

EMILY DICKINSON AND WALT WHITMAN

The “Beginners”

Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson were both “beginners” . . .
“beginners” aren’t starters-out on a path others have traveled.
They are openers of new paths, those who take the first steps . . .

—Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich’s essay “Beginners” (1993) presents Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as the start or “beginn[ing]” of American poetry, and this idea is now critically commonplace. However, Rich’s description and the title of her essay are drawn from Whitman’s poem “Beginners,” and she emphasizes both poets as “strange” and, quoting the poem, “dreadful” to “their place and time” (*What Is* 91). Rich’s observations remind the reader that both poets were the literary rebels and revolutionaries of their day and beyond. Their centrality to the canon comes not in spite but because of their “strange[ness].” Both rebelled against the European poetic and cultural traditions that so influenced their contemporaries and predecessors, and their revolution was achieved through the hybrid and democratic nature of their poetics. Therefore, contrary to the dominant literary history of the twentieth century—a history characterized by boundaries, divisions, and deference to the aesthetic—hybridity and politics lie at the heart of the American poetic canon.

Whitman and Dickinson’s work is hybrid because it “problematises boundaries” between poetic genres and forms. It additionally mixes. Dickinson mixed meters, forms, and discourses. Whitman mixed literary genres, modes, and traditions as well as socioeconomic and cultural groups. Blurring boundaries, mixing, and the signature techniques of each poet—Whitman’s catalogues and free verse and Dickinson’s dashes—exemplify their intention to create poetic forms that reflected the democratic ideo-

logies of the nation's inception and rebelled against the Eurocentric culture and canon that continued to dominate American culture and inform social structures despite over fifty years of political independence.

Thus, their poetic revolutions were driven by America's post-colonial status and part of an effort to forge a distinctly American, culturally and socially reflective poetic. The necessity of this poetic revolution is evident in the writing of another revolutionary of the period, Ralph Waldo Emerson. While the United States had established its fiscal, industrial, and technical might, its culture lagged as Emerson argues in the essay "The American Scholar" (1837):

Perhaps the time is already come . . . when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than exertion of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age . . .
(*Nature* 83–84)

Emerson's prose provided a distinctively national and revolutionary philosophy for the "new age" of American culture but, William Carlos Williams wrote, formally "Emerson did not entirely escape" the influence of the Eurocentric and "false" "cultural strain." "He was a poet, in the making lost" (*Selected Essays* 155, 135, 139). Instead, the revolutionary new poetry for a "new age" of post-colonial American cultural development was provided by Dickinson and Whitman. This chapter presents Whitman and Dickinson as post-colonial poets and employs Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity in conjunction with analysis of their poetic form and identity. It thereby culturally relocates the poets and their democratic and revolutionary poetics in an alternative, political, hybrid, and multicultural American poetic history that challenges dominant critical constructions of "The Social Function of Poetry" in America.

While the work of both poets is hybrid and democratic in impulse, Whitman and Dickinson's poetic revolutions were very different in nature. In the opening inscription of *Leaves of Grass* (1892 edition), Whitman's first-person speaker announces to the reader:

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse. (3)

The lines overtly declare his political intentions, his synthesis of self and nation, and exemplify the hybrid merger of prose and poetry and lyric and epic through which the poet achieved his formal revolution. His revolution returns to ideologies of the American Revolution and, like his Revolutionary predecessors, Whitman engaged Native America to generate a distinctively American poetic persona. The figure of the Native American informed one manifestation of his poetic identity, the Native American Adam. Meanwhile Native American languages and oral traditions contributed to the development of his formal techniques and facilitated Whitman's rejection of traditional verse forms governed by rhyme and meter. His culturally hybrid persona and poetic were further intended to resolve the poet's contradictory promotion of both manifest destiny and democratic multiculturalism. Despite the virtual impossibility of resolving this contradiction, the poet's, as deemed by James E. Miller, "*Lyric-Epic*," his self-mythologizing "Song of Myself," is also his mythopoeis of an idealized American democratic society.

While Whitman's revolution is overt, Dickinson's is elliptical, and she recognized that it would not be realized until some future time. As she writes in Poem 839, it was therefore:

Unfulfilled to Observation—
Incomplete—to Eye—
But to Faith—a Revolution
In Locality— (*Poems* 386)

