EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY OF "THE INSTEAD"

Christine Savinel

Klincksieck | « Études anglaises »

2009/4 Vol. 62 | pages 401 à 414

ISSN 0014-195X
ISBN 9782252036969

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-anglaises-2009-4-page-401.htm

Distribution électronique Cairn.info pour Klincksieck.
© Klincksieck. Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

La reproduction ou représentation de cet article, notamment par photocopie, n'est autorisée que dans les limites des conditions générales d'utilisation du site ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, en tout ou partie, sous quelque forme et de quelque manière que ce soit, est interdite sauf accord préalable et écrit de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France. Il est précisé que son stockage dans une base de données est également interdit.
Mutability in Dickinson’s poetry is one element in a broader meditation on double-edged possibility. Many of her poetic structures and tropes operate around a movement of violent replacement—of one instance, idea or choice by another. In this article, I propose to determine what Dickinson means by calling such possibility “the Instead.” Vision and election are denied her (or denied by her), in a fundamental scene that becomes the well-spring of the “non-choice” that disseminates its tropes and structures throughout her work. But Dickinson ironically converts not-being-chosen into choosing—instead. Studying her poetic strategy reveals a complex scheme of variability—in praise of the infinite possibility of poetry and in political protest against all prescribed patterns.

Dickinson’s fear of mutability proves near-obsessional. She situates herself within the well-worn tradition of lamenting the passing of time and seasons, the *ubi sunt* motif familiar in poetry since antiquity. Her manner tends, however, to have a very specific intensity. Many of the innumerable poems about the season dearest to her, Summer, dramatize its mutability through the use of a future that includes both its coming and its passing (“It will be summer—eventually/. . . Till Summer folds her miracle—”, J 342). The very idea of a possible change may ruin the pleasure: “My Summer—is despoiled—/Because there was a Winter—once—” (“The Winters are so short—”, J 403). The spoiling of perfection and delight is not merely linked with a possible change to come, but with the very possibility of change. The

fact that there could be or will be something else at the very place—literally, *in stead*—of the element of beauty or joy is enough to despoil it. Mutability in Dickinson may be expressed through the common form of succession, replacement, passing; but it may also take that of a radical mutation, a violent substitution or reversal. Strangely enough, however, melancholy does not belong to the poet’s lexicon. Loss is not construed as a source of painful joy. In the summer poems, loss of colors, sounds and fragrances is always sensually expressed and lamented; but as we have just seen, the idea of loss seems almost more painful than the loss itself. Hence the very possibility of replacement becomes the object of mental outrage, as if the poet found the very idea, in all its abstraction, more offensive.

Indeed, mutability in Dickinson is a key element of a broader reflection on double-edged possibility. She often moves, within the same poem, from the ecstasy of possible understanding and knowledge, or grace and salvation, to their violent opposites of non-election and rejection, cast finally into the outer darkness of both knowledge and grace. A corollary of her fundamental stance of indeterminacy, this movement of radical reversal or subversion provides the structure for many of her poems, lines, and even word-sequences. It is a function of the poet’s exacting mind and spirit. That she can never be certain about meaning or grace undermines all propositions—while her hardly ever separating intellect from vision or faith creates the very condition for this deployment of an anguished system of radical alternatives.

“*But—the Instead—the Pinching fear*”

The word “instead” appears in a few poems, but only in this poem, “Why make it doubt—it hurts it so—” (J 462), is it converted into a substantive, “the Instead.” This move obviously endows the notion with a different value and structure, turning it into an entity, a domain, even a system, perhaps. This strangely difficult poem presents a most interesting, exemplary pattern:

