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NOTES AND COMMENT

Narrative Technique in Emily Dickinson's "My life had stood a loaded gun"

Helmut Bonheim

Literary theory has in recent decades made more progress in the field of prose fiction than of verse—progress in the sense that theories suggest fresh approaches to the text. But the interpreter of verse ought to be privileged to catch some of the crumbs of these theories too, for the newer approaches to narrative might well be applied, for instance, to narrative poems, such as some of Emily Dickinson's.

"My life had stood a loaded gun" begins with the typical elements of narrative exposition: a prior state of things is postulated (anteriority).¹ This state continues for an unspecified length of time (habituality).² Then a particular moment is named ("till a day/ The owner passed"), and this shifting of chronological gears gets the plot under way:

1 My life had stood a loaded gun
 In corners, till a day
 The owner passed—identified,
 And carried me away.

This stanza, a single sentence, establishes a good part of the vital data we need if we want to interpret the remainder of the narrative.

The Narrator

The narrator is also the central character, a part of the fictive world, and thus a special type of *persona* often met with in fiction—what F.K. Stanzel calls an "embodied" narrator³ as opposed to a disembodied voice. This persona is introduced in the submerged simile of the opening line: ". . . had stood /like/ a loaded gun." So we are back in the age-old convention of a thing rather than a sentient being telling its story. In rhetoric it is called "prosopopoeia." The technique was especially popular in eighteenth-century narrative: Addison's "The History of a Shilling" was one of the pioneers, along with Crebillon's *The Sopha*. Other nar-

rators professed to be a needle, a goose-quill or a corkscrew. Charles Dickens' "A Remarkable Chair" and "My Mahogany Friend" are part of the tradition, which Emily Dickinson could have encountered in many a Victorian instance.⁴ A modern example is T.F. Powys' much-reprinted short story, "The Bucket and the Rope."⁵

The gun in the poem is typical of such thing-narrators in that it also shifts constantly, chameleon-like, between its nature as inanimate thing and animate being:

- 2 And now we roam the sov'reign woods,
 And now we hunt the doe—
 And every time I speak for him
 The mountains straight reply.

The actions of the gun are at first quite matter of fact, except that when the gun goes off in stanza 2 it is said to "speak." Since the mountains reply, a relatively conventional metaphorical expression, the personification is still muted. On the other hand, "we roam" and "we hunt" puts the narrator into the class of the being that hunts. So the semantic features which the gun gains in stanza 2 seem in part to contradict the implications of stanza 1, in that the prosopopoeia becomes evident as the thing-narrator increasingly arrogates to itself qualities of a human, or at least sentient being:

stanza 1	stanza 2
+ object	+ object
— person	+ person
+ passive	— passive
— sentient	+ sentient
— expressive	+ expressive

In prose narrative, character is normally created by a gradual accretion of personal qualities. Here it is developed by a set of contradictions of what was implied earlier on. That is perhaps the allowable license of lyric as opposed to narrative logic—though one could cite examples from narrative prose as well.

Character

Stanzas 3 and 4 expand on the actions of the hunter-destroyer and his agent the gun, intimately united in their murderous work, but we learn almost nothing about the human partner in the alliance:

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

The gun going off was personified in stanza 2 as "I speak"—but in stanza 3 the

explosion is conveyed by the more insidious “I smile,” Gradually we see that the owner of the gun is also its lover. The gun going off is not painful; rather it creates “pleasure”—a Freudian narratologist would surely point out the orgastic image. In stanza 4 the togetherness of hunter and gun becomes more clearly an odd kind of love affair: the gun, conventionally a male object, is now the female partner in a love relationship. It is totally loyal and subservient, and apparently glad without reservation to be “used” by the master (this is the term with which Emily Dickinson refers in three of her letters [about 1859 to 1865] to the man in her abortive attachment to a member of the other sex)⁶ who has “identified” her as his property.

The muted irony of the fatal “speak to him” in stanza 2 turns more violent and lethal in the ambiguously “cordial light” of stanza 3, for “cordial” suggests something that has to do with the heart, as well as meaning “hearty” in the sense of “friendly.” Such an ambiguity is also inherent in the smile of pleasure on the “Vesuvian face”—the facial display of friendship or subservience is equated with its own contradiction, the grimace of pain and destruction. The simile transports a Petrarchan play of ironies, an equation of opposites.