Her "Revolution" was "Unfulfilled to Observation" in the sense that it was, during her lifetime, a private revolution, which required "Observation," or readers, to be fulfilled. Formally, it was derived by synthesizing the popular and public ballad form, evident in the quatrains of Poem 839, with a lyric sensibility. This synthesis reflects the public orientation of her private poetic. It was further a "Revolution / In Locality." The poet's "Lexicon" defines local as "pertaining to a place" (Webster).¹ Dickinson's poetic revolution was grounded in her locality, New England and America. However, local is also defined as "pertaining to a fixed or limited portion of space" (Webster). In contrast to Whitman's democratic, expansive poetic with its incorporative persona, catalogues of the nation's diverse geography and inhabitants, and free verse form, Dickinson's democratic revolution is shaped

by the constraints of her gender and social position and intimately bound with the concepts of containment and “circumference.” Both are reflected in the variety of female personas Dickinson’s speaker inhabits in her nationally grounded poetic exploration of the identities of poet and woman. They are also evident in the incorporation of iambic pentameter within her ballad meter structures to reflect and challenge the Old World patriarchal structures implicit in the poetic forms and meters inherited from Great Britain. Her dashes actively and democratically engage the reader, as do Whitman’s catalogues. Like his free verse, they opened up her poetic form, altered the poetic line, and influenced the development of poetry in America.

The second stanza of Poem 839 suggests the future significance of her revolution:

Unto Us—the Suns extinguish—
To our Opposite—
New Horizons—they embellish—
Fronting Us—with Night. (86)

While her voice and presence are often overwhelmed by Whitman’s in this study and the work of poets of the American Strain, her poetic was no less significant to the generation of “New Horizons” of American poetry and the strain’s (r)evolutionary tradition. The first part of this chapter establishes that tradition by illustrating the revolutionary, hybrid, and democratic nature of Whitman and Dickinson’s poetic form. The second part examines the cultural significance of their poetic personas. The conclusion locates their work, Whitman’s in particular, as a poetic “beginn[ing]” intended to lead to the emergent poets and poetries of the late twentieth century. Thus, theirs was not only a post-colonial revolution but a rebellion against the “false” “cultural strain” and the dominant Eurocentric national culture and poetic canon that must be continued by the “Poets to Come” of the American Strain.

THE HYBRID REVOLUTION

While Whitman and Dickinson were certainly neither alone in the efforts to generate a reflective national literature nor the only cultural revolutionaries, they were unique in translating revolution into poetic form. Their “strangeness” is ultimately born of the mutually informing revolutionary

and hybrid nature of their work. Their work is formally hybrid because of their revolutionary and democratic intentions; their work is revolutionary because it is hybrid.

"Their Presidents Shall Not Be Their Common Referee
So Much as Their Poets Shall."

Larzer Ziff observes that in 1776, Americans declared "their political independence from Great Britain, but it was not until 1837 that they received . . . what Oliver Wendell Holmes called, 'their intellectual declaration of independence'" (16). This "declaration," quoted in the introduction to the chapter, was Emerson's essay "The American Scholar." Its content was provoked by America's post-colonial culture, and it set the stage for Whitman's arrival.

Despite American political independence, Ziff argues that the nation's line of cultural development suggested:

The history of the [American] culture would be the history of European man in the new world, bringing to it institutions best fitted to subdue it. American civilization might differ from that of European countries in that it blended people of different stocks and was distinguished by a high degree of mobility, both social and geographical. But classes, or at least distinct social groupings, would stabilize, and the necessarily different American institutions would nevertheless exist to protect the very same elements of human continuity that were protected by the institutions of European civilization. (10)

To impede this Europeanized line of development and counter the predominance of the "false" "strain" of culture, Emerson envisioned, as he writes in "Nominalist and Realist" (1844), an American "Adam" (267), a "new man" (274) who might cast off "subdu[ing]" European institutions and provide an alternative to the "European man in the new world." Emerson also sought an American bard. In "The Poet" (1844), he observes that America has yet to produce a poetic "genius" who might "with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness . . . dare to chaunt our own times and circumstance" (281).

In 1855, with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman answered Emerson's call for a national bard in the poetic persona

of the “new man” and American “Adam.” Emerson’s writing indicates the importance of poetry in developing a national culture and identity—“poetry will revive and lead in the new age” (*Nature* 84)—and Whitman further asserted that poetry might act as a political force. In the preface to the 1855 edition he wrote:

Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff
most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them
the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee
so much as their poets shall. (*Leaves of Grass* 619)

Whitman asserts the poet as a nation’s true head of state, suggesting both the political and cultural power of poetry. However, his statements also emphasize the country’s need for poets. This need is attributable not only to the nation’s lack of a distinctive national literature and culture, but to the distance between America’s legal, social, and cultural reality and its democratic founding principles. These ideologies are prevalent across editions of *Leaves of Grass* and central themes of “Democratic Vistas” (1871), which emphasize repeatedly the necessity of a national literature, and in particular poetry, to the realization of “American democracy” (*Leaves of Grass* 760).

Whitman focused on poetry because he believed poetic form and political and social structure to be intimately related. As he put it in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” “feudal processes and poems” must be “left” “behind” and “the poems and processes of Democracy” “assumed” (293–294). The lines call for destruction of the imported European poetic canon, and further suggest that a nation’s poetry, specifically its poetic form, is inextricable from its governmental and social structures. The political agency of the poet therefore arises from his or her ability to alter or perpetuate established social structures through poetic form.