Why make it doubt—it hurts it so—
So sick—to guess—
So strong—to know—
So brave—upon its little Bed
To tell the very last They said
Unto Itself—and smile—and shake—
For that dear—distant—dangerous—Sake—
But—the Instead—the Pinching fear
That Something—it did do—or dare—
Offend the Vision—and it flee—
And They no more remember me—
Nor ever turn to tell me why—
Oh, Master, This is Misery—
This is one of Dickinson’s darkest poems, devoid of any burlesque relief. It reads like a twelve line rhetorical question without any question mark, followed by a concluding line of still darker commentary. It is also one of the most spectacular poems as far as dashes are concerned: visually, the poem appears perforated by the long dashes (the manuscript less so, dashes being more irregular, but the effect remains striking; see Franklin facsimile ed., 782). To the ear, it sounds like one long cry of anguish, with halting voice, pausing every other syllable at times (“So sick—to guess—”; or “For that dear—distant—dangerous—Sake—”). The poem opens in extreme impersonality (“it hurts it”), and the lyrical voice openly makes its presence felt only in line 11 (“no more remember me”). The second half throws partial light on the beginning: while the reader may at first get the impression that “it” stands for a dying infant (“So brave—upon its little Bed”), it appears to possibly refer to the soul, while first the fear, and then the misery are revealed as belonging to the lyrical ‘I. Let us begin by concentrating on the middle of the poem, on the see-saw moment when everything might turn out for the best, and it seems the “shake” of the soul might win the “Sake,” and even proves “brave” enough to “smile” at the “Vision”—just “vision” as its own reward, or perhaps a vision of salvation. The middle line of this unusually uneven poem is “For that dear—distant—dangerous—Sake,” where the three adjectives that qualify the mysterious “Sake” to be gained are both connected by assonance and separated by dashes. The dangerous proximity between “dear” and “distant” is such that the “But” and the reversal it announces come as little surprise. Here is a highly Dickinsonian moment: the very fear that the vision might be lost makes it “flee.” Instead of the almost attainable vision, we now have a lost vision; instead of a chosen self, a forsaken one (not remembered, nor told why). Interestingly, the self enters the poem at the instant when the vision is lost—which is another way to specify that election is not for me, or that the state of Grace implies depersonalization. This poem is exemplary in that its whole pattern is organized around the one movement of reversal (vision gained, vision lost); it is also unique insofar as the moment of replacement and loss constitutes itself and presents itself for what it is: “the Instead.” And if “the Pinching fear” can be construed syntactically as the fear that the soul has offended the perfect vision by its sins, it can also be read verse-wise as an apposition to “the Instead”—which it aptly qualifies and amplifies.

Like all writers and poets, Dickinson may be said to repeat the same fundamental scene endlessly. With her, it might be the scene of the failed conversion. That she could not declare to her Amherst community of Congregationalists that she indeed had seen God face-to-face appears as a decisive element in her life, thought and work. That she was unable to participate in the general revival in the 1850s of the form of “public conversion” that was practiced in the seventeenth century by English Puritans to a large extent determined her mental structures. The reverse is true too: such public declaration of private certainty as to her own election was doubly foreign to her mind and soul. But subsequent to her failed election by
God, her resistance, reticence and doubt took on a new color, when dramati-
tized against the backdrop of their potential public exposure (as she saw or
chose to think). The scene of her near-election, of her possible and then
failed election, comes to be represented in her poetry among the various
decors of tragic sunsets, apocalyptic dreams or naked deserts. Staging and
scenario vary: the I meets a stranger, a Lord, a Master, who then disappears
(“I started Early—Took my Dog”, J 520); the vision might occur or might
have occurred (“I should have been too glad, I see”, J 312)—but instead it
does not, or did not. The very experience of “the Instead” takes the various
forms of stories and scenes of disappearance or vanishing of the vision, and
also of exclusion, rejection or banishment of the self.

In a perspective where choice governs mental representations, pronouns
naturally come to the fore—me or him? Them or me? Any reader of
Dickinson recognizes here a familiar motif. The poet displays a remarkable
talent for using pronouns to stage the question of choice while depersona-
lizing it—at least as far as the Other is concerned. A short poem, dated
1866, presents a telling variant (J 1094):

Themself are all I have—
Myself a freckled—be—
I thought you’d choose a Velvet Cheek
Or one of Ivory—
Would you—instead of Me?

