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“Dragons – in the Crease”:
The Many Masks of Emily Dickinson

MARINELA FREITAS
University of Porto

ABSTRACT: This article examines the multiplicity of masks in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, focusing on her strategies of concealment and revelation through tropes of the veil, the dragon, and the volcano. By situating Dickinson within the Victorian dramatic tradition and the cultural expectations imposed upon nineteenth-century American women writers, the analysis highlights her slant poetics as a means of negotiating identity, authority, and desire. Dickinson’s poetic selves often emerge as armored bodies – simultaneously reticent and explosive, veiled and volcanic – whose vitality is dramatized through recurrent figurations of fire, ice, storm, and eruption. The essay argues that Dickinson’s art lies in this poetics of excess, where silence and obliquity become performative strategies that exceed the constraints of gender and culture.

RESUMO: Este artigo aborda a multiplicidade de máscaras na poesia de Emily Dickinson, debruçando-se sobre as suas estratégias de ocultação e revelação através dos tropos do véu, do vulcão e dos dragões. Inscrevendo a sua obra na cultura vitoriana do recurso à voz dramática e considerando as expectativas culturais impostas às escritoras na América oitocentista, esta análise sublinha a importância da obliquidade como forma de negociar questões de identidade, autoridade e desejo. Os “eus” poéticos dickinsonianos surgem muitas vezes como corpos blindados – simultaneamente reticentes e explosivos, velados e volcânicos –, cuja vitalidade é dramatizada através de figurações do fogo, do gelo, da tempestade e da erupção. Este ensaio defende que a arte de Dickinson assenta numa poética de excesso, na qual o silêncio e a

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obliquidade se tornam estratégias performativas para ultrapassar as restrições culturais e de género.

KEYWORDS: Dickinson, masks, slantness, veil, volcano, dragon, excess

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dickinson, máscaras, obliquidade, véu, vulcão, dragão, excesso

. . . so you see when you go away, the world looks staringly, and I find I need more vail – Frank Peirce thinks I mean berage vail, and makes a sprightly plan to import the "article," but dear Susie knows what I mean.

Emily Dickinson, Letter to Susan Gilbert, March 12, 1853

When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person.

Emily Dickinson, Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson,
July 22, 1862[1]

To understand how poetic voices speak, split, and disguise themselves in Emily Dickinson's work is to confront one of the central problems of her poetics: the construction of identity through masks. The ontological status of Dickinson's lyric "I," and its relationship with language, remains a central concern for critics, for her poetry persistently fashions dissimulated, fragmented, and performative selves. This practice aligns Dickinson with a long tradition of dramatized lyric voices, many of which were part of her "personal canon". Her reading habits reveal her debts to William Shakespeare, master of disguise and equivocation, and to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, whose dramatic voices destabilized Romantic notions of sincerity. In this sense Dickinson belongs firmly to a Victorian culture in which fictional personae allowed poets to explore emotions not admissible in public discourse.[2]

For women writers in nineteenth-century America, however, the assumption of masks had an added urgency. While popular and prolific, women authors were often constrained by the didactic function imposed on their writing and by social expectations of reticence and decorum. Literature was expected to project a moral ideal of womanhood, not to represent individual female subjectivity – as though individual reality, opposed to the stereotyped female experience, was inherently disruptive to the social order. As Joanne Dobson phrases it, the duty of the woman writer was "to be both present as a feminine voice and absent as a uniquely female presence" (Dobson 1989, 57). The socially accepted feminine discourse – that erased individuality within the decorous silence of stereotype – was nothing more than a strategy of containment, shaping women's identities through the maintenance of cultural conventions and the inhibition of social change. In the words of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity consigned women to an existence akin to that of the "Invisible Lady" – a popular attraction consisting of a mysterious voice without body or face (qtd. in Dobson 1989, 56). Consequently, socially sanctioned images of the female self – such as the personae of the child, the bride, or the wife – pervaded women's textual production, allowing them to inscribe into their writing personal 'nobodies' with social existence.

In Dickinson, however, to be 'Nobody' or 'nought' is to become the very reverse of somebody, as in the poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr260).[3] By invoking for herself the condition of "Nobody," the poetic subject simultaneously effaces the body itself ('no-body'), turning it into a blank page – a *tabula rasa* – upon which other bodies may be inscribed to re-fashion it. Indeed, in Dickinson's poetry the multiple selves or 'supposed persons' protect, through embodiment, the poet's personal identity, while rendering the poetic identity fluid by incessantly generating other, non-self bodies. As Sandra Runzo states, Dickinson wholly participates in the obsessive re-conception of her own body, so that, through continuous performances – whether as weapon, bride, animal, ghost, man, or martyr (among many other poses) – her "masquerading personae" explore the possibilities of selfhood, dramatizing the domain of supposition and desire (Runzo 1999, 59).

