

THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD IN THE WRITINGS OF EMILY DICKINSON

by

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Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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September, 1970

Blacksburg, Virginia

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to  
who undertook the direction of this thesis, for his valuable advice  
on the many facets of its preparation. Thanks also are extended to  
, who first introduced me to the study of  
and to for reading the thesis  
and making suggestions. A special note of appreciation is also due  
to , in whose class this study first  
began, for his encouragement and criticism in the early stages of the  
project. was extremely helpful with his  
evaluation of the linguistic elements of Chapter V.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When the reader approaches the poetry of Emily Dickinson, he realizes at once that here is a unique body of work. These poems do not fit into the pattern of nineteenth century verse because of certain licenses taken with both form and tone. But neither may the poems be appropriately called twentieth century, in spite of their foreshadowing of twentieth century technique and tone.

Numerous critics have set out to analyze the techniques responsible for this uniqueness. Many articles have analyzed the unconventional rhyme, the meter, the imagery, the vocabulary. Along with these analyses, however, few Dickinson scholars have failed to comment on her striking use of verbs, outstanding among which are the many occurrences of various forms of the subjunctive mood, a usage very noticeable because it has become almost obsolete after centuries of steady decline.<sup>1</sup> In the editing of the earliest volumes of poems, the "problem that gave most trouble was Emily Dickinson's predilection for what seemed to be a subjunctive mood when the indicative properly was called for."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The decrease in the use of the subjunctive may be illustrated by the following percentages for three writers given by Ronald David Emma: the subjunctive forms make up 6.8% of the verbs in a Shakespeare sample, as against 3.3% in Milton and none in T. S. Eliot! Milton's Grammar (The Hague, 1964), p. 140. Quoted in Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 243.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, "Introduction," The Poems of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. xlvi.

Thomas Johnson, however, along with some other Dickinson scholars, advances the theory that these subjunctive verbs are not actually subjunctive. In his 1955 biography, he states that "what at first seems to be a subjunctive mood might better be called a continuing or universal present indicative."<sup>3</sup> But Johnson and those who have agreed with this position have offered little evidence to support their contentions, which seem to be based chiefly on their own intuitive understandings of these poems.

Recent research, however, has thrown much light onto the forces which shaped Emily Dickinson's poetry. Students now know more about the education and the intellectual environment of this poet than they did only a few years ago. They also know more about her poetry itself, thanks not only to the Johnson edition, but also to the more recent scholarly studies which it made possible and which in turn have augmented it.

The purpose of this study is to examine in detail Emily Dickinson's subjunctive mood constructions to determine whether Johnson's claim is justified or whether Dickinson made deliberate, conscious use of the subjunctive mood to say something that no other form would allow her to say. The study will also suggest some possible explanations for this characteristic of the Dickinson style. Specifically, I shall deal with those subjunctives which omit the final s in the third person singular and are not used in combination with a modal auxiliary, the

<sup>3</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. 93, hereafter cited as Emily Dickinson.

common. Modern English device for expressing a condition contrary to fact. These seem to be the forms which Johnson does not accept as true subjunctives.

Chapter II of this thesis will present a survey of previous research on this subject, including a brief history of the criticism and editing of Emily Dickinson's poems in relationship to her subjunctive forms. Chapter III will examine the linguistic influences on this poet's work. Chapter IV will examine her letters in an effort to determine how she used the subjunctive mood in her prose. Chapter V will examine the poems themselves, classifying and analyzing the various appearances of the subjunctive forms under question. It will include a study of the frequency of appearance of the subjunctive in the poems. Chapter VI will present the conclusions of the study.

It is, of course, impossible to determine with absolute certainty the workings of the mind of Emily Dickinson or of any other poet. But if a reader can gain insight into the techniques of her poems, then he can gain insight into the meanings of her poems, many of which are still surrounded by a great deal of mystery.

## CHAPTER II

### EDITING AND CRITICISM OF THE POEMS

Critical reaction to her poems began before Emily Dickinson died. The reaction to her subjunctive verbs can be divided roughly into three stages. The first began when she chose Thomas Higginson and Samuel Bowles, both minor literary arbiters of their day, as the first two outside readers of her poems, which had hitherto gone to only a few members of her family and intimate friends.

Their early rejection of her techniques is literary history. In the 1860's Lowell, Holmes, Longfellow, Emerson, and Bryant were the established and popular poets. When their influence began to wane, women writers of occasional verse were widely published.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to examine examples of the poetry that was highly regarded by publisher, critic, and reader during the years that Emily Dickinson was at the peak of her creative process. While putting Emily's poems away in his desk, Samuel Bowles printed "without critical reproof" verses such as the following in his newspaper, the Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican:

God bless the girls  
Whose golden curls  
Blend with our evening dreams  
They haunt our lives  
Like spirit wives,  
Or--as the naiads haunt the stream.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Klaus Lubbers, Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution (Ann Arbor, 1968), pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup>Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Middletown, Conn., 1968), p. 121.

Another example of Bowles' taste appeared in the Republican on July 2, 1857:

A TENDER LAY

Be gentle to the new laid egg,  
For eggs are brilliant things;  
They cannot fly until they're hatched,  
And have a pair of wings:  
If once you break the tender shell,  
The wrong you can't redress;  
The "yolk and white" will all run out,  
And make a dreadful "mess."<sup>6</sup>

Emily Dickinson was evidently determined not to bend to this current taste and "regularize" her forms in order to see her work published.

Nearly all of Higginson's letters to Emily Dickinson in which he evaluated the poems she sent him are lost. What we know of his comments we infer from her letters to him. We know that in one letter he referred to her work as "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled."<sup>7</sup> That Higginson was referring to more than rime and meter we can infer from the editing he did (in collaboration with Mabel Loomis Todd) on the first two volumes of the poems, which were published posthumously in 1890 and 1891 (Poems by Emily Dickinson, Boston, 1890, and Poems by Emily Dickinson, Second Series, Boston, 1891).<sup>8</sup>

The 1890 book contained 116 poems. Among the editorial changes are six substitutions of the indicative form for the subjunctive. Here are some examples:

<sup>6</sup>Miller, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup>Lubbers, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Citations from Dickinson poems in my text are from the Johnson edition. Numbering of poems is that used by Johnson. All references to earlier editions of the poems and information about variant versions of poems were gleaned from this edition.