As usual, it is impossible to know for certain who “you” or “Themself”
are. She often uses “Themself” to refer to a kind of collective and singular
divine entity—if such were the case here, the “you” she addresses and the
“Themself” she evokes might be the same. In a personal context, “them-
self” might also be friends, supposing the “you” were friend or lover (as
possibly suggested by “choose a Velvet Cheek”). While such a reading can-
not be ruled out, a religious context sounds far more likely, considering the
frequent replay of the drama of being chosen or not. Presenting herself as
“freckled” might suggest (beside literal truth) that she is half tainted by sin,
while “Themself” are her referents, the elected beings, either converted (the
young converts’ velvet cheek) or dead saints (“Ivory”). But our goal here is
to observe the mechanism of the “Instead” moment, which, in this exam-
ple, undergoes a subtle and baroque-like double twist: while it seems ini-
tially that for once “Herself” was chosen instead of the others, she once
more questions that choice through the expression of her past disbelief
(“I thought you’d choose”), which introduces a retrospective mental “ins-
stead”; and then she replays the same drama in the present, in the final line
“Would you—instead of me?”. The dash takes the place of “choose them,”
which is omitted. Instead of the choice, in its place, literally, stands the
dash—which signifies the choice in absentia, and marks the blank of of
such a non-event. While it may express acute anguish about not being cho-
sen, the line also creates a confusion between those who could be not-me,
hence elected (them instead of me, you instead of me?). And if the final “Me” is emphatically dramatized at the end of both the line and the poem, it remains jeopardized by the “instead of” instance which occurs in three forms—“Would you”, the dash, and “instead of.” We can see here how occurrences of this structure of what we might call a “reversed choice” are to be found everywhere, often in discreet forms.

Indeed, the mental structures of sudden substitution of one option for its reverse (mainly, of blank for vision, and non election for grace) also pervade the very structures of language and syntax. The rather frequent lack of syntactic articulation in her poems favors sudden changes. As for the dashes, as we just saw, they often appear as possible forms of “the Instead”: as mute plastic signs that can either connect or disconnect words or clauses, they can operate whatever sudden operation the poet invests them with. In that respect, they can also appear at times as minus signs, when, in the transition from before the dash to after it, a substraction is effected—of vision, grace, God’s face. We see that discreet forms of “instead” operations can become the organizing principle for whole poems, at several levels of structure and form.

Nevertheless, on numerous occasions, the choice operates differently. Not in the sense that a single poem represents the self as permanently elected (apart from some semi-burlesque images, such as the “Queen of Calvary” of poem J 348 or the “Wife” of poem J 199, perhaps). Rather, the choice itself operates conversely: instead of representing herself as chosen, then not-chosen, the poet’s persona dramatizes herself as choosing to, or choosing not to.

The conversion of choice

Thus does Dickinson pass from being not-chosen to choosing not to be, converting the non-conversion scene, in a way, into a scene of choice. We can identify the same counter-move in terms of her manner of situating herself in relation to the literary world; as an unpublished poet, that is, not-chosen by the New England literati, she chose a form of retirement and epistolatory sub-publication. This is how Susan Howe views Dickinson’s declining to meet Emerson when he was a guest at her brother’s house next door: “One unchosen American woman alone at home and choosing” (Howe 18). Though there may be more to the story, as Howe knows well, the reversal of rejection is definitely at work here. What were possibly the two major experiences in her life—not being elected by Grace, and not being published—fostered similar or complementary structures of rejection and counter-moves. The “Instead” principle could apply equally well to the biographical experience of literary non-choice, and such famous lines as “Publication—is the Auction/Of the Mind of Man—” (J 709) obviously read as a part-bravado, part-sincere subversion of her own literary exclusion. However, I will not take up the parallel here, primarily because, beneath the surface analogy, the two choices fail to compare structurally:
while the non-publication was a non-selection imposed from outside, the origin of the religious non-election is obviously undecidable—she did not feel chosen, or she could not declare she had seen the face of God, and who could say to what extent such non-election was beyond her own choice and feeling? She spent the rest of her life, and one could almost say most of her poems, reenacting that spiritual inner drama, and reappraising its terms and stakes. This is the drama which, we might say, provided her with her most vital poetic structures.

