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Impossibility . . . / Exhilarates . . . / Who tastes it

— syntactic and epistemological aporia as

radical poetic apparatus

in Emily Dickinson's poetry

by

Susan Clark

B.A., The University of Toronto, 1976.

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

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I found the words to every thought
I ever had — but One —
And that — defies me —
As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

Emily Dickinson

APPROVAL

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DEGREE: Master of Arts (English)

TITLE OF THESIS: "Impossibility/Exhilarates/Who tastes it." -- syntactic and epistemological aporia as radical poetic apparatus in Emily Dickinson's poetry

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

IMPOSSIBILITY .../EXHILARATES .../WHO TASTES IT — SYNTACTIC AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL APORIA AS RADICAL POETIC APPARATUS IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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April 20th 1995
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Abstract

Where Presence — is denied them.
They fling their Speech

This thesis examines Dickinson's "anti-epistemology": her extension, complication and elaboration of a sometimes patently sensual "luxury" of radical doubt across a landscape of Calvinist, patriarchal and Transcendental sureties intolerable to her — as a poet, as a woman, and as a believer. Specifically, the thesis addresses what I consider Dickinson's most startling achievement as a poet: the constellation of language acts, refusals and syntactic devices I call her "apparatuses of aporia" and which I propose enable for Dickinson the "exhilarating impossibility" of attempting through language what neither language nor the mind can attain.

PART ONE documents the ground or landscape in which these "apparatuses" operate. Chapter One, "'The throe of Doubt wedded' 'Lest Certainty be sere'," introduces Dickinson's urgent but voluptuous uncertainties; identifies the ways in which these uncertainties dictated her drastic rejection of poetic closure at all levels; and speculates on the implications of this rejection for traditional epistemological stances. Chapter Two, "'Won't you ask that — / Of the low Ground': turning hierarchy on its side," looks at her re-description of the physical and spiritual worlds as anti-hegemonic, severally deconstructed, their grammatical and physical boundaries blurred; and again suggests the necessarily destabilizing impact of these refusals and subversions on any conceivable system of knowledge. Chapter Three, "'Could I but ride indefinite': Writing beyond knowing," traces her experiments in enacting knowing in language in such a way as to catch

understanding between categories — midway between noun and verb, between the known and the unknown, the knowable and the unknowable; or to incapacitate it altogether — the task of the "apparatus of aporia" — so as to somehow make language, the mind's instrument, throw thought beyond itself, to burst the mind with its own creature.

PART TWO examines the specific devices Dickinson employs to build her aporias. These devices and areas of disruption include: "bad grammar" — mistakes with number, prepositions, and nouns of multitude; repetition, uninflected verbs, missing referents, confusions of subjects, and of objects. A separate section discusses her punctuation tactics, specifically detailing the use of the dash as a potent instrument of discontinuity, a flag for relational truth and an enabling instrument of polysemy.

Wonder — not precisely knowing
And not precisely knowing not
A beautiful but bleak condition
He has not lived who has not felt

This thesis is for my parents, with love
and thanks

I leaned upon the Awe —
I lingered with Before —

For every culture there are *languages* it could not use because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction.

— Suzette Haden Elgin

Dickinson is unread because Dickinson is unreadable.

— Sharon Cameron

Acknowledgements

This thesis evolved from a paper I began in an immensely generative seminar on "The American Gothic" covering the work of Poe, Melville and Dickinson, led by Miriam Nichols at Simon Fraser University in the spring of 1991; and a directed reading supervised by her in the summer of 1993. I am indebted to her teaching, and grateful for her encouragement.

My thinking on ecstasy, abjection, and the "unspeakable" in general has been tested, enlarged and contested in e-mail and other conversation with Christine Stewart, who is completing a thesis (UBC 1995) on Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood.*

I would like to thank David Stouck for his timely time and energy, and for his support.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> For lack of knowing what I actually express for the Other, I constitute my language as an incomplete phenomenon of flight outside myself.
>
> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 373

> The function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating, it is interpreting.
>
> Foucault, *The Order of Things* 40

In Poem [838] Dickinson states with inescapable weight: "Impossibility . . . / Exhilarates . . . / Who tastes it"[1] Impossibility in language might be understood as that which is unspeakable, unwritable, not iteratable. My thesis is that Dickinson's work contests the heavy marking that traditionally puts the divine, paradise, perhaps the female, and certainly death on one side of a speakable/unspeakable divide or divides. My suggestion is that her poetic devices are a conscious attempt to breach, blur, suture, or disallow that divide — to make a pine as "unspeakable" as divinity; or divinity as writable as a pine; and further to place the languaging mind itself in the arena of the unspeakable, where it cannot properly abide; to use language against language's communicative assumptions, and particularly to use syntax's own constructive abilities to construct impossible places, im-

1. The full poem reads: "Impossibility, like Wine/Exhilarates the Man/Who tastes it; Possibility / Is flavorless — Combine // A Chance's faintest Tincture / And in the former Dram / Enchantment makes ingredient / As certainly as Doom —"

possibly related to its too-easy tautologous dominion. And — if the "function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating, [but] interpreting" [Foucault 40] — to humble epistemology with its own tools by refusing its seeing and demonstrating and even its interpreting strategies. To provide as known nothing at all; nothing but the empty grasping of understanding, its nakedly desirous gesture. And then to posit this place-no-place, this impossibility, or radical indeterminacy, as Paradise.

