

## The Language of Dogs: *Mythos* and *Logos* in Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>

MATTHIAS BAUER

Emily Dickinson's attitude to myth and mythology is an elusive subject. The reader scanning the index of Richard Sewall's comprehensive biography,<sup>2</sup> for example, will perhaps at first rejoice at the number of references under "myth" and "legend." None of these items, however, refers to the role of mythical stories in Dickinson's reading and intellectual development. Instead, all the passages indicated deal with the "legendary" aspects of her own life, culminating in Sewall's quoting a letter by Mabel Loomis Todd written in 1881: "It is a lady whom the people call the *Myth*. . . . She has not been outside her own house in fifteen years. . . . She dresses wholly in white, & her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful."<sup>3</sup> But even though biographical material as regards Dickinson's concern with myth may be scarce, Sewall's information is not entirely irrelevant. Emily Dickinson's seclusion from the world, the "myth" of her life, may have more to do with her attitude towards myth or sacred story than meets the eye. To learn about this, however, one has to look at the poems themselves, where one is confronted with a mystery far greater than that of a particular social habit.

It can be taken for granted that Dickinson was familiar with classical mythology, and even more so with the great stories of the Old Testament. While her knowledge of Latin and of classical literature in general was considerable,<sup>4</sup> it is no exaggeration to say that the Bible had always been the foremost reading matter in the Dickinson household.<sup>5</sup> Emily Dickinson never chose to treat a particular myth extensively (with the exception, perhaps, of Eden), and explicit allusions to mythical stories are much rarer in Dickinson than, for example, in Robert Browning or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose work she knew well.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, when the presence of myth is not merely regarded as a question of

subject-matter or historical costume it can be recognized as an essential feature of Dickinson's poetry. The ground appearing under the surface of experience is time and again described in terms which link it, by way of allusion, with the great mythical stories, notably with the Garden of Eden and with Orpheus. Myth comes in, so to speak, with the words chosen for a personal experience of immediate, overwhelming impact.<sup>7</sup> The hallowed matter, accessible to those who are endowed with finer means of perception, may and must be told, and the way in which this is done decides about its truthfulness. In the following, one remarkable aspect of the relationship between mythical experience, rational response and language in Dickinson's poetry will be examined: the fact that dogs have much to do with this relationship.

Dogs do not abound in Dickinson's poetry; they are much rarer than, for example, birds, bees, or butterflies. Nevertheless, in several poems the homely figure of the dog has a very special function to fulfil with respect to *mythos* and *logos*. It appears as a companion of the speaker where events in the natural world (which includes human consciousness) become transparent for deeper, archaic, original levels of meaning ("antiquiest" is the word Dickinson uses in "Further in Summer than the Birds," 1068). In these poems (in particular 186, 500, and 520) the dog, being able to perceive, understand, and communicate, acts as a mediator between the ordinary and the extraordinary; it helps to disclose and identify the mythical or even religious dimension of the speaker's experience.

By way of contrast, however, it seems useful to discuss first a poem in which the dog has a very different part to play: in poem 1317, a persiflage of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, the dog serves to characterize as mere myth what in the book of Genesis figures as an awe-inspiring example of God's power.<sup>8</sup>

Abraham to kill him  
 Was distinctly told —  
 Isaac was an Urchin —  
 Abraham was old —

Not a hesitation —  
 Abraham complied —

Flattered by Obeisance  
Tyranny demurred —

Isaac — to his children  
Lived to tell the tale —  
Moral — with a Mastiff  
Manners may prevail.

All the sentences are complete but, like telegraphese (and many nursery rhymes), extremely terse. Thus Dickinson contrives to tell the story in eight lines of five or six syllables, adding a "Moral" which purports to make the biblical event timelessly relevant to the lives of children and adults alike. To Roland Hagenbüchle, in this poem the essentially Christian virtue of obedience is perverted into its very opposite.<sup>9</sup> In his view, Abraham's following the divine order violates a superior commandment, the democratic principle of humanity.<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that Hagenbüchle perhaps takes the poem somewhat too seriously and, upon a different level, not seriously enough.

The speaker apparently claims to tell the story as it was handed down from Isaac and his children. This version, however, differs considerably from the account in Genesis. For example, the biblical statement that "God did tempt Abraham" (Gen. 22:1) is completely left aside. Indeed, the whole event is never taken quite seriously and seems to be told with a wink right from the beginning. It is as if the supposed story-teller's name, Isaac, had been taken as a hint to treat the tale in a rather ridiculous vein.<sup>11</sup> Dickinson's choice of words confirms this impression. The God of this poem (alias "Tyranny") is by no means to be feared like the God of the Old Testament. He can be managed quite easily since he is amenable to flattery. Accordingly, Abraham is not obedient but shows "obeisance," which, as a "bodily act or gesture" (*OED* 3.) is a different thing altogether. The apparently archaic use of the word "demurred" (8) underlines that the event is treated as an outdated story. Abraham and the "Urchin"—the capital "U" drawing attention to the first syllable, "Ur"—seem to belong to a prehistoric age. This version of the story can be moralized, like a myth, but it cannot be taken seriously as an example of man's confrontation with a God who surpasses his comprehension.