Let us focus again on the religious act by Dickinson the *heretic*—literally, she who chooses—, another of her favorite self-projections or self-dramatizations. Here is a forceful instance of a poetic scene of systematic choosing (J 324):

```
Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—
I keep it, staying at Home—
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—
And an Orchard, for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—
I just wear my Wings—
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton—sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—
I’m going, all along.
```

The whole poem could be paraphrased along an “instead” structure, even before the word itself appears in the last stanza; it is, indeed, already implied in the opposition between “Some” and “I” (instead of keeping the Sabbath going to Church, I keep it staying at home, etc.). What she fantasizes as an exclusion from church (which never was the case, she remained as much part of the congregation as she wished to) is here converted into a solitary but delightful celebration in the midst of Nature. Dickinson rather triumphantly chooses the most resonant words for her own private Sabbath in her garden: the “Bobolink” outsounds the “Dome,” and “Orchard” rings at least as richly as “Chorister.” The same carillon continues in the second stanza, where the Bobolink is turned into a live church bell enchanting line eight with the reverberating paronomasia of “Sexton—sings.” Meanwhile, the poet indulges in a flight of historical fancy, casting herself, beside the bird, as a Salem witch, a heretic bestriding her broom: “I just wear my Wings—.” But there is more to the line, as we find in it the Dickinsonian positive use of the restrictive word “just”: instead of the rite of the church, I *just* fly, I merely soar, in immediate elevation and contact with the sky. Choosing less means gaining more, as was already implied in
the original shift in the meaning of “keep,” as in keeping a rite, from observing it publicly, line 1 (“Some keep the Sabbath”), to observing it by also keeping it to oneself, line 2 (“I keep it”). Restriction, restraint, or not choosing to go may lead to fantastic opportunities. Boldly heretic as usual, Dickinson operates a wild replacement: “instead” of the Clergyman, just God. The reader can recognize through the surprise effect of “God preaches” both Presbyterian and Transcendentalist overtones. We might also find the tongue-in-cheek qualification of God as “a noted Clergyman” worthy of her revered Dickens’s handling of irony. But the poem does not stop on such a triumphant and jocose note. After the two discreet “instead” structures comes the overt one in the last two lines: “So instead of getting to Heaven”—which reintroduces the original scene of non-election. The irony persists, as does the tongue-in-cheek tone, but this time at her own expense—instead. The choice of a private celebration of God gained her direct access to Him, but costs her the loss of any certainty as to salvation. The very last line, however, makes the reader reconsider the ultimate orientation of irony: “I’m going, all along” can be read, in the religious register, as the heretic’s condemnation to roam about the world in a condition of uncertainty, and so the poet here falls prey to her own irony; or it can be seen as a powerful declaration of mental energy, in which case irony would be evenly distributed. This ending incidentally seems to confirm what Geoffrey Hill has to say about Dickinson, that with her, unlike with Emerson, “the line-walking . . . is a conscious exploitation of a double-standard” (Hill 504). Indeed, what her “line-walking” demonstrates is the ambivalent nature of of just such a double-standard: she plays on the dual level of ritual and natural religion here, while applying on all sides the double-standard of irony.

Such conversion of non-election constitutes in itself an ironical choice, which cannot fail to set in motion a whole system of alternation and oscillation. Several poems are structured on this common pattern, with different combinations of tones and degrees of irony. In such an “instead” pattern, the key to—possible—interpretation is often given by the ending: the very moment in the oscillation line where the poem chooses to stop. “Some keep the Sabbath going to church—” ends thus on an ironical backlash and a declaration of mental freedom (as well as on a paradoxical non-closure of the poem, since it stops on “going all along”). Let us just read one more poem on the same pattern—“My period had come for prayer” (J 364); here are the first two stanzas:

My period had come for Prayer—
No other Art—would do—
My Tactics missed a rudiment—
Creator—Was it you?

