

**"Do I Contradict Myself?"
Patterns of Tabula Rasa and Sexuality
in Emily Dickinson's no. 754**

"Very well then I contradict myself," claims Walt Whitman as an answer to his own question in part 51 of "Song of Myself". "Singing one's self" being the ultimate cue to explore American transcendentalist poetry of the 19th century, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson it is Walt Whitman who is to be considered as a basis upon which it is safe to build and subsequently, for the sake of argument, analyze the works of Emily Dickinson, from a 21st century male point of view. By introducing distinct manifestations of tabula rasa and determinism in the development of "one's self" I will attempt to investigate the appearance of these seemingly contradictory concepts in Dickinson's "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (754 by the Johnson numbering) with a special attention to love, sexuality, and the seemingly contradictory appearance of tabula rasa and determinism. A preliminary investigation of these concepts is necessary in order to explore their fundamental presence in the poem at hand.

The opposing ideas of the human mind as a "blank slate" or a pre-existent, detached entity constantly appear as a recurring argument on a philosophic level, with a variety of philosophers arguing for and against these fundamental concepts, out of which I will list the most salient ones for the sake of illustration. It was Aristotle who first coined the term 'unscribed tablet' (*On the Soul*, Book III, chapter 4), in opposition to Plato's concept of the spirit with no corporeal manifestation, an opposition to which I will return in the discussion of the Greek levels love, and its Latin equivalents. The idea of the tabula rasa was further developed in the writings of Avicenna and Abu-Bakr, among others, whose works were later incorporated into the Western/Christian canon via St. Thomas Aquinas along with the Aristotelian concept of the blank slate. This notion was fiercely contested by St. Bonaventura, a contemporary of Aquinas and a strong advocate of the Platonic concept of the human mind

as an entity that pre-existed as a celestial body before descending into a material body. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* John Locke reintroduced the blank slate state of the human mind at birth, and that further information, data, and experience are all accumulated later on and processed by the sensory organs, again of later development:

"What is, is," and "It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be," not universally assented to. But, which is worse, this argument of universal consent, which is made use of to prove innate principles, seems to me a demonstration that there are none such: because there are none to which all mankind give an universal assent. (Book I, Chapter 01, 4)

Locke argues against the existence of an innate knowledge that accompanies man from birth, and places perception as the fundamental means by which the human mind receives information. Locke places perception above the senses in importance, as the threshold of thinking and, subsequently, reflection in the human mind:

Perception the first simple idea of reflection. PERCEPTION, as it is the first faculty of the mind exercised about our ideas; so it is the first and simplest idea we have from reflection, and is by some called thinking in general. Though thinking, in the propriety of the English tongue, signifies that sort of operation in the mind about its ideas, wherein the mind is active; where it, with some degree of voluntary attention, considers anything. For in bare naked perception, the mind is, for the most part, only passive; and what it perceives, it cannot avoid perceiving. (Book II, Chapter IX, 1)

Here Locke slightly contradicts himself by stating that the mind 'cannot avoid perceiving' what is there to be perceived, therefore determined to perceive it which, for the sake of my argument, is a perfect fit as far as Emily Dickinson is concerned. The Lockean empiricism, as a counterbalance, was answered in the form of the determinism theory of Thomas Hobbes, who argues for an inherent mental content in the human mind, predominantly selfishness - a flaw that is predetermined and granted. Again, these seemingly contradictory notions can be traced at several points in the works of Emily Dickinson and in the poem at hand, where the poet treats the idea of mental growing and development of the person through levels of corporeal physical and ultimately sexual manifestations, a concept which I will investigate at

a later point. The clash of the two ideas resurface in Dickinson's poem through her mention of the 'Owner' in line 3: "The Owner passed — identified —".

