# Form and Content in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to reconcile two competing camps of thought about poetry. According to the first camp, there is an intimate relationship between the form and content of many poems. *What* they say is bound up with *how* they say it. As a result, they could not have said what they did in just any other way. According to the second camp, it is possible to paraphrase poems, including the sort just described. We can say what they say in different words. We can even express their content in ordinary prose.

We encounter both camps in scholarship on Emily Dickinson's poetry. First, there are those who claim her jarring punctuation, unexpected line breaks, and slant rhymes are crucial for understanding the meaning of her poems. Her unusual formal choices are connected to her challenges to Victorian and Puritan ideas about order, rationality, and tradition. She would have compromised her subversive message had she proceeded in a more conventional fashion. [1] Second, there are those who maintain Dickinson's poems are amenable to paraphrase. We can say what she says in other words. In fact, much of the critical literature on Dickinson involves doing precisely that. It expresses in straightforward prose what she expressed in poetry.

In this chapter, I will argue we can embrace both camps. Poems can exhibit *both* unity of form and content *and* paraphrasability. What I say will have broad applicability, but I will focus on Dickinson to make my case. Her poetry is a good test because her form is especially tightly connected to her message. Thus, her poems are especially resistant to paraphrase. Yet, before I turn to Dickinson, it is necessary to say more about the two key concepts in play, "unity of form and content" and "paraphrasability."

## 2. Unity of Form and Content

There are at least two ways to understand unity of form and content, a weaker and a stronger way. [2] The stronger way involves taking unity to refer to *inseparability*. A work's form and content are inseparable if we cannot prize them apart without distortion. That is, we cannot understand the content of the work in isolation from the form in which it occurs. And it is not possible to pair the content with a different form without distorting its meaning.

The weaker way of understanding unity of form and content involves construing unity as *harmony*. [3] The assumption here is that it is possible to distinguish a poem's form and content. Once we distinguish these two elements, we can see them as standing in various relationships with each other. They can complement each other, giving the work a kind of inner harmony. Or, they can fail to fit with each other, creating internal tension and discord.

Harmony between form and content can arise in several ways. Perhaps the most obvious is onomatopoeia. It is a poetic device in which the sound made by uttering the words is connected to the subject matter of the poem. For an example, consider the final line of the

first stanza of Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass." The repeated s-sound resembles the hissing of a snake, which is the poem's subject.[4]

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally rides —
> You may have met Him — did you not
> His notice sudden is —
> (J986/F1096)

Form-content harmony has a different basis in "By Homely Gift and Hindered Words." Here the increasingly shorter line lengths reflect the diminution to nothingness that the poem discusses.[5]

> By homely gift and hindered Words
> The human heart is told
> Of Nothing —
> (J1563/F1611)

Other rhetorical devices, such as punctuation, can also be used to create inner harmony. For instance, at the end of "After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes," Dickinson employs a series of dashes to slow the tempo. The *ritardano* effect mirrors the experience of freezing described on the semantic level.[6]

> This is the Hour of Lead —
> Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons, recollected the Snow –
> First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —
> (J341/F372)

Thus, we can see how some of Dickinson's poems exhibit unity in the weaker sense of *harmony*. Proving that they exhibit unity in the stronger sense of *inseparability* is more difficult. I will take this task head-on shortly. But first let me turn to the other main issue in this chapter, paraphrasability.

## 3.  Paraphrasability

Paraphrase has been a contentious issue since the rise of New Criticism. It was a dogma of the movement that poems cannot be paraphrased, and many opponents balked at exactly this point.[7] Although the popularity of New Criticism has waned, the battle over paraphrasability is not over. It continues to be attacked and defended on many fronts.[8] Even so, I side with those who think the dispute is largely terminological. It arises because the rival factions do not agree about what paraphrasing involves.[9]

All parties accept that to paraphrase something is to say the same thing in a different way. The question is how to parse "saying the same thing." One option is to construe it broadly. On this view, you manage to say the same thing as someone else only if you produce the same *total effect*. To provide an adequate paraphrase, you must not only express the same propositional content as the other person. You must also capture the emotional power, imagistic force, etc. of his or her words.

Opponents of paraphrase often assume this stringent standard when defending their view. Cleanth Brooks maintained that paraphrases fail because they miss a poem's emotional force.[10] Max Black made the same point when explaining why he thought metaphors resist paraphrase.[11] More recently, Gordon Graham has argued paraphrases cannot capture the image provided by a poem.[12] Finally, Angela Leighton has maintained that paraphrases miss the non-propositional element of poems that is central to their significance.[13]

Defenders of paraphrasability such as Peter Kivy tend to concede the substantive point here. They allow that our best paraphrases often cannot capture *everything* poems have to offer. What Kivy denies is that paraphrases ought to be able to do such things. The purpose of a paraphrase is not to preserve the total effect of the original poem. It is only to present the poem's propositional content (if the poem has any, and not all poems do).[14]

At this point, a second question arises. Suppose we grant that paraphrasing is only about capturing propositional content. It is still necessary to determine how exhaustively and how precisely this content must be captured. Does an adequate paraphrase have to provide all the propositional content of the original? Or just some? Does it have to convey the exact same propositional content? Or just more or less the same?