The Heaven - unexpected come [came] (J. 513)

When Winter shake [shakes] the Door

.....  
Then a softness - suffuse [suffuses] the Story -

.....  
And only the Sea [waves] - reply - (J. 619)

Also of note are the inconsistencies in the editing by these and other early editors. These inconsistencies frequently occur within a single poem. The following is also from the 1890 volume:

And Whatsoever Insect pass  
A Honey bear [bears] away (J. 380)

Why did the editors leave pass unchanged? In the same poem they changed five be's to is's but left the following unchanged:

To gain the Purple Democrat  
The Humming Bird - aspire -

In Poem J. 647 Emily Dickinson had written:

I only know - no Curricule that rumble there  
Bear Me -

The Higginson-Todd version was:

I only sigh, - no vehicle  
Bears me along that way.

In the same poem the phrase "If Town it have" was left unchanged.

Higginson wrote, in his preface to this first volume, that the poems were "here published as they were written, with very few and superficial changes. . . ." He seemed to be apologizing for this laxness when he further wrote: "After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Preface to Poems by Emily Dickinson (1890)," reprinted in The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, 1968), pp. 11-12.

In her Preface to Poems: Second Series, Mabel Loomis Todd wrote that "all interference not absolutely inevitable has been avoided."<sup>10</sup> However, she and Higginson changed fifteen subjunctives to indicatives in this volume. The following are examples:

Eternity enable [enables] the endeavoring  
Again. (J. 680)

The General Rose - decay [decays] -  
But this - in Lady's Drawer  
Make [Makes] Summer - When the Lady lie [lies]  
In Ceaseless Rosemary - (J. 675)

Inconsistencies still occurred, as well:

And when the Sun go down -

Her Voice among the Aisles  
Incite [Incites] the timid prayer [Go remained subjunctive] (J. 790)

When Orient have [has] been outgrown -  
And Occident - become [becomes] Unknown -  
His Name - remain - [Remain was left unchanged] (J. 307)

In relating the history of this editing, Mrs. Todd's daughter spoke of "Emily's grammatical irresponsibility" and wrote: "Emily persistently used a plural verb with a singular subject. . . . This 'mistake,' my mother thought, was deliberate, as Emily's use of 'be' for 'is' was deliberate. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

When these first two volumes appeared in the bookstores, they sold surprisingly well, but the reviews appearing in the popular newspapers and magazines were often harsh. Arlo Bates wrote:

<sup>10</sup>Reprinted in Blake and Wells, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Discovery of Emily Dickinson (New York, 1945), p. 43.

For . . . there is hardly a line in the entire volume, and certainly not a stanza, which cannot be objected to upon the score of technical imperfection. The author was as unlearned in the technical side of art as if she had written when the forms of verse had not yet been invented.<sup>12</sup>

An anonymous reviewer, in commenting on Dickinson's poems, stated: "It is their lack of grammatical correctness and their absolute formlessness which keeps them almost outside the pale of poetry."<sup>13</sup>

The heavy-handed editing continued in the 1896 edition by Mabel Loomis Todd (Poems by Emily Dickinson, Third Series, Boston), in which Mrs. Todd altered thirteen instances of the subjunctive mood, and in the first two volumes edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, in which a total of twenty subjunctives were altered to indicative.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1930's, however, the tone of the criticism and the technique of the editing began to change. American criticism had been journalistic, reflecting primarily popular taste. Now, this journalistic criticism was replaced by scholarly research and interpretation. "The thaw [of Dickinson scholarship], which consisted in a continual growth of the canon, an increase in knowledge about the person, and in a more thorough explication of the poetry, set in immediately after 1930."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>"Miss Dickinson's Poems," The Boston Courier, November 23, 1890, reprinted in Blake and Wells, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup>The Critic, XVI (December 19, 1891), reprinted in Blake and Wells, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup>The Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime (Boston, 1914) and Further Poems of Emily Dickinson: Withheld from Publication by Her Sister Lavinia, co-editor Alfred Leete Hampson (London, 1929).

<sup>15</sup>Lubbers, p. 162.

Whereas in 1930 Louis Untermeyer was still talking about her "mistakes in grammar,"<sup>16</sup> strong defenders soon began to explain those "mistakes." In 1935 Grace B. Sherrer pointed out that much of the poet's "so-called incorrect use of verbs may be classified as examples of her habit of expression in the subjunctive with occasional omission of an auxiliary."<sup>17</sup> She offered the following examples:

You see, I cannot see your lifetime,  
I must guess  
How many times it [may] ache  
For me today. (J. 253)

Death sets a thing significant  
The eye had hurried by,  
Except a perished creature  
[Should] Entreat us tenderly. (J. 360)

This critic concludes: "The subjunctive mood is the natural mode of expression to this writer, whose mind reacted subtly to the contradiction, uncertainty, and vagueness of the natural and spiritual worlds."<sup>18</sup>

In 1938 George Frisbie Whicher, in the first scholarly biography of the poet, took a similar stance, stating that "the tension of her poetry seems to have thrown her into a state of chronic trepidation which only the subjunctive could express."<sup>19</sup>

The editing done during this second period reflects the critical judgment. Mrs. Bianchi's Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson (with Alfred Leete Hampson, Boston, 1935) contains only three examples of the

<sup>16</sup>"Emily Dickinson," Saturday Review (July 5, 1930), quoted in Grace B. Sherrer, "A Study of Unusual Verb Constructions in the Poems of Emily Dickinson," American Literature, VII (March 1935), 37-46.