“A Revolution in Form and in the Traditional Conceptions of Literature Itself”²

Whitman’s signature formal techniques—long lines, catalogues, and parallel structure have long been linked with his claim to be “the poet of democracy” (Miller, *Leaves* 5). However, it was through hybridity—the blurring and problematization of boundaries between literary genres and modes—that he achieved the “revolution in content” and “in form” of his democratic poetics. Applying Homi Bhabha’s conceptualization of hybridity to one

of Whitman's formal techniques, the catalogue, reveals that Whitman's poetic structure not only suggests democratic social structure but enacts it through the reader's role in the process of the poem.

While the idea of Whitman as a political poet is not novel, it does run counter to the well-entrenched political/aesthetic binary that dominated the American poetic center for much of the twentieth century. The predominance of the binary explains Betsy Erkkila's preface to *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989). In it she announces, "*Whitman the Political Poet*. The title is at once a statement of subject and a challenge. It is an attempt to restore a series of linkages—Whitman, political, poet—that have been torn asunder in the wake of Modernist, Formalist, and New Critical strategies" (v). Erkkila also squarely locates her study in the canonical debates of the period. She observes:

We have learned that Whitman is best and most interesting as a personal rather than as a political poet; indeed that he is at his worst and most problematic as an artist when he is being most political. What is at stake here is an American canon, a particular way of reading and interpreting literature and a literary profession grounded in the assumption that aesthetic value is an indwelling essence detached from ideological interest and the messiness of history. (7)

The book is a leading example of one of the two trends in multicultural critiques of the poet's work that evolved in its wake. It presents Whitman's poetics as an idealized, albeit problematic, model of American democracy.³ The second trend emphasizes the contradictions arising from Whitman's poetic project and the failure of the poet's form to achieve his intentions. This view is exemplified in David Simpson's "Destiny Made Manifest: The Styles of Whitman's Poetry" (1990), Karen Sanchez-Eppler's *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (1993), and Ali Behdad's *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (2005). The proponents of each view consider many of the same poetic techniques, yet read them in virtual opposition.

However, any analysis of their form must consider the post-colonial poetic inheritance against which Whitman and Dickinson rebelled. Poetry in English during their day was dominated by iambic pentameter and the sonnet. The form of the sonnet, particularly the English sonnet with its closing couplet, presents the poet as the final authority and reinforces the

legitimacy of a single perspective or worldview pithily condensed into two lines. Given educational and publishing access in patriarchal and class-based European societies, this worldview historically belonged to a privileged, educated male. Therefore, the strict form of the sonnet both enacted and perpetuated the class stations and gender roles of the day, making it the most undemocratic of forms. In addition to the narrowness of its scope, the sonnet's scale was limiting. The small scale and scope of the sonnet might have fit "the small scales of European kingdoms, empires," but, Whitman's writing intimates, it was not adequate for the diverse expanse comprising the United States and its inhabitants (*Leaves of Grass* 641). The meters that governed British verse and the "laws" of inherited poetic forms were equally inappropriate to American democracy.

To generate a poetic form appropriate to America's scale and diversity, to free verse from the constrictions and prescriptions, social and formal, of inherited verse forms, and, in turn, to resist the "stabiliz[ation]" of "classes" and promote the democratic promise of a "high degree of mobility, both social and geographic" (Ziff 10), Whitman created a hybrid form fusing prose and poetry. In "Ventures on an Old Theme," following the section title "NEW POETRY—," he writes, "In my opinion the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry" (322). In the same passage he goes on to argue that "*Poetry*" has no place for rhyming meter and suggests:

[I]t is, notwithstanding, certain to me, that the day of such conventional rhyme is ended. In America, at any rate, and as a medium of the highest aesthetic practical or spiritual expression, present or future, it palpably fails, and must fail, to serve. (322–323)

Whitman wanted poetry, "the highest aesthetic, practical, or spiritual" form of "expression," but rejected the undemocratic poetic conventions and forms inherited from Europe. He therefore hybridized genres to forge a new poetic informed by prose, the source of his long lines, and structured not by rhyme or meter but catalogues, parallelism, and repetition.

Matt Miller's "Composing the First Leaves of Grass: How Whitman Used His Early Notebooks" emphasizes the role of prose in the development of Whitman's line. Miller observes, "it seems to have been crucial to his creative process that the boundaries between genres remained unstable" (114), an observation aligned with my definition of poetic hybridity.⁴ Working "[w]ithout the musical prerogatives of meter," "with a highly variable line

length that was determined only by the sentence (or speech unit of the sentence) that he was writing,” lent itself to a “generative” technique that evolved into the catalogue (Miller 119–120). The catalogue is, in turn, intimately linked to the poet’s use of parallelism and repetition. Erkkila argues, “[Whitman’s] verse form, like the catalogue technique in which it is rooted, is a poetic analogue of democracy, inscribing a pattern of many in one.” It is therefore able to undo “traditional hierarchies by presenting each person as part of a seemingly indiscriminate mass” (88). She goes on to assert that a “similarly equalizing and unifying effect” is achieved through “his use of parallelism, and reiteration and his extensive use of coordinate, conjunctive, and prepositional constructions” (89). Ultimately, Whitman’s hybridization of genres led to the formal techniques through which the poet expresses democratic ideologies.