Here too opponents of paraphrase often embrace the more restrictive option. For instance, Peter Lamarque claims paraphrases fail because there is no such thing as synonymy at the fine-grained level. Any change in wording—or even in punctuation or grammar—produces a slightly different meaning.[15] Others argue that paraphrases cannot succeed because the meaning of some poems is open-ended. There is no limit to what they suggest and imply, or to what we can get out of them. Thus, it is simply impossible to say everything these poems say.[16]

Once again, defenders of paraphrase tend to concede the substance of the opponent's position. A paraphrase may not be able to capture all or exactly the propositional content of a poem. Especially if this includes all the propositions the poem might bring to mind. But defenders of paraphrase counter by saying the bar should not be set so high. Success should not require reproducing every statement a poem might be taken to say or to imply. Nor should it require doing so with perfect precision. The reason for lowering the bar is that a paraphrase is not supposed to be a *substitute* for the original.[17] As Brooks himself concedes, it is only supposed to be a "scaffolding" that helps us understand the original.[18] A paraphrase only has to say more or less what the original poem says on one interpretation to serve this purpose.

In this chapter, I will adopt this final, modest view of paraphrase. I will hold that an adequate paraphrase only has to capture the propositional content and not the total effect of the poem. In addition, it does not have to reproduce all the propositional content. It only has to present approximately what the work says on one acceptable interpretation.

## 4. The Tension between Paraphrasability and Unity of Form and Content

We can now return to the questions raised at the outset of the chapter. Is paraphrasability consistent with unity of form and content? Can a particular poem exhibit both of these features?

At first pass, the answer seems to depend on how we think about unity of form and content. If we interpret unity in the weaker way as *harmony*, the two theses appear consistent. The inner harmony of a poem may be hard to capture in a paraphrase. But harmony tends to contribute to a poem's total effect, not its propositional content. Since a paraphrase only has

to capture propositional content, the fact that a poem exhibits harmony of form and content will not make it resistant to paraphrase.

Think again about Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass." It exhibits harmony of form and content because the hissing sound of the words fits the subject matter of a snake. But the hissing sound of the words only makes the description of the snake more striking. It does not convey any new claim about the snake, or about anything else for that matter. So, if a paraphrase failed to reflect the hissing sound, it would not be inadequate.

On the other hand, if we construe unity as *inseparability*, it does seem inconsistent with paraphrasability. If the form and content of a poem are inseparable, we cannot change the form without distorting the content. Yet, a paraphrase necessarily involves changing the form. It is an attempt to say the same thing *in a different way*. So, it seems a paraphrase necessarily involves distorting the content. Of course, not every paraphrase will distort the content so much that it fails even approximately to capture the meaning of the original. But this will be a constant danger.

The rest of this chapter will focus on the tension between paraphrasability and unity-as-inseparability. I will argue that it is possible to resolve this tension. My strategy will be to examine why inseparability arises when it does. For once we understand the source of inseparability, we will be able to see why it is consistent with paraphrasability after all. A close look at Dickinson's works will guide us along the way.

## 5.   Unity of Form and Content in Dickinson's Poetry

Dickinson scholars often praise her poetry because it exhibits unity of form and content in the weaker sense of *harmony*. Her unorthodox punctuation, meter, and rhyme schemes fit well with her unorthodox ideas. For example, Stanley Williams writes, "In her half-rhymes, her irregularities of speech and rhythm, her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience; the awkwardness in her poetry became a metaphor of life itself."[19] In Miller Budick's words, "Disorder, therefore, is conveyed in Dickinson's poetry not only imagistically and thematically. It is represented linguistically and visually as well."[20] Finally, as James McIntosh puts it, Dickinson's greatness lay in her ability to find "appropriate styles and forms for representing an untethered inner life."[21]

Yet, some scholars make the stronger claim that the form and content of Dickinson's poems are *inseparable*. For instance, Wendy Martin says Dickinson *had* to express her subversive views in an unconventional form. "She abandoned standard meter and rhyme, threw conventional grammar out the window, and forced her readers to work to understand her meaning. *The traditional structures of poetry were incapable of conveying the ideas she wanted to express.*"[22] Roland Hagenbüchle makes a similar point. He asserts, "Emily Dickinson's poetry is characterized by an element of deliberate indeterminacy, *which alone can do justice to the mystery of existence.*"[23] Such thoughts give rise to Sharon Leiter's thesis that Dickinson's works defy paraphrase.

> "Where paraphrase is possible," wrote the great 20th-century Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, "the sheets have not been rumpled. Poetry has not spent the night." Anyone who has attempted to paraphrase a Dickinson poem, to reduce it to a simple clean thought, knows that her sheets are indeed rumpled.[24]

I am inclined to agree with Martin, Hagenbüchle, and Leiter. It seems right to say Dickinson had to write how she did. A conventional approach would have compromised her anti-conventional message. Yet, it is not exactly clear why, and Martin *et alia* do not say. So what we need is an argument.

One possible starting point is Martha Nussbaum's idea that form is not always neutral.[25] Form can shape and condition content. More importantly, it can contribute to content. Using a particular form can express judgments and claims. It can imply the acceptance or rejection of a particular worldview. From Nussbaum's idea, it follows that the form of a poem can stand in various logical relationships to its content. In particular, the form can be logically consistent or inconsistent with the content. The claims implied by the form can fit with the poem's intended message or conflict with it.