<sup>17</sup>Sherrer, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>This Was a Poet (New York, 1938), p. 234.

subjunctive/indicative alteration. More interestingly, it contains three examples of indicative forms altered to subjunctives, as below:

Circumscription - enables [enable] Wo - (J. 269)

As when the Neighbor holds [hold] the Lamp (J. 419)

His Fingers, as He passed [if he pass] (J. 436)

The 1945 edition by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham (Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson, New York) shows only one alteration of subjunctive to indicative but contains five parallel changes; that is, from one subjunctive form to another subjunctive form, the following being examples:

Till Sunrise take [call] us back to Scene - (J. 944)

Forgive me, if the Grave come [seem] slow (J. 577)

The third stage of Dickinson criticism, including reaction to the subjunctive forms, began in 1955. This most significant year saw at last the publication of an authoritative variorum of her work, the three volume edition by Thomas H. Johnson. Some contemporary scholars, free to examine the poet's own work without the "corrections" imposed by earlier editors, have placed a third interpretation on these unique verb forms.

Johnson himself, feeling that the poet must have been groping for ways to say things in her own particular fashion, examined the line "Only love assist the wound." If we assume, he said, that it is subjunctive, we would infer the meaning "only love can assist the wound." But Johnson felt that she meant: "Only love does assist the wound." He concluded: "If this is her meaning, then what at first seems to be a subjunctive mood might better be called a continuing or universal

present indicative."<sup>20</sup> He pointed out that this concept would be consistent with her habit of using elliptical phrases and paring unessential words.

Charles R. Anderson took a similar position in examining this stanza:

The General Rose decay -  
While this - in Lady's Drawer  
Make Summer, when the Lady lie  
In Spiceless Sepulchre. (J. 675)

"By omitting the final s she was trying to get down to the basic stem of the verbs, their pure uninflected verbal quality, paring away number, mood, and even the partial limitation in time implied by the present tense."<sup>21</sup>

However, neither these two writers nor anyone else has offered much evidence to support this contention. On this third interpretation of the subjunctive forms, many readers must find themselves in agreement with John Crowe Ransom, who wrote of the Johnson biography: "It is a good book, though . . . [too] lacking in documentation to be a definitive one; sometimes Mr. Johnson tells his findings without taking his readers into his confidence by showing them his evidences."<sup>22</sup>

There have been, then, three stages of critical and editorial reaction to Emily Dickinson's subjunctive forms. The initial reaction, which began during her lifetime and extended into the 1920's, was for

<sup>20</sup>Emily Dickinson, p. 93.

<sup>21</sup>Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (New York, 1960), p. 67.

<sup>22</sup>"Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," Perspectives USA (Spring 1956), reprinted in Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 97.

the most part a tendency to label these forms, along with other unusual stylistic features, as mistakes in grammar or barbarisms. When American literary criticism took a scholarly turn around the 1930's, the verbs in question were recognized as subjunctives and labeled as such. Since 1955, in the new spurt of Dickinson scholarship impelled by the publication of the variorum edition of the poems, a more subtle interpretation has appeared, an approach which seems to be based upon increased sensitivity to the poet's techniques and heightened understanding of her thought processes.

### CHAPTER III

#### LINGUISTIC INFLUENCES ON EMILY DICKINSON'S WRITINGS

Literary influences help to determine a poet's themes and forms. They may also shape technique. For many years critics tended to take at face value Emily Dickinson's disclaimer of her intellectual background in her second letter to Higginson, in which she declared, "I went to school - but in your manner of the phrase - had no education." In the next paragraph she wrote of her father, "He buys me many Books - but begs me not to read them - because he fears they joggle the Mind."<sup>23</sup> However, in the most thorough study to date of Emily Dickinson's reading, Jack L. Capps offers considerable evidence that such statements cannot be taken literally.

The poet's father, Edward Dickinson, had received a classical education (Yale, 1823).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, he was the most prominent lawyer in Amherst, a leader in his church and a United States Congressman. Not only did he present to his children various books which he considered appropriate, but those children had access to his own library, which was of considerable size and scope. As Capps notes, Edward Dickinson was not the kind of man to spend money foolishly on books that he did not intend to be read. Today, the student of Emily Dickinson, benefited by the Johnson editions of her letters and poems

<sup>23</sup>The Letters of Emily Dickinson, Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 404. All subsequent citations from Dickinson letters in my text are from this source. Numbering of letters is that used by Johnson.

<sup>24</sup>Emily Dickinson's Reading (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 12.



and by other recent research, cannot fail to be impressed by her knowledge of literature, as well as by her knowledge of such fields as geography, history, and astronomy.

In particular, three sources seem to have exerted the most influence on the work of this poet. Capps' study leads him to conclude: "Next to the King James version of the Bible, which was by far her most common reference, Shakespeare's works appear as her most frequent source of allusions."<sup>25</sup> In addition to Capps' tabulation of allusions in the Dickinson poems, the reader may also note her letters. An examination of letters J. 369 through J. 1044 shows that approximately one letter in seven contains some specific Biblical allusion. This total does not include those which merely mention God or Christ. Such frequent allusions are particularly notable when we consider that many of these "letters" are the merest of fragmentary notes, sent across the hedge to her brother's wife Susan or across town to friends to accompany gifts of fruit or flowers or to transmit recipes. In this same group of letters, approximately one in twenty contains some specific allusion to the plays of Shakespeare.

The third major influence appears to have been the prose of Sir Thomas Browne, whom the poet mentioned in the famous letter to Higginson. These three literary influences, of course, are products of the same time and the same place and are written in the same kind of English. It seems safe to assume, then, that Elizabethan English,

<sup>25</sup>Capps, p. 24.

which was rich in instances of the subjunctive mood, had an effect on the poet's technique as well as on her allusions.