The "Moral" points out that the "Tyranny" of this poem never was God but was and is man-made. "Manners," just like the word "Moral," reduces the whole event to the level of social correctness and renders it quite harmless. This is again confirmed by the choice of words with its exaggerated use of alliteration: "Moral — with a Mastiff / Manners may prevail." The word *mastiff* is derived from Latin *mansuetus*, which in turn goes back to *manus*;<sup>12</sup> its etymology thus denotes a dog that has been tamed or "accustomed" (*suetus*) "by hand"; similarly, *manners* is derived from *manus* by way of *manuarius*.<sup>13</sup> This process of taming by hand is also implied in "flattered," which probably first meant "to flatten down, smooth" and "to stroke with the hand, caress," a sense still current in French *flatter*<sup>14</sup> and implied in King Lear's words about his evil daughters, "They flattered me like a dog."<sup>15</sup> The god of this poem is one who can be handled easily; like a big, domesticated dog he may seem fierce but in fact he wouldn't hurt a fly.

The "Moral" reads exactly as if a fable had been turned upside down: it is not the animal kingdom that provides us with lessons for our lives but a story from the earlier history of mankind is taken to be of didactic value with respect to our behaviour to beasts. Moreover, in view of Dickinson's well-known predilection for word-play, I do not think it beside the point to regard the choice of the word "Mastiff" as a transformation of *Master*, a suggestion underlined by the echo of the "er" sound in "Manners." Thus attracted to the sound of the words, however, we are called upon to regard "Manners" as a purely human standard, the rules of erring man. The topsy-turvydom of God being taken for a dog is, of course, also a matter of words, since "dog" is "God" turned round, and was used, as the *OED* confirms, in the place of "God" in profane oaths.<sup>16</sup> (Compare the still current expletive "doggone," a euphemistic alteration of "God damn[ed]".) The "Mastiff" is certainly to be seen against this dog/god background, and when we listen carefully to the "Mastiff" that has replaced a *Master* (or *Ma-stir*), we come to realize that one of Dickinson's satirical thrusts is directed against inflexibility and dogmatism of whatever kind.

Some thirty years before Dickinson wrote her poem, Søren Kierkegaard published a kind of meditation on the story of Abraham and Isaac. To Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, the story was either to be dismissed

as ridiculous or it was to be taken deeply seriously as an example of the never-to-be-comprehended paradox of faith. Kierkegaard lashes out at contemporary preachers who, in an all too facile manner, insist on God's substituting a ram for Isaac and forget, for instance, all about Abraham's painful three-day ride.<sup>17</sup> In any case, Abraham's behaviour cannot be an example for our daily lives. Dickinson seems to share Kierkegaard's aversion to the moralization of this deeply disturbing biblical story. In her poem, however, the seriousness of the event has to be inferred *e negativo* from the satiric version she presents.

Dickinson's main point seems to be the unmasking of a self-made divinity<sup>18</sup> that does not really demand the sacrifice of the beloved as an act of love (as the New Testament God demands it of himself).<sup>19</sup> The harmless, moralized religion of her own time, as it was propagated, for example, by Unitarian preachers,<sup>20</sup> is exposed as sheer mythology.<sup>21</sup> (Moreover, it contrasts sharply with "The Bumble Bee's Religion" of poem 1522, in which the "little Hearse like Figure" [1] of the dead bumblebee may "The vanity divulge / Of Industry and Morals / And every righteous thing" [4-6].) At any rate, the fate of an ancient sacred story seems to depend on what is made of it; a sacred story degenerates to mere myth—in Sir Thomas Browne's words, becomes "μυθικόν, that is made up or stuffed out with fables"<sup>22</sup>—when it is treated as such. As Dickinson stresses in poem 1545, however, it may serve to express a genuine truth about the natural world, human life, and God, when it is told differently: "The Bible is an antique volume / Written by faded Men" (1-2) as long as the stories are treated like shadows from the past. "Had but the Tale a warbling Teller" (13), that is to say, would the story be told vividly and with melodious clarity,<sup>23</sup> it would have a magnetic effect upon "All the Boys" (14).<sup>24</sup> In Sidney's words, the "forcibleness or *energeia* . . . of the writer" turns an old story into "a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner."<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \*

Where myth is not dead and past but belongs to present experience reason is not excluded. The "warbling teller" as a model of Dickinson's own poetic persona<sup>26</sup> strives to know and understand. This is where

the dog comes in again. While in poem 1317 it appears as a deity who acts quite irrationally but may be tamed, Dickinson elsewhere presents the dog as a help for gaining access to mythical knowledge. This ambivalence coincides with the traditional image of the dog as a representative of the passions and lower instincts and as a faithful companion whose perceptiveness makes it possible to find out or track down what otherwise remains hidden.<sup>27</sup> Specific aspects of this tradition are reflected in poem 500, in which myth, knowledge, language and the humble but crucial role of the dog in these matters are discussed:

Within my Garden, rides a Bird  
 Upon a single Wheel —  
 Whose spokes a dizzy Music make  
 As 'twere a travelling Mill —

He never stops, but slackens  
 Above the Ripest Rose —  
 Partakes without alighting  
 And praises as he goes,

Till every spice is tasted —  
 And then his Fairy Gig  
 Reels in remoter atmospheres —  
 And I rejoin my Dog,

And He and I, perplex us  
 If positive, 'twere we —  
 Or bore the Garden in the Brain  
 This Curiosity —

But He, the best Logician,  
 Refers my clumsy eye —  
 To just vibrating Blossoms!  
 An Exquisite Reply!