Note: I have chosen to treat quotations of Dickinson's work, whether letters or poems, differently from other quoted material appearing here. Dickinson quotations contain only that punctuation which belongs to the material quoted. Commas and periods which are part of my sentences will appear outside the quotation marks.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

"'The throe of Doubt wedded' — 'Lest Certainty be sere'"

a

to — and — I —
would — were —
then — no — this —
if — or — when —
was — but — not —
for

is

in — as — my — be
— her — we — his
— he — you — all
— one — like —
him — our — just —
day

know

From *a* through *is* to *know* seems a short tumble in a list documenting the most frequently used words in Emily Dickinson's poetic vocabulary.[2] The above tally shows a very particular verb preceded only by the bare connective tissues of lan-

2. This information is from *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*, S.P. Rosenbaum, ed. [865 ff.]

guage (articles, pronouns, conjunctives, indicators of time, and possessives), four forms of the verb *to be*, and its metaphorical cognate, *day*.[3] With its immediate inflections (*knew —knows — knowing — known — unknown*), the word *know* looms above all others in Dickinson's vocabulary.[4]

With its most obvious cognates, the total nearly doubles again. And with related terms,[5]the subject of knowing — seeing, demonstrating and interpreting —

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3. The word *know* occurs 230 times in Dickinson's poems, the thirty-fourth in frequency. [Rosenbaum 865]

4. Viz.: *knew* [80 instances], *unknown* [34x], *known* [32x] *knows* [31x], and *knowing* [13x]. The cumulative total is 426 instances.

5. Some cognates and related terms are: tell [135x]; *mind* [79x]; *thought* [69x]; *think* [43x]; *prove* and *sure* [36x]; *doubt* [27x]; *guess* and *brain* [26x]; *truth* [25x]; *consciousness* and *memory* [24x]; *remember* [18x]; *believe, circumference* [17x]; *answer, belief, fact, mystery* [15x]; *conscious* [14x]; *doubtless, learned* and *mistake* and *taught* [13x]; *certain, judgment, unconscious, understand* [12x]; *conviction, ignorant, learn, perceive, question, supposed, teach* [11x]; *certainty, experiment, fictitious, uncertain* [10x]; *science, wisdom, wiser* [9x]; *conjecture, ignorance, riddle* [8x]; *guessed, infer, inference, invisible, meant, puzzled, revelation* [7x]; *ascertain, comprehend, doubtful, inferred, proof, reason, thinking* [6x]; *believed, believes, comprehension, conclusion, formula, philosopher, recognize, scholars, thoughts, understood* [5x]; *affidavit, analysis, answered, conclude, concluded, discover, discovery, established, philosophy, observation, persuaded, presuming, proves, questioned, ratified, speculate, statement,* [4x]; *authority, authorized, certified, conjectured, contemplate, intuition, mathematics, measures, mistook, mysterious, opinion, perceiveless, perception, philology, quantify, ratio, reality, reasons,* [3x]. And others — more tenuously but resonantly linked: *wonder* [26x]; *precise* [19x]; *curious* [12x]; *recollect* [25x]; *remembered* [11x]; *forgetting, forgotten, dazzled;* [6x] *forgets, bewildered* [5x]; *names* [13x]; *difficult* [12x]; *experience* [11x]; *possibility, story* [9x]; *distinct, history, strange, remembering* [8x]; *hoped, hopeless, remembrance, nameless* [7x]; *attention, honest, impossible, recognition, recollection* [6x]; *convey, decide, estranged, efface, exhibit, fainter, language, mystic, overlooked* [5x]; *contemplated, experienced* [4x]; *visions, recollected, recollection, recorded, reminded*

can be said to occur literally "countlessly," as Dickinson herself might put it, significantly outstripping the frequency of the first person pronoun, as do 1223 instances of *no* and *not*, and another 1255 of *but* and *if* — two classes of the tiny, potent, "wild" words,[6] from which language — and thus our "known"[7] itself — can only struggle to recover at any instance of their use.

This downpour of epistemological vocabulary will alarm no one who has read Dickinson's work attentively, though its bulk confirmed may surprise anyone. The real wonder of the numbers — that this relentless and massive emphasis on knowing seems weightless in the instant of reading her — can perhaps be attributed to Dickinson's own refusal of knowledge as substance, as proprietary, and her radical doubt not merely of those beliefs we call beliefs, but of those beliefs we call facts. Dickinson speaks against the accumulation of knowledge, which was the avarice of her era and against the machinery it had built to mass-produce that knowledge — but in doing so allows herself no easy foothold. In

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[3x]. See also Rebecca Patterson's list below of the science words Dickinson shared with Emerson.

6. See Letter [562], in which Dickinson tells Otis Lord, "dont you know that 'No' is the wildest word we assign to language?" It is worth noting that these words, so significant in Dickinson, are not given much stature generally and are thus not normally tracked attentively in concordances. The Rosenbaum concordance reports their quantity only: the textual references are not given. It is particularly significant in the context of this thesis that these "wild words" are not about knowledge's content, but about its process, are part of its grammar, or "apparatus," rather than its material.

7. My slightly idiosyncratic use of "known" as a noun in this thesis intends to conflate knowledge with ownership (known, own) as it is the particular assumptions implied by ownership (static object status, exchange value, moment of acquisition, fear of loss, owner as master/superior to thing known, etc.), and the possibility of a type of knowledge, that are at issue.

goading the known, the poet appears to be standing nowhere, standing on no "ground." She seems to question the assumptions of physical science *as* she questions the I-Thou of love *as* she questions the imperatives of faith — from "nowhere." These poems are not riddles with known answers; they are not the teasers of any system's sales pitch. If we are at sea, so is the poet — "And row in Nowhere all day long"[8] by her side.

Temporary permanence: the vita of doubt

> That we are permanent temporarily, it is warm to know, though we know no more. [Letter 962]

In *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dickinson's near contemporary, fellow New Englander, and friend of the family,[9] states his apparent commitment to a closed system of questions and their answers which define his world:

> Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy.[10]

Though it is perhaps unfair to characterize Emerson's complex oeuvre or the beliefs of the Transcendentalists by such a citing, the remark is nevertheless Emerson's, and could never have been Dickinson's.