Whitman also hybridized the lyric and epic poetic modes. The epic afforded the scale and national emphasis Whitman sought, while the lyric “I” allowed Whitman to present himself as a representative speaker and the “new man” and American Adam. To describe Whitman’s innovative mode, James E. Miller coined the term “lyric-epic.” Quoting from Whitman, he explains:

Here is the germ of Whitman’s radical innovation. His inspiration is lyric, his ambition epic, the one to be fitted within the structure of the other. A lyric is traditionally defined as a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of the poet or speaker. On the surface, the lyric appears poles apart from the epic, embodying as it does the poet’s own “physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality.” But Whitman in effect decided to cast himself in the role of his own epic hero, using his lyric gift not only to express himself but also to “tally” the “momentous spirit and facts” of his “immediate days and current America.” His eyes would be turned both inward and outward, and his voice would be both personal and public. (*Leaves* 25)

The synthesis of the two forms is explicit in his 1871 “Inscriptions” to *Leaves of Grass* in which Whitman declares himself a political poet and his intention to use the lyric “I” to speak for fellow Americans, “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse” (3).⁵ Emphasizing both the political origins of Whitman’s hybridization and the relationship between poetic and governmental form, Miller further observes, “He was the first American poet to see that, as America had begun

a heretofore untried experiment in democratic governance, so the American poet must find a new epic form to match" (*Leaves* 12).

In *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic*, Miller suggests that Whitman initiated a new and American tradition, the personal epic; however, his analysis points to the generation of another uniquely American poetic tradition. By combining the two poetic modes, by turning his poetic eye "both inward and outward" and creating a voice "both personal and public" (Miller, *Leaves* 25), Whitman, along with Dickinson, established a new American lyric tradition differing from the established Western and Romantic lyrical tradition. Harold Bloom asserts:

[F]rom 1744 or so to the present day the best poetry internalized its subject matter, particularly in the mode of Wordsworth after 1798. Wordsworth had no true subject except his own subjective nature, and very nearly all significant poetry since Wordsworth, even by American poets, has repeated Wordsworth's inward turning. (*Agon* 287)

While critics of the experimental camp would contest the claim "nearly all significant poetry," it is widely agreed that the personal lyric in the Romantic tradition dominates American poetry. However, Whitman's poetic, which employs a representative lyric speaker constructed to express and embody his nation, provides a foundational example to the contrary. His work establishes a uniquely American and radical lyrical departure that would be reenacted in various fashions by his progenitors in the American Strain.

Having established Whitman's signature poetic techniques as derivative of the hybridization of literary genres and poetic modes, arguments against their democratic implications can be considered through an examination of his catalogue. For Erkkila, the catalogue is "the poetic analogue of democracy" (*Whitman* 88). For Simpson, it offers "celebrative parallelism in which all potential conflicts are subsumed" and "fails to ponder the fact, and fact it was, that the aggregate did not allow for the freedom and individuality of all within it" (187). However, Whitman's poetic does not merely equalize but actively engages the reader in the process of American democracy.

Bhabha uses the "stairwell" to model both how hybridity operates and to theorize the cultural space it creates, describing it as the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (*Location* 4). The persons and groups of Whitman's catalogues

present these “fixed identifications” while the catalogue technique acts as a “stairwell” between them. The very act of naming diverse elements of society and presenting them nonhierarchically opens up new poetic and social space in which American democracy can be rethought and reformulated. In “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman writes, “Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you, / Each has his or her place in the procession” (*Leaves of Grass* 84). While the lines offer a clear statement of democratic ideology, reading them in conjunction with the following passage, which Simpson presents in support of his argument, offers the opportunity to consider the theoretical concretely. In section 15 of “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes:

The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,
 The woollypates hoe in the sugarfield, the overseer views them
 from his saddle,
 The bugle calls in the ballroom, the gentlemen run for their
 partners, the dancers bow to each other,
 (*Leaves of Grass* 37)⁶

In this catalogue, Whitman frees each group from its local, cultural, and socioeconomic context and places them in “the procession,” the democratic space of his poem. The poet’s catalogue generates the potential for a symbolic interaction that does not “equalize” as Simpson suggests. Instead, as Bhabha describes the stairwell, the catalogue “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (*Location* 4). Significantly, it is the reader who ultimately generates the interaction between the groups presented in the catalogue.