In stanza 4 the faithfulness with which the narrator (or narratress) guards the master at night is considered better than sharing his bed—the suggestion of an erotic relationship, though it is expressed by negating it, is hardly to be overlooked. On the other hand, if we wanted to add the feature “+ female” to a revised list of the gun’s attributes, we would be hard put to find the phrase or word in this stanza which clearly justifies that addition:

- 4 And when at night, our good day done,
 I guard my master’s head,
 ‘Tis better than the eider duck’s
 Deep pillow to have shared.

But we still know practically nothing about the “master” and hunter. With the old narrative convention that an inanimate object tells the story goes the naivete and psychological simplicity of the narrator, the dream-like treatment of the other characters and their motives.

The chief character being a gun suggests at the beginning that he/she is a mere artifact. But that artifact increasingly has imputed to it an expressive ability (in stanza 2), sentience and emotions (in stanzas 3 and 4), finally a capacity for philosophical speculation as well. Repeatedly the gun engages not only in actions but also in emotional reactions of a human kind, which are not, oddly enough, registered in the human member of the partnership. On the other hand, the fact of the gun being a mere object continues to run parallel to its animate nature, so that at almost every important point in the poem alternative readings suggest themselves.

This double identity of the central character is only gradually established. If we look at the features of the persona in the two middle stanzas, we find that the five attributes which the gun had in stanza 2 have been supplemented by five others:

stanza 2	stanzas 3 and 4
+ object	
+ person	
– passive	
+ sentient	
+ expressive	
	+ lethal
	+ servant
	+ subservient
	+ lover
	+ female

The unification of the two characters, now become loyal friends or lovers, is emphasized once more in stanza 5:

5 To foe of his I'm deadly foe,
None stir the second time
On whom I lay a yellow eye
Or an emphatic thumb.

The connotations of the images shift from stanzas 2 to 5: from hunting to war, from “hunt the doe” in stanza 2 to killing the “deadly foe” in stanza 5. The rhetorical figure of personification is kept alive in the imagery: the firing of the gun produces a “yellow eye,” and the doom which the gun pronounces is “an emphatic thumb.” Perhaps this thumb-image is not brought in merely to effect the slant rhyme with “time”; it may also reflect the poet’s conception of how a gun is loaded, cocked or fired. Or perhaps it is to be read in a transferred sense, as an echo of the thumbs-down gesture with which a Roman emperor dooms the gladiator to death. Certainly it adds to the self-depiction of the narrator as one who takes pleasure in destruction. The masochistic self-abasement of the persona has a corollary characteristic: the sadistic pleasure in being fatal to others. There is no indication that this revelling in the dealing out of death to others is meant self-critically or ironically.

Character in the Coda

As in a prose narrative, the work ends with what Labov calls a “coda,”⁷ or a narrative tail. The coda is usually distinguished by a return to the present tense (narrator’s present as opposed to narratorial past),⁸ by a suggestion of events to come (a heterodiegetic prolepsis), by a conclusion which moves from scenic report to a higher level of abstraction, and a final illumination of the character’s situation. Dickinson’s finale has all of these qualities. The general truth at which the coda arrives takes the form of a paradox hard to understand, an aporia without solution:

- 6 Though I than he may longer live,
 He longer must than I,
 For I have but the art to kill—
 Without the power to die.

It is perfectly typical of narrative that the display of rhetorical fireworks comes to a peak at the close—although we might ask, confronted by a prose narrative, if the way that the two characters are opposed in the last lines of the final stanza (one has the “art to kill” and the other the “power to die”) might not just as well have been reversed into “power to kill”/“art to die.” Perhaps the “art to kill” is one which can be exercised at discretion, whereas the “power to die” is synonymous with “ability to die”—a privilege absolutely denied to an inanimate object such as a gun.

The concluding thought of the story will be made clearer if we translate some of the words to make their common denominators visible:

For I have but the art to kill— = I am with the power to make die
 Without the power to die. = I am without the power to . . . die

This is presented as the final, evidently paradoxical, statement about the meaning of the narrative. It seems to argue: the gun is lethal, but is itself condemned to immortality.