In regards to the 'Owner', a dash follows, than the word 'identified', followed by another dash. It is hard to determine who identifies who in this scenario. Identifying herself with an 'owned' object, Dickinson deals with the contradictory nature of possession (i.e. to possess and to be possessed), and to possess a firm point of reference, who can "carry her away" (line 4) and make use of the 'Loaded Gun' that sits there, idle, inert. With the question of identification raised in the first stanza, signs of Dickinson's "Master poems" can be traced. Many of her poems begin with addressing a "Signor", a "Sir", a "Master", or simply "He", the identity of which is never certain. Examples include, according to the Johnson numbering, the poems 315, 848, 865, 203, and 640. The breathless immediacy of the word 'identified' (inserted between two dashes) reflects on that. Emily Dickinson had many 'masters' during her life, male tutors, supporters, and friends, who all had a profound effect on her life and writing, such as Leonard Humphrey and Benjamin Franklin Newton in her youth, or Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Otis Phillips Lord in her later days. Along with that, Emerson and Shakespeare can be counted among her 'literary masters.'

According to this interpretation it is the presence these "Owners", that contributed significantly to the tabula rasa that is the poetry of Emily Dickinson, by stimulating her "sensory experiences" (in the Lockean sense) principally through extensive correspondence. The subsequent, rapid, and surprising nature of the death of these "masters", the death of her dog Carlo, as well as her mother's illness contributed to her ceaseless fascination of mortality and her own alleged immortality. This, in all, "determined" (in the Hobbesian sense) Dickinson's life and poetry.

One possible interpretation of the last stanza of 754 is a reflection on her inability to die, while forced to witness the passing of everyone who once was dear to her. The "loaded

gun" metaphor serves as an alleged guilt in this connotation to anyone in her surrounding, friend or foe: "On whom I lay a Yellow Eye — / or an emphatic Thumb —" (stanza 5, lines 23-24). However, the image of the gun is 'loaded' with sexual content which, just like in the poem, is ready to burst to such an extent, that even the mountains echo its voice. The discourse on sexuality in the 19th century and especially in a Puritan America was far from legitimate (one only needs to think of the adversities of Walt Whitman after the publishing of *Leaves of Grass*). To gain a better perspective on how sexually illicit content can be interpreted in the poem, a further look is required on what Foucault understands as 'we other Victorians', that is a series of contradictory perceptions about love and sexuality that, according to the author, are still prevailing today, to a certain extent.

In the introduction to his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault suggests that sexual representation and, more fundamentally, discourse is a reciprocal after-effect of the repressive nature of sexuality in western society (Foucault 11-13). In chapter I of *The Repressive Hypothesis (The Incitement to Discourse)* Foucault further argues for the necessity of a verbal and visual representation of sexuality in both high and low culture (19-21), as a reaction to legal and Christian indoctrination. The repressive nature of sexuality and its subsequent discourse had to surface in different manners or, in other words, generally human and natural desire that is ultimately and culturally repressed at such a broad scale will require and in a long run will find a way to ventilate, whether through action or, as in the case of Emily Dickinson, through creation. In the second chapter (*The Perverse Implantation*) Foucault distinguishes three major factors according to which sexuality was and had been judged and interpreted by: canonical law, Christian pastoral, and civil law:

They were all centered on matrimonial relations: the marital obligation, the ability to fulfill it, the manner in which one complied with it, the requirements and violences that accompanied it, the useless or unwarranted caresses for which it was a pretext, its fecundity or the way one went about making it sterile, the moments when one demanded it (dangerous periods of pregnancy or breast-

feeding, forbidden times of Lent or abstinence), its frequency or infrequency, and so on. (37)

In this manner these three laws determined and oriented sexuality and the contemporary notion of decency and indecency prior to the nineteenth century. In some ways, these ideas permeate the social and cultural diasporas of later ages as, through prohibition and repression (41). This leads to what Judith Butler calls the subversive forming of identity in the female unconscious, i.e. with regards to female identity in western culture the end does not justify the means, but rather the means justify the end. In other words, constituting identity is a performative act, accomplished by the same expressions and modes of conduct that are rather considered its results (25). It is the same female self-constitution, imposed by cultural conventions, that Emily Dickinson challenges by embodying a phallogentric imagery and questioning its validity in a poetic context, in a self-contradictory way. In this sense (drawing on Foucault and Butler), although objectified and worshipped at the same time, women and more fundamentally sexuality was not to be discussed, a topic which is treated in a rather obscure yet exceedingly harsh manner in 754. In order to collide the 'blank slate' - determinism contradiction with the hidden, illicit nature of sexuality in the poem a systematic approach is required to the threefold hierarchy of love and, inherently, sexuality.