Otto Jespersen includes numerous lines from Shakespeare in his examples of the subjunctive mood.<sup>26</sup> Examination of these examples reveals lines such as the following: ". . . if Sir John Falstaffe have committed disparagements unto you . . ." (The Merry Wives of Windsor, I. 1. 28); ". . . if hee doe not mightilie grace himself on thee . . ." (Macbeth, V. 3. 2); "Then give me leave, that I May turne the key, / That no man enter. . . ." (Richard II, V. 3. 36).

Jespersen also chooses the following examples from the King James Bible as illustrations of the subjunctive: "And if thou sell ought unto thy neighbor . . ." (Leviticus 25.14); ". . . if thou bring thy gift to the altar . . ." (Matthew 5.23).

George O. Curme uses the following passages from the King James Bible to illustrate the uses of the subjunctive mood:<sup>27</sup> "If God so clothe the grass . . ." (Luke 12. 28); "If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. . . ." (John 11.21).

Examination of the prose writings of Sir Thomas Browne shows them to be rich in the subjunctive uses of were and be and relatively full of the specific subjunctives in question, as the following examples

<sup>26</sup>A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, ed. Niels Haislund (London, c. 1949), VII, 627-640.

<sup>27</sup>English Grammar (New York, 1947), pp. 246-248.

illustrate. In Pseudodoxia Epidemica may be found these usages:<sup>28</sup>  
"Now if it happen that any be so strongly constituted . . ."; "And  
though Porta conceive . . ."; ". . . though it favour the amulet . . ."  
In "Religio Medici" appear such usages as ". . . if he fall  
asunder. . . ."29

Another source which seems to have exerted significant influence on Emily Dickinson's poetic style is the hymns of Isaac Watts. The influence of the hymn meter on her stanza form is generally acknowledged. Capps states that the Dickinson home library possessed three collections of Watts' hymns: Christian Psalmody; The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs; and Village Hymns. He reports, furthermore, that "the last two were recommended in the Seminary Catalogue for the personal libraries of young ladies attending Mount Holyoke," and that in the poet's day, "reflection upon the hymns was recommended as an edifying tonic for the devout."<sup>30</sup> Into her poems and letters she wove various quotations from these hymns. From Voice of the Poet the reader learns that Watts frequently used the subjunctive in when clauses, as in the following (from Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Book 6, No. XXX, stanza four): "The God that rules on high, / And thunders when he please. . . ."31

The last influence on the poetry of Emily Dickinson to be considered here is that of her formal education. An assessment of its influence

<sup>28</sup>The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Simon Wilkin (London, 1852), I, 207-8.

<sup>29</sup>Browne, II, 358.

<sup>30</sup>Capps, p. 73-74.

<sup>31</sup>Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 246.

on her penchant for the subjunctive mood must, however, be mostly speculative. There is no record of the books she used in her early years at Amherst Academy,<sup>32</sup> but there is preserved a list of the textbooks in use at Mount Holyoke during the time she was a student there. Among them is A Practical System of Rhetoric by Samuel Phillips Newman (50th edition, New York, 1834).<sup>33</sup> Although this book discusses grammar and syntax in detail, it makes no specific mention of the subjunctive mood. A substantial portion of the book consists of examples of the work of such masters of English prose as Sir Thomas Malory and John Dryden. The author advises the student that "the examples . . . are particularly designed to lead the student to notice the characteristic traits of different styles."<sup>34</sup> Though these examples contain many occurrences of the subjunctives were and be, they do not seem to contain any examples of the third person singular subjunctive of the action verbs.

Another of Emily Dickinson's books is famous because she referred to it in her letter to Higginson as one of her "only companions." That is her lexicon, the 1836 edition of An American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster. While this book is helpful in the study of her individual poems, it yields little evidence that a regular user would be particularly conscious of the

<sup>32</sup>Capps, p. 103.

<sup>33</sup>Capps, p. 190.

<sup>34</sup>Newman, p. 249.

subjunctive mood. In its definitions of most verbs, it specifies the indicative forms, but it does not mention the subjunctive mood or name any subjunctive forms. However, Noah Webster did comment elsewhere about the type of rhetoric taught in American schools in the poet's day. In 1856 (when Emily Dickinson was 26 years old), he wrote:

"Our students are taught in school the subjunctive form: If thou have, if he come, etc. . . ." (quoted here from Jespersen, p. 624). He went on to say, however, that they seldom used it in actual practice. Emily Dickinson, apparently, was one of the exceptions.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN THE LETTERS

A study of the subjunctive mood in the poems of Emily Dickinson would not be complete without a look at the subjunctive mood in her prose, which exists in the form of 1,046 letters in the aforementioned three volumes prepared by Johnson. This chapter will examine the various occurrences in the letters of the third person singular subjunctives of action verbs, so that the reader may compare them to the occurrences in the poems. Awareness of the similarity or contrast of a writer's prose and poetic styles should contribute something to the understanding of both.

There are several usages which appear at first glance to be subjunctive but which may be plausibly explained as something else. Initially to be considered is the ubiquitous problem of the collective noun which may be considered to be singular or plural. Several of the seeming subjunctives in the Dickinson letters might be explained so, as in the following examples: ". . . and when the 'choir invisible' assemble in your Trees . . ." (J. 951); "How extraordinary that Life's large Population contain so few of power to us . . ." (J. 275); ". . . that her innumerable company of Angels leave her very few of what are called so . . ." (J. 849). The last example might also be explained if Emily Dickinson were actually considering Angels, the object of the preposition of, to be the subject. Such a practice is still rather common in colloquial usage.

Colloquial usage might account for another fairly large group of seeming subjunctives containing the word dont (Emily Dickinson almost invariably wrote this contraction without the apostrophe). This word appears once or more in 20 letters, in contexts such as the following: "God chooses repellant [sic] settings, dont he, for his best Gems?" (J. 692); "I think his physical life don't want to live any longer" (J. 360); ". . . if it dont ruin your constitution" (J. 72); ". . . ar'nt there days on one's life when to be old dont seem a thing so sad" (J. 73). If the poet intended don't to be only a contraction for do not, never a contraction for does not, it should be considered a subjunctive. Don't does not appear in the poet's lexicon. It was evidently, therefore, considered to be less than standard English usage. Another colloquialism, you was, appears several times in the early letters. It should be noted also that nearly all the questionable uses of don't in the letters occurred early in the poet's life (before 1853).