A gun, of course, can hardly be said to be immortal: immortality is conventionally the property of a being that might be *expected* to die: a sentient being, like a man or a beast, or at least an organic one, like a rose bush. A gun, by contrast, can die only if it is destroyed or exposed to rot and rust. And even then: since it never lived, how can it be said to die? The choice “+alive” versus “-alive” is inapplicable to a gun. What we can conclude from this analysis is that the poem presents a puzzle concerning the nature of a central character and the nature of a “virtual” action,⁹ that is, an action that the narrator puts forward as merely imaginary and that, even within the framework of the fictive world, may or may not take place.

What perhaps remains indisputable, however, is that the gun is in some human sense “+ alive.” Otherwise the change from “My life had stood a loaded gun / In corners . . .” to the activities of stanzas 2 to 5, in which the persona/gun comes to an active sense of itself, would make no sense. The central idea of the poem would be naught. What we can also conclude is that the action or fate of the narrator/gun involves a now-then sequence, a *nacheinander*, which is the domain of narrative, as opposed to a here-there sequence, a *nebeneinander*, which is a primary domain of the lyric.

In that sense our reading of the final lines and what it says about the two beings involved is a matter of narrative rather than lyric logic. Perhaps it is best to decide what, precisely, that argument is only after we have taken a look at the crypto-argument as it develops over all six stanzas. For the narratological analysis is incomplete if we concentrate on what we see in the poem. There is also the ques-

tion of what else is puzzling, what resists interpretation.

The last two lines, reduced to their common denominators, pose the most obvious puzzle. What has the power to make others die, but is itself immortal? The obvious answer might well be: the Almighty. But if the gun itself is almighty, what is the nature of the master who is mightier yet than his possession, the gun, and thus in his turn governs the Almighty?

In the opening line of the poem that master is said to be the owner of the gun—he passed and “identified” it, i.e., he knows the gun, had apparently owned it previously (an analepsis on the analepsis already noted). If we ask who can own “My life” at all, the answer might very well once more be: the Almighty. In other words, God is the master of the gun in stanza one, God is the gun itself in stanza six. The roles have reversed.

Put in rhetorical terms, the metaphor of *gun = subservient being* turns into its reverse, *gun = omnipotent being*. Thus the poem’s central metaphor, if we want to take it at all seriously, shows itself to be a metaphor gone off the tracks, a *catachresis*. This means that the central direction of the narrative is very much cast in doubt, for the metaphorical nature of the two lovers allows us to assume that the narrative has an allegorical meaning. In the first stanza the gun is Everyman in the guise of Everygun, and is made use of by the Divine Hunter. The gun shows itself grateful for being allowed to come to life in His hands. At the end of the poem the assignment of roles in the allegory is reversed. Both the statement “I am with the power to make die” and the statement “I am without the power to . . . die” effectively make the gun take over the divine status of its now mortal discoverer and owner. The allegorical equation no longer works. Why?

One possible reason is that the initial metaphor has retained life through several stanzas and become a Petrarchan *conchetto* or conceit. The change takes place because the vehicle of the initial metaphor is repeatedly extended and explored—that is how a poetic conceit comes about. If the life of the metaphor’s vehicle is extended (the gun is at first a mere thing, a tool, but later on a deathless object), its tenor is left to fend for itself. As the conceit develops, the connotations of the gun as implement are explored and expanded on. Here it is mere common sense that tells us that a gun might well outlive several generations of merely mortal owners. But to say that it lacks the “power” to die attributes volition to the inanimate, the man-made object. We can endow an apparatus like a gun with “+ power” but not with “+ volition.” At the end the paradox of its immortality shoulders out the immortality of its supernatural owner in a shift of allegorical meanings. The characters in the narrative become inconsistent, their roles founded on the sand of an overextended metaphor.

On the other hand, such illogicality is also inherent in other death poems of Emily Dickinson. The narrative configuration is roughly the same, too: we have that odd companion, the fly, in “I heard a fly buzz when I died” and the coachman in “Because I could not stop for death/ He stopped for me.” What is conventionally considered the absolutely private experience of death is put in terms of a grotesque partnership, and that partnership gives each work its fascinating touch of grotesquerie. Then too, the illogicality of these death-oriented sketches is of

the kind we accept in the genres of *Märchen* and fantastic story, elements of which the narrative of “My life had stood a loaded gun” partakes. The little tailor kills seven giants at a stroke, the coach-and-four turns into a pumpkin—this is a familiar dynamic in a large portion of the world’s literature, and there is no reason why Emily Dickinson should have been any more shy of using it than were Hawthorne or Dickens. What might in real-life discourse seem mere catachresis has in a fiction the virtue of fantasy, the odd logic and shifts of perspective familiar from our dreams.