Of his role as a poet, Whitman wrote, “He comes to no conclusions, and does not satisfy the reader” (*Leaves of Grass* 794).⁷ As opposed to the sonnet, the dominant form of the day, the poem and the catalogues within do not dictate or draw conclusions for the reader. What Simpson suggests is a lack of poetic/political analysis or a reductive parallelism (186–187) is instead a democratic engagement of the reader. The poet’s socioeconomic and cultural mixing generates an active, hybrid, poetic space that engages the reader in American democracy by requiring her to locate contradictions and differences or similarities and parallels among the catalogued groups.

Whitman concludes section 15 with an observation on his poetic process, “And of these one and all I weave the song of myself” (*Leaves of Grass* 39), which is also the song of his nation. The section and the

poet's catalogue technique present an idealized space that celebrates the nation's diversity yet "weave[s]" it into a unifying song and national poetic. Thus, Whitman's poetic acts as Bhabha's hybridity, "at once a vision and a construction—that takes you 'beyond' yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present" (*Location 3*). Rather than providing historically situated political analysis, the section and his larger poetic are left open, presenting American democracy as an ongoing project initiated by the poet and perpetuated by the reader.

The poet presents a diverse range of subjects in order to incorporate and express the nation's diversity. "[A]ll" come together in his democratic and hybrid poetic, "I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms" (*Leaves of Grass* 286). The poet's inclusive poetic is ultimately achieved through the hybridization of prose and poetry and the consequent techniques of cataloguing and parallel structure, which lend themselves to the democratic mixing of the poem's subjects and democratically engage the reader in the poet's "vision" and "construction" of American democracy.

"I See—New Englandly"

Whitman's poetic speaker roams across the country cataloguing the diversity of the American landscape and recording "the varied carols" (*Leaves of Grass* 12) of the country's inhabitants. His poetic proclamations make clear his democratic agenda and revolutionary intentions. However, it is more difficult to reconcile the life and letters of the reclusive Dickinson, whose poems were effectively not published in her lifetime, with a democratic agenda and groundedness in her identity as an American. While Dickinson's poetic is frequently presented as political and revolutionary from a feminist perspective, her revolution is not often contextualized within her culturally post-colonial status. However, Dickinson's metrical mixing and her signature technique, the dash, are part of a hybrid, democratic, formal revolution based in her identity as an American woman poet.

The decline of New Criticism, the critical movement that ensured her place in the canon (Golding 87), and the ascent of alternative critical approaches such as literary feminism vastly altered Dickinson scholarship. While feminist treatments of her work dominate contemporary criticism and are utilized throughout my analysis, critical approaches informed by New Historicism have yielded conflicting readings of her work. Any reading asserting Dickinson as a political poet must acknowledge these interpretive differences. They are readily illustrated by some of the interpretations of Poem 788, which begins "Publication—is the Auction / Of the Mind

of Man—” (*Poems* 351) and is frequently analyzed in conjunction with the fact of Dickinson’s limited publication. Several critics suggest that the lines and poem rebel against the patriarchal construction of the poet as male and the publishing practices of the period, which reinforce this gendering (Gilbert and Gubar 559; Petrino 21). “[T]he Auction” reflects a literary market that readily published the work of women writers as long as both concurred with “the Mind of Man”—conventional and patriarchal ideologies concerning women and women’s writing.

Meanwhile, Betsy Erkkila and Domhnall Mitchell argue that poem and Dickinson’s lack of publication reflect her wish to maintain her elite social class (“Emily Dickinson and Class” 17, 19; “Emily Dickinson and Class” 199).⁸ While Erkkila’s writing on Whitman emphasizes both the revolutionary and democratic nature of his poetic, she describes Dickinson as a “New England aristocrat” whose “antidemocratic values were at the very center of her work” (23) and reflected by the poet’s “refusal to publish” (17). Both Mitchell and Erkkila offer historically located readings of her work that incorporate the facts of the poet’s life and letters alongside the content of her poems. Their readings largely elide Dickinson’s form and do not consider significant elements of her use of first person, generally regarding the speaker of the poems as synonymous with the author.

David Drews and George Hutchinson suggest that “Whitman in person largely, though confusedly and idiosyncratically, internalized typical white racial attitudes of his time, place, and class.” Like Whitman, Dickinson’s personal beliefs and communications were sometimes at odds with the politics of her poetry. However, unlike Whitman, Dickinson, whose poetic is rife with metaphors of a contained and potentially destructive creative force—“On my volcano grows the Grass,” “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” (*Poems* 624, 341), was effectively cut off from the idealized social openness and fluidity of American democracy that inspired Whitman’s “destruction” of the European canon and “freeing” of verse. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, “Literally, women like Dickinson, Brontë, and Rossetti were imprisoned in their homes, their father’s houses; indeed, almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men’s houses” (83). As a woman of a family with financial, intellectual, and social status, Dickinson was a “New England aristocrat.” However, her “title” circumscribed her experience of American democracy and her realization of social fluidity, and this shaped the nature of her revolution.