God grows above—so those who pray
Horizons—must ascend—
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend—

It seems, to an extent, that the irony is already in place before the start of the poem, as the reader wonders where the obligation to pray might come from. Again, what Hill calls the “double-standard” applies here: it could be a demand of the religious community; but then the second line suggests it might be the poet’s own decree, and “No other Art—would do—” could evoke the sudden insufficiency of poetry. In the same strongly ironical vein we noticed about “God preaches, a noted Clergyman—” in poem J 324, we find here the provocative presentation of the shortcomings of prayer, that is, the absence of God. It ranges from the familiar apostrophe to God (“Creator . . .?”) to the feigned suggestion that the fact the unique addressee of prayer has turned absentee can be downgraded to “a rudiment” missing in the “Tactics” of prayer. The rhetorical question “Was it you [missing]?” participates in the mockery by creating an impression of confusion. The conventional rite of prayer in turned into a burlesque sequence. Dickinson partly maintains the same tone in the second stanza. She drops the theatrics, but proceeds with the mockery of conventional religious practices or representations. Choosing to mock the stereotypical localization of God in the skies, the poet plays at taking this literally, and since it means ascending, she embraces the disenchanting earthly form of literally going up—North. The preposterous character of the two enterprises (the believers soaring up into the skies, the poet going North to look for God) is further emphasized by the run-on line between “pray” and “horizons,” which succeeds in interposing the blank of the line-ending between the two, and also in misplacing “Horizons”—to be expected rather at the horizon-ending of the line. Among Dickinson’s jocose poetic tactics, we also note how she paralyzes the ascension by multiple methods (“—must ascend—” is brought to a standstill in between the two dashes, and also by the expression of an obligation, as well as by the present tense). The last three stanzas describe the fantasized locus of God:

His House was not—no sign had He—
By Chimney—nor by Door
Could I infer his Residence—
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler—
Were all that I could see—
Infinitude—Had’st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended—
Creation stopped—for Me—
But awed beyond my errand—
I worshipped—did not “pray”—
The burlesque tone has apparently disappeared. The third stanza deflates the wild allegorical localization: not only is God de-localized, but the very notion of location is abolished. The reader finds himself in free-fall, from allegorical security to the barest abstraction. Dickinson captures the metaphorical act itself in favor of abstraction, starting with the “Vast Prairies of Air// Unbroken by a Settler,” where she transposes the American landscape of the frontier, only to have it recede into a not (yet) discovered territory. In that respect, if the burlesque tone has vanished, the mockery of the double-standard has not, and we can see here an ironical barb directed at the American settlers and their descendants who proudly make of their historized territory a model for a religious landscape. The reversal system applies here too, of course, since we know the typological projection works the other way round—America as a Biblical topography, not the reverse. (Franklin specifies here that this poem was written on stationary embossed with a double-headed eagle, so Dickinson’s irony might have been thus refocused, if necessary; Franklin 640.) Anyway, the poet dismisses any topography in favor of a blank space, also materialized in the inter-strophic blank that expands between “Air” and “Unbroken.” Then she changes metaphors abruptly, passing from the image of land to that of face in order to qualify the abstract notion of “Infinitude.” We are obviously back to the original scene of non-election one more time. She has accomplished the “errand” alone once again, only to further apprehend that incapacity in her to materialize or visualize the face of God, as she was expected to do in the conversion scene. The line “Infinitude—Had’st Thou no Face/That I might look on Thee?” repeats this haunting interrogation—and retroactively shows that beneath the burlesque question of stanza one, “Creator—Was it you?” lay the real one. Then the last stanza presents again a variant on the instead scene. Incapable (to choose) to be chosen by God publicly, she can (choose to) be chosen privately, on the mental scene of her mind and soul, which she dramatizes also as a cosmic scene. On that other stage of election, the silent God of negative theology, abstractedly allegorized as “The Silence,” finally chooses “her,” who finds herself elected, picked out, and shown as such between the dashes (“—for Me—”). The last line proves a typical “instead” line: it can be paraphrased as: I did not pray, I worshipped instead. Values however remain ironically ambiguous. One might think the errand was a failure, since she just worshipped. It is interesting to note that just can easily duplicate instead. We know Dickinson can often reverse the restrictive value of “just” by associating it with an antagonistically grand image or notion (on the pattern of the last line of ‘I’m ceded—I’ve stopped being Theirs—,” J 508: “And I choose, just a Crown”). A similar form of ironical opposition seems to be present in “I worshipped—did not ‘pray’,” if we read it in the instead mode: I worshipped instead, I just worshipped. The whole poem can also be seen as the rhetorical marginalization of prayer as form or rite, from the “Prayer” in line 1 to the “‘pray’” between inverted commas on which it closes.
So we have seen in this poem how “the Instead” can entail meditations on the possible manifestation or silence of “Infinitude”—the empty place, the blank in-stead. We have also noticed its evolution into a sophisticated system of ironies—which I now propose to briefly outline.