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8. Poem [661], "Could I but ride indefinite".

9. Dickinson apparently refused to come to lunch at her brother's house when Emerson was visiting, though he expressly requested to meet her. He had been "given as father" of her poems when they appeared anonymously in a New England publication.

10. *Emerson on Transcendentalism*, Edward L. Ericson, ed., 3.

To look back for a moment at the poet's life (a scholarly routine I hope to avoid as far as possible here), the young Emily seems to have been genuinely excited by the promise of knowledge. Certainly her curiosity was wide-ranging and life-long. As a girl, and later as a young woman studying at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, she seems to have been especially drawn to the study of geography, maths, geometry, botany and chemistry[11] and learned to read at least Latin and possibly Greek well. But it seems her expectation of knowing was disappointed by her early encounter with, and pained recognition of, the "owned known" — that dream of static knowledge, and its application — a given of her era — to man's [sic] earthly ends: dominion, progress, permanence.

So, Dickinson was "schooled," though as she commented ruefully to Thomas Higginson, her longtime correspondent and rather clumsy mentor, she had "no education."[12] Certainly by the time she began to write poetry seriously, she

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11. As witnessed by her letters at the time (1847-48); and more lastingly, by her persistent use — however ironically — of the vocabulary of science, maths and, to a lesser extent, exploration and foreign countries, throughout her writing career. Standard texts of the era such as Olmsted's *Compendium of Astronomy* and especially Benjamin Silliman's *The Elements of Chemistry* wrote lyrically of science and Dickinson apparently responded to their language enthusiastically — reserving for her use their namings, their vocabulary, and their delight in precision but tossing their systems. A casual and incomplete list, according to Patterson [110], of scientific and mathematical terms unusual in poetry to that time but apparent in both Dickinson's work and Emerson's includes: *algebra, analysis, astronomy, chemistry, circumference, classify, electricity, equation, formula, geometry, hypothesis, intrinsic, logarithm, mathematics, microscope, science, solstice, stability, synthesis,* and *telescope*.

12. Letter 261: "I went to school — but in your manner of the phrase — had no education." Dickinson, with her knowledge of Latin, may have been conscious of another meaning here. Education is derived from the same root as a cognate,

seems to have established for herself that the knowledge she had so far been offered, though fascinating and even beautiful, was strangely constricting and profoundly unlike the world as she experienced it herself daily.

In fact, we might even posit that it was because of this loss of faith in man's known, especially in the wake of her equal rejection, almost a decade earlier, of the certainties of the religion she had been raised in that she turned to writing (or unwriting) with such palpable urgency; and might speculate that about this time she may have begun to see that the greater excitement — whether in the religious or secular sphere — was in the questions posed rather than in their answers. And, eventually, as I hope to show, found that a sometimes patently sensual "luxury" was associated with the rejection of the possibility of any answer at all, in the face of still-urgent inquiry.[13]

Further, Poem [7][14] from 1858, for example — also, significantly, the first to use the dash as other than a standard bracketing device — makes patent that her

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educe, meaning to lead. Her famed "Master" letters make bitterly clear Dickinson's desire for a real mentor; something her nature and circumstances and perhaps most of all her genius would deny her. I think the joke, and it's a sad one, about the much-debated recipient of Dickinson's "Master" letters, is that she couldn't send them to anyone. There was literally no one for her to send them to.

13. After a four-year silence (as far as we can tell from the remaining mss.), Dickinson began writing regularly. Poem [7] from 1858 voices her decided stance contrary to prevailing belief systems and against the incapacities of present systems of knowledge ("My figures fail to tell me/ How far the Village lies — / Whose peasants are the Angels") and hints strongly at her preference for being "left in the dark" ("My faith that Dark adores —").

14. Because the numbers by which we customarily identify Dickinson's poems and letters are not hers and are very probably misleading in their annihilation of Dickinson's own ordering of her work in fascicles, replacing what are — in the opinion of contemporary Dickinson scholars such as Sharon Cameron —

lines may be read in a number of different ways, unequivocally offering the reader polyvalence in her provision of at least two, if not three, choices ("morning's Canvas/ Larceny — legacy —") in her definition of night.[15]

"Where Presence — is denied them. / They fling their Speech": The apparatus of prayer

> Prayer is the little implement
> Through which Men reach
> Where Presence — is denied them.
> They fling their Speech
> By means of it — in God's Ear —
> If then He hear —
> This sums the Apparatus
> Comprised in Prayer [437]

Dickinson, who stated that she "could not pray" and therefore wrote poetry,[16] saw clearly that prayer's intent — once stripped of the patent absurdity and suspect homage of one-way speech addressing an insubstantial, unsubstantiated "Father"[17] — was to radically exceed the target of other uses of language. She can, I

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strongly interrelated *groups* of poems, with a one-dimensional, linear organization, I have chosen as a minor protest and constant mnemonic of this editorial travesty to at least refuse the clinical convention of P### and L###, and will instead use square brackets to enclose poem numbers throughout, spelling out the words Letter or Poem before them where is any possibility of confusion and wherever practicable quoting the first line of poems as "title" as well.

15. See further on the complications of this particular definition below, under "Slippage." Chapter Four.

16. Letter [278], "Good-night. Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray" (this is followed directly by her "song," the poem, "It is not dying hurts us so, —" Poem [335].)

think, be shown to have in effect set out to remodel the giddying promise of prayer's "apparatus" after her own desires, as an investigation of the potential of language itself. To more precisely gesture towards that area of our human experience where "Presence — is denied" — our unknown, or unknowable, the limits of knowledge — Dickinson arrived at a genre that might as well be described as "super-fatted prayers" as "broken hymns": language's own "fling" or leap at the unknown, beyond what can be thought (far beyond the domesticated "Father," and the "tent" of Heaven),[18] hyphenating known and unknown into a kind of earthly Paradise.