Inconsistencies or conflicts between form and content hold the key to *inseparability*. To see why, think about the impact of form-content conflicts on ordinary conversation. Imagine a person who terminated a spat with you by repeatedly yelling, "I don't care what you think about me!" In such a situation, we might wonder whether the person believed the content of his or her outburst. If they did not care, why are they yelling? Or, suppose someone said to you, "A person ought to use gender-neutral language in his speech." Here it would be reasonable to doubt whether the person grasped what he or she was saying. If the person stood behind gender-neutral language, why use masculine pronouns when referring to a person in the abstract?

In sum, conflicts between form and content in ordinary conversation generate incoherence. They make us confused about what people are trying to say and make us doubt whether people stand behind their utterances. This point applies to poetry as well. If poets use a form that is inconsistent with their message, they undercut themselves. They prevent themselves from successfully communicating with their readers and listeners. We can derive a rule about inseparability from this observation. *The content of a poem is inseparable from the forms in which it can be consistently expressed.*

For an example of how this rule works, we can think about Dickinson's relationship to hymn form. Hymn form refers to 4-3-4-3 or "common" meter combined with iambic stresses and an *xaya* rhyme scheme. The lines are also usually end-stopped rather than enjambed.[26] Hymn form dominated Puritan church music in the 17th–19th centuries.[27] In particular, it was the form used by Isaac Watts, whose hymnals were everywhere in New England, including the Dickinson home.[28] Because of hymn form's prevalence in the Puritan church, it came to be associated with Puritan views. The association was so strong that using hymn form came to imply support for Puritan ways of thinking.

Like all members of mid-19th century Amherst, Dickinson imbibed the Puritan tradition. Her poems often traded in Puritan ideas and made use of Puritan imagery. Yet, although she sometimes seems obsessed with hymn form, she frequently departs from it.[29] She often abandons 4-3-4-3 measure and its variants, whereas Watts almost never did.[30] She also more freely uses false rhymes than Watts, who felt the need to make his rhymes exact, especially at the end of his hymns.[31] Finally, unlike Watts, Dickinson does not always end-stop her lines but makes use of enjambment. In fact, she frequently does not even end her lines as the meter demands. She pushes the final word or phrase to the following line where it stands alone.[32]

Why did Dickinson *have to* write this way? The reason, I maintain, is that she was not an unwavering supporter of Puritan ways. She challenged and questioned them as often as she affirmed them. Thus, a sincere and unwavering adherence to hymn form would have been inappropriate. It would have implied a greater allegiance to the Puritan worldview than she actually held. In sum, Dickinson had to write how she did because logical consistency demanded it. She had to depart from hymn form at least some of the time because she would have contradicted herself had she not.

We see a second example of inseparability of form and content if we look at Dickinson's attitude toward the poetics defended by Lord Henry Home Kames. In his *Elements of Criticism*, Kames asserted that the meter and rhyme of a poem should be regularized and "subjected to certain inflexible laws." [33] Grammatical and punctuation rules ought to be observed. In addition, congruence of line and thought breaks ought to be mandatory.[34] Kames defended his rigid prosody on rationalist grounds. He saw a high degree of order and regularity as a sign of rationality. And he viewed rationality, in turn, as synonymous with the good and the beautiful. Thus, insofar as a work aimed for these aesthetic ideals, it ought to exhibit a high degree of order and regularity.[35]

Kames's *Elements* was widely read in 19th century America. For those working in its shadow, using a regimented style came to imply support for his worldview. It suggested tacit agreement with the identity of the rational and the good or beautiful. Dickinson was familiar with the idea. She had studied Kames during her time at Mount Holyoke. But she did not accept the Kamesian position. She saw the world as full of chaos and disorder, but no less beautiful because of it. That is not to say she regarded order as bad, just that she saw goodness and beauty in disorder as well.[36] Thus, it would have been inappropriate for Dickinson to follow Kames's rules. It would have suggested acceptance of the very rationalist worldview she contested. Logical consistency required her to depart sometimes and to some degree from Kames's prosody. She had to make use of nonstandard meter, punctuation, rhyme scheme, and the like.[37]

This account fits what we find in Dickinson's poems. Although they adhere to Kames's rules in some respects, they often do not. We encounter jarring punctuation and unexpected line breaks as well as slant rhymes and offbeat meter. These features led some early critics to lament that she was ignorant of the tradition. Others complained she did not understand the rational basis for poetry or needed a lesson in basic grammar.[38] By my lights, these critics have it wrong. Dickinson did not accidently transgress accepted poetic standards because she was unfamiliar with them. She violated them because she understood them and disagreed with them. Her non-traditional poetics was a consequence of defiance, not ignorance.