In the first part of the poem, the speaker witnesses a hummingbird's visit to her garden.<sup>28</sup> This summary, however, rationalizes an event presented in terms of sheer wonder, culminating in the "Fairy Gig," which locates its rider in the realm of the supernatural and fabulous, the land where Queen Mab in her chariot is "Drawn with a team of little atomi / Over men's noses as they lie asleep" (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.4.57-58). The last line of the third stanza is marked by a rather abrupt change. With the disappearance of the bird the rhyme scheme is interrupted,

and the sudden shift from the ethereal music-maker to the prosaic "Dog" is quite a bit of an anticlimax. The question with which the poet and her dog "perplex" themselves, "If positive — 'twere we," concerns both their own reality (if it were positively we who saw and heard this) as well as the reality of their experience (if we can be positive that we saw and heard this). The specific or momentary natural event blends with a mythical one, as the Garden (twice capitalized) may be one born(e) "in the Brain," that is, it may be (imaginatively) brought forth by the mind as well as kept in it, remembered from time immemorial. The capitalized "Curiosity" helps us identify this Garden as Eden, where, of course, the desire to know for certain, to be positive, had such fatal consequences. In the words of poem 503, the question is whether "Eden[']s — a legend — dimly told" (l. 14) or whether there is an actual remembrance of how "Brooks in Eden — / Bubbled a better — Melody" (9-10).

One might perhaps think that Dickinson is holding "logic" up to ridicule by making a dog its foremost representative, a being that is known for its instinct rather than its power of reason. But then the speaker calls the dog's answer "exquisite," and I doubt that she is just being ironic here, especially since the dog's perceptiveness is contrasted favourably with her own "clumsy eye." The mythical event has had a real, perceivable effect upon nature, just like "Orpheus' sermon" in poem 1545. The bird was quite literally endowed with a moving force: "just vibrating Blossoms" are the dog's evidence for the existence of what now has withdrawn to "remoter atmospheres." That seemingly hybrid being, the dog-logician, embodies the idea of perceptiveness in the sense of keen natural understanding and heightened sensitivity to movements that escape duller minds.<sup>29</sup>

Dickinson in this poem, too, takes advantage of the playful force of words to make her point. If the Dog is the best logician, he must be a philo-logist, too. For instance, if halting and irregular verse is called doggerel, it seems quite appropriate that the Dog makes his first appearance in that part of the poem which bears the closest resemblance to it. Dickinson, as we know from her letters, was nothing averse to dog Latin,<sup>30</sup> and I suspect that "Cur-iosity" is one of the reasons for the dog to become a logician.<sup>31</sup> *Cur* of course means "why" and is

appropriate to the logician who enquires after causal connections. The connection is supported by the Dog's answer being "exquisite," which as a Latin word (*exquisitus*) means "attentive to every detail"; as it is derived from *exquiro*, "to ask about, inquire into."<sup>32</sup> And yet the Dog's logic is "exquisite" rather than merely "inquisitive"; it is rational in the sense of being beautiful rather than merely rationalistic. The "Platonism" of this concept is not as vague as it may at first appear. Thus in the *Republic* (376a-b) Socrates points out the philosophical nature of the dog, observing that its sympathetic reaction rests on the criterion of knowledge.

But Dickinson, one might argue, calls her dog a "Logician," which is not exactly the same as "philosopher" and perhaps an even more surprising epithet. If there is a tradition, however, of referring to the philosophical nature of the dog there are equally familiar models for calling a dog "the best Logician." In Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, Orion (the dog-star) defends the dogs against Autumn's defamatory remarks on "those foul-mouthed mangy" animals.<sup>33</sup> Orion reminds Autumn of the fact that "*Chrisippus* holds dogs are Logicians" (698); for when a dog "commeth where three broad waies meet" (701) and has ascertained that the game he is after has neither gone the first nor the second road, "Without more pause he runneth on the third" (704). This logical deduction may be of the simpler kind but the story had nevertheless been used by the sceptical philosopher Sextus Empiricus as a major argument supporting his critical view of the reliability and superiority of human perception.<sup>34</sup> In a similar context it appears in Montaigne's "Apologie de Raymond Sebond,"<sup>35</sup> and it is this context of scepticism, I think, which casts further light on Dickinson's praise of the dog-logician because it coincides with the speaker's awareness of her own perceptual limitations. In the contemplation of the wonderful appearance and disappearance of the hummingbird's "Fairy Gig," the human speaker realizes that she has but a "clumsy eye" (20) while her dog, obviously in far closer contact to what is going on in the natural world, "Refers" (18) her to the subtle effects she has overlooked. The dog literally carries her "eye" (and her *I*) back into the "Garden" as a place of origin;<sup>36</sup> his logical inference from effect to cause is a re-ply, a folding back<sup>37</sup> upon the original movement of the bird and the "dizzy

Music" (3) of its "wheel." The "best Logician," endowed with superhuman qualities, himself becomes a mythical being while he testifies to the reality of a miraculous event.