At least eleven subjunctives in the letters may be classified as subjunctives of wish (see the discussion of this classification in Chapter V). The following examples illustrate such usage: "That every Bliss we know or guess - hourly befall him - is his scholar's prayer - " (J. 621); "God keep his vow to Sparrows. . . ." (J. 257); "Heaven's choicest blessings attend them - and evil pass by without turning. . . ." (J. 29); "Cupid forbid!" (J. 683). Such usage, of course, is not unusual in Modern English, either in the poet's day or in the present day.

Remaining to be considered are the usages that are unusual. These may be divided into three categories: those subjunctives appearing in adverb clauses, those in noun and adjective clauses, and those in main clauses. (The same classifications are used in the chapter on the poems.)

Appearances of the subjunctive in adverb clauses are by far the most frequent. Twenty-three letters contain one or more subjunctive verbs. Nearly all of these appearances are in conditional or temporal clauses which express conditions that are contrary to certain fact: ". . . unless one's star go with it . . ." (J. 830); ". . . till it concern ourselves . . ." (J. 1004); ". . . if it undertake . . ." (J. 780); ". . . unless it bring with it that sweet power to remember . . ." (J. 623). Such a practice, of course, is not far removed from literate modern usage.

Seventeen of the letters contain one or more appearances of the subjunctive mood in noun or adjective clauses. At least one of these can be classified as indirect discourse, a construction that often used the subjunctive as far back as Anglo-Saxon English: ". . . shall we tell them who else cherish . . ." (J. 279). Modern English, of course, rarely uses the subjunctive in indirect discourse. Most of the other occurrences in noun and adjective clauses appear to be the type that would normally be used with a modal auxiliary to express some degree of possibility: ". . . whatever [might] await us of Doom or Home, we are mentally permanent" (J. 555); "That no Flake of it [may] fall on you or them - is a wish. . . ." (J. 566); "It grieves me that anything [should] disturb you . . ." (J. 735); ". . . what words



[can] express, . . . what fancy [can] conceive . . . " (J. 46).

The third category of subjunctives, those appearing in main clauses, contains only nine. Of these nine, several are in little verses within the letters, so they are not actually examples of the Dickinson prose style. Examples of the prose usages follow: "Our poverty entitle us . . ." (J. 277); ". . . still a simple choir bear the canto on . . ." (J. 190).

Most noteworthy is the comparative infrequency of the subjunctive mood in Emily Dickinson's prose. Except for the instances of don't, there are a total of only 58 letters in which subjunctives appear, or an average of only one letter in eighteen. When this is compared with the frequency of occurrence of the subjunctive mood in the poems (see Chapter V), a difference in prose and poetic styles emerges.

One further analysis of the subjunctive mood in the letters was made. A year-by-year count of the poems which contain subjunctive verbs shows no significant pattern. The frequency of appearances varies randomly from year to year. During several years there are no subjunctives at all. The conclusion from this analysis must be that the appearance of subjunctives in the letters has little or no correspondence to the appearance of subjunctives in the poems, and that for Emily Dickinson the subjunctive mood was almost entirely a poetic device.

## CHAPTER V

### THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN THE POEMS

Careful study of Emily Dickinson's poems themselves yields considerable data useful in analysis of her subjunctive forms. The poems contain many other archaisms in addition to the subjunctives in question (the third person singular action verbs without the s inflection or a modal auxiliary).

Dickinson's frequent use of these other "heirlooms of the past"<sup>35</sup> is quickly apparent to even the casual reader. The most common forms are the archaic contractions 'tis, 'twere, and 'twas: "'Tis opposites - entice - " (J. 355); "'Tis frequently the Way - " (J. 364); "And then 'twas put among the Dust" (J. 360); "As 'twere a bright Boquet - " (J. 342); "So - when 'twas time to see - " (J. 348); "I'm sure 'tis India" (J. 299).

Another frequent archaic form is the -eth and -est verb inflections: "A glee possesseth me" (J. 326); "And whom he foundeth, with his Arm" (J. 350); "Thou settest Earthquake in the South - " (J. 502).

The third notable archaism is the second person pronoun forms thou, thee, and thy: "And thou - not there - " (J. 368); "With thee, in the Desert - " (J. 209); "Nothing affront thy secrecy" (J. 1402).

<sup>35</sup>Curme, p. 235.

Even if the action verbs in question might not be true subjunctives, it would be difficult not to concede the more common and overt subjunctive uses of were and be. A quick glance at the poetry reveals the frequency with which were appears: "Except that flight / Were Aliment - " (J. 257); "I wish I were a Hay - " (J. 333); "As if the House were His - " (J. 389). The latter two usages, of course, are still relatively common in Modern English. The reader may also note: "That were the Mind dissolved - " (J. 370); "That were the little load - " (J. 217); "Weariness of Him, were quainter / Than Monotony" (J. 679). Be, which is not so conventional a modern subjunctive as were, also appears with high frequency: "Assassin hid in our Apartment / Be Horror's least" (J. 670); "Upon Himself be visiting / The Emperor of Men - " (J. 674); "And that - a further - and the Three / But a presumption be - " (J. 695). Poem J. 611 uses the subjunctive be in each of its four stanzas. Emily Dickinson was without doubt as intimate and comfortable with such archaisms as she was with the sources from which she drew them, particularly the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare. From these archaisms to a true subjunctive seems only a small step.

For the purposes of this discussion, the appearances of the subjunctive forms under question are divided into three syntactic categories: those appearing in adverb clauses, those appearing in noun and adjective clauses, and those appearing in main clauses.