## 6.  Case Study: "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain"

I have been arguing in an abstract way that Dickinson's poetry exhibits inseparability of form and content. I now wish to examine a concrete case. Several of Dickinson's poems would do. But one representative example is "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain" (J 280 / F340).[39]

> I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
> And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading — treading — till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through —

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

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

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

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

On the semantic level, the poem describes a failed attempt to make sense of something. Reading literally, it is death in general or a particular person's death that defies comprehension.[40] At first, however, the project seems to succeed. Religious rituals, traditions, and ceremonies provide an orderly framework for processing death. As a result, sense seems to "break through." Yet, no matter how often the rituals are repeated, or how deeply society tries to engrain the traditions, they are not enough. They cannot do what they are being asked to do. They cannot support the weight of explaining death. Unfortunately, there is nothing to replace the orderly framework provided by rituals and traditions. So, when they collapse, confusion and bewilderment reign. Death becomes incomprehensible to the poet.

The poem adheres to Watts's hymn form with some exceptions. It uses common meter throughout. Apart from the last line of the third stanza, which was the conclusion of the poem in its initial printing, it exhibits iambic stresses. The poem also follows the standard *xaya* rhyme scheme. It even uses exact rhymes for all but the final stanza, which employs a slant rhyme. Finally, the poem's punctuation is grammatically nonstandard. Periods have been omitted. The commas and dashes serve rhetorical rather than grammatical or semantic purposes.[41]

The form of the poem mirrors its semantic content in several ways. The strict use of hymn form at the beginning suggests an initial nod toward Puritan ways of thinking. The break from hymn form at the end symbolizes an eventual departure from such approaches. It represents a failure to find them ultimately viable.[42] Similarly, the adherence to a regimented prosodics in the first stanzas implies an initial acceptance of a rationalist ideology. It is a gesture toward the idea that the world is an orderly and comprehensible place.[43] But the failure to follow a regimented prosodics throughout suggests an equivocal attitude toward this idea. The

fact that the most noticeable breaks occur at the end hints that the poet ultimately despairs of rational ways of looking at the world.[44]

Such unity of form and content is an aesthetic virtue. It is part of what makes the poem great. But there is more to the matter. Dickinson did not align the poem's form and content just out of concern for poetic excellence. It was also a matter of logical necessity. Dickinson *had to* write more or less how she did to express the poem's message. She *had to* break in some way from hymn form and from rationalist prosodics. For if she had not—if she had perfectly conformed to Kames's prosodics and perfectly followed Watts's hymn form— she would have tacitly endorsed rationalist and Puritan ways of thinking. But these ways of thinking are what she wished to call into question. They are what she found inadequate to the task of making sense of the world. Thus, an unqualified adherence to hymn form or rationalist prosodics would not just have been an aesthetic defect. It would not just have meant a displeasing loss of harmony between form and content. It would also have resulted in a performative contradiction. Dickinson would have affirmed in how she wrote the worldview she challenged in what she wrote.

Note that this argument does not establish the necessity of *the specific form* of "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain." It does not show Dickinson had to use a non-standard metrical foot at the end of the fourth stanza or a slant rhyme at the end of the fifth stanza. The argument's conclusion is merely that Dickinson had to depart *in some way or other* from hymn form and rationalist prosodics. She had to use *some kind* of non-conventional format. Not necessarily the particular one she did.

## 7.   Paraphrasing Dickinson

The central question of this chapter is whether unity of form and content is consistent with paraphrasability. In other words, can a poem exhibit both of these properties? In the preceding sections, I argued that some of Dickinson's poems exhibit unity. Thus, the question now becomes whether these poems are also paraphrasable. That is, can we express their propositional content in straightforward and literal prose?

I think the answer to this question is yes. We *can* paraphrase Dickinson's poems. Critics and commentators do it all the time. Indeed, my discussion of "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain" included a partial paraphrase. What is perplexing is how this could be so. How could it be that *Dickinson* had to express her unconventional ideas in an unconventional format, but *we critics* can convey the same ideas straightforwardly? How could it be that there are constraints on her form of expression but not ours? It seems one of these two ideas must go. If we want to hold on to paraphrasability, then we should concede Dickinson could have expressed herself in any old way. If we wish to insist Dickinson had to express herself how she did, then we should concede a paraphrase somehow comes up short.

There are a few tempting ways to respond to this dilemma. The first is to say Dickinson faced stylistic restrictions because of the historical context in which she wrote. In 19th century New England, the expression of religious ideas may have frequently occurred through hymn form. So then and there the use of hymn form may have implied support for religious ways of thinking. But we do not make these associations any more. Hymn form has long been divorced from religious content. Poets now use it to express all kinds of other things as well. Thus, the implications and restrictions Dickinson had to deal with do not apply to us today.

There is something to this first line of response. The implications that attach to a particular form often arise because of conventional associations. As a result, when these conventions disappear, so too do the implications. Yet, this point does not explain why Dickinson faced stylistic restrictions but critics do not. For it does not accommodate the intuition that a critic who lived in Dickinson's time and place could have paraphrased her poems. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, for instance, could have supplied a gloss of the poems he published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* in the 1860's. At least, it would not have been incoherent for him to do so.

The second temptation is to say Dickinson faced stylistic restrictions because she was writing poetry and not prose. It might be reasonable in a poetic context to hold that employing a given form implies claims. But the idea seems less plausible in the context of discussing prose. When writing in a particular prose style, we tend not to think we are declaring our allegiance to some ideology. When reading the prose of others—especially if it is academic prose—we rarely consider whether their form implies commitments or claims. Thus, perhaps prose is different from poetry in being unburdened by implications.