To understand the way Emily Dickinson treats sexuality in the poem it is imperative to trace the three elements and levels of love and the corresponding Greek terms, namely *somatic* love (*soma* as the body), *eros*, and ultimately *agape*. Accordingly, these correspond to the three levels of love in the man as: body (*sexus*), soul (*psyche*), and spirit (*pneuma*). This threefold manifestation of love trickles down throughout the poem, and surfaces in several points. The first and third line of each stanza is in tetrameter, while the second and the fourth is in trimeter, a clean structure maintained consistently all the way through, attesting to Greek and Shakespearean influence.

Sexus is apparent right in the first line with the introduction of the 'loaded gun' metaphor, and the previously discussed issue of ownership and possession in the subsequent lines of the first stanza. However, Dickinson's own uncertainty/frustration/fear (whatever it is, a deep discomfort is apparent with a painful acquiescence towards the end, where the subversion of her identity, in the Butlerian sense, completes the circle; also, the image of the hunting, with the frail "Doe" as prey is very telling, as well as the "Vesuvian smile" - both are full of rage and pain) becomes eminent in the fragmented rhyme scheme which, again, is carried on with flawless consistency. Emerson is a major source in this regard, both in the ABCB pattern and in the extensive use of slant rhyme. Poems such as "Song of Nature", or indeed the threefold treatment of love in "Initial, Daemonic and Celestial Love" are fine all fine examples. Where Emerson uses semicolons and commas, Dickinson uses dashes. In the 4 middle stanzas all the rhyming lines (the second and fourth) are half/slant rhymes: "Doe / reply", "glow / through", "head / shared", and "time / Thumb". Only in the first and last stanzas do the lines rhyme 'properly': "Day / away" and "I / die".

Apart from the first stanza, all the second lines end with a dash, whereas in the last stanza there are two dashes. This eminent build-up leads up to the crescendo of the final stanza, and together with the breathless urgency of the lack of punctuation, the continuity caused by the dashes and the alternation of syllable number an accelerating speed of a sexual intercourse permeates the poem. One only needs to read it out to feel the tension. The tension, however, is broken by the only mark of punctuation in the poem: the comma at the end of the last but one line, after the word "kill". This serves as a reminder of what follows, i.e. the lack of "power to die", much like the vague sense of emptiness after an orgasm. The same orgasmic allusion is provided by the "gun" itself and the simile in lines 11-12: "It is as a Vesuvian face / Had let its pleasure through —". In this sense, the poet can give, but cannot take. Initially, all the previously discussed examples treat love as sex, moreover they do so with sex and

orgasm in the masculine sense of the word, i.e. ejaculation. It is the first step in which Dickinson enacts the role of the embodiment of a phallogocentric culture. Thus *sexus*, physical love, or the love for the sake of possession appears in the poem.

The next level, *eros*, or love through attraction appears at several points, and puts Dickinson's affection towards the "Owner" in a different perspective. Possession itself, in this case, is somewhat altered. The moment of identification is emphasized with the word being placed between two dashes in the third line; it is followed by "And carried Me away —". This line initiates a pattern which, again, is followed consistently all the way through: any reference to herself or the "Owner" is spelled with a capital letter. In lines 5 and 6 it is immediately a plural form: "And now We roam in Sovereign Woods — / And now We hunt the Doe —", a mutual relationship is established. This is repeated in lines 7, 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, 21, 22, and 23. *Eros*, contingent on attraction, or a "cordial light", as in line 9, is, by definition passionate love, sensual desire and longing, a stronger emotion than *philia*, which is brotherly love. According to Plato, however, *eros* does not necessarily incorporate sexuality; it can be purely emotional, i.e. Platonic; the appreciation of beauty itself in someone (as discussed in the *Symposium*). This same appreciation reappears in the second stanza with the image of the hunt ("through Sovereign Woods —" with capital letters, every place, every time), in the fourth stanza with the image of guardianship and vigil at night (which is a better comfort than a "Deep Pillow"), the same defense turned into offensive stance in the fifth stanza (emphasis on "I'm deadly foe" between two dashes). The element of taking away one's life is only mentioned here, whereas it explicitly appears in the last stanza. By then all affection is gone, as the separation between "owned" and "owner" becomes apparent with the evident difference in their expected life. The stanza is broken up by five dashes, in every line but the third, where that fateful comma is to be found. With that, only the third and last level of "love" is left to investigate and trace in the poem.