One may thus recognize in Dickinson's poem a movement from mythical experience to rational reflection and back to myth, to a fusion of *mythos* and *logos* in the figure of the dog-understander. This concept itself is part of a mythological tradition. In gnostic literature, for example, the dog was held to be a symbol of the *logos*, partly because of his discriminating faculties (judging the living and the dead), partly because his constellation, the Cynosura, was regarded as responsible for the creation of earthly plants just as the divine *logos* created the heavenly plant, man.<sup>38</sup> It is quite improbable that Emily Dickinson was conversant with, let us say, Hippolitus's attack on the Gnostics (from which some of these views are known). As the examples from Nashe and Sextus Empiricus have shown, however, the tradition in which her Dog's role as the "best Logician" is prefigured is by no means an esoteric one.

The affinity of *mythos* and *logos*, as well as of myth and wordplay, is made explicit in poem 1602:

Pursuing you in your transitions,  
 In other Motes —  
 Of other Myths  
 Your requisition be.  
 The Prism never held the Hues,  
 It only heard them play —

The poem was enclosed in a letter, but I think its addressee, "you," cannot be identified with a particular human being. The person addressed is rather elevated to a superhuman level in that he or she is regarded as a source of light which the speaker, who compares herself to a "Prism," tries to capture. Dickinson plays on the sound of "Prism" when she says that it "never held the Hues": her speaker cannot be a "prison" to the "you." This elusive, ever-changing, spectral personage can only be seen in the motes that reflect it. The paronomasia "Motes" and "Myths" serves to point out that mythical stories, like specks of dust in a ray of light, reflect an inscrutable, mysterious substance. They have

to change as the light changes, and as they are made of words they do so by means of verbal transformation. When the "Hues" of the "you" are "heard" to "play," the synaesthetic transformation is brought about by likeness of sound. When the "you" is pursued in changing notes this is done by means of changing *mots*,<sup>39</sup> a tacit play on words confirmed by the musical sense of the word *transitions*, which makes it clear that the "other Motes" are also "other modes" into which the original melody is transposed.

In this poem, as in poem 500 or in 1545, there is a demand for the right kind of sensibility or susceptibility. It is the tone of the words, the vibrating of the blossoms, the warbling of the teller that makes all the difference when truth is pursued. The finest nuances may decide whether old stories just belong in "antique" volumes<sup>40</sup> or whether they come alive. Moreover, a characteristic feature of Dickinson's attitude to myth is to be noticed. The reference to "Myth" goes together with the concept or image of pursuit. This is underlined by the synaesthetic "hues," which, in connection with the prism, refer to colours but which also, as they are "heard," denote the cries of the pursuer. At the same time, there is no clear-cut distinction between the pursuer and the pursued: the speaker is both the one who is "pursuing you" and the one who listens to the hues which seem to pursue her. (Simultaneously, she is the medium, the prism which reflects the whole process.)<sup>41</sup>

\* \* \*

The image of the pursuit introduces another mythical role of the dog, in which it may represent the desires and longings of the speaker's heart. Thus in poem 186 the dog is identified, by means of a quotation from the beginning of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as the anguish of the soul despairing or nearly despairing of salvation:

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

It should not tease you —  
 By your chair — or, on the mat —  
 Or if it dare — to climb your dizzy knee —  
 Or — sometimes at your side to run —  
 When you were willing —  
 Shall it come?  
 Tell Carlo —  
*He'll tell me!*

This poem was also sent in a letter; its recipient is unknown. As in poem 1602, however, it would be pointless to try and identify its addressee. It is just “you” to whom the soul turns in its anguish and to whom it wants to send her very pain and restlessness, the whimpering “Hound within the Heart.” Nevertheless, biographical facts help us understand the poem, in particular the last lines, “Shall it come? / Tell Carlo — / *He'll tell me!*” The fact that Carlo is the name of Dickinson’s own dog<sup>42</sup> tells us about the way in which communication from the mysterious “you” is expected. This is confirmed rather than disproved by a possible allusion to the extraordinary dog of that name in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (published 1853).<sup>43</sup> The allusion would strengthen the feeling of comic relief in Dickinson’s poem but it would also emphasize the perceptiveness of her canine messenger: the dog will be the one who rightly senses the answer of the unknown “thou” (“Thee,” line 6) or “you” and will be able to communicate it to the speaker. He will indeed bear a message of relief to her who is haunted by the “little Hound within the Heart.”<sup>44</sup>

The dialectical or even paradoxical relation between pursuer and pursued is expressed by the apparent contradiction between the fact that the whining and barking hound “will not go” and the statement in the very next line that it is tied up so that it *cannot go* (“Would you *untie* it, were you me —”). The very fact of being on leash seems to make the dog all the more ready to turn upon the self. Only when it is untied may it act as a go-between and thus, paradoxically, bring about a bond which eases the strain. Dickinson again uses the “material” of language, letters and sounds, to make her statement evident when she chooses an anagram of *unite*, “*untie*,” for the possible act of liberation. The twofold image of the dog in this poem—as an embodiment of inner pain

and desire and as a messenger and go-between—corresponds to the ambivalent nature traditionally observed in the dog.<sup>45</sup> (A similar image is used in poem 236, where the speaker sends a message of devotion to a divine personage by means of “*His little Spaniel.*”)<sup>46</sup> Like the speaker’s dog in poem 500, who serves as a kind of link between her and the magic event in the natural world, Carlo in poem 186 obviously speaks the language that enables him to create a link between the speaker and the mysterious personage to whom the “little Hound” of the first stanza might be sent. And just as the “best Logician” in poem 500 alludes to a literary or philosophical topos, Dickinson transforms a classical motif when she speaks of the dog’s “bark and start” in the context of a desired union with the person addressed. The motif is summed up by Eli Edward Burriss:

When the poets Vergil and Horace describe magic rites which are intended to bring lovers together, the lover’s dog usually barks—a sign of the approach of his master and of the success of the rite. This is, of course, a literary conceit, based on Theocritus.<sup>47</sup>

In Dickinson’s poem no magic rites are performed and the barking dog is found “within the heart”; but nevertheless, as it seems to me, the allusion is strong enough to bring out more clearly the situation of a lover who longs for her absent beloved.

\* \* \*

The dog appears in yet another role in Dickinson’s poetry when it serves to identify the mythic features of the poet’s persona. This is the case in poem 520, in which a common event turns out to be a rather unusual one:

I started Early — Took my Dog —  
 And visited the Sea —  
 The Mermaids in the Basement  
 Came out to look at me —

What at first seems to be an ordinary morning stroll to the seaside is at once, however mockingly, transposed to a mythic sphere by means

of the curious mermaids coming out to look at the speaker and the anthropomorphic "Frigates — in the Upper Floor" of stanza 2 who "Extended Hempen Hands" (6) in order to catch her like a mouse (7). The "Basement" and the "Upper Floor" serve to personify the "Sea" who is paid a visit. When the mythic dimension of the event is established, the dog of line 1 will be recognized as part of it. In the third stanza, the speaker's meeting with the "Tide" is described in terms allusive of ravishment or sexual encounter:

But no Man moved me — till the Tide  
Went past my simple Shoe —  
And past my Apron — and my Belt  
And past my Boddice [sic] — too —

The goddess who governs the tide and is, moreover, the origin of the morning dew (cf. lines 13-14: "And made as He would eat me up — / As wholly as a Dew") from which in turn the pearl is born (19-20: "Then my Shoes / Would overflow with Pearl") is Selene-Luna, a deity traditionally blended with the figure of Artemis(-Hekate)-Diana.<sup>48</sup> The chaste huntress is, mythologically speaking, closely related to the goddess who governs female cyclicity and fertility. Her standard attribute is the dog.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the dog is a constant companion of the moon (as we know from the moonshine's own mouth in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).<sup>50</sup>

Only at the end of the poem the goddess-speaker seems to have the command of the tide that her role demands (23-24: "And bowing — with a Mighty look — / At me — the Sea withdrew"). In the lines before, the huntress, in a characteristic reversal of roles reminiscent of poem 1602, is pursued like a "mouse"<sup>51</sup> (17: "And He — He followed — close behind"). The fact that in poem 520 Dickinson refers to the mythic intercourse between Selene and Okeanos is confirmed by the very similar subject of poem 429, in which, at first, the commanding nature of the female moon seems much more firmly established:

The Moon is distant from the Sea  
And yet, with Amber Hands —  
She leads Him — docile as a Boy —  
Along appointed Sands —

In the third stanza, however, this clear-cut identity and assignment of roles is questioned or even reversed when “the Amber Hand” is suddenly attributed to the “Signor” and the supposedly female speaker identifies with the sea (“Obedient to the least command / Thine eye impose on me —”). In poem 284, the “Sea” is addressed as a person (“Thee”), “toward” whom the speaker forgets “her own locality.” “Thee” here implies the reference to a Greek god (*theos*): a few lines later Amphitrite is mentioned, the nymph who was courted and pursued by Poseidon.<sup>52</sup>

The Luna-Diana figure as a persona of the female poet seems particularly appropriate for the dialectics of chastity and ravishment, command and submission, which characterizes her encounter with the “Man” (poem 520, line 9). While in both poems, 520 and 429, there is a strong erotic element in these meetings, they also refer to a confrontation of the speaker with a mythical power greater than herself, a natural force which is not only personified but regarded as divine. This is confirmed, for example, by the appellation “Signor” as a thinly disguised *Lord*.<sup>53</sup> In Dickinson’s poetic strategy, human experience is located within a mythic frame of reference which is transformed or revitalized in such a way that it may become a means of representing the numinous character of the experience.

This is not quite the same as the Christian allegorization of myth which transformed Artemis-Selene into a representation of the chaste Mother of God or into the Church as the Bride of Christ.<sup>54</sup> Neither is it the same as the philosophical allegorization of myth such as Giordano Bruno’s interpreting the encounter of Actaeon and Diana, in which the pursuer becomes the pursued, as representing the dialectics of knowledge, i.e. the fact that the learner is as much sought out by the object of his curiosity as it is sought by him.<sup>55</sup> But Dickinson’s method in the poems discussed can be regarded as a poetic analogue to these patterns of transformation. They provide a background to the speaker’s self trying to account for her own meaning and identity. And this is where the crucial figure of the dog turns up once more (822, ll. 9-12):

Adventure most unto itself  
The Soul condemned to be —  
Attended by a single Hound  
It’s own identity.

