



## The poetics of space in Emily Dickinson's poetry

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### Abstract

I argue that the poetry of Emily Dickinson gives us exemplary insight into what Gaston Bachelard has termed the poetics of space—the mundane, yet intimate domestic spaces that construct our sense of selfhood and security, of identity and of alterity. I investigate Dickinson's poetry for its cognitive insight and visionary construction of spatial forms.

**Keywords:** emily dickinson, bachelard, poetry, space

### Introduction

For Bachelard, the poetic act has no past. Poetry has in this theory the property of being referable to a direct ontology. Bachelard states that the study of the poetic image, is to be done by a phenomenology of the imagination. For Bachelard poetry is a commitment of the soul (Bachelard 6). He states that the poem possesses the reader of poetry (Bachelard 7). For him, a phenomenological inquiry on poetry must go beyond sentimental resonances (Bachelard 7). To him, poetic expression creates being (Bachelard 8). Bachelard is interested in the poetic image at its origin (Bachelard 9). He states that to be speaking well is part of living well (Bachelard 11). To him, poetry is a phenomenon of freedom (Bachelard 12). To him, poetry is an origin of consciousness (Bachelard 13). For him phenomenology liquidates the past and starts the new (Bachelard 16). For him the imagination, is ceaselessly enriching itself with new images (Bachelard 20). For him, the house is an entity of the intimate values of inside space (Bachelard 25). For him, imagination augments the values of reality (Bachelard 20). For him all inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home (Bachelard 27). The house is experienced in its reality and in its virtuality, in thoughts and dreams (Bachelard 27). We gain comfort by reliving memories of shelter (28). Through poetry we touch the poetic depth of the space of the house. The house allows daydreaming and dreams in peace (Bachelard 28). The house integrates thoughts, memories and dreams (Bachelard 28). Without the house, humans would be dispersed beings (Bachelard 29). The house of memories is psychologically complex (Bachelard 36). To read poetry is to daydream (Bachelard 38). For Bachelard the study of the poetic imagination requires being receptive to the image at the moment it appears. The poetic entity has a dynamism of its own and is a direct ontology. It is in reverberation that Bachelard finds the real measure of the being of a poetic image. The communicability of an image is of ontological significance. Bachelard seeks a phenomenological determination of images (Bachelard 3). Only consideration of the onset of the image can restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness (Bachelard 4). Poetry acquires on our very being a grip that bears a phenomenological mark (Bachelard 7). The exuberance and depth of a poem are phenomena of resonance and reverberation. The poem through exuberance

awakens new depths in us. For Bachelard, expression creates being. A phenomenology of the poetic imagination concentrates on bringing out the quality of origin in various poetic images. Phenomenology confronts what is new. Bachelard examines images of felicitous space and calls his investigations topophilia. Space that has human value is termed by Bachelard as eulogized space. Space concentrates being within protective limits. The image of the house is a topography of our intimate being. For Bachelard the house is a tool of analysis of the human soul. The house is an entity for the phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space. Wendy Martin states that Dickinson wrote prescient poetry that embodied principles of fragmentation, isolation, independence, and self-reliance (Martin vii). Martin notes that she anticipated the psychological preoccupations and poetic themes and practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Martin 8). Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz note that that Dickinson had and maintained an impressive number of social connections over the course of her lifetime (Smith and Loeffelholz 1). Helen Vendler notes that Dickinson's poetry can be cryptic, elliptical, compressed, enigmatic, and abstract (Vendler 64). In poem no 2 from *The Complete poems* Dickinson creates a space of intimacy in the figure of the garden, which is opposed to spaces which do not belong such as "another sky" (Dickinson 4). Dickinson, I argue wrote a poetics of spatiality that reconceives our understanding of space. The poetry of Dickinson tends to be brief and in a miniature form. Dickinson's poetry was published posthumously. The poetry can be mysterious and given to abstraction. In poem 23 of the Franklin reading edition of the poems, the figures of the Bee, Butterfly and the Breeze evoke a spatiality of freedom. Alliteration is used to evoke an intimacy of space. Nature, rather than the Trinity, becomes for Dickinson a space of movement. The bee and butterfly both evoke flight. In poem 32 describes the transition from summer to autumn. Space here is both expansively present as well as absent. The space of a horizontal field evokes the passage of a walk. The absence of the summer rose is an intimate loss. The poem evocatively shows how space is molded by the seasons. In poem 90 the grandeur of nature in spring is described. The vastness of an outdoor landscape is filled with human value. The immensity of space is described in the figure of the flower being expected everywhere. The