"Blessed are they that play for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven"[19]

Is rejection of the known in favour of the unknown a kind of Paradise? From early on in her writing life,[20] Dickinson appears to have unflinchingly proposed at nearly every opportunity her poetry afforded her (which, as we will see, is a nearly infinite multiple of its total *apparent* bulk) a radical epistemological uncertainty as the informing agent of both her ostensible subjects (themselves often only more explicit questions) and the language in which they are written.

Her poems explode every certainty they either propose or explore, not, it seems to me, as a nihilistic gesture, but as an affirmation of the genuinely liberating *activity* she saw as the essence of knowing. One could speculate that had there

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17. The quotation marks are Dickinson's; see e.g. Poems [127], [153], [215], [1258] and [1461]. Dickinson's poems do not believe in God-the-Father. They mock him as too small, too gendered, too socially relative.

18. Poem [243], "I've known a Heaven, like a Tent —"

19. Letter [690]. In another letter [513], Higginson is told that poetry is her only playmate.

20. Perhaps the age of 27; from at least poem [7].

been in our grammar an agentive substantive such as Ernest Fenollosa proposes in his work on ideograms,[21] or Heidegger suggests was lost to Western civilization at its very inception[22] — were the "Word" that was made "flesh" understood as a new and liberating part of speech, as verb *and* noun — Dickinson need never have made her monsters; need never have invented what I will call her multitudinous "apparatus[es] of aporia,"[23] after her "apparatus" of prayer, her many apparatuses

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21. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, San Francisco : City Lights Books c. 1936.

22. Through the "mistranslation" of "being" and "to be" from the Greek; see *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy.* Cf., too, the related concept of "manifesting" Benjamin Lee Whorf documents in his "An American Indian Model of the Universe" in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, John B. Carroll, ed.

23. It should be noted that this is my term, not Dickinson's, and is largely used in its pre-postmodern sense: "aporianism" is an archaic term for skepticism, Dickinson's dearest exercise:

> Sweet Skepticism of the Heart —
> That knows — and does not know —
> And tosses like a fleet of Balm —
> Affronted by the snow —
> Invites and then retards the Truth
> Lest Certainty be sere
> Compared with the delicious throe
> Of transport filled with Fear [1413]

Were it feasible to use the word "koan," without invoking another culture and another religious paradigm, I might nearly as easily have employed that. I am interested that Kristeva has connected "aporia" with Freud's understanding of "primal repression" and have some sense that the aporias Dickinson creates may have some resonance with the hysterical [physical] paralysis Freud and Breuer track in some of their clients in *Studies in Hysteria*; see further in the bibliography.

of confoundment in which every word risks a slip into a realm where Platonic language, Christian language, dare not go; where grammar damns the believer, and only a rogue may enter its Heaven.[24]

An Excess of Wonder

> And bye and bye — a Change
> Called Heaven —
> Rapt Neighbourhoods of Men —
> Just finding out — what puzzled us —
> Without the lexicon! [246]

Dickinson's urgent but voluptuous uncertainties roll in the weightlessness of unbelief, but they roll. Upside down, all the change fallen from our pockets, we might believe "Heaven" just earthly, no more than a bend in the horizon, a thought, a view, that thing we can see out of context, at a distance, or in an unfamiliar place, without quite understanding what we're looking at.

> In wonder, 'the mind comes to a stand, because the particular concept in question has no connection with other concepts. The object that arouses wonder is so new that for a moment at least it is alone, unsystematized, an utterly detached object of rapt attention. . . . Wonder — thrilling, potentially dangerous, momentarily immobilizing, charged at once with desire, ignorance, and fear — is the quintessential human response to what Descartes calls a 'first encounter'. . . . an almost inevitable component of the discourse of discovery, for by definition wonder is an instinctive recognition of difference, the sign of a heightened attention, 'a sudden surprise of the soul'. . . in the face of the new. [Greenblatt 20]

24. "Unless we become as Rogues, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven —" [end of Letter 715].

Early on in his book, *Marvellous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World*, Stephen Greenblatt notes that Descartes felt that whereas a "moderate measure of wonder is useful in that it calls attention tc that which is 'new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be' and fixes it in the memory," an "excess of wonder" is harmful, "'for it freezes the individual in the face of objects whose moral character, whose capacity to do good or evil ha[s] not yet been determined.'" That is, Greenblatt explains,

> 'When we wonder, we do not yet know if we love or hate the object at which we are marveling; we do not know if we should embrace it or flee from it. For this reason wonder, Descartes argues, 'has no opposition and is the first of all the passions.' Similarly for Spinoza — in whose account wonder was not, strictly speaking, a passion at all, but rather a mode of conception *(imaginatio)* — wonder depends upon a suspension or failure of categories and is a kind of paralysis, a stilling of the normal associative restlessness of the mind. [20]

That "associative restlessness" some might call the language-making function; and wonder, the ekstasis [25] or "delicious throe" that leaves the Christian soul or the citizen's sanity in jeopardy.

To go beyond language, but not beyond thought; to go beyond thought but not beyond language. To experience self or thing beyond language; or, self or thing in language. The speaker in Poem [280], "I felt a Funeral in my Brain", tells us that her "Mind went numb" and "it seemed / That Sense was breaking through" and

> Then Space — began to toll
> As all the Heavens were a Bell

25. This is Jean-Paul Sartre's preferred spelling and carries with it some of his particular definition of the term. See the annotation under *Being and Nothingness* in the bibliography following.

