

Cristanne Miller: On 520 ("I started Early--Took my Dog--")

My favorite among Dickinson's multiple unexpected changes in verb tense occurs in the deceptively innocent "I started Early?Took my Dog-- / And visited the Sea--" (520). Here the speaker presents herself as walking quietly by the sea, seeing its landscape, in childish metaphors, until stanza 3[There the] sudden introduction of the conditional "Would," however, gives the speaker away, This auxiliary changes the mood of the verb and of the poem: what seemed a single action in the past now seems to be either a hypothetical or a customary, repeated action. The speaker's tale becomes a sexual fantasy--repeated either in her imagining of what it would be like to walk by what she sees as a masculine and therefore dangerous sea, or in her imagination as she in fact walks by the sea, or in her metaphorical representation of real dealings with the world of men. The speaker teases the reader, and perhaps herself, just as much as she does the sea/Man. She pretends to be entirely innocent in her motives for going to the sea (walking the dog) and then repeatedly lets it touch her to the point of mutual arousal before she runs away to the "Solid Town." The last lines of the poem give the sea dignity in his lovely but otherwise undignified chase and underline the sexual content of the poem:

Until we met the Solid Town?

No One He seemed to know?

And bowing?with a Mighty look?

At me?The Sea Withdrew?

As with Dickinson's mixture of past and present tenses in other poems, her combination of differing verb tense and mood in this narrative, remove it from any simple, temporal context. The poet does not let us place her speaker easily, and the speaker is allowed her coy retreat to apparent innocence and safety.

Dickinson's gravitation toward the simple (habitual) present and toward the uninflected verb may suggest her overriding concern to escape the historicity of time, to make herself in some way timeless and thus safe from the forces of death and loss she feels . . . strongly . . . It seems to me, however, that these verb forms (and Dickinson's poems) point more toward a concern with ongoing process, revelation, continuous perception, and change than toward the lyric suspension exemplified by the dancers on Keats's Grecian urn or the predictable return of Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," The teasing disappearance of Dickinson's verbs from any single time or person repeats itself in her experiments with other parts of speech, and in the narratives of her poems generally. . . .

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