presence of “Fern Odors on untraveled roads-” suggests vast uncharted spaces. Poem 122 suggests movement through space. Birds, the Bee and a leaf all move through the air suggesting considerable tracts of space. Poem 124 seeks to evoke the immensity of cosmic space by evoking worlds and firmaments. The poem shows the relative importance of space. In the vastness of cosmic space Kings, Queens and Doges are of relatively low importance. In poem 129 the Alps are a space of obstruction between places. The Alps are a source of space that is both solemn and attractive. In poem 134 Paradise possesses a moat of pearl, which denotes a space encircling paradise, a conception of space that is vast. In poem 138 the plumed procession of Angels denotes the space of a procession. In poem 165 the space occupied by Volcanoes is both still and active. The poem tells of how the vast spatial reach of the Volcano allows it to consume villages. The poem describes the human face in spatial terms as embodying stillness in the face of volcanic pain. The ecospatiality of the poem maps the terrain and describes the vineyard as palpitating. The space of the volcano is for the antiquary akin to the space of Pompei. The space of the inner life is comparable to a volcano in that it is both still and volatile and capable of great explosive powers. In poem no 181 space is imagined as heights, which are leapt. The idea of leaping is both a symbol of life and of death. In poem 187 we are given scenes of celestial spatiality with a planet in the sky and streaking by it the unloosed energy of a meteor. To make intimate the enormity of space and time is Dickinson’s distinctive spatial achievement. In poem 194 Dickinson gives a spatially compressed view of human life. By calling herself “Empress of Cavalry!” she makes herself spatially akin to Jesus. Dickinson’s compact and stark style that cuts down excess ornamentation, her ambitious and innovative use of punctuation, her multiple and varied choices and versions of poems all make the poetry open to reinterpretation. The poetry embodies multiple perspectives, voices, and contradictory interpretations. The poetry anticipates the preoccupations and themes that came later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dickinson’s poetry has been variously edited and its proper editing is a contested field. Early editions of Dickinson emphasized Dickinson as an individual artist whose poetry is ahistorical. The editing of Dickinson is an act of interpretation. The poetry is questioning of tradition and rethinks the relationship between poetry and the world. Dickinson was deeply interested in inner experience and critiqued the external world. Dickinson’s letters have their own value as works of literary immediacy. Dickinson’s writing is the source of cultural, social, psychological, and affective articulation. The categories of author, aesthetic and the literary are challenged in the poetry which transgresses normative boundaries. Dickinson’s artistic intentions are singular in that they are innovative for their age, and they resisted the fixity and finality of print. The appeal of the poetry has been widespread, appealing to both modernists and traditionalists. The centrality of Dickinson to American literature became apparent by the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hart Crane was among the poets influenced by Dickinson. Allen Tate considered Dickinson as being a heroic voice against industrialism and did a southern reading of the poetry. Dickinson was attracted to the soft weather of the South. There is an extraordinary body of feminist criticism on Dickinson. Feminist criticism sees Dickinson as a rebel.

Dickinson was an important influence on confessional poetry. Dickinson guarded her privacy. She was immune to the war fever of the civil war. She rejected the conventional rhetoric of church and state. Dickinson’s reaction to the war was marked by resignation. She is against official rhetoric and ideology. Susan Dickinson received more writings from Emily Dickinson than any other person. Susan received from Emily draft versions of poems. They shared a mutual passion for literature. In her lifetime, Dickinson circulated her writings through manuscript correspondences. Emily reached out to Susan regarding the writing of poetry, and Susan acted as a consultant, collaborator, and liaison. Emily sent Susan a range of writings over years. The letters Emily wrote to Susan show humor and show changes in style and experimentation. The letters show that they were fond of reading. The Dickinson’s combined the domestic and the poetic and the spiritual with the mundane. For Emily and Susan poetry was ennobling. In theology Dickinson was a rebel. The poetics developed by Dickinson was innovative and refused convention. Dickinson’s poetic work embraces the challenge of representing the entirety of human emotion. Dickinson’s view of the world has an existential aspect, and her use of language is often dramatic. Her poetry does not advocate a transcendent reality. She rejects divine sanction in regulating human life. She is intensely aware of temporality, individual limitation and isolation. Her poetry allows for alternative genderings. The poetry exists in a liminal space where the gender of the speaker can be altered. She was pioneering and iconoclastic in her exploration of the self. She was aware of the literature of the past and the popular literary culture of her age. Dickinson was aware of the old and new sermon styles. She was influenced by temperance literature. Popular sensational literature influenced her poetry. The literature of misery also influenced Dickinson. She was aware of her contemporary popular culture which influenced her style of writing. Dickinson was interested in women’s writing, and she displayed a wide variety of female representations in her writing. Dickinson was largely uninterested in ethnic injustice, political conflict, industrial conditions, and the lives of the lower classes. She was largely unaffected by public affairs. Dickinson did not identify with other women poets of her day. She was literarily ambitious but was not a progressive in her politics. Dickinson did not seek publication and most of her poems were published posthumously. Her poetic vision is distinguished by its originality. Her poetry reached maturity early and her style developed but did not change much. The spatial integration of diverse cognitive and aesthetic elements informs Dickinson’s writing. By making spatially intimate a wide variety of spatial frameworks Dickinson invites the reader to reconceptualize the world in a stranger understanding of human possibilities.

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