I do not think this view of prose is accurate, and I have argued against it elsewhere.[45] More importantly, Dickinson rejects the view. Prose writing has a robust set of connotations in her mind. She associates it with limitation and restriction. In particular, she connected it with the suppression of her voice and perspective. For example, in "They Shut Me Up in Prose" (J613/F445), she links prose with her experience as a child of having been confined to a closet. In "I Dwell in Possibility" (J657/F466), she likens poetry to a house that is more open and expansive than the house of prose. Finally, in a note to her sister in law, Susan Dickinson, she expresses her high estimation of their creative abilities by saying, "we are the only poets, and everyone else is *prose.*"[46]

Thus, Dickinson did not face stylistic restrictions because she wrote poetry rather than prose. She would have faced restrictions on the prose front as well. Since she believed prose implied restrictiveness, it would have been wrong to use prose to pursue her ideal of "circumference"—the project of "embracing life with the most complete and comprehensive perspective."[47] We see this fact born out in her letters. Personal correspondence would ordinarily be an occasion for prose. But Dickinson's correspondence contains poetic elements, including meter, rhyme, and line breaks. Parts have even been published as poetry.[48]

Although these two tempting responses fail, they are on the right track. There is a difference between what Dickinson is doing qua poet and what we are doing qua critics. But the difference is not that we are writing in different genres or historical contexts. It is that we are performing different types of speech acts. Poets are doing something akin to assertion. They are presenting their own views, perspectives, and attitudes about some subject matter. By contrast, when we critics are paraphrasing poets, we are engaging in reported speech. We are conveying what someone else has said rather than expressing positions of our own. These two speech acts—assertion and reported speech—are governed by different norms. Thus, they are encumbered with different restrictions. Let me explain.

An assertion is an utterance in which we claim something holds or is true. It follows that, when making one, we represent ourselves as standing behind what we are saying.[49] We commit ourselves to the accuracy of our statement.[50] For example, if I say, "death defies rational comprehension," I commit myself to the view that death defies rational comprehension.

Reported speech is different. When paraphrasing or quoting someone, we may represent ourselves as standing behind the accuracy of our report. We may commit ourselves to having captured what the original speaker said. Thus, there is a sense in which we are making a kind of assertion. Yet, in reported speech, we do not represent ourselves as believing the content of the original speaker's utterance. We do not commit ourselves to the truth of what the original speaker said. For example, if I state that, "Dickinson said that death defies rational comprehension," I do not represent myself as standing behind the idea that death defies rational comprehension. I attribute this idea to Dickinson. Of course, I may agree with her. But such agreement is not implied by my report of her words.

The fact that in assertions we stand behind what we are saying whereas in reported speech we do not has an important consequence. It entails form-content contradictions can plague assertions but not reported speech. Let me explain why.

In the case of an assertion, a form-content contradiction undermines the speaker's reliability. Because the form of the speaker's utterance implies something that conflicts with the content of the utterance, it calls into question whether the speaker believes the content. It suggests the speaker may not understand what he or she is saying or may not stand behind it. In either case, there is reason to question the speaker's assertion.

Form-content contradictions do not threaten the reliability of someone who reports the speech of another. If a person uses a form that contradicts the content he or she is reporting, this may suggest he or she does not believe the content. But it will not thereby impugn his or her epistemic standing. For a person does not represent himself or herself as believing the content he or she is simply reporting.

An example illustrates the point:

JOHN: A person should use gender-neutral language in his speech.
JANE: According to John, a person should use gender-neutral language in his speech.

The form of John's assertion contradicts its content. His decision to use a masculine pronoun rather than an available neutral term to refer to a speaker in the abstract implies he thinks gendered language is acceptable.[51] Yet, this is the opposite of what he says. Thus, a question arises as to whether John stands behind his assertion and grasps the import of it. Jane's utterance does not suffer from this problem. She also uses a masculine pronoun when referring to a speaker in the abstract. This may signify that she too considers gendered language permissible. But even so, Jane does not thereby contradict herself. For she does not represent herself as believing John's claim that speakers ought to use gender-neutral language. She merely attributes the claim to him.

We can apply this lesson to the case of Emily Dickinson. If Dickinson wishes to asserts a challenge to Puritan ideals in one of her poems, she must use a form that fits this challenge. In particular, she must not use a form, such as hymn form, that would signify support for Puritan ideals. Doing so would imply acceptance of what she wants to question, and so amount to a performative contradiction. Critics intent on paraphrasing Dickinson are not similarly constrained. They can use whatever form they like to report her challenge to Puritanism. By making such a report, they do not represent themselves as endorsing the challenge. So, they do not call their own reliability into question if they use a form that supports Puritan ways.

To summarize, form-content contradictions can plague assertions but not reported speech. So, when a poet such as Dickinson asserts something, she must use a form that fits

her content. By contrast, when reporting a poet's attitudes and beliefs, critics face no such restriction. They do not have to use a form that fits their content. This is the sense in which form and content can be inseparable for the poet but not for the critic.