As we have seen in poem 520, the dog or hound is indeed a means of identification. It may be an attribute helping us to learn about the role of the person it accompanies. In poem 822, it is the one trustful companion of the soul on its way between its origin and final destination ("traversing the interval").<sup>56</sup> The soul is "condemned to be" an "Adventure most unto itself," or, while it is "condemned to be," it is yet "Adventure most unto itself"; it selects, in the words of poem 303, "her own Society."<sup>57</sup> What seems remarkable is not so much the fact that the soul has an identity but that this identity is called a "Hound." The soul's consciousness of itself requires, in this poem, that it is attended by the most sensitive and watchful of Dickinson's animals, the dog. In the context of Dickinson's other dog figures, this may, paradoxically, suggest that the identity of the soul consists in its ability to sense and detect what remains hidden to human perception. This means, in a kind of circular movement, the "discovery" (12) of "How adequate unto itself / It's properties shall be" (9-10). This adequacy is related to the most "profound experiment" (7), the experience of death (6, 3). "Identity" is the dog which (or who) helps explore this border region. As poems 428 and 520 with their reversal of roles between the moon and the sea have shown, however, the identity by which the soul is attended may be a precarious one and may be gained only when it is lost or put at risk. When it appears as "the little Hound within the Heart," it is deeply painful.

In a letter written in 1862 to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson tries to explain why she leads such a retired life (the kind of life, we remember, that led to her being called "the Myth"). "Of 'Shunning Men and Women,'" she writes, "they talk of Hallowed things, aloud — and embarrass my Dog — He and I dont object to them, if they'll exist their side."<sup>58</sup> A little earlier she had written to Higginson: "You ask of my Companions Hills — Sir — and the Sundown — and a Dog — large as myself, that my Father bought me — They are better than Being — because they know — but do not tell — . . . ."<sup>59</sup> They "do not tell" that is, like those who talk about "Hallowed things" so loudly that they (as well as the talkers) cease to exist, who empty the myths of their sacred truths or turn a dark, inscrutable personage into a harmlessly tyrannical mastiff. It is as if the biblical injunction, "Give

not that which is holy unto the dogs" (Matt. 7:6) had to be turned around to become true. When God has been made a dog, Dickinson's message seems to be, one should pay attention to what dogs may have to communicate.

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität  
Münster

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Professor Inge Leimberg for her encouragement, criticism and numerous suggestions. Thanks are also due to Dr. Christiane Lang-Graumann and Professor John R. Kayser for valuable material.

<sup>2</sup>Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>Sewall 216.

<sup>4</sup>See Vincent J. Cleary, "Emily Dickinson's Classical Education," *ELN* 18 (1980): 119-29.

<sup>5</sup>Sewall 694.

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Sewall 671 and 678.

<sup>7</sup>For a theoretical discussion of this affinity, see Ernst Cassirer, "Sprache und Mythos: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen" (1925), *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs* (1956; 8th ed. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994) 71-158; e.g. 104-05 (extraordinary experience), 112 (the original connection of verbal consciousness and mythical or religious consciousness) and 127 (mythical hypostasis of the word).

<sup>8</sup>Quotations are from the edition by Thomas H. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>Roland Hagenbüchle, *Emily Dickinson: Wagnis der Selbstbegegnung* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1988) 252: "Die urchristliche Tugend Gehorsam wird hier in ihr Gegenteil verkehrt."

<sup>10</sup>"Dem Gedicht zufolge verletzt Abrahams Befolgung des göttlichen Befehls ein höheres Gebot: das demokratische Prinzip der Menschlichkeit" (252).

<sup>11</sup>Isaac's name, as Cruden's concordance to the *Authorized Version* explains (p. 708 in the 14th ed., London, 1848) and as Emily Dickinson surely knew, means "laughter."

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (ODEE), s.v. "Mastiff."

<sup>13</sup>ODEE, "manner<sup>1</sup>."

<sup>14</sup>Quotations from OED, "flatter," v.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>15</sup>*King Lear* 4.6.96-97. Quite surprisingly, commentators seem to take it for granted that Lear compares his daughters to flattering dogs; see, for example, Kenneth Muir's

note in the Arden edition (London: Methuen, 1972). The use of the singular, however, together with the older meanings of the word *flatter*, indicates that Lear also compares himself to a dog who has been tamed by flattery (cf. his "I smelt'em out" in 4.6.103).

<sup>16</sup>OED *tdog*, n.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>17</sup>See especially towards the end of the introduction to the "Problemata," called "Preamble from the Heart" in Alastair Hannay's translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 81-82. Kierkegaard's works were not yet translated when Dickinson wrote her poem. *Fear and Trembling* (1843) is not mentioned as a source, however, but as a contemporary intellectual foil. Sewall 699 makes a somewhat distorting reference to Kierkegaard in connection with Dickinson's poem.

<sup>18</sup>Since Dickinson's poem was published only in 1945 and received together with or even after the great works of the modernists, it seems legitimate to compare it with Thomas Mann's treatment of the story in *Joseph and His Brethren*, where Abraham's task is discussed among Joseph and his father Jacob. As in Dickinson's poem, the story is told with a wink. Thus Joseph ingeniously stresses that the point about God's order was not Abraham's obediently fulfilling it but to make him realize that his God is different from all others (notably from Melech, the bull king of the Baalim). He is different in that he abhors such practices as the sacrifice of the first-born. God, in Joseph's version, for a moment plays the role of a cruel animal monster only to correct the more effectively man's conception of him. Accordingly, as in Dickinson, the irony is not so much directed against God but against man's idea of him.