If Whitman’s personal experience and poetic reflect a national culture of cultural and geographic mobility, then Dickinson’s suggests Ziff’s description of America’s Europeanized course of development and the

evolution of “stabilize[d]” “classes, or at least distinct social groupings” (10). William Carlos Williams observes that Emerson—another, to use Erkkila’s terms, “New England aristocrat”—and Dickinson were both “circumscribed by a slightly hackneyed gentility.” Yet, Williams writes, “Dickinson was of the same school, rebelliously” (*Selected Essays* 155). Ultimately, her hybrid poetic both reflects and rebels against the European patriarchal traditions and social structures at odds with her realization of American democracy, making hers “a Revolution / In Locality—” (*Poems* 386) However, Erkkila contends that Dickinson’s class status offered her more choices (though, she acknowledges, less mobility) than women with lower socio-economic status and ultimately provided the space and time to pursue her poetry (3). That is likely the case, but the paradox of the situation must also be acknowledged—her poetic revolution came at the cost of maintaining her social fixity and this is reflected in her poetic and her poetic achievement.

In *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David Reynolds describes the distractions that prevented Dickinson’s largely forgotten female contemporaries from attaining similar literary achievement. These include involvement in the suffragette movement and the adoption of popular and paying literary genres and styles (419). His examples suggest that were Dickinson to have pursued publication over her art or the more overt political activism both Mitchell and Erkkila seek to establish the poet as political in a feminist or democratic sense, we would be unlikely to be analyzing her poetry at all. Given her circumstances, Dickinson chose to live an exaggerated performance of her social fixity and experienced and enacted democratic social fluidity through her poems and the variety of personas she adopted. Meanwhile, Whitman was free to travel the country and move comfortably through American social strata, and this freedom is reflected in the geographical range of his poetry and his all-embodying poetic persona.

However, the poets’ personas will be addressed further later. At present, the focus is Dickinson’s form, and her more subtle revolution requires additional poetic context. Dickinson’s post-colonial poetic inheritance was dominated by British traditions. Kay Cornelius observes:

Most of the leading poets writing in the English language during Dickinson’s time, including Dickinson’s favorites, the Brownings, preferred graceful lines of iambic pentameter, which has five accented syllables to each line. In a time when poetic language was generally “high-flown” and poets used difficult and complex

verse forms such as the sonnet, Dickinson's four-line stanzas seem almost *crude* by comparison. (39; emphasis mine)

In Poem 256, Dickinson wryly acknowledges some of these differences, rejecting British poetic tradition and contrasting it to her “New” and revolutionary American and feminine poetic:

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune—
 Because I grow—where Robins do—
 But, were I Cuckoo born—
 I'd swear by him—
 The ode familiar—rules the Noon—
 The Buttercup's, my Whim for Bloom—
 Because we're Orchard sprung—
 But, were I Britain born,
 I'd Daisies spurn—

None but the Nut—October fit—
 Because, through dropping it,
 The Seasons flit—I'm taught—
 Without the Snow's Tableau
 Winter, were lie—to me—
 Because I see—New Englandly—
 The Queen, discerns like me—
 Provincially— (*Poems* 114–115)

The speaker, in this case Dickinson in the persona of “the poet,” asserts, “The “Robin’s my Criterion for Tune—” because she “grow[s]” “where Robins do.” The place both grow, it becomes clear with the later reference to New England, is the United States, and because of her nationality, the speaker’s aesthetic outlook is aligned with the “Robin[’s]” and “Buttercup[’s].” Were she “Britain born,” she would “spurn” such preferences. However, the poem goes beyond mere aesthetic differences due to regional flora and fauna. The use of birds to symbolize “the poet” is well documented in her work, and, like Whitman, she frequently associates poetry with song.⁹ Based on these associations, the first two lines indicate her “criterion” for poetry is also derived from her American nationality. “But, were I Cuckoo born—” is grammatically equated through parallel structure with being Britain

born, “But, were I Britain born—,” and suggests an opposing “criterion” that aligns British poetics with the cuckoo.

The bird is a suggestive choice. The cuckoo leaves its eggs in the nests of other birds, and its hatchlings, typically larger than the nest-owner’s progeny, outcompete them for resources. The usual result is that the cuckoo’s hatchlings thrive while the other fledglings die. At least some of these facts would have been known to Dickinson as they are presented in Webster’s dictionary, which was so integral to her poetry.¹⁰ The affiliation of the cuckoo with British poetry and poets comments on the artificial and even dangerous post-colonial literary inheritance from Britain when it is deposited in another nest like American poetry. Thus, Dickinson presents a similar, but less overt, argument to Whitman’s call for the destruction of European authority and poetry.