## 8.   The Conversation Model of Interpretation

A central part of my view is that Dickinson is doing something akin to making assertions. She is setting forth ideas as right or true. She is representing herself as standing behind or endorsing what she says. As a result, her poems contain statements of her beliefs. I base this part of my view on Noël Carroll's conversational model of interpretation. According to Carroll, when interpreting a work of art, we should think of ourselves as engaged in a conversation with the artist. Our task is to figure out what the artist is trying to say to us through his or her work.[52]

There are several ways to challenge my approach here. First, Dickinson often does not seem to be making assertions in her poetry. She seems to be forwarding hypotheses or making conjectures. Thus, she is not presenting the statements we encounter as right or true. She is presenting them as plausible, interesting, or otherwise worthy of our attention. As such, we should not think she believes everything she says. We should allow that she might have doubts about much of what she writes down. One benefit of this interpretation is that it explains why her poetry contains so many contradictions. It is not because she embraces inconsistency or does not understand rudimentary logic. It is because she wants to investigate alternative ways of thinking about her subject matter.

If Dickinson's poetry does not contain assertions, then the worry about form-content contradictions disappears. Even if Dickinson uses a form that conflicts with the content of a poem, it does not undermine her epistemic standing. Of course, it might still lead us to question whether she believes what the poem says. But it does not cast doubt on her sincerity or reliability. For she does not represent herself as believing what the poem says. Once the threat of form-content contradictions goes by the board, my argument collapses. There is no longer reason to think her form must fit her content. She can express her ideas however she pleases.

In response, I concede we should not always interpret Dickinson's poems as containing assertions. She sometimes engages in speech acts that do not involve standing behind what she says. But I do not think we should totally abandon the idea that her poems contain statements of her beliefs. Doing so would make nonsense out of a common practice. Scholars often treat Dickinson's poetry as if it expressed her views. They support their claims that she held a particular belief by quoting or paraphrasing one or more of her poems. If her poems did not contain assertions, if they did not present views she stood behind, this practice would be misguided. The content of her poetry would provide no evidence that she embraced or rejected a particular position. Of course, some scholars might accept this implication. I do not. I believe our interpretive principles generally ought to accord with how we actually proceed. Maintaining that our customary practices sometimes go astray is fine. Holding that we err systematically is a *reductio ad absurdum*.

There is a second way to challenge my application of the conversational model of interpretation to Dickinson's poetry. Even when it does seem best to read her poems as containing assertions, it is not clear we should attribute these assertions to her. For she may not be speaking in her own voice when she writes. Like an actor on the stage, she may be taking on a persona. She may be occupying a character who is performing a speech act, not

performing one herself. So, just as we do not attribute to an actor the claims he or she makes on the stage, so too we should not attribute to Dickinson the claims found in her poems.[53] Indeed, there is good reason to think this approach is correct. In one of her letters to Higginson, Dickinson explicitly says she does not speak in her own voice in her poetry. She writes, "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person."[54]

I believe we ought to take Dickinson at her word here. We should allow that some of the time she is not speaking in her own voice. Yet, the relationship between form and content remains important in these situations. If Dickinson does not speak in her own voice in a given poem, using an inconsistent form does not undermine her epistemic standing. But it does undermine the standing of the "supposed person" in whose voice she is speaking. Returning to the example of an actor on the stage helps here. Suppose while portraying a petulant teenager, an actor screams at the other characters, "I don't care what any of you think about me!" Uttering this line in this way does not prompt us to question *the actor's* state of mind. But it does make us wonder about the mindset of *the character* whom the actor is playing. The intensity with which the claim is expressed suggests the character wants to get it across. Yet, the desire to get the message across makes sense only if he or she cares what the other characters think. And that is the opposite of what he or she says. Thus, it makes sense question whether the character understands and believes his or her statement.

In sum, I believe Dickinson sometimes just wanted to articulate a position without endorsing it. She wanted to call an idea to our attention without having to stand behind it herself. In these cases, she could have used any form she wanted. But also believe Dickinson sometimes wanted to do more than just articulate a given idea. She wanted to assert it. Either in her own voice or in the voice of a hypothetical person, she wanted to forward it as accurate or true. To succeed at this project, she had to attend to form-content considerations. She had to make sure her form and content aligned with each other. If she had not done so, either she or the "supposed person" in whose voice she was speaking would have fallen prey to a self-contradiction.

## 9. The Cognitive Value of Poetry

Granting my picture of Dickinson is accurate, why does it matter? Why is it important to acknowledge she could not have asserted her beliefs in any old way? And why is worth insisting we can nonetheless paraphrase her works? To answer these questions, it helps to set them against the backdrop of the debate over the value of poetry.

One way to defend poetry is the cognitivist route. According to this approach, poetry is valuable because it can educate and instruct. Good poems matter because they can teach us truths about the world around us and about ourselves. They can get us to recognize and accept insights we would otherwise dismiss or ignore.

Critics of the cognitivist position sometimes concede that poems may be able to *give voice* to important truths. But they counter by saying that if we really want to *learn* these truths— if we really want to acquire *knowledge* of them—we are better off consulting other sources. First, poems rarely provide reasons or evidence in support of what they say.[55] Second, as Plato argued in the *Ion*, poets themselves are seldom trained experts concerning the topics they

discuss such that we might be justified in accepting the claims they make on their authority. Thus, or so the objection goes, if we really want to be taught about these matters, if we want to acquire knowledge and not merely true beliefs, we ought to look elsewhere. We ought to turn to philosophy or the various sciences, where we find carefully presented arguments and credentialed experts.