<sup>19</sup>Cf., for example, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . ."

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, the passage from William Ellery Channing's ordination speech (1819) as quoted in Ursula Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1970) 202-03.

<sup>21</sup>Different though this reading of the poem may be from Hagenbüchle's, I would agree with his calling its tone "cynical." Especially since *cynical* is derived from κῶων, "dog," it is an appropriate term for the ridicule of a god that has literally gone to the dogs. The word *cynic*, however, has always been ambiguous, expressing contempt for dog-like behaviour but also a positive kind of identification with characteristics of the dog; see e.g. the scholium on Aristotle quoted by Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism* (1937; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1967) 5. Dickinson seems to have the simplicity and poverty of the cynic in mind (cf. Dudley 98) when her speaker applies the term to herself in poem 178; she realizes that all her "priceless Hay," which she had carefully stored up, has suddenly gone: "And from a thriving Farmer — / A Cynic, I became" (ll. 11-12). The cynic chooses to lead a dog's life, so to speak, on the margins of human society, rejecting all that is illusory or contradicts the *logos*. See the article on "Kyniker" in *Der kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike*, ed. Konrat Ziegler and Walther Sontheimer (1975; München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979) 3: 399-400.

<sup>22</sup>*Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1981) 35 (l.vi.). In Webster's 1828 dictionary (New York: Johns Reprint, 1970), "mythic" is glossed as "fabulous."

<sup>23</sup>Cf. OED, "warble" 2.a. and b. *Warble* may often be "a jocose substitute for *sing*" (OED 2.a.), and in transitive use it may mean "To express or celebrate in song or verse" (3.b.).

<sup>24</sup>The crucial role of the "Warbling" voice of the poet is confirmed by the fact that Dickinson noted down no less than thirteen different alternatives in her draft, where she opts for "thrilling" after having noted down "typic — hearty — bonnie — breathless — spacious — tropic — warbling — ardent — friendly — magic — pungent — [again] warbling — winning — mellow —" (Johnson ed., vol. 3, p. 1067). Cf. Charles R. Anderson's comment: "The point of her attack is not the Old Testament but its expounders." *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (London: Heinemann, 1963) 19.

<sup>25</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1973) 138 and Shepherd's note (226); 113.

<sup>26</sup>On Dickinson's role as the "warbling teller" of "a nineteenth-century American Gospel," see Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, "Tender Pioneer": Emily Dickinson's Poems on The Life of Christ," *American Literature* 59 (1987), repr. in *On Dickinson: The Best from American Literature*, ed. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1990) 139-56.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, the chapter on the dog in Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1973) 58-66, and *Der kleine Pauly* 2: 1245-49. For the ambivalence of the English lexeme *dog*, see Lilo Moessner, "Dog—Man's Best Friend: A Study in Historical Lexicology," *English Historical Linguistics* 1992, ed. Francisco Fernández, Miguel Fuster, and Juan José Calvo (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994) 207-18.

<sup>28</sup>When the female pronoun is used for Dickinson's speaker, this does not mean that the "I" of her poems is always a woman.

<sup>29</sup>Anderson's conclusion seems too reductive: "These two intruders then proceeded to argue the problem of appearance versus reality, and the positivist won out over the idealist in a logical Q.E.D." *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* 115.

<sup>30</sup>A delightful example is letter 34 in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958), which was actually published as a "Valentine" in *The Indicator* (Amherst College) 2 (7 February 1850) and contains both dog Latin ("Magnum bonum, 'harum scarum,' zounds et zounds, et war alarum, man reformam, life perfectum, mundum changum, all things flarum?") as well as doggerel verse ("The Dog is the noblest work of Art, sir. I may safely say the noblest — his mistress's rights he doth defend — although it bring him to his end — although to death it doth him send!").

<sup>31</sup>There is a tradition of exchanging the syllables *cur* and *dog*. See for example, the explanation of the word *condog* (i.e., *concur*) in the OED.

<sup>32</sup>*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982). On Latinisms in Dickinson's style, see Lois A. Cuddy, "The Latin Imprint on Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Theory and Practice," *American Literature* 50 (1978), repr. in *On Dickinson* 92-102.

<sup>33</sup>*A Pleasant Comedie, called Summers last will and Testament, The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow, repr. ed. F. P. Wilson, vol. 3 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) l. 648. The passage is reprinted in *The Literary Companion to Dogs*, ed. Christopher Hawtree (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993) 71-74.

<sup>34</sup>*Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes (Outlines of Pyrrhonism)* l.60, 64-72. It is a sign of the popularity of the story that Nashe did not draw directly from Sextus Empiricus. See McKerrow's commentary in *The Works of Thomas Nashe* 3: 428-31.

<sup>35</sup>Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Alexandre Micha, vol. 2 (Paris: Garnier-Flammariion, 1979) 128-29; cf. Hawtree 78-79 (Florio's translation).