Forged of irony and ambivalence, Dickinson's masks conceal while revealing, and reveal while concealing, for revelation is nothing other than yet another mask of diversity: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed –", as she would write in another of her poems (Fr407). In this sense, the image of the veil – or the understanding of the mask as a veil – best captures the construction of personae that never fully unveil themselves, presented as both transparent and opaque, through a language that outlines while refusing absolute visibility. This trope resonated powerfully with nineteenth-century gender ideology. Women were expected to embody modesty and silence, and the veil literalized these ideals: the covered face served as a physiognomic mask in a culture fascinated with reading the soul through features. Yet Dickinson transforms the convention into a tool of poetic seduction. In her letters she remarks that when the world grows too staring, she requires "more vail", as quoted in the first epigraph (L112). A similar idea can be found in the letter-poem "A Charm invests a face –" (L357; Fr430), sent to Maria Whitney, in which the "Lady" dares not raise her veil "For fear it be dispelled –," as fascination depends on concealment:

A Charm invests a face –
Imperfectly beheld –
The Lady dare not lift her Vail
For fear it be dispelled –
But peers beyond her mesh –
And wishes – and denies –
Lest Interview – annul a want –
That Image – satisfies –

Emily –

Desire circulates in the mesh that hides as much as it suggests, permitting the speaker to manipulate the domains of supposition and longing. The veil is thus a paradoxical medium: transparent enough to invite vision, opaque enough to refuse full disclosure. As with the goddess Isis, whose veil no mortal could lift, Dickinson's poetic veils promise infinite revelation without ever yielding it completely. They represent the threshold of a knowledge obtained not through revelation but through perpetual unveiling, *ad infinitum.*

Dickinson’s very style – indirect and elliptical – contributes to this obliquity. In fact, in her poetry, slantness is at once a state of perception (“a certain Slant of light” that reveals “[the] internal difference – / Where the Meanings, are –” [Fr320]), and the very medium through which that new perspective is attained (“Tell all the truth but tell it slant – / Success in Circuit lies” [Fr1263]). If for Dickinson, slantness is both a mode of seeing and the medium of poetic expression, the mask, then, is never mere concealment. It is revelation staged as performance. The very poetic physiognomies Dickinson offers in lieu of the requested portraits or visits testify to her almost theatrical concern with presenting her self: sometimes eluding the feminine stereotype, as in “[I] am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves” (L345); at other times excessively embodying it, turning her sexual role into performance. In such instances, the traditional image of feminine reticence and vulnerability is often redefined, invested, in Terence Diggory’s words, with “all the strength of armor” (Diggory 1979, 138-39). Indeed, modesty becomes literal armor in poems like “Shame is the shawl of Pink” (Fr1437), as the blush becomes a protective garment, a corporeal armor transforming vulnerability into defense; or a “citadel”, as in “I had not minded – Walls –” (Fr554), as each crease of the Lady’s veil is guarded by dragons:

. . .
A limit like the Vail
Unto the Lady's face –
But every Mesh – a Citadel –
And Dragons – in the Crease –
(Fr 554)

The lady’s veil, instead of marking weakness, becomes militarized and reticence is redefined as strength. Dragons are, thus, threshold guardians, preventing the Other from fully penetrating the self or the page, for as Ryan Cull points out, we can associate the word “crease” to clothing and women’s roles, as well as to paper and the folding of paper, fundamental for Dickinson’s project of copying her poems into fascicles and sets (Cull 2022, 150). Like Dickinson's slant style, dragons in the crease are never fully seen; they are suggested presences hidden in folds. In this sense, the placement of dragons "in the crease" also dramatizes how even in the smallest fold of concealment (a veil, a dash, a silence) lies monstrous energy.