It is at this point that the issue of paraphrase comes to the fore. Defenders of poetry argue that we cannot look elsewhere to learn what poems teach us. For it is not possible to say in other words what poems say. The impossibility of paraphrase guarantees that poems have unique truths to offer us. It ensures philosophy and the sciences cannot teach us what they do.[56]

I do not agree with this view. But I am partial to a moderate version of it. On the one hand, I believe we should accept the possibility of paraphrase. If a poem contains propositional content, then we can articulate it in ordinary prose. There are no propositions that only poetry can express.[57] On the other hand, I believe we ought to embrace the idea lying behind the denial of paraphrase. We should accept that poetry has unique cognitive value. Two considerations lend credence to this idea. One is commonly acknowledged. The other gets to the heart of the present paper.

First, the common point. As noted before, a paraphrase cannot capture all there is to a poem. At best it captures a poem's propositional content. Thus, even a successful paraphrase may miss important things. For instance, it may fail to provide a poem's experiential or emotional meaning. Some of these things are cognitive in nature despite being non-propositional.[58] Consider again "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain." It gives us knowledge of what it is like to have a mental breakdown in the face of death. This experiential knowledge is of cognitive value. For it provides us with a benefit that relates to our mental process, functions, and goals. But it is not reducible to a set of propositions. We cannot express the experiential knowledge we gain here in a set of statements about the world. Reading "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain" may also provide us with a kind of training in how to handle death. This ability, skill, or know-how is of cognitive value. But at least on one theory, it too cannot be reduced to a set of propositions.[59] So here is one way to defend the unique cognitive value of poetry while allowing for paraphrase. We can say poetry's unique cognitive value lies in the non-propositional but nonetheless cognitive elements of a poem that even a successful paraphrase cannot preserve.

The drawback of this response is that it changes the terms of the debate. Opponents frame their objection to the unique cognitive value of poetry in terms of *propositional* content. They claim it does not convey any distinctive *propositional* truths.[60] Proving poetry has cognitive value of a *non-propositional* sort does not meet this challenge.

In this paper, I have developed a response that engages opponents on their own terms. I have argued there are some propositions we cannot assert in just any old way. We may be able to *articulate* or *express* them as we see fit. But we cannot *assert* them—we cannot present them as true or represent ourselves as believing them—however we please. We must abide by certain formal or stylistic restrictions on pain of contradiction. In some circumstances, such

as those faced by Dickinson, these restrictions require the use of a particular kind of poetic form.

This argument does not establish everything defenders of the no-paraphrase thesis might want. It does not prove the unique effability of any particular proposition. It does not prove there are some propositions we can only express in one way. But showing there are some propositions we must assert in a particular kind of poetic form is still an important conclusion. For it secures the indispensable cognitive value of poetry on the narrow terms dictated by its opponents.

**Notes:**

[1] See, for example, E. Miller Budick, *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language: A Study in Symbolic Poetics* (Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 14; Wendy Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33, 41–43; Roland Hagenbüchle, "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1974): 50; James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), 17; David T. Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 1966), 119; Christine Ross, "Uncommon Measures: Emily Dickinson's Subversive Prosody," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 10, no. 1 (2001): 74, 81, 92; Stanley T. Williams, "Experiments in Poetry: Emily Dickinson," in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 255..

[2] See Meyer Schapiro, "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content," in *Art and Philosophy*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 7–13. Owen Hulatt discusses a third way of understanding unity of form and content. He maintains that unity arises when the form of the poem is unobtrusive. In other words, the poet has executed the formal schema at hand in such a way that it does not feel forced but rather flows organically. Owen Hulatt, "The Problem of Modernism and Critical Refusal: Bradley and Lamarque on Form/Content Unity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 1 (2016): 47–59.On this account, Dickinson often intentionally breaks with the ideal of unity of form and content.

[3] "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content," 7.

[4] Kamilla Denman, "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2, no. 1 (1993): 25–26.

[5] Denman, "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," 39.

[6] Denman, "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," 27–28; Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 41; Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson, a Poet's Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 51.

[7] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase."

[8] See Angela Leighton, "About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (September 1, 2009): 168.

[9] Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Updated (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 75–76; Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 106; Jerrold Levinson, "Who's Afraid Of A Paraphrase?," *Theoria* 67, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 8.

[10] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," 184; see also A.C. Bradley, *Poetry for Poetry's Sake* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1901); Lepore, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," 184–85.

[11] Max Black, "Metaphor," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 55, 1954, 293; Max Black, "How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson," *Critical Inquiry*, 1979, 141–42; cf. Richard Moran, "Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force," *Critical Inquiry*, 1989, 90–94.

[12] Gordon Graham, "Aesthetic Cognitivism and the Literary Arts," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30, no. 1 (1996): 3.

[13] Leighton, "About About," 170–71.

[14] Elisabeth Camp, "Metaphor and That Certain 'Je Ne Sais Quoi,'" *Philosophical Studies* 129, no. 1 (2006): 2; Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, 104–6.

[15] Peter Lamarque, "Poetry and Abstract Thought," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (September 1, 2009): 46; Peter Lamarque, "The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning," *Ratio* 22, no. 4 (2009): 398–420; Peter Lamarque, "Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value," in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24–28.