Playing at degrees: “the instead” as a scheme?

Only a few poems are entirely devoid of any note of irony. Irony is inherent in Dickinsonian modality and poetics. It is probably the most forceful conversion of rejection she operates, since it discursively places her in a stance of double-standard as well as of hermeneutic exclusion of the literal-minded reader. Most of the poems dealing with revelation and salvation operate on an either entirely or partly ironical mode—such as the two we have just analyzed; but they are not the only ones, and from the burlesque self-mockery of “was myself—too small” (“I took my power in my Hand,” J 540) to the mock self-deprecation of “I cannot dance upon my Toes” (J 326), poems dealing with the self almost all enact an instead pattern, in which her obvious limitations are turned into grand (and often secret) achievements. Some poems though come to mind as being outside the scope of irony and reversal structure: those about sorrow, for instance, and mourning (we can read a certain irony, however, in the oxymoronic “Quartz contentment” in “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—,” J 341; or in the declaration “I measure every Grief I meet,” J 561; but it is of another nature, and not fully part of the reversal system).

Dickinson uses other poetic and grammatical means to counter exclusion and frustrate the very principle of choice. She often tends to multiply choice in order to defuse it, and to play on degrees and alternatives in all possible ways. She thus uses and somehow even manipulates comparison, for instance, as indicated by her broad use of the notion in her famous line “We see—Comparatively” (J 534). Comparison controls a system of constantly shifting possibilities, and Dickinson uses it intensively in that poem where Giants are replaced by Gnats—instead. She herself often writes in such “comparative” mode, which in fact usually means comparing opposites, and progressing by antonyms and oxymorons. Comparison, indeed, seems to be also integrated in the great system of “the Instead,” becoming a way to associate the two terms of the reversal. Besides the classical type of oxymoronic clause we have just seen in poem J 341, for instance, she also creates dramatic oxymorons, using the dash operator, as might be expected. The key line of the poem “Mine—by the Right of the White Election!” (J 528) is “Mine—here—in Vision—and in Veto!” This is very clearly another poem about election, in which the poet forcefully, even violently, declares that the title of “elect” belongs to her; she keeps undermining her own assertion (“Delirious charter”), or substituting another form for the accepted one (“White Election” sounds like an oxymoron of a kind). Thus coordinating “Vision” and “Veto,” in a line besides solemnly punctuated by dashes, tends to mislead the reader for a second: he might come
to the conclusion that this is a triumph of vision, and overlook the radical barring operated by “Veto.” The two words are also deceptively near in their sounds, bordering on paronomasias. So “Veto” seems to be celebrated as another state of “Vision” while it bars it. Dickinson ironically and freely plays on the very system of radical alternatives: discursive logic would require it to be “in vision, or in veto instead.” We can find the same sophisticated form of Dickinson’s playing with exclusion and integration through a deceptive proximity of sounds in “By hope or horror lent,” for instance (“Two Lengths has every day”, J 1295).

