

consider them functional equivalents? The point of transformation, as I understand it, is that it is the releasing of some “spring,” the resolving of some problem, the satisfaction of some need. But Alexis is never presented as wanting something that can be or is fully satisfied. Nothing “closes,” “resolves,” Alexis’ story: he just disappears from our view. Transformation and transcendence are not, then, functionally the same.

3. Stewart is mistaken: Greimas has not been able to pry loose desire from the notion of function. “Il est frappant, il faut le noter dès maintenant, que la relation entre le sujet et l’objet, que nous avons eu tant de peine, sans y réussir complètement, à préciser, apparaisse ici avec un investissement sémantique . . . de ‘désir’” (*Sémantique structurale*, p. 176). There is no Subject without desire: without Subjectivity.

It would have been perfectly possible for the narrator to present Alexis’ family purely as obstacles to his sainthood: the author of the original *Vita* did. The point is, our narrator did not: the extraordinary pathos of the text—a pathos absent from the Latin original—comes, not from Alexis himself, but from the development of his family as Subjects of desire: desire for Alexis.

4. Never did I suggest that God was purely present to Alexis or that Alexis was without strong desire, or intention. I (Bernard) pointed out that Alexis (the Christian) is in a paradoxical relation to God, who is *both* absent and present. Alexis is both questing and at peace. And the extreme quality of the ordeals that he undergoes as he seeks (to serve) God make of him a hero—and a saint. Alexis does struggle, not to be canonized (nothing in the text suggests that he desires that) and not to find weird new masochistic things to do to himself, but utterly to renounce the world with its pleasures and honors and to devote himself exclusively to God. This is a type of Christian heroism—whether Stewart *likes* it or not.

5. and 6. “Must God be invested in Greimas’ model as a second subject?” Stewart inquires. There are certainly texts, even ostensibly Christian texts, in which I would think not: texts in which God’s role is nonexistent, or at least trivial, and in which he could easily be relegated to some minor function, such as that of Adjuvant. As to the *Alexis*, let us assume for a moment that we refuse to accord God the function of (second) Subject. What are we to do with him? He is, of course, Alexis’ Object (to consider that Alexis desires mortification as a goal in itself is deliberately to distort the text). God is also his Destinataire, in that he calls Alexis to his service: “*confie sa mission*” to Alexis. And then, he

is also Alexis’ Adjuvant: he provides boats, etc. A case could even be made for calling God—along with Alexis’ family and the people of Rome—Alexis’ Destinataire: God is worshiped and glorified through Alexis. He benefits (in that sense) from Alexis’ holiness. God’s presence thus pervades the text; the only function he doesn’t fill is that of Opposant. . . .

But why should we work so hard to refuse to God the central role of Subject? After all, it is, to a considerable degree, what God desires, or wills, that the text is concerned with.

In fact, I cannot tell whether it is to the notion of a second Subject or to God’s filling the role of Subject at all that Stewart objects. If the former, why should it be impossible for a text to contain two (or even more) Subjects? (Even Greimas provided for “S₁ vs. S₂”: two hostile Subjects.) A narrator can consider events with respect to the desires of several different characters. If the latter, may divinities not apply for the position of Subject? Must they ever be relegated, along with the trees (*qui montrent le chemin*), to the role of Adjuvant? And if so, why? What of biblical narrative? The Old Testament Yahweh is hardly just anybody’s Adjuvant!

7. As I pointed out above, Greimas himself has not been able to separate “plot structure” from “desire,” event from intentionality, or teleology. The problem is that Greimas has assumed that desire is always of the same concupiscent and antagonistic structure. He can deal with concupiscent characters, but not charitable ones. He can integrate into his model antagonism (S₁ vs. S₂) but not an acceptance of hierarchy: confrontation and rivalry but not obedience and service. He is, if you will, comfortable with sinners, but not with saints. And neither, it would appear, is Stewart.

EVELYN BIRGE VITZ
New York University

Dickinson and the Dialectic of Rage

To the Editor:

Sharon Cameron’s thesis in her article “‘A Loaded Gun’: Dickinson and the Dialectic of Rage” (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 423–37) is that the seven poems in question reveal a conflict “between forces of sexuality and forces of death; the poems schematize experience for the explicit purpose of preventing the convergence of sexuality and death, of avoiding the acknowledgment that the two join each other in time and that the self comes to its end at their meeting. The third voice intervening in the dialectic . . . is

often one of rage"; and "rage is a way of preventing the convergence of sexuality and death." While this forms an attractive hypothesis, it is not sufficiently borne out in the texts of the poems themselves; indeed, imposed on them as something of a procrustean bed, it frequently leads to inadequate, or even inaccurate, interpretations.