The fierceness of Dickinson's veil, guarded by dragons, resonates with many other poems in which she challenges the cultural constraints imposed upon women by presenting female poetic subjects so hyperbolic that they transcend external boundaries to create a new performative space where metamorphosis, the grotesque, and excess secure autonomy. Yet the "rebellion" of these bodies is never openly assumed; hence the recurrent image in her poetry of fiercely defending an inner dimension beneath an external cloak of conformity. Not rarely, the pink exterior is but the faded or filtered reflection of a pulsing, explosive red interior that animates the being, as in "The reticent volcano keeps / His never slumbering plan; / Confided are his projects pink / To no precarious man. . . . " (Fr1776). Indeed, if the veil is Dickinson's trope of concealment, the volcano is her emblem of interior vitality. Repeatedly, her poems imagine an eruptive energy hidden beneath calm surfaces: explosive, sublime, and potentially destructive.

"Nineteenth-century American women poets", Elizabeth Petrino explains, "often used extreme geographical settings – tropical jungles and arctic locales –" (Petrino 1998, 7), serving as a metaphor for women's isolation, but also passionate interiority, insofar as emotions and feelings were generally described in terms of released and restrained energies, with temperature and tension emerging as dominant motifs. As Simon Williams states in *Emotion and Social Theory*, the expression of emotion is intimately tied to the notion of bodily imagery, for "discourse does not simply fabricate bodies (...). Bodies also shape discourses and the rational structures of knowledge with which we, quite literally, 'grasp' the world" (Williams 2001, 63). In this process of apprehension, metaphorical oppositions such as 'interior-exterior,' 'body-soul,' 'opening-closure,' 'self-world' often translate the confrontation between the fluid, volatile body and the social order of the body. In Dickinson, the image of the volcano aptly conveys this overwhelming vitality that shapes both world and self, opening itself to a constant play of oppositions by desiring the fluidity of lava – and, by metaphorical extension, of identity. In often uncontainable compositions, the poet identifies the vibrant energy of the self with the eruptive forces of volcanic mountains, hidden beneath an outward mask of inactivity, in an apparently paradoxical coexistence:

On my volcano grows the Grass
A meditative spot –
An acre for a Bird to choose
Would be the general thought –

How red the Fire rocks below
How insecure the sod
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude

(Fr1743)

In "On my volcano grows the Grass", the slopes appear pastoral, a "meditative spot" where even a bird might rest. Yet beneath this sod "the Fire rocks," threatening eruption. The opposition between "on" and "below" dramatizes the tension between social calm and inner force. Even the word "rocks" wavers between noun and verb: the solidity of lava or its restless rocking motion. Green vegetation covers red depths; social surfaces conceal torrid interiors. This duality makes the volcano a metaphor for the self: outwardly reticent, inwardly impetuous. The chromatic opposition – green against red – also suggests that Dickinson values the Sublime over the Beautiful. Dickinson ironizes the cultural expectation that women's writing should remain harmonious, since the speaker only seems to display a "green" veil to shield a red, fervent, violent, discontinuous interiority. In truth, her art pursues the disruptive excess of the Sublime, that domain long reserved for male poets. By embodying both green and red within the same figure, she asserts self-sufficiency: the 'volcanic self' harbors both fertility and destructive spark.

This indeterminacy in the subject's stance toward a possible eruption is reinforced by the double syntactic structure in the verse "Did I disclose." Read as a conditional clause ("How insecure the sod / Did I disclose"), the possibility of opening to the exterior seems to imply the destruction of the social realm, whether by the volcanic torrent within or by the contained intensity that would certainly shock general opinion; hence the subject's reticent desire, choosing not to break the boundary that protects her social identity. Read as the subject of the sentence ("Did I disclose / Would populate with awe my solitude"), there's a desire for explosion, for the revelation of her singularity. Were she to disclose herself, the poetic subject would see her volcano wholly invaded by "awe". If read as a metaphor for womanhood, the volcano points even to a kind of sexual and intellectual power as formidable as it is underestimated.

The volcano can also be understood as a metaphor for writing itself. The carefully measured lines of the poem cover subterranean torrents of language and an ardent and marginal imagination. "The sod" represents not only the surface of social convention but also the surface of the page. To "disclose" the fire beneath would be to shatter decorum and reveal the speaker's true identity – an act Dickinson repeatedly refused. Hence the suspension at the poem's end: the speaker chooses not to disclose, leaving the possibility of eruption hanging in silence. And much like the Biblical silence that preceded Creation, poetic silence serves as the prelude to revelation – a threshold that lends grandeur and majesty to an event yet to come: fearsome, excessive, awe-inspiring.