The Macrostructure of the Plot

The second stanza of the poem makes clear that the exposition of the narrative is over quickly: the “till a day” in stanza 1 is a deixis of time, a typical trigger in narrative: it signals the exact point where the shift from exposition to narrative proper takes place. It is the watershed between the panoramic report of stanza one and the scenic depiction of events which dominates stanza 2. The repeated “And now” with which the following lines begin also posits a chronological base time, as Gerard Genette calls it.¹⁰ The first stanza had begun prior to that “now,” with the past tense. In Genette’s system this is an “achrony,” a break in the narrative time sequence. When a discourse reaches back to a prior time in the story, Genette calls this an analepsis¹¹—here that reach seems unlimited (“had stood”), but is then interrupted by the deictic “till a day.” The reaching back involves a state of things which lies outside the plot proper, so that it is in Genette’s parlance a “heterodiegetic analepsis.” Both the heterogesis and the analepsis are perfectly standard ploys of narrative exposition. In stanza 2, by contrast, a self-contained story begins to develop, without flashbacks or flash-forwards. The homodiegetic progression continues until we arrive at the concluding stanza, which is proleptic, speculating as it does about future events. Such an analysis makes the symmetrical macrostructure of the plot fairly clear: the bolus of the tale consists of stanzas 2 to 5, that is, of four stanzas of narrative, neatly framed by the analepsis of the exposition and the prolepsis of the conclusion.

The microstructures of the story, on the other hand, are not so symmetrical. As in prose narrative, the events in the poem represent a varied relationship between the number of times an action is reported and the number of times the action occurred: since “speak” in stanza 2 and “smile” in stanza 3 report the same action, the plot is not advanced in stanza 3. Put into the formal terms of Genette again,¹² the first three stanzas contain a variety of relationships between how many times an event occurred (l x or n x) and how many times that event is recounted:

stanza	message	here we are told
1	“the owner . . . carried me away”	l x what happened l x
2	“And now we roam . . . ”	l x what happened n x
2&3	“every time I speak . . . smile”	n x what happened n x.

This analysis reveals the special nature of the narrative: only in stanza 1 is the story of the kind we normally expect of prose fiction in our time: the general rule is that single and particular actions are depicted singly, whereas panoramic views, plot summaries and the indication of extended or repeated events play a merely supporting, marginal role. But this is a rule valid for Ernest Hemingway and J.D. Salinger rather than for Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving. In that sense the poem uses a narrative technique still current in the late nineteenth century: its use of scene and image is subordinated to the qualities of fable, moral tale and semi-philosophical speculation.

Other Patterns of Narrative Technique and Style

As the poem progresses a series of shifts in point of view occurs. In the terms of Susan Lanser, the perspective shifts after stanza 1 from external scene to summary.¹³ After the first stanza there is also a shift from outer to inner vision¹⁴ and from literal to figural,¹⁵ and from the stance of posteriority ("carried me away") to that of anteriority¹⁶ ("Though I than he may longer live"), with a simultaneity of action and narration in the stanzas in between. We might add other axes along which the perspective shifts: from this-worldly to other-worldly, for instance, or from visual to contemplative. Of the roughly thirty such axes between which, according to Lanser, narrative perspective can vary, probably more than half could help us formulate distinctions relevant to this poem, and help reveal more clearly its development and overall shape. Not that the analysis of the poet's point of view techniques would in and of itself constitute absolute proof of the preponderance of narrative elements in the poem; but it is certainly suggestive of the degree to which the poem can be illuminated by being read as though it were a work of fiction.

The final stanza is altogether dominated by parallels and seeming contradictions (from a structuralist viewpoint, the arrangement in pairs is the essential: agreement and contradiction are analogous if not identical structures). The stanza begins, for instance, with two contradictory sequences: a climax and an antimetabole:

climax: 1 2 3
 Though I than he may longer live

 1 2 3
 He longer must [live] than I.

The climax, in other words, takes the form of a 1-2-3/1-2-3 structure. In an antimetabole, by contrast, a 1-2-3 sequence is followed by a 3-2-1 sequence, or a 1-2-3-4 by a 4-3-2-1 sequence:

antimetabole: 1 2 3 4
 Though I than he may longer live

 4 3 2 1
 He longer must [live] than I.