And Being, but an Ear
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here —

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down —
And hit a World, at every plunge
And Finished knowing then —

The release of new perceptions and the energy of heightened attention inherent in the experience of the smash of reason or the loss of solid ground can dazzle,[26] entrance, intoxicate, transfixing one with what might be a "Change" called "Heaven" on earth. When this situation is given duration we can speak of "aporia" or confoundment.

Believing what we don't believe
Does not exhilarate. [1741]

In a letter Dickinson says, "On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings* — [. . .] we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble."[27] This is a (typically and tellingly) comic description of Dickinson's relationship to beliefs of all kinds, and belief in general. It is also an image of mental frenzy, were we to read its "hundred times an hour" literally. And it is a systalic image: the systole/diastole of a heartbeat — life (beat) in-

26. Compare the disappearance of the "Heaven" like a "Tent" alluded to above — the quotidian Heaven revealed to have been a false shelter, a confinement, a limit, exposed as having used language to con in Poem [243]; and the famous "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —" Poem [1129], which notes, "The truth must dazzle gradually" among numbers of instances of "dazzlement" and bewilderment in Dickinson's poetry.

27. Letter [750].

terrupted with death (lack of beat). The "nimble" jump of belief up, into that "Change — called Heaven" and its inevitable fall back to earth. However it is read, it is the antithesis of stasis: a belief which doubts *as* life.

Poem [280], "I felt a Funeral in my Brain", quoted above, takes a church as its locale, and documents the sort of plunge through the floorboards of that church that may obliquely refer to Jonathan Edwards' famous 1741 sermon in Enfield, Connecticut, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," the "Application" of which notes that the disbelievers in the congregation were *at that moment* — as always — suspended above the pit of hell.[28]

Though Dickinson's more direct and rhetorically insouciant response is perhaps her simple correction of Edwards' "misreading" of the Bible[29] in a much later poem, where she chastens him for conflating physics and deity, "Fail in an instant, no man did/ Slipping — is Crash's law",[30] her more immediate, complex replay and reply asserts that her "brain" is what's a witness to death, and what's holding her, sinner or no, up. It is a woman's mind which is supporting a funeral, the Christian rite of passage from life to death, and which may be itself, watching

28. More fully: "That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. *There* is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is Hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of: there is nothing between you and Hell but the air; it's only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up." In Bradley, Beatty, Long and Perkins, eds., *The American Tradition in Literature* 98-113.

29. That is, of Deut. XXXII. 35, "*Their foot shall slide in due time*," as "they were always exposed to *sudden* unexpected destruction."

30. Poem [997], "Crumbling is not an instant's Act".

itself, the object of that funeral; and it is *in* a woman's mind that the utter "slip" and "crash" to try the limits of the known/unknown is undertaken.

Of course, there is no Hellfire. The "actual" rather than threatened plunge through the floor boards that Poem [280] documents reveals to Dickinson's narrator the converse of what has been promised. In fact, the unending freedom and multiple enlightenments experienced, though dizzying and likely terrifying, would in Dickinson's terms in many ways surpass the eventual Heaven offered to the "bleating"[31] "'Faith'", the congregation clinging to the planks of their timid dimension above.

Poet, historian and critic, Susan Howe, defines the Calvinism of Dickinson's time and place as

> grounded in the Old Testament, through typological interpretation of the New; authoritarian. . . . stressed personal salvation through strenuous morality, righteousness over love, . . . autocratic governing principle over liberty [38]

and notes that it was a fiercely self-righteous religion in some state of degeneration "under the unpredictable strains of frontier living" as compared with

> Cotton Mather's early Idealist conception of a "living and true God, infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible" [41]

Here is the "degenerate" religion and its idealistic prototype which can be assumed to have influenced Dickinson from an early age. In fact, I have assumed, for want of any more conspicuous compelling factor, that it may have acted as

31. See Poem [313], "I should have been too glad, I see —".

the principal spur to her lifelong investigations and revolutions in language as well as supplying some of the forms of the questions she tried.

As a teenager, in the moment of her defiance of it,[32] the letter of populist Christian doctrine seems to have represented to her *real* illogic proposing itself as an "ideal platform" overlying the dreaded "irrationality"[33] of the unknown. Deconstruction of that platform, *thinking through* that floor, breaking stiff "Reason" with the language-like "Sense" it has overlain, was probably the only defence anyone — especially, perhaps, a woman — could mount. And so Dickinson appears to have chosen the active, relentless, sometimes tortuous, sometimes giddy "illogic" language offered as the only possible relation she could have to truth (I intend this "illogic" of language as quite opposed to a quietist "a-logic," or "a-logocentrism" — the abrogation of thought implied in some mystical traditions, though it may bear those traditions other similarities) her point seeming to be that our language if *read* to the very verge of its own impossibility is enough itself to provoke our enlightenment.

To return to the poem: when the plank broke in Dickinson's narrator's Reason, it seemed to her that she "Finished knowing". Finding the universe beneath the floorboards multiple (a "World" at every "plunge") and perhaps fearing her language will "fit" only one, she couples herself with a gargantuan "Silence," as though she and it were an entire "Race," "wrecked solitary." Curiously, however, we the readers find that the poem does not stop and a second glance reminds us that writing *is* "silent" and might, if it could be absolute space ("all the Heav-

32. Susan Howe notes that "Dickinson's refusal during her teens to join the Great Awakening of the Congregational Church left her startlingly alone." [54]

33. Susan Howe notes Cotton and Increase Mather's particular "Dread of the Irrational" [46]

ens"), become absolute sound ("a Bell") — a transubstantiation which, I think, Dickinson's dashes attempt (see below, Chapter Four, page 63 ff.).