[16] For discussion of this point, see Max Black, "More about Metaphor," *Dialectica* 31, no. 3–4 (1977): 443–45; Black, "How Metaphors Work," 142; Camp, "Metaphor and That Certain 'Je Ne Sais Quoi,'" 6–8; Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," 79; Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry*, 1978, 46n16; David Hills, "Problems of Paraphrase: Bottom's Dream," *Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication* 3, no. 1 (2007): 31..

[17] Christopher M. Bache, "Paraphrase and Paraphrasing Metaphors," *Dialectica* 35, no. 3 (1981): 307–326; Black, "How Metaphors Work," 142; Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," 75; Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, 105–6.

[18] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," 182; Peter Kivy, "Paraphrasing Poetry (for Profit and Pleasure)," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 4 (2011): 367–377.

[19] Williams, "Experiments in Poetry: Emily Dickinson," 255; see also Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, 119.

[20] Budick, *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language*, 14.

[21] McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 17.

[22] Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 33, emphasis added; see also Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 41–43; Ross, "Uncommon Measures," 74, 81, 92; Sharon Leiter, *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (Infobase Publishing, 2007), xi.

[23] Hagenbüchle, "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," 50 emphasis added.

[24] Leiter, *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson*, xi.

[25] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15; see also Antony Aumann, "The Relationship Between Aesthetic Value and Cognitive Value," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, no. 2 (2014): 117–127; Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, 1947, 180; Ernie Lepore, "The Heresy of Paraphrase: When the Medium Really Is the Message," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2009): 196–97.

[26] Martha Winburn England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," in *Hymns UnBidden*, ed. Martha A. Winburn and John Sparrow (New York: New York Public Library, 1966), 130n29; Thomas Herbert Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Belknap Press, 1955), 85; Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 156.

[27] England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 130n29; Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, 56.

[28] Cristanne Miller, "Dickinson's Structured Rhythms," in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 394–95; Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, 74.

[29] England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 131; Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, 55; cf. Judy Jo Small, *Positive As Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme* (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 41–48.

[30] England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 130n30.

[31] England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 129; Miller, *Emily Dickinson, a Poet's Grammar*, 142.

[32] England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 130.

[33] *Elements of Criticism*, ed. Peter Jones, 6th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 2:440.

[34] For example, Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 444–46, 457.

[35] Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 1:27, 1:141-149; 2:722; see England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 140–42; Ross, "Uncommon Measures," 76, 81–82.

[36] Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 41.

[37] Ross, "Uncommon Measures," 81. In one sense, Dickinson does not depart from Kames. She still abides by his central rational principle that form must fit content (Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 386).

[38] R. P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 223; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Preface to Poems by Emily Dickinson," in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 12; Harold Monro, "Emily Dickinson--Overrated," in *The Recognitino of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 121.

[39] For other examples, see "The Mountains Stood in Haze" (J1278/F1225) as discussed by Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet*, 166–67; "Heaven—Is What I Cannot Reach" (J239/F310) as discussed by Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, 117–18; and, finally, "You're Right—The Way is Narrow" (J234/F249) as discussed by England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," 135–36..

[40] Cf. David S. Reynolds, "Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 180.

[41] Miller, *Emily Dickinson, a Poet's Grammar*, 53.

[42] Miller, *Emily Dickinson, a Poet's Grammar*, 116; Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, 118.

[43] Ross, "Uncommon Measures," 81–82.

[44] Susan Miles, "The Irregularities of Emily Dickinson," in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 123–29; cf. Gay Wilson Allen, "Emily Dickinson's Versification," in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 182–83.

[45] Aumann, "The Relationship Between Aesthetic Value and Cognitive Value."

[46] Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Herbert Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 144, L56. For other discussions, see Wendy Barker, "Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,

2002), 78; Ross, "Uncommon Measures," 72; Miller, *Emily Dickinson, a Poet's Grammar*, 145–47..

[47] Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 34.

[48] Erkkila, "The Emily Dickinson Wars," 18; John L. Spicer, "The Poems of Emily Dickinson," *Boston Public Library Quarterly* 8 (1956): 136–41.

[49] John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 64, 66; Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1979), 42; Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 74.

[50] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Judgment and Assertion," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5 (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 385–87.

[51] Renée Jorgensen Bolinger, "The Pragmatics of Slurs," *Noûs*, March 1, 2015, 1–24.

[52] Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 97–131.

[53] See Monroe C. Beardsley, "Intentions and Interpretations: A Fallacy Revisited," in *The Aesthetic Point of View*, ed. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 188–207; Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," 103–6; Daniel O. Nathan, "Art, Meaning, and Artist's Meaning," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Mathew Kieran (Wiley, 2005), 287.

[54] Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 412, L268; Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 49.

[55] For discussion, see Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 1 (2002): 3–26.

[56] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," 185; Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, 94, 112.

[57] For discussion and some possible exceptions, see Camp, "Metaphor and That Certain 'Je Ne Sais Quoi.'"

[58] Mark W. Rowe, "Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 188 (1997): 322–341; Mark W. Rowe, "Literature, Knowledge, and the Aesthetic Attitude," *Ratio* 22, no. 4 (2009): 375–397.

[59] Gilbert Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That," in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1971), 212–25.

[60] See, for example, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994); Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, no. 3 (1992): 191–200.