The most frequent appearance of the subjunctive, not surprisingly, is in the adverb clauses of the poems. There are at least 127 poems containing one or more such usages. Several of these adverb clauses

are if clauses: "What if the Bird . . . / Forget the secret of His wing / And perish . . ." (J. 346); "If your Nerve, deny you / . . . If he fear to swerve - / . . . If your Soul seesaw - " (J. 292); "If He dissolve . . ." (J. 236); "But - if He ask where you are hid" (J. 494); "If One wake at Morn - / If One wake at Midnight - better - " (J. 450); "If my Bark sink" (J. 1234).

Some subjunctives appear in other conditional clauses: "The Heart cannot forget / Unless it contemplate" (J. 1560); "Except it quiet bring" (J. 81); "Provided it do hopeless - hang - " (J. 239).

Concessive clauses introduced by though (or tho') frequently contain subjunctives: "Though Winter fire - sing clear as Plover - " (J. 495); "Tho' Gabriel - praise me - Sir - " (J. 725); "Though She forget the name I bear" (J. 727).

Frequent sources of the subjunctive are the temporal clauses which are numerous in Dickinson's poems: "When larger function - / Make that appear - " (J. 745); "Before the West begin - " (J. 721); "Till One Breadth cover Two - " (J. 710); "Before it see the Sun!" (J. 1255); "When folded in perpetual seam / The Wrinkled Maker lie" (J. 1261); "Until the peevish Student / Acquire the Quick of Skill - " (J. 545).

Noun and adjective clauses contain action verb subjunctives in at least 35 of the poems: "[the fear] / That Something - it did do - or dare - / Offend the Vision - and it flee - " (J. 462); "A prayer, that it more angel - prove - " (J. 493); "I cannot vouch the merry Dust / Do not arise and play" (J. 321); "I fear me this Circumference / Engross my Finity - " (J. 802). All of the above examples seem to reflect a tone of doubt and uncertainty, for which the subjunctive is a logical

choice. But the following examples seem to suggest no doubt and uncertainty: "The Robin is the One / That interrupt the Morn / . . . The Robin is the One / That overflow the Noon / . . . The Robin is the One / That . . . / Submit that Home - and Certainty / And Sanctity, are best. . . ." (J. 828); "More prudent to assault the Dawn / Than merit the etherial scorn / That effervesce from her - " (J. 1486); "Ourselves are conscious He exist - " (J. 630); ". . . the Common Day / That arise and set about Us - " (J. 741). Perhaps these examples form part of the basis for Johnson's theory of the "universal present indicative."

Certainly the most peculiar and puzzling form of the subjunctive, especially in its frequent appearance (at least 108 poems), is that which appears in main clauses. A few of these may be explained with some traditional grammatical logic. The following examples are one type: "And God forbid I look behind - " (J. 274); "God keep his Oath to Sparrows" (J. 690). A similar construction appears in both stanzas of J. 225:

Jesus! thy Crucifix  
Enable thee to guess  
The smaller size!

Jesus! thy second face  
Mind thee in Paradise  
Of ours!

These seem to be what Curme calls the subjunctive of wish.<sup>36</sup> He gives the following examples: "God bleſs you! The Lord have mercy on us! Heaven forbid! [God] Hang it! [God] Confound you!" Curme notes that

<sup>36</sup>Curme, p. 237.

in current English these expressions may be replaced by expressions which use may: "Jesus! [may] thy crucifix / Enable thee . . ." or: "Jesus! [may] thy second face / Mind thee in Paradise / Of ours!"

The overwhelming majority of the subjunctives in the main clauses, however, may not be explained traditionally, as the following examples illustrate: "Only God - detect the Sorrow - " (J. 626); "The failure but confirm the Grace" (J. 522); "Nor History - record it - " (J. 594).

Here the critics have resorted to speculations about the tone and mood of the poems in which such forms appear. Without doubt, much of Emily Dickinson's poetry is full of uncertainty, full of questions. It would be convenient, therefore, to assume a one-to-one correspondence between the subjunctive mood and those poems written in a tone of doubt. However, this is not quite the case. As Thomas W. Ford pointed out, "She did not picture the world in terms of simple dichotomies. It was not a case of either-or. . . . She made her verse a mixture of regularities and irregularities."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there is some correspondence between tone and technique. One can find many poems of longing, of uncertainty, of death (a state which she strove to understand) which do employ the subjunctive in main clauses, a technique which seems perfectly appropriate.

In one of the earliest Dickinson poems about death appears this second stanza:

<sup>37</sup>Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (University, Alabama, 1966), p. 67.

No Wilderness - can be  
Where this attendeth me -  
No Desert Noon -  
No fear of frost to come  
Haunt the perennial bloom -  
But Certain June! (J. 195)

The antecedent of this in line two is death. So the poet has described, or speculated about, the condition of death. Here there is no tone of doubt; to the contrary, there is the word Certain and the exclamation point. But there is the uninflected Haunt. In line one the use of can be rather than is in the parallel construction suggests that the poet had in mind can Haunt rather than Haunts. It is possible to interpret can as suggesting a mere possibility. Furthermore, the fact that both verbs are used in negative constructions makes a subjunctive interpretation possible. (In line two attendeth recalls the poet's fondness for archaic forms.)

A later poem dealt with death and resurrection:

No Crowd that has occurred  
Exhibit - I suppose  
That General Attendance  
That Resurrection - does -

Circumference be full - 5  
The long restricted Grave  
Assert her Vital Privilege -  
The Dust - connect - and live -

On Atoms - features place -  
All Multitudes that were 10  
Efface in the Comparison -  
As Suns - dissolve a star -

Solemnity - prevail -  
It's Individual Doom  
Possess each separate Consciousness - 15  
August - Absorbed - Numb

What Duplicate - exist -  
What Parallel can be -  
Of the Significance of This -  
To Universe - and Me? (J. 515) 20

Here are several subjunctive forms: Assert (1. 7), connect (1. 8), live (1. 8), prevail (1. 13), Possess (1. 15), and exist (1. 17). (The reader might assume that Exhibit, (1. 2), is a plural form because its subject, crowd, is a collective noun.) Line five contains the undisputed subjunctive be, one of this poet's very frequent usages, as noted earlier. That these other verbs are subjunctive is the logical conclusion, especially in light of the tone of this poem, which is quite different from that of the previous example. Here there is the final question, indicating that the poet did not resolve her doubts about the significance of death and resurrection.