Again, though this religion she twice refused might be seen as reviling or forbidding what seemed most "awakening" to her, she appears not to have thrown the form away with its content entirely. In fact, as suggested above, in attempting to redefine the content, intent and address of prayer, while preserving its desire to "fling" some representation of the speaker "beyond," where "Presence is denied", and in that attempt to make a "hyphen" between the knowable and the unknowable — or the word and flesh — Dickinson becomes in a sense her own saviour.[34] The "death" of knowing, she seems to suggest — perhaps echoing Christianity's "die to be [truly] born" — is its "true" life.

". . . the awful doors . . ."

> . . . if reading is a dangerous activity, this is because it has the potential to disrupt everything that we know, to make our consciousness aware of what it cannot name or encompass, in short, to make us aware of "death." This is not to detract from the power of death in all its physical manifestations, but to say that death signals above all what de Man (1984)

34. I suspect too that her "marriage" (see her multiple "Bride" and "Wife" poems) may also refer to this "hyphenation," in the sense that she experiences herself as wed to an unseen and possibly incorporeal being/non-being, and is herself "without the sign" of that marriage (see "Title divine — is mine!/ The Wife — without the Sign!" Poem [1072] — among work supposed to be from 1865, but presently dated 1862 — in many respects a difficult poem, especially in that it seems in its last lines to reveal the timid mechanism behind this boastful pageant). In the same poem she is "Born — Bridalled — Shrouded — / In a Day" making this "marriage" formally and materially the middle term between life's "shores" both of which have access to our unknown (see also self as "Term between" "Eternity" and "Immortality" Poem [721], "Behind Me — dips Eternity —").

> calls "a linguistic predicament": the impossibility of transparence, the difficulty of reading. [Helen Regueiro Elam 76]

Dickinson's courage in using the permanently unanswerable desires which can be said to be built into our language as a means of the perpetual extension, complication and elaboration of the often patently sensual "luxury" of her doubt — her persistent "plunge" in the service of a map of the limits of the unknown — are implicit in her strategy of revelatory aporia. That momentary "little death" of reason — which so parallels the "little death" of orgasm — as the mind defeats itself and leaps to a new register seems the sole available resolution of the unbearable tension language, representing the human condition, can produce. Such a loss of mind need not be read as the trace of Dickinson's madness (as several biographers and a number of earlier critics have suggested) nor even as the ecstatic or transcendental tourist bus the language I am using here might suggest, that well known "out" — the sublime, the ineffable, — written into so much of the literature, and especially the poetry, of the Romantic and Victorian periods, but as the brave and often nearly jaunty exploration of places our whole language structure has taught us to fear, from whose bourne they give us to understand, no traveller may return. As a flirt with death itself. Or, as Dickinson put it, early on:

> Just lost, when I was saved!
> Just felt the world go by!
> Just girt me for the onset with Eternity.
> When breath blew back,
> [. . .]
> Therefore, as One returned, I feel
> Odd secrets of the line to tell!
> Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores —
> Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
> Before the Seal! [160]

Dickinson's relation to death is a keen and pervasive one. It sharpens the quality of "impossibility" that fascinates her, for it is *the* exhilarating "impossibility." To

acknowledge how much of death there is in the language structures that fascinated her might educate any temptation in her reader to fall into the rosy world of the capital-I Ineffable. Blanchot might have had her work in mind when, commenting on a passage from Kafka's *Diaries*, he says:

> The whole passage might be summarized as follows: you cannot write unless you remain your own master before death; you must have established with death a relation of sovereign equals. If you lose face before death, if death is the limit of your self-possession, then it slips the words out from under the pen, it cuts in and interrupts. . . . Kafka feels deeply here that art is a relation with death. Why death? Because death is the extreme. He who includes death among all that is in his control controls himself extremely. He is linked to the whole of his capability. . . . [91]

The senses of "Sense"

> . . . it's erotic to say everything
>
> Lyn Hejinian, *The Guard* 24

Significantly, "Sense" has broken through from underneath Reason's plank. It comes cracking through the repression made of it, and reveals itself not only not identical with itself, with Reason, but quite other: multi-dimensional (many "World"s), dimensionless in the sense that it seems limitless (the narrator may still be falling, from all we can gather from the text), and without description (nothing is said to describe these worlds, as the variety of "knowing" which keeps description in its stable, has "finished"). All of which is in fact, the antithesis of "knowing."

Alice famously fell similarly into Wonderland; and Artaud read, began to translate, then hotly rejected, Carroll's underground.[35]

Gilles Deleuze describes how *Alice in Wonderland* "evolves" from a story which refers to the "underground" (Carroll apparently originally thought to title his book "Alice's Adventures Underground") — rabbit holes and wells and "bod-

ies which penetrate each other" and "co-exist" — to one in which everything is surface — playing card characters. Down gives way to right and left, to the lateral; sinking to sliding. " . . . Everything visible (or rather all possible knowledge) is found along the surface. . . . Consequently, there are no adventures of Alice; there is but *one* adventure: her rising to the surface, her disavowal of the false depths, and her discovery that everything happens at the borderline" [280].

For Julia Kristeva, the "semiotic" feature of language — as detailed in her *Revolution in Poetic Language*[36] — equally disrupts the symbolic; and perhaps Dickinson is more interesting yet in that her "Sense" can be read as both disrupter and disrupted. As symbolic it overlies, is the plank over, containing the sense that must be repressed; and as semiotic, is the very pressure resisted which finally — or perhaps continuously — "breaches"[37] that symbolic. Or, to employ

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35. Apparently Artaud was at first attracted to then dismissed Carroll's work and developed a great contempt for him:

> "'Jabberwocky [which Artaud began to translate] is the work of a profiteer who wanted — while filled with a well-served meal — to fill up intellectually on others' suffering. . . . When one digs into the shit of the individual being and his language, the poem must necessarily smell bad; 'Jabberwocky' is a poem that its author has taken special pains to keep outside the uterine being of suffering into which all great poets have dipped, and from which, delivering themselves into the world, they smell bad." [Letter from Artaud, quoted Gilles Deleuze, "The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud" 279].