She also rejects British forms and meters. While the robin sings a simple song or “tune,” the cuckoo sings a “familiar” “ode,” a traditional verse form often written in iambic pentameter. Dickinson names her poetic form in contrast to British verse and thereby suggests its suitability to America. In her Webster’s dictionary, in addition to its musical definitions, the word “tune” is specifically connected to a bird song and also defined as the “Proper state for use or application; right disposition; fit temper or humor” (Webster). These definitions indicate that a tune is a more natural production for a robin than an ode, and that such a song is “in tune” with the poet’s intentions or poetic criterion that are linked to her “Locality” (386).

The poem proceeds to identify and differentiate qualities associated with English verse and her own New England or American poetic. The ode is significantly performed at noon, a time connected to men and male domination in the poet’s writing (Barker 52, 67). While the time of the ode’s performance connects it to a male-dominated poetic tradition, its “familiar[ity]” indicates the dominance of this tradition. The juxtaposition of the tune to the ode also recalls the style of Dickinson’s verse, described by Cornelius as “crude” for the time in terms of form and style, as opposed to the more formal and polished tradition of the ode. This difference takes on a distinctively American and revolutionary association in the final three lines as Dickinson puns that she sees “New Englandly” rather than Englandly. The poet simultaneously likens yet differentiates herself from “The Queen” with the double meaning of the word “provincially.” According to Dickinson’s Webster’s dictionary, the provinces of the Queen are the countries belonging to her “kingdom” through “conquest or colonization” and the former status of the colonies of North America

(Webster). The speaker and Queen both “discern” or “make distinctions” (Webster) “provincially,” based on the countries’ former roles as colonizer and colonized. However, due to her provincial, or post-colonial status, the style of Dickinson’s populist “tune” is provincial, “not polished” and “rude” (Webster). The double entendre rings with irony and is intended to differentiate her poetic from the English poetic tradition in both style and substance. The poem asserts her role as a female poet practicing a “*New*” and American tradition reflective of her democratic nation.

Formally, this differentiation and “*New[ness]*”—her poetic revolution—was achieved through hybridity. While Whitman synthesized free or open verse from the distinct genres of prose and poetry, creating a hybrid sociopoetic space in the process, Dickinson’s poems are both formally and metrically hybrid. Her poetic has long been read as influenced by the hymns of Isaac Watts, and her metrical framework understood as common meter, which derives from ballad meter. The ballad is formed of quatrains of various patterns of tetrameter and trimeter. It usually employs an *abcb* rhyme scheme, which informs or comprises the scheme of many of Dickinson’s poems. The ballad is a populist and public poetic form as its use in hymns attests. David Caplan presents the ballad’s history and status in English poetry:

Antony Easthope argues that the Renaissance courtly lyric’s displacement of the feudal ballad marks a crucial shift: “The two forms—ballad and the Renaissance courtly poem—exemplify opposed kinds of discourse: one collective, popular, intersubjective, accepting the text as a poem to be performed; the other individualist, elitist, privatized, offering the text as representation of a voice speaking.” Easthope’s overly schematic argument presents neatly contrasting pairs. English literary history forms a battle between the ballad and the pentameter, with the ballad as the valiant loser. (111)

While Easthope’s history might be “overly schematic,” there are certainly two distinctive poetic traditions and “discourse[s]” whose boundaries Dickinson blurs. Her poems, with their “individualist[ic]” and private nature, are generally understood to possess many qualities of the pentameter tradition, which overlaps with the lyric tradition. However, she utilizes the form of the “popular” and “collective” ballad tradition. By combining the two she “problematizes boundaries” between the personal and the public and asserts, as described in Poem 256, her distinctly American and feminine

hybrid “tune” to counter the dominance of the British male “ode” and, thus, enacts her poetic rebellion.

However, this rebellion and Dickinson’s adoption of ballad form and meter also register the constraints of the woman poet. A. R. C. Finch, having emphasized the dominance of iambic pentameter in English verse, observes that, as a male poet, Whitman was free to “disregard accentual-syllabic prosody, the entire basis of the patriarchal poetic tradition since Chaucer” (168). Dickinson, Finch suggests, chose to “gnaw at iambic pentameter mostly from a strict metrical framework” because she needed to work within patriarchal standards to achieve poetic authority (168). Even while working within these restraints, Dickinson is both a “beginner,” as Rich identifies her, and a revolutionary. As Finch points out, “Dickinson is the only canonical female poet before the turn of the century who resisted the authority of [iambic pentameter]” (169).