Dickinson's eruptions echo the volcanic force of poetry experienced by Aurora Leigh in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's eponymous work. Aurora Leigh describes her first encounter with poetic texts as a moment of revelation that regenerated her world: "throwing flat / The marts and temples, the triumphal gates / And towers of observation," preparing her thereby "to elemental freedom" (Barrett Browning 1998, 29 [Book I, lines 845-854]). In a clear biblical evocation of Christ and the moneychangers in the temple, this passage underscores poetry's regenerative disruption – the word as divine incarnation – which demolishes old conventions, distorted interpretations that limit the clarity of expression and perception essential to the poet's mission: to tell the truth, with art in its service. Dickinson's volcano is quieter but no less powerful: its silence generates tension, a sublime held in reserve. Emerson had already imagined the "American Scholar" as a mind like Etna or Vesuvius, flaming with knowledge (Emerson 1950, 59). But Dickinson's volcanic image is darker, more inward, emphasizing the destructive risks of such force.[4]

Although this imagery is most prevalent during the period conventionally accepted as spanning 1861 to 1863, and although it is confined to a relatively small number of poems, the volcanic persona is so striking that it resonates residually in other personae throughout Dickinson's work. Yet it is worth noting that the incendiary bodies of Dickinson's poetry are frequently cooled by ice, which delays eruption: Dickinson writes but does not publish, promises but does not explode. Often it is precisely in the dialogue between voices of ice and voices more torrid that one encounters the display of an identity flowing through the Dickinsonian geographical – and physiognomic – map. Fire and ice are complementary terms in their opposition, sometimes even uniting in a single voice, in a strange equilibrium where the excess of one may annihilate being altogether.

If in the volcanic eruption the poetic subject would be destroyed by lava, losing social identity, in the freezing of the self it is the inner vitality that is extinguished, nullifying existence itself. The poem "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple" (Fr321) even presents these two states – warming and cooling – as principles of natural order. Yet it is always the element of fire that proves most desirable, for it is already rooted within, in that process of cooling enacted beneath the sensuality of purple. A similar tension arises in "Ah, Teneriffe – Receding Mountain –" (Fr752), where the poetic subject longs for the retreat of the snow encasing the volcanic mountain in an icy armor:

> Ah, Teneriffe – Receding Mountain –
> Purples of Ages halt for You –
> Sunset reviews Her Sapphire Regiments –
> Day – drops You His Red Adieu –
> Still clad in Your Mail of Ices –
> Eye of Granite – and Ear of Steel –
> Passive alike – to Pomp – and Parting –
> Ah, Teneriffe – We're pleading still –
> (Fr752)

Teneriffe's "Mail of Ices" imposes not mere silence, but a total muteness that isolates and withdraws the mountain's volcanic force, rendering it impassive before external beauty, with its "Eye of Granite – and Ear of Steel –." Yet this image of closure may be reversed, for the mask of ice contains a double potentiality: if frozen, it becomes lethal, annulling being entirely in the absence of vitality; but if melted by the inner lava, it is also source of water and renewal. It is precisely this fertility that the poetic subject seems to desire, imploring Teneriffe to erupt. Thus, the thermally hybrid persona embodied in this mountain's image – uniting ice and lava in a single body – more effectively translates, in visual terms, the tension underlying the persona commonly considered volcanic: the assertion of a marginal interiority through the display of an icy mask that must not dominate but rather serve an inner combative energy that explodes within. Hence the recurrent desire for the recognition of the volcano within, lest the self be extinguished by the social mask of ice. Volcanic imagery therefore crystallizes what Ana Luísa Amaral called "Dickinson's poetics of excess" (Amaral 1995).

The imagery of fire and ice in Dickinson often shades into the Gothic, where vitality threatens to collapse into terror. Here, storm, bomb, and pit become metaphors for psychic extremity, situating her poetics at the threshold between creativity and madness. In "A Pit – but Heaven over it –" (Fr508), the subject finds herself suspended above an abyss, glimpsing heaven around and above yet unable to escape the depth beneath: "A Pit – but Heaven over it –/ And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad;/ And yet a Pit –/ With Heaven over it –". The paradox is cruel: the vision of transcendence increases torment, for the pit is also the body, source not of life but of confinement. The subject fears that a single dream, a single slip, might collapse the fragile prop that holds her aloft. The only resource is composure: she must 'hold the Bomb' at her breast, mastering her own explosive vitality lest it annihilate her ("But since we got a Bomb –/ And held it in our Bosom –/ Nay – Hold it – it is calm –"). The poem resonates with Poe's short story "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), where the prisoner of the Inquisition paces the circumference of a circular dungeon, measuring the abyss. Poe's narrator escapes by controlling his body and his terror. Dickinson's speaker faces a similar ordeal: the bomb is both heart and madness, vitality and threat. Imagination, which could liberate, also sabotages. The poem ends not in release but in suspended waiting, the self imprisoned by its own excess.