There seem to be many links between such practices of comparison or paronomasia and the operative structures around non-choice analyzed earlier. Dickinson plays with degrees of proximity and distance, of exclusion and integration—using comparison or paronomasia as sophisticated operators of variation and constant possibility. So the “pinching fear” of “the Instead” comes to be appropriated and poetically distilled as a system of possibility. The variations and reversals, the mock proximities and real antagonisms are included in what seems to be a system of “the Instead,” or even perhaps a scheme of “the Instead.” I would use “scheme” here as in the meaning of the French word dispositif, both display and practice. There really seems to be a scheme at work, that has the very mechanisms of grammar and of poetics work against themselves to further the generalized play of reversals. Ironical structures and discourse, an abstract use of metaphors or an oxymoronic one for paronomasia—all tend towards claiming or promoting the possibility for variation. It is interesting to note that the use of the word “tactics” in “My period had come for Prayer,” as seen above, is, as far as I know, unique in the whole set of poems. As we saw, she uses it ironically, but at the same time, that very poem exemplifies particularly well, not her praying tactics, but her poetic strategy. So many connected structures, forms and significations might very well constitute a sophisticated scheme at work.

All—possible

We might say, therefore, that Dickinson’s tendency to move easily towards extremes does not so much depend on an alleged eccentricity as on some strategy of dealing with rejection or doubt. Playing on variants and variations, playing with degrees or suggesting alternatives: all of this allows her to pass from barred visions to open ones and from choice as exclusion to choice as possibility. Her famous line, “I dwell in Possibility—” (J 697), referring to poetry itself, confirms, it seems to me, that idea of a prevailing scheme of “the Instead,” including at one extreme the fear of the always-possible dissolution of vision, and at the other extreme its conversion into the freedom of possibility—primarily through language, and poetry. It is as if she were, in a way, using the baroque against itself, or diverting the energy at work in the twists of the baroque to go beyond, “all the way.”
It is indeed interesting to see how, in a later quatrain, the poet revisits possibility (J 1208):

Our own possessions—though our own—
'Tis well to hoard anew—
Remembering the Dimensions
Of Possibility.

The poem sounds slightly flat and epigrammatic at first, except for the beautiful final sweep of the run-on line “Dimensions/ Of Possibility.” Then we realize that the initial and final repetition of “Our own” in the first line creates an interestingly ironical effect of closure; also that “possessions” should ambiguously rhyme with “Dimensions” suggests a meaning that eludes us at first. In fact, it is the very range of possibility, from negative to positive, that either threatens with loss our (material) possessions or promises more to our (spiritual) ones. More generally, those ambivalent “dimensions of possibility” become the poet’s material.

A reader of Dickinson’s Johnson Variorum Edition cannot fail to think of her practice of the variants: the way she took care to write them down in her manuscripts, at the bottom of the small translucent sheets of paper on which she wrote her fair copies, where the words that accepted variants were signaled by a tiny cross to the left. In the context of an unpublished poet’s legacy, those suggested alternatives are part of the poet’s voice of “possibility”. But since we will never know why she still left alternative choices (her “instead” fabric, or her “Variorum Monument” in Adrienne Rich’s phrase) in those supposedly definitive, or at least advanced versions, we should be extremely careful as to our conclusions. For all the perceptive analyses found in Sharon Cameron’s book Choosing Not Choosing, Dickinson's Fascicles, her assertion that “variants to the poem, variant poems—must be understood as being half-incorporated by that poem” (Cameron 4) seems to demand further justification. It is one thing to note Dickinson’s obvious modernity, and another to extend it to transforming her variant notes into a contemporary poet’s practice of indeterminacy.