<sup>36</sup>Cf. *OED* "refer" v. I.2.: "To trace (back), assign . . . to a person or thing as the ultimate cause, origin, (author,) or source"; and also Webster's (1828) second definition of "refer": "To reduce as to the ultimate end"; with an illustrative quotation from Bacon: "You profess and practice to refer all things to yourself."

<sup>37</sup>Cf. the etymological note in Webster: "L. *replico*; *re* and *plico*, to fold, that is, to turn or send to . . ."

<sup>38</sup>See C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1968) 162.

<sup>39</sup>Webster (1828) "mot": "Primarily, a word." Cf. the parallel to poem 500 with its "remoter atmospheres" (my emphasis). The affinity is underlined by "exquisite" (500, line 20) and "requisition" (1602, line 4).

<sup>40</sup>Cf. poem 403, ll. 15-16: "But Ararat's a legend — now — / And no one credits Noah — . . ." Just like poem 1317, however, this statement does not question the truth of the mythical story itself. What is deplored is its current ("now") lack of credit.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. the end of the first part (Sonnet 26) of Rilke's *Sonette an Orpheus* (*Werke*, vol. 2 [Frankfurt: Insel, 1980] 503-04): "O du verlorener Gott! Du unendliche Spur! / Nur weil dich reiend zuletzt die Feindschaft verteilte, / sind wir die Hörenden jetzt und ein Mund der Natur." ("O you god who is lost! You infinite track! / Only since ravaging hatred dispersed you at last / Are we the listeners now and a mouthpiece of nature.")

<sup>42</sup>Carlo is first mentioned in her letter no. 34 (February 1850; cf. n30 above).

<sup>43</sup>Carlo is a creature of discriminating taste. For example, Mrs. Jamieson tells her hungry afternoon guests "how intelligent and sensible the dear little fellow was; he knew cream quite well, and constantly refused tea with only milk in it." Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford / Cousin Phillis*, ed. Peter Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) 124. The allusion is not ruled out by the fact that Dickinson seems to have owned her Carlo at least since 1850.

<sup>44</sup>Another, however indirect, mythical reference may be to the Prometheus figure who is, in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's translation of Aeschylus's "Prometheus Bound," punished by heaven's (or Zeus's) "wingèd hound" (Shelley I.i.34; E. B. Browning, *The Complete Works*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1900] vol. 6, l. 1211; Aeschylus's "πτηνὸς κῶων"). The hound is an image of the anguish of the soul, as well as of a jealous God, in Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," written some thirty years after Dickinson's poem (which remained unpublished until 1945).

<sup>45</sup>See above n27.

<sup>46</sup>See lines 12-15: "Say — that a little life — for His — / Is leaking — red — / His little Spaniel — tell Him! / Will He heed?" Either the Spaniel is the messenger who is entreated to "tell Him," or the speaker herself is the faithful dog that dies for its master.

<sup>47</sup>Eli Edward Burriss, "The Place of the Dog in Superstition as Revealed in Latin Literature," *Classical Philology* 30 (1935): 32-42; here 36. References are to Horace, *Epodon* V.58; Vergil, *Eclogae* VIII.107 and the second idyl of Theocritus.

<sup>48</sup>See e.g. the article on Diana in *Der kleine Pauly* 1: 1512; Hugo Rahner, "Mysterium lunae," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 63 (1939): 311-49, 428-42; 64 (1940): 61-80, 121-31, especially 64 (1940) 61-68.—In a far more direct way "reality" and "mythology" are blended in the dog figure by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in "Flush or Faunus." See *The Complete Works* 3: 175.

<sup>49</sup>Only one of many literary sources is Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 379 E.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. 5.1.249: "this dog [is] my dog." In Dickinson's poem 663, the moon replaces the dog accompanying figure.

<sup>51</sup>For "mouse" as a girl who is being pursued cf. the term "mouse-hunt" in *Romeo and Juliet* 4.4.11. Cf. also *OED* "mouse" 3.a. and b. and Richard Riegler, *Das Tier im Spiegel der Sprache* (Dresden: C. A. Koch, 1907) 63-64.

<sup>52</sup>On this poem (in the context of Dickinson's mythical "thou") see Hagenbüchle 219.

<sup>53</sup>The fact that Dickinson describes religious experience in paradoxical, erotic terms (and vice versa) shows that she deliberately connects herself to a tradition characterized by such formulations as Donne's "for I / Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee." *Holy Sonnets* XIV, ll. 12-14, quoted from *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (1929; Oxford: OUP 1971) 299.

<sup>54</sup>See Rahner, e.g. 313-14.

<sup>55</sup>See the fourth dialogue of part 1 in Giordano Bruno, *De gl'heroici furori. Des fureurs héroiques / De gl'heroici furori*, ed. Paul-Henri Michel (Paris: Société d'édition "Les belles lettres," 1954).

<sup>56</sup>On the poem, see Charles R. Anderson, "The Conscious Self in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," *American Literature* 31 (1959), repr. in *On Dickinson* 33-51, 50. I am not quite sure whether Dickinson's "identity" may be equated with "the Self," as Anderson does at the beginning of his essay (33).

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Lothar Cerny's discussion "Emily Dickinson's 'The Soul Selects Her Own Society': An Approach through Political Imagery," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 19 (1986): 112-28.

<sup>58</sup>Letter 271.

<sup>59</sup>Letter 261.