36. Kristeva uses Mallarmé's *The Mystery in Literature* to help describe her indescribable: "Mallarmé calls attention to the semiotic rhythm within language [as] [i]ndifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgement, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax." [1984:29]

another vocabulary, Dickinson's "Sense" is the sense of the mind, *and* the sense of the senses; is sensual/nonsensical and "sensical." And this confusion speaks plainly to her voluptuous physical craving for and enjoyment of her doubts.

Belief believes itself to have a target outside language. And/but that language can provoke the utter lockup of our reason, the bursting of which might feel like belief. This glorious muddle, or nearly orgasmic crisis could not fail to enslave the masterless Dickinson's interest.

In Poem [313], Faith "bleats — to understand!" — why? Apart from its audible sneer at the sheep of the Lord's flock, the remark might also be read as a comment on Augustine's *nisi crederitas non intelligitas* — "unless you believe you will not understand." If believing operates in its own arena, confirming itself, and only incidentally pulls knowing in its wake, it is an ideal and irrefutable challenge to rationalist presumptions.[38]

> We are 'Dust'
> We apologize to thee
> For thine own Duplicity [1461]

Dickinson's Creator apparently made us the original ourselves of this problem of belief, which we in turn have given to our language. We are the incarnation of God's own "knowledge of good and evil," beast-angels, contradictions in terms, in the *confounding* position of apologizing to the Creator for the sin It made inevitable in us.

> Knows how to forget!
> But — could It teach — it? [433]

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37. The word is a favourite of Kristeva's in this same context.

38. It is interesting to note that Dickinson's suggested alternate for "bleat" in this line is the sexually and intellectually loaded "faint," — the "little death" of reason.

That scholar Rebecca Patterson's preferred version of these lines — "Knows how to forget!/But — could *she* teach — it?" (my emphasis)[39] — is loaded in her reading of them with an "actual" lost and longed-after lover seems a nearly perfect example of the near-nothing that divides a philosophical from an erotic, a fleshly from a spiritual, understanding in Dickinson. Or does nothing at all divide them?

First Apparatus of Aporia: The Rejection of Closure
"This World is Not Conclusion." [40]

In "The Rejection of Closure," Lyn Hejinian sets out her argument, noting

> . . . in writing, an essential situation, both formal and open, is created by the interplay between two areas of fruitful conflict or struggle. One of these arises from a natural impulse toward closure, whether defensive or comprehensive, and the equal impulse toward a necessarily open-ended and continuous response to what's perceived as the 'world,' unfinished and incomplete. Another, simultaneous struggle is the continually developing one between literary form, or the 'constructive principle' and writing's material. The first involves the poet with his or her subjective position; the second objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself.
>
> The 'open text,' by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in the other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The 'open text'

39. The Rosenbaum concordance also favours this version.

40. Poem [501].

> often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material, turn it into a project; that is, it resists reduction. [41]

Closure is equated with stasis and perhaps with issues of ownership in Dickinson; it is the real horror.[42] So: "This World is Not Conclusion." — period — begins Poem [501]. If we are familiar with Dickinson's punctuation at all, the period — any period — will probably bring us up short. Then the joke bursts on us: "Not Conclusion." — Period!

And say the period — the "beckon" and "baffle" of death-not-death — sends us back to the beginning of the line, as though we've hit a wall; we may read a completely different sentence. Did we see, "This world is not the end, there is another world beyond" or "This world won't 'end' for us — we'll be buried here: there is no beyond." Closure whether of disbelief or belief seems queried. And this unfettered reading ties the mind in knots. A further question might be, can the reader read both sentences at once?

" . . . to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise"

> But from the nineteenth century, literature began to bring language back to light once more in its own being. . . . For now we no longer have that primary, that absolutely initial, word upon which the infinite move-

41. *Raddle Moon* 4:33-34.

42. Cf. Poem 413: "I don't like Paradise — it's always Sunday" as a bad joke (one would expect it always to be the Lord's Day in Heaven) and a display of "bad attitude" — a joke with a certain chill in it for Dickinson, raised in a Calvinist milieu where Sunday was a day of inaction, a day of *don'ts*. See also further in Appendix One.

> ment of discourse was founded and by which it was limited; henceforth, language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day. [Foucault 1973:44]

> So instead of getting to Heaven, at last —
> I'm going, all along [324]

As suggested above, closure as ownership of the known and the unknown was a tactic of the "poetics" of the religion Dickinson refused. Such "End"-directedness seems intolerable to her, as a poet, as a woman, and as a believer;[43] and she appeared to see in a simple, gay rejection of it the possibility of "saving" *herself* at each moment of her life.

Further, if knowledge in general may be identified with closure and that closure with the sort of "grasp," or "comprehension" — a thing held, reached all around ("grasp," "seize": the word's Latin root meanings suggest aggression, moreover) — which reads as ownership — [ad]vantage or *standing above* implicit (to see is to know, alternately to stand upon rather than to *under*stand) — doubt will perhaps read through its grip.

Believing that "An enlarged ability for missing is perhaps a part of our better growth,"[44] Dickinson will implement devices in her poetry to make that poetry

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43. Despite Dickinson's frequent suspension of belief, I am convinced that it is simple-minded to assume her atheism, pantheism, polytheism. Her need to question, her acute and energetic agnostic perturbation might be read as a lifelong investigation of not only what but how one *could* believe; moreover, how one could "pray."