This Gothic dramatization of consciousness recurs in storm imagery. Thunder, tempests, and earthquakes become metaphors for psychic upheaval. In “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Fr340), the storm resounds within: mourners tread, a drum beats, a bell tolls, until “I, and Silence, some strange Race, / Wrecked, solitary, here –”. The collapse of knowing is figured as both death and storm, the self annihilated in its own imagination. Similarly, in “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –” (Fr867), the brain itself splits under pressure. Nerves become bombs, consciousness a volatile substance threatening rupture. Yet such imagery is double-edged: destructive, but also creative. The same intensity that risks madness fuels poetic invention. To figure imagination as storm or bomb is to acknowledge its dangerous excess, but also its power.

Thus, Dickinson’s Gothic dimension locates poetry in a space of perilous vitality. Like Poe, she dramatizes the psyche under extreme duress, but where his tales resolve in external escape or doom, her poems dwell in the suspended instant, the held bomb, the storm within. Here lies the sublime of her art: the recognition that creativity itself is explosive, that the self lives always at the verge of annihilation. The struggle for life – in or through life – depends on the physical and psychological mastery of the self. The mask of horror allows for testing and knowing the limits of identity, while also recognizing the need to control its impulses toward self-destruction.

Dickinson’s art is defined by masks that simultaneously conceal and reveal. Through the figures of veil, volcano, ice, storm, and dragon, she dramatizes a poetics of slantness in which identity is never singular, but always multiplied, deferred, and staged. The title image of this essay, “Dragons – in the Crease,” crystallizes this paradox. Each fold of the veil, each crease of the page, conceals not passivity but force: guardians of identity, embodiments of sublimity, fiery presences in the smallest spaces of silence. In Dickinson’s poetics, even modesty bristles with defense, and every dash harbors the threat of eruption. To read her is to approach these dragons in the crease – to glimpse, within obliquity itself, the inexhaustible energies of being.

END NOTES

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[1] Letters 112 and 345, respectively. All references to Dickinson's letters are taken from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson,* edited by Cristanne Miller and Domnhall Mitchell (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024).

[2] It is worth noting that Thomas Wentworth Higginson famously called Dickinson's style "spasmodic" – "You think my gait 'spasmodic' – I am in danger – Sir" (L341) –, probably associating Dickinson's seemingly unruly and excessive style to the Spasmodics, a group of minor Victorian poets who, although very popular, were often criticized for the extreme states of mind conveyed in their verse (Letter 265). Although sometimes "used derogatorily", as Miller and Mitchell note, "the term was applied to many poets E[mily] D[ickinson] admired, including Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Longfellow" or Alexander Smith (Miller/Mitchell 2024, 363).

[3] All references to Dickinson's poems are taken from R. W. Franklin's Reading Edition of Emily Dickinson's *Complete Poems* (Franklin, 1999), hereinafter referred to as Fr, followed by the number of the poem.

[4] The volcanic metaphor recurs in multiple guises. In "I have never seen 'Volcanoes' –" (Fr165), natural volcanoes are described as "old" and "still," but human faces can erupt with volcanic intensity – anguish smoldering like Vesuvius before the antiquarian's gaze. Here the volcano becomes a physiognomy of passion, a sign that true vitality lies within.

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MARINELA FREITAS

Marinela Freitas is Assistant Professor of the Department of Anglo-American Studies of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto. She is a collaborator of CETAPS and a member of the Board of Directors of the Margarida Losa Institute for Comparative Literature (ILCML), where she coordinates the research group Intersexualities. She has several publications in the fields of American Literature, Feminist Studies, and Utopian Studies. She is the author of *Emily Dickinson e Luiza Neto Jorge: Quantas Faces?* (Afrontamento, 2014), for which she received the PEN Club Award - Essay 2015. She co-ordinates *She Thought It: Crossing Bodies in Sciences and Arts*, a database with entries on women whose steps have significantly marked history in fields such as sciences, arts, music and literature.

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