However, quite interestingly, many poems present forms of fully integrated variants. The variants on the manuscript versions, indicated at the bottom of the poem, testify to the poet’s intense work to find the right word, and also to her fascination for choice and non-choice—to paraphrase her, for the “dimensions” of lexical “possibility.” But when she finally does not select one word only, but two, or several, her choice also points at a representation of (infinite) possibility within the poem. Once again, the frequent use of dashes enables her to create loose structures. The series she uses, for instance, to describe a state of Consciousness—“August—Absorbed—Numb” (J 515, “No Crowd that has occurred”)—with no other links but dashes, is, we might say, not composed of strict equivalents, but presented as a disconnected juxtaposition of variants. Examples of such lists of what I would call incorporated variants abound, but there is one
stanza in “The Love a Life can show Below” (J 673), in which Dickinson indulged in her passion for possibility in a spectacular way (she is describing here what love can be like on earth):

’Tis this—invites—appalls—endows—
Flits—glimmers—proves—dissolves—
Returns—suggests—convicts—enchants—
Then—flings in Paradise—

If one may argue that in this case, she describes various moments and forms of love, the length of the sequence far exceeds the freest of poetic rules. With as many dashes as words, the manuscript conveys an impression of a list of words (Franklin 860). The stanza expresses the considerable possibility of language at the same time as it describes a series of appearances and vanishings (“proves”? “dissolves” instead). On the whole, these lines exhibit a perfect instead system, counteracting the mutability they express by the idea of the immense possibility of the poet’s lexicon.

We might also interpret in a similar vein her famous declaration “So I write— Poets—All” (J 569, “I reckon, when I count at all—”): not only do poets rank among the treasures of the world (sun, summer and heaven), but they can also extend its possibilities. At the end of the poem, Dickinson replays the scene of possible election, this time as poetic “Grace.” With the ellipsis at its center, “Poets—All” represents perhaps the most complete form of the system of possibility for Dickinson.

There is no conclusion to such a system, which perpetrates reversals. The incorporated variants we have seen, for instance, paradoxically imply a form of disjunctive poetics. And no poetically extended possibilities ever assuage the metaphysical or spiritual terror expressed in the line we started from: “But—the Instead—the Pinching fear”. But we have seen, however, how the initial cry of “Not me?” may come to be converted by the poet into an ironical but somehow lyrical “— not Me—”.

I would like to come back finally to my suggestion of a scheme of “the Instead,” to try to briefly qualify, or at least question the status of such a dispositif. In his short text, Qu’est-ce qu’un dispositif?, Agamben revisits the notion as it was used by Foucault, as a set of means, practices and as an overall political strategy—roughly. However far such broadly political view may seem from Dickinson’s poetics, there are some unexpected points of similarity. Here is a brief extract of one of Foucault’s definitions: “par dispositif, j’entends une sorte — disons — de formation qui, à un moment donné, a eu pour fonction majeure de répondre à une urgence. Le dispositif a donc une fonction stratégique dominante […]” (Foucault 300). Indeed, most of Dickinson’s poems seem to be written in a kind of urgency, linked with a spiritual anguish. They were also written against a background of what can be considered as political intolerance: the social and intellectual intolerance manifested through indifference towards avant-garde poems.
written by a woman; and the form of mental pressure exercised by the very demand for conversion—even if it was not followed by the actual rejection Dickinson more or less playfully dramatized afterwards in her poems.

The “instead” scheme she seems to have—eventually—elaborated out of so many connected forms of irony and variability go far beyond a mere compensation strategy: to the point of inventing the very foundations of free poetics; to the point of claiming the right to disengage from any set patterns. It goes also further than Hill’s view of a “double-standard,” on to a strong claim for the right to ambivalence. The choice of “going, all along”—instead—is an ironical choice, and one of political irony. Dickinson’s own poetic dispositif is a scheme against patterns.

Christine SAVINEL
Université de Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle

Bibliography