The following poem presents situations which are quite hypothetical:

What care the Dead, for Chanticleer -  
What care the Dead for Day?  
'Tis late your Sunrise vex their face -  
And Purple Ribaldry - of Morning

Pour as blank on them 5  
As on the Tier of Wall  
The Mason builded, yesterday,  
And equally as cool -

What care the Dead for Summer?  
The Solstice had no Sun 10  
Could waste the Snow before their Gate -  
And knew One Bird a Tune -

Could thrill their Mortised Ear  
Of all the Birds that be -  
This One - beloved of Mankind 15  
Henceforward cherished be -



What care the Dead for Winter?  
Themselves as easy freeze -  
June Noon - as January Night -  
As soon the South - her Breeze 20

Of Sycamore - or Cinnamon -  
Deposit in a Stone  
And put a Stone to keep it Warm -  
Give Spices - unto Men - (J. 592)

The poet asks and answers three questions. The answers, which all mean "nothing," take the form of examples of other impossibilities and therefore use the subjunctives vex (l. 3), Pour (l. 5), cherished be (be cherished, l. 16), Deposit (l. 22), put (l. 23), and Give (l. 24), to indicate situations which are contrary to fact.

On the other hand, the poem below has quite a different tone:

Hope is a subtle Glutton -  
He feeds upon the Fair -  
And yet - inspected closely  
What Abstinence is there -

His is the Halcyon Table 5  
That never seats but One -  
And whatsoever is consumed  
The same amount remain - (J. 1547)

In this poem there is no questioning or uncertainty. The tone is positive. Here appears a subjunctive form (remain, l. 8) that cannot seemingly be explained. A close reading of the poem, however, again suggests Johnson's explanation of the "universal present indicative." Here is a process that goes on and on without ceasing. Perhaps, then, Dickinson chose the uninflected remain to suggest the lack of finiteness she wished to express. This position seems reinforced by another poem about hope:

Hope is a strange invention -  
A Patent of the Heart -  
In unremitting action  
Yet never wearing out -

Of this electric Adjunct           5  
Not anything is known  
But it's unique momentum  
Embellish all we own - (J. 1392)

Again Dickinson speaks of a continuous, never-ending process of "unremitting action" which in its "unique momentum" never wears out-- hence again the uninflected Embellish (l. 8).

The following poem discusses two kinds of support, the kind which ends and the kind which goes on indefinitely:

The Props assist the House  
Until the House is built  
And then the Props withdraw  
And adequate, erect,  
The House support itself           5  
And cease to recollect  
The Auger and the Carpenter -  
Just such a retrospect  
Hath the perfected Life -  
A past of Plank and Nail           10  
And slowness - then the Scaffolds drop  
Affirming it a Soul. (J. 1142)

The verbs support (l. 5) and cease (l. 6) may be the result of uncertainty if one interprets this to be a poem about death, although even then there seems to be no doubt here, but a very positive feeling. On the other hand, if the "perfected Life" is a stage of new maturity, the two verbs in question may once again represent an ongoing process with no definite end.

In addition to the kinds of clauses in which the subjunctives appear, another classification of these forms is of great interest: that is, according to the varying frequency of the appearance of the

subjunctive forms from year to year. It is not the primary purpose of this study to engage in biographical interpretation of Emily Dickinson's poetry. However, some relationship is apparent between Dickinson's use of the subjunctive mood and the critical years centering around 1863.

These years are cited in all biographical studies of the poet as a period of great emotional stress. This stress is apparent to the reader who proceeds through the poems chronologically. In 1861 the poems become full of tensions and questions. Obscurities and linguistic irregularities are frequent. Insofar as the subjunctive verb forms are concerned, this irregularity reaches a peak in 1863, after which it gradually lessens (see Appendix).

Thomas Johnson dates the earliest known Dickinson poem in 1850. He places 57 poems in the years through 1858. In none of these early poems does the subjunctive form in question appear. She began to use that subjunctive in 1859, when it appears in five of the 94 poems of that year, or an average of one in nineteen poems. Its frequency increases with each year, appearing in averages of once in thirteen poems in 1860, once in ten poems in 1861, once in five poems in 1862, and culminating in a high frequency of once in three poems in 1863. After that year, the frequency drops to once in six poems in 1864, once in seven poems in 1865, once in nine poems in 1866 and 1867. In most of the remaining years it remains close to the overall average for all her poems, once in seven. During the last three years of the poet's life, 1884-1886, she composed 54 poems, in none of which

the subjunctive form appears.

Of course the question is, why did Emily Dickinson use so many more subjunctive forms in 1863? There is no convenient answer. An attempt to classify any group of her poems as to subject matter or tone soon meets with frustration. Neat classifications are impossible because of the poet's ambiguities, metaphors and mixed subjects. If we can accept the most common biographical speculation, 1861 was the great crisis year in her life. If the subjunctive is supposed to be the result of inward emotional struggle, its frequency should therefore be highest in that year rather than in 1863. The 1861 and 1862 poems do seem to represent the peak of this poet's personal struggle, as the following examples illustrate.