The third level of love, that is *agape*, is connected to the third aspect of the human mind: the spirit, or the *pneuma*. The *pneuma*, unlike the soul (*psyche*) is detached from the corporeal body, the husk, whereas the soul, in this sense, is inextricably attached to it. This follows the Platonic idea of the pre-existent spirit, against that of the "blank slate", both of which, at the level of the *agape*, or love for love's sake, are apparent in the poem. The usage of the past perfect tense in the first line sets the scene, as if the poem itself, and the "life" described in it were viewed in retrospect, i.e. it is something finished, yet it cannot be left behind, the poet cannot break away. The moment of identification is again crucial for this. It is where the poet experiences epiphany, the point where the contradiction is first revealed (the nature of the "Owner" as the sensory experience and the "gun" as the "blank slate", full of potential), although she reveals it for the reader in a different manner i.e. through the construction of the poem, the system of the dashes, the rhyme pattern, and the frame. The fourth line and the comma in line 23 form a frame by which the poem reflects on itself. "And carried Me away —" is the mark: this is the starting point of the journey, from where the *eros* starts and leads to a climax, which fails to come. The comma breaks the circle only to serve as a reminder that now, by the last stanza, the tabula rasa is full, yet the last line remains with the fact that nothing had come to its end, as there is no 'power to die', no period, no full stop, only a dash. The "loaded gun", by definition, is determined to this open end.

As previously stated and as it appears in the poem, by love the poet can give, but in a subversive manner (in the Butlerian sense), can only take away life. The frame formed by the first and last stanzas and more importantly by the moment of identification and the comma: these manage to bring together the contradictory tenets of determinism and the tabula rasa. By this Dickinson reaches the *agape*, where she stands as a loaded gun, loving to love, "without the power to die", or much like Whitman in his "Song of Myself", she is "large" enough to "contain multitudes", inhibiting the in-between, the mid-space between the two genders which

is, by rational standards, uninhabitable. This closely corresponds to the Blakeian cycle of innocence - experience - innocence through experience, with the third state being the *agape*.

A similar comparison immediately springs to mind in the form the last stanza of "The Celestial Love" by Emerson:

Love's hearts are faithful, but not fond,
Bound for the just, but not beyond;
Not glad, as the low-loving herd,
Of self in others still preferred,
But they have heartily designed
The benefit of broad mankind.
And they serve men austerely,
After their own genius, clearly,
Without a false humility;
For this is love's nobility,
Not to scatter bread and gold,
Goods and raiment bought and sold,
But to hold fast his simple sense,
And speak the speech of innocence,
And with hand, and body, and blood,
To make his bosom-counsel good:
For he that feeds men, serveth few,
He serves all, who dares be true. (118)

Here Emerson achieves something strikingly similar to the layering of the levels of love in Dickinson's 754, only on a larger level, namely not through a cycle of three successive poems. The parallels for *sexus*, *eros*, and *agape* are to be found in "The Initial Love", in "The Daemonic Love", and in "The Celestial Love" respectively. In the passage quoted above, and indeed in his three poems Emerson treats the patterns discussed previously in 754, the contradiction in the first two lines of the stanza, as well as incorporating the essence of "containing multitudes" in the Whitmanian sense in the last two lines which, perhaps, can be considered as resolving the said contradiction.

Through a complex layering of images and a cyclical logic Emily Dickinson manages to incorporate the struggle of the tabula rasa with the inexorable determinism, also by commenting on the contradictory existence of the woman in regards to contradictory nature of the discourse on sexuality. The diverse discourses of love serve as a viewpoint

mechanism, much like the "transparent eye-ball" (8) of Emerson. By the threefold manifestations of love the poet acutely comments on the presence of the woman through inherent, formally active yet performatively and ultimately impotent enactment of masculinity, a bitter mockery on her status life, in her family, and on a phallogocentric world. In 754 it is ultimately "very well" that Emily Dickinson "contradicts herself".

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