May stimulate an eye
 When folded in perpetual seam
 The Wrinkled Maker lie.

"My Life" may seem to be just a jumble of words "dropped careless on a Page" as some have complained, but underneath the riddle, the poetic voice, the pen/gun lies as the deadly paradox of Emily Dickinson's language.

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