Thus, in the poem "I should have been too glad, I see—," far from trying to "utter truisms" and finding herself instead "speechless with rage," the poet expresses in a finely balanced, in no way disrupted, dialectic the truth of an experience made meaningful in terms of that which is beyond experience and a "beyond" that is, and can only be, realized in language. Earth and heaven are transformed by, and subsumed into, the poem's dialectic in such a way that they demand to be seen, not as conventional truisms, but as consciously linguistic entities. They are transparently, not complacently, ironic; the terms in which their opposition is couched echo back and forth, engendering knowledge by the act of suspending definite knowledge, faith by suspending traditional faith. "Too glad," "too saved," "too much," linked with the conditionals "should" and "would have been," express the linguistically unattainable in a process of affirmation and negation: "should have been" is both positive and negative, "too glad" negates the positive "glad," and the dialectic is intensified by a "would have been" that points not only forward to a transcendent "Heaven" but from that heaven back to a heaven on earth, and so makes a statement about its own method of inference. By denying and then inverting the traditional notions "earth" and "heaven," the poet establishes both earth and heaven in a new linguistic "place," in the poem itself, where verbal force is operative and where, taken to its limits, it simply stops. The ineffable is contained in the dialectic of language both as a term in that dialectic and as the place where the dialectic ends. The force that impels the dialectic is not, however, anything that might properly be called sexuality; it is Eros in search of, and recoiling from, Thanatos: the word in search of, and resisting, silence. Far from being frustrated, it accepts frustration, limitation, containment as the principle of the dialectic that enables it to speak. "Faith" may bleat, the poem does not; the irony is that the poet who knows this knows also that her words are the bleating of faith at the limits of what can be known and said. Rage does not seem to enter this poem at all: there is no rage in the acknowledgment that Eros is contained by Thanatos, Thanatos by Eros, that the ineffable is located at the limits where effables meet in pure relatedness (Rilke's *reiner Bezug*). If there is a third voice in

the dialectic, it is not rage but silence; in so balanced a movement, the rage that might otherwise encounter silence as frustration is subsumed into an Eros that needs the unattainable as its essential end.

Again, in the poem "My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—," the degree of linguistic transformation involved seems to have escaped Cameron's notice. Violence here is surely the poet's violation of the world, itself a twofold act, for to name things is to kill them in their "thingness" and at the same time to violate the dimension of total meaning proper to the "Owner," the God-Thanatos figure in the poem. Like her words, the poet herself cannot enter that dimension where the "Master . . . must" (must what? the hiatus in this chiasmic syntax forces into high relief the tension between "her" contingency and "his" necessity); she can only be his instrument, bound to life and process. The dialectic is again between Eros and Thanatos, speech and silence; sexual imagery, whether overt or covert, is part of this deeper structure. The poem does not seem to require the notion of "fury" at all.

Similar objections might be brought against other interpretations advanced in this article. While rage does exist in some of Dickinson's poems, it is either a cultural rage at the tyranny of male sexuality and the autocratic God of Puritanism or, at times, a more reflective rage against Eros-tyrannos and Theos-Thanatos; it exists as a preliminary rather than as a final stage in her poetic oeuvre. The main criticism that can be made of Cameron's article is that it imports its categories from an experience that has not assimilated the lessons these poems have to offer: that the laws of experience, of meaning, are heuristic, that its structures are linguistic, and that interpretation, therefore, must partake of the dialectic it expounds. Where an interpretation fails to do so, it reverts to rhetoric, and in the article this is sometimes the case. Nor does Cameron pay sufficient attention to the relevant secondary literature (in particular Cody and Gelpi). Furthermore, her claim that this approach to "a specific group of Dickinson's poems" is able to shed light on "lyric poetry generally" is hardly fulfilled. Cameron, however, does provide valuable insights into the nature of poetry, as when she writes that "meaning is consciousness carved out of the recognition of its own limitations": this is pure Dickinson. In conclusion, one must state that Cameron has performed a considerable service in directing critical discussion to the processual and dialectic method of Emily Dickinson's poetic knowledge.

ROLAND HAGENBÜCHLE, JOSEPH T. SWANN
University of Wuppertal, Germany