Critics of prose fiction have learnt to identify such sequences by focusing on repeated elements in the text, much as critics of verse have always done. Such elements include characters, actions and motives, but also words, images, colors, grammatical forms or other verbal units. For instance in stanza 6, line 1:

1	personal pronoun	I
2	conjunction	than
3	auxiliary	may
4	adverb	longer

reversed into stanza 6, line 2:

4	adverb	longer
3	auxiliary	must
2	conjunction	than
1	personal pronoun	I

This is a fairly conventional rhetorical analysis. In fact the structure of these lines is more tightly interwoven than the available figures of classical rhetoric allow us to show. If we analyze all the words actually there rather than a selection that happens to fit our hand-me-down nomenclature, we come to a more complex formula. No term for it exists, except perhaps *diacope*: a set of repetitions after an interval of unspecified length:

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Though	I	than	he	may	longer live
3	5	4	6	2	1	
	He	longer	must [live]	than	I.	

Every element contained in the one line, except for the initial “Though,” is repeated, or (like the “live”) suggested in the other, but in a roughly chiasmic sequence. Repetitions with a difference are wont to present a contradiction or a paradox. But here the “Though” introduces no clearly perceivable paradox at all. “I may live longer” versus “He must live longer” is a senseless contrast unless the word “live” is meant in two different senses. And indeed, an object, in contrast to the hunter and the soldier, cannot in normal parlance be said either to live or to die. In other words, the final stanza proposes that other characteristics be attached to the gun, but also puts these characteristics in question, “under erasure,” as a deconstructivist would be likely to put it: “+/- alive”? “+/- mortal”? The examination of theme, like that of plot, brings us back to the question of character.

Conclusion

There remains the question of how useful it is to apply such tongue-twisters of

narratology as “heterodiegetic analepsis” to a poem of twenty-four lines. Whatever one may think of the narratological jargon, the technical terms stand for established concepts, and the concepts in turn are counters in theories. These theories posit an interest in how the elements of a text (for instance of plot, chronological sequence, perspective, rhetorical figures) give it coherence and meaning, or fail to impose coherence and meaning. Without such a theory in the reader’s head, the poem may well remain an unsystematic sequence of utterances, pretty and unproblematic. With it, the poem can be read as narrative *in parvo*. It is a narrative puzzle in lyric form, and under the kind of analysis appropriate to narrative it yields up some of its more hidden meanings, though not all.

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NOTES

1. Helmut Bonheim, “How Stories Begin: Devices of Exposition in 600 English, American and Canadian Short Stories,” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*,¹ (1982), 191-226.
2. Ibid.
3. Franz K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 90.
4. Viktor Link, “Bank Note, Corkscrew, Flea and Sedan: Additions to a Checklist of Eighteenth-Century Fiction,” *The Library Chronicle*, 42 (1978), 159-167. Cf. also Link’s *Die Tradition der außermenschlichen Erzählperspektive in der englischen und amerikanischen Literatur*, Heidelberg, 1980; an earlier study is R.K. Meeker, *Experiments in Point of View: Animal, Vegetable and Mineral Narrators in the 18th Century English Novel* (Ph.D. Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1955).
5. *The Second Penguin Book of English Short Stories*, ed. Christopher Dolley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 105-112.
6. The letters are quoted verbatim and closely discussed by John E. Walsh, *The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971), pp. 170-202; also cf. Donna Dickenson, *Emily Dickinson* (Berg Women’s Series, Leamington Spa and Dover: Berg, 1985), pp. 24f; the relevance to “My life had stood a loaded gun” in particular has been discussed by Sandra M. Gilbert, “The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood,” in Suzanne Junasz, ed., *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 26-28.
7. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience,” in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, ed. June Helm (Seattle and London, 1967), pp. 39-41.
8. Natascha Würzbach, *Die Struktur des Briefromans und seine Entstehung in England*, Diss. Munich, 1964, pp. 7-23.

9. Helmut Bonheim, *The Narrative Modes* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), pp. 31-36, 152, 163.
10. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, tr. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 42.
11. Genette, p. 48.
12. Genette, p. 50.
13. Susan S. Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 201.
14. Lanser, p. 207f.
15. Lanser, p. 217f.
16. Lanser, p. 200.