A weight with Needles on the pounds -  
To push, and pierce, besides -  
That if the Flesh resist the Heft -  
The puncture - coolly tries -

That not a pore be overlooked  
Of all this Compound Frame -  
As manifold for Anguish -  
As Species - be - for name -

(1861)

(J. 264)

Of Course - I prayed -  
And did God Care?  
He cared as much as on the Air  
A Bird - had stamped her foot -  
And cried "Give Me" -  
My Reason - Life -  
I had not had - but for Yourself -  
'Twere better Charity  
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb -  
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and Numb -  
Than this smart Misery.

(1862)

(J. 376)

These were also years in which the death poems appeared with great frequency.

The 1863 poems, while often still speaking of death, pain, and loneliness, seem to have come to grips with them, to have placed them in perspective. The tone is quieter. For the most part, they lack the breathless excitement, even panic, of the 1861 poems. There are fewer poems in 1863 than in 1861, and the reader senses a more disciplined craftsmanship in their production.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson's subjunctive forms have been an issue from the very beginning of the publishing history of her poems. At first misunderstood and thought to be errors, they were altered, along with other "irregularities," by the first several editors of the poems. Not until scholarly criticism came to the forefront in this country were they recognized and labelled as forms of the subjunctive mood. This view was challenged, however, by Thomas Johnson and others who believe that the poet did not intend the forms to be traditional subjunctives.

However, there are too many factors to allow this type of blanket interpretation. The chief literary influences on the Dickinson style are the finest examples of Elizabethan English, in which the subjunctive mood appeared regularly. Furthermore, it is highly likely that Emily Dickinson's general intellectual atmosphere and her education exerted a positive influence on her usage of the subjunctive as well as of the other archaic forms which appear in her poetry.

Comparison of the subjunctive forms in her poetry and those in her prose shows virtually no correspondence between the two. Usage in the prose is much less frequent and shows no pattern in time sequence. It appears that the poet's choice of subjunctive forms in the poems was not casual but highly deliberate, made to express the specific meanings she wished to convey.

The variety of contexts and constructions into which Emily Dickinson inserted her subjunctive forms makes impossible a simple explanation of them. The Johnson interpretation can probably be justified for some of the poems, but more yield themselves to explanation on the grounds of some uncertainty, hesitancy, or reluctance in the context or tone of the poems.

The most notable finding of this study is the pattern that emerges in the time sequence of her use of the subjunctive forms. Regardless of how biographical a writer's work may or may not be, it is bound to reflect in great degree his state of mind at the time it is produced. Something in Emily Dickinson's state of mind in the year 1863 caused her to use the subjunctive forms two to three times oftener than she did in most of the other years of her life. Furthermore, that frequency built up gradually in the years to 1863, and declined gradually thereafter. A study of the events of that year<sup>38</sup> reveals nothing in the life of this poet which would offer an explanation. More logical years for this high frequency to occur might seem to be 1862, which was by far the poet's most prolific year, or 1861, the year in which most biographers feel she suffered severe emotional stress, perhaps even a breakdown. In 1862 Emily Dickinson had written, "I dwell in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose - " (J. 657); but the 1863 poems do not "dwell in possibility." Most have a positive, assured tone.

<sup>38</sup>See Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven, 1960), II, 73-85.

It seems possible that psychological factors might account for the frequency of the subjunctive in 1863, but the specific factors that might be the cause are uncertain. It also seems possible that during these peak years she was experimenting more with poetic devices which she felt would help her to achieve richness of sound and style in her poems. Because of her Elizabethan heritage the frequent subjunctive forms would have signified to Emily Dickinson the height of poetic achievement. Unquestionably, the poet wrote most of her finest poems in the years 1862 to 1864. If we assume that her art reached a climax in 1863, we can consider the subjunctive forms as a characteristic of the poet's finest craftsmanship.



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APPENDIX

FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE OF THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD IN THE POEMS

Year	Number of Poems in Which Subjunctive Appears	Total Poems	Ratio
1859	5	94	1 in 19
1860	5	64	1 in 13
1861	11	110	1 in 10
1862	73	341	1 in 5
1863	46	133	1 in 3
1864	29	174	1 in 6
1865	13	87	1 in 7
1866	4	34	1 in 9
1867	1	9	1 in 9
1868	3	21	1 in 7
1869	3	16	1 in 5
1870	1	26	1 in 26
1871	2	27	1 in 14
1872	2	34	1 in 17
1873	7	50	1 in 7
1874	5	39	1 in 8
1875	3	20	1 in 7
1876	7	37	1 in 5
1877	4	43	1 in 11
1878	4	25	1 in 6
1879	6	30	1 in 5
1880	5	26	1 in 5
1881	0	31	
1882	3	22	1 in 7
1883	2	37	1 in 19
1884	0	41	
1885	0	11	
1886	0	2	
Undated	11	120	1 in 11

Average ratio: 1 in 6.5

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## THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD IN THE WRITINGS OF EMILY DICKINSON

Nancy Kenney Bird

### Abstract

The subjunctive mood in the poems of Emily Dickinson was from the outset a source of confusion to editors and readers. The first editors thought that these forms, in particular the third person singular verbs which omit the s inflection, were incorrect usages. These editors often "corrected" them by adding the missing inflection. Later, more scholarly critics recognized and labelled them as forms of the subjunctive mood. Since 1955 Thomas Johnson and some other contemporary critics have suggested that they are not true subjunctives but forms of a "universal present indicative."

It is now known that the chief influences on Emily Dickinson's poetic style were from Elizabethan literature, written in a language rich in subjunctives and the other archaisms which characterize her poetry.

There is little or no correspondence in the appearance of subjunctive forms in the letters and in the poems. The subjunctives were almost entirely poetic devices. The subjunctive forms in poems appear in many different syntactic and semantic contexts. Therefore, one explanation of these forms is not satisfactory, although the Johnson interpretation may apply to a few poems. In 1863 Emily Dickinson used them in an average of one in every three poems, a frequency twice as high as the average. Furthermore, that frequency

built up to the year 1863 and gradually declined thereafter. She apparently chose the subjunctives deliberately and they became a characteristic of her finest work.