However, Dickinson’s poetic additionally exhibits metrical hybridity that allowed the poet to both reflect and rebel against the social structures inherent in the poetic forms and meters she utilized. According to Finch, Dickinson “appears to have scrupulously avoided five-stress lines except . . . where iambic pentameter evokes patriarchal concepts, particularly Christianity and traditional patriarchal poetic and other ‘author’ity” (170). The cultural significance of this technique is illuminated through Bhabha’s explanation of hybridity. Through her strategic use of iambic pentameter, Dickinson links the five-beat meter to the dangerous and unsuitable male-dominated tradition and discourse of British poetry described in Poem 256. The strategy is evident in the third and fourth lines of that poem, which are comprised of an iambic pentameter line expressing both British and patriarchal poetic authority:

/But, **were**/ I **Cuc**/koo **born**—
I’d **swear**/ by **him**— (*Poems* 114)

Thus, the poet makes iambic pentameter a “site of discrimination and domination.” She resists the authority of the line by dividing it in two, or in Bhabha’s terms, “deform[ing]” it (159). Her strategic use of iambic pentameter “reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (*Location* 160). Her metrical hybridizations recognize and challenge the dominant meter and the undemocratic, patriarchal discourse and social structures it represents.

Poetry and “Possibility”

Dickinson’s poetic signature, her use of dashes, is another form of rebellion against inherited post-colonial and patriarchal forms, and it effects a democratic openness in her poetry. Analyzing Poem 721 of the Johnson edition, Jay Ladin argues Dickinson’s use of dashes suggest the poem as an “ongoing process”:

By ending the sentence and the poem with a dash—a pause—rather than a period, Dickinson suggests . . . that the poem is a glimpse of an ongoing process, rather than a complete picture of a static state or object. (49)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the poet’s English contemporary, identified the dominant form of the day, the sonnet, as such a “static” “object” trapping a “static state” when he described it as “a moment’s monument” (546).¹¹ The sonnet achieves its monumental status, in both senses of the word, through its prescriptive form and closed structure. Its form, in turn, reflects the static nature of the British class system as well as the fixity of female gender roles within that system. Dorothy Mermin observes, “for the Victorians” women were not poets; rather, “*poems* [were] women” (68). Both Mermin (68) and Margaret Homans (569–570) emphasize that the conventions and forms of the poetic tradition Dickinson inherited frequently served as a trap for a woman poet, perpetuating her objectified poetic and social status. Dickinson’s dashes disrupt the static nature of this poetic tradition and rebel against her own social fixity. While American democracy has never been equally realized by all—as the difference in Whitman and Dickinson’s poetics suggest—her dashes present the poem as an “ongoing process” that reflects her nation’s democratic social structure through the position in which it places the reader, who is essential to “the ongoing process” or realization of the poem’s meaning.

Dickinson emphasizes the democratic possibilities of poetry in the much-analyzed Verse 666 in which “Possibility” becomes a metaphor for poetry. The poem’s form demonstrates its openness or “Possibility” by closing with the dash method previously described by Ladin and a suggestive final couplet that emphasizes opening rather than closure, “The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise—” (*Poems* 215). However, the dash is of particular significance in the opening stanza as well and it ends each of the lines:

I dwell in Possibility—
 A fairer House than Prose—
 More numerous of Windows—
 Superior—for Doors— (215)

According to the speaker, in this case “the poet,” the numerous doors and windows of poetry indicate that the genre allows for the association of more ideas and themes than prose. The additional windows provide more views, in other words, more viewpoints or more ways of viewing or understanding the work. It is “Superior—for Doors—” suggesting they are both greater in quality and number. Doors provide both a means of entering or approaching the poem as well as the means to exit it—to form conclusions as to meaning and intent. Doors and windows are also another way of suggesting the particular openness of Dickinson’s poetic counter to the closed form and the caught and contained moment of the sonnet. The form of Verse 666, with each of the first stanza’s lines ending with the dash, literally punctuates its theme of openness. This invitation to interpretative possibility is in stark contrast to the closed form of the sonnet, which is resolved for the reader by the poet with a couplet or sestet. Dickinson’s dashes allow both the poet and the reader to “dwell in Possibility.” Like Whitman, Dickinson democratically equalized the role of poet and reader.

“Strange and ‘Dreadful’ to Their Place and Time”

While Whitman and Dickinson are not often labeled post-colonial poets, they did rebel against their post-colonial cultural inheritance, and Homi Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity provides a fresh and meaningful way to culturally locate their poetics. Both sought nationally representative and democratic formal alternatives to inherited European poetic forms, conventions, and traditions and both derived hybrid solutions. As a consequence of their hybrid revolutions, their work, as Rich described it, was “strange,” and even “dreadful” to “their place and time.” However, despite their centrality to the American canon, in the larger and “deeply purist” context of Western literature (Allen, Introduction 3) and culture described in the introduction, their work continues to be “strange” and difficult to classify.

The “strangeness” resulting from her hybrid combinations contributed to Dickinson’s difficulties with publishing her poetry during her lifetime. Even after her death and editorial intervention, their hybrid originality