44. "An enlarged ability for missing is perhaps a part of our better growth, as the strange Membranes of the Tree broaden out of sight." (Letter [951]). See again Appendix One on the social implications of this "ungraspability" in Dickinson's work.

frequently utterly "ungraspable." Her emphatic rejection of both closure and associated hierarchical structuring (see below, and in Chapter Two) allow her to keep her work mobile, slippery, teasingly beyond possession by its reader, as a knowledge-object, or producer of ownable meaning, just as its subject is nearly unfailingly the limits of knowledge.

Getting past closure to "gather Paradise", an example

The express relation between stasis and closure is vividly made in:

> They shut me up in Prose —
> As when a little girl
> They put me in a Closet
> Because they liked me "still" [613]

Steeling ourselves to accept the terrible biographical suggestion as harmless analogy[45] we read: "shut . . . up," and "Closet". And the off, but near, end-rhyme: "Prose—" and "Closet —" makes us read "Close it" — "Close your mouth," or "conclude it," make closure. There are strong allusions implicit to the female's notoriously restless/not "still" — in fact, both "open" and "mouthed" — sexuality, which a girl must learn to close and "still" as she does her tongue. The "close-it" is "Prose"'s closure — which "shuts her up."

By comparison, the house Dickinson chooses, "of Possibility," (read poetry) is all doors and windows and gaping —precisely because, we may assume, of the explosive devices Dickinson means by poetry.[46]

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45. Here is another tension in Dickinson, played along the same axis as sense/sensuality. Is the blood Camille Paglia, in *Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, sees everywhere blood, or text? Is the child a child or a noun? Is the closet a closet, or prose? Is the lover language?

46. As it took the top of Dickinson's head off when she read it: "If I feel physically

I dwell in Possibility —
A fairer house than Prose
More numerous of windows
Superior of Doors
Of Chambers as the Cedars
Impregnable of Eye
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky
Of Visitors — the fairest —
For Occupation — this —
This spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise [657]

The means of enlarging possibility are poetry's — and especially her poetry's — devices. Prose is a closet, but *this* dwelling is the inner and outer indistinguished. It is "all"[47] by virtue not of "comprehension" in the sense of encircling, but by non-exclusion, openness. Not by getting everything *inside* does it hope to

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as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry." [Letter 342a: Higginson quoting Dickinson to his wife after their first meeting]. Her house has no roof, "naturally."

47. "All" — so often the mark of the totalizing vision — is common in Dickinson: a word begging an impossibility, throwing itself at comprehension, when it is not boldfacing a limitation. A very few examples from her earliest work include: the provokingly complacent voice of the Church "Yet have all roads/ A clearing at the end —" in Poem [10], her first brutally graphic description of the condition of doubt which is her life ("My wheel is in the dark!/ I cannot see a spoke/ Yet know its dripping feet/ Go round and round"); and in poem [17]: "She nods, and all begin/ Surely such a country/ I was never in!" with its suggestion of a radically different, *female* authority — monarch or God; or the faint echoing behind this line in poem [155]: "Take care — for God is here — that's all" — one of the dangers being that the "all" that is God is dangerous ("take care") in a gendered language; and its playful *double entendre* —the dismissive "that's all" morphing into the august "[he] is all" and back.

"know" its possibilities, but by not being, or expecting to be, lockable (the owned known).

In this world, the intuition of a present Paradise *fits the hands that made it*, however "narrow". Further, "gather" has the sense of "understand," without the violence of "grasp." Poetry blows the roof off — and that roof is replaced with real heaven: "The Gambrels of the Sky." It is itself — naturally — a paradox: a house without a roof or rooms, where the fruitful ambiguities of poetry's potential to enact a rejection of closure force a new kind of attention.

Moreover, *reading* such illimitation cannot end. It may not even begin: the "eye" may not "impregnate" ("impregnable of eye"), may not just *look* to own; vantage is not ownership, is not the agent; just reading the words won't help. The "impregnator" of the text — that which will make it fruitful — it already within it. Conversely (of course!), "impregnable" is one of those odd words in English which also means its exact opposite: a free-for-the-taking device fit to render any text and any reader "fruitful." Reader, read again; oppositely. Learn this against the single reading of orthodox hermeneutics.

And read against the finitude of end-stopped line, and finally against the self-containment of the poem itself.[48] Scholars such as Sharon Cameron have turned our attention to Dickinson's so-called "fascicles," her original arrangement of her work in sewn bundles which were decimated by her earlier editors, suggesting that the poems might have been organized to speak among themselves, to speak to each other, to speak, essentially, as one poem. Cameron reads the fascicles as units, and whole fascicles as sequential; reading so as to use information from one poem to inform the following or preceding poem.[49] It is as though the multiple

48. See further under "Slippage," Chapter Four.

question marks decorating — practically speaking — in place of a date, the last 125 poems in Thomas Johnson's edition of the *Complete Poems* might as well serve as a printer's device signalling the lack of beginning or end in any particular Dickinson poem.

Reading as oblivion, reading as absorption [50]

> Forcing, abbreviating, pushing, adding, subtracting, riddling, interrogating, re-writing, she pulled text from text. [Howe 29]

Among the hoard of devices which can turn language loose to push the limits of its "circumference," it is interesting to consider Dickinson's relation to exegesis. Raised in a Christian community (that is, one based in more than two thousand years of textual interpretation of a single book), and a reader of contemporary literature, Dickinson would very naturally have read any text as capable of *an*other reading.

It is another sort of closure to be able to render one text another text and only one other text. So to abandon, deny or obscure the "sovereignty of an original Text" is a subtle but enormous move, in effect tying hermeneutics' tongue in knots, or making it Babel — an "Ethereal Blow"[51] indeed.

It is interesting to compare Michel Foucault's assertion, in *The Order of Things*, that the 16th century had marked the point of no return in this respect for language itself:

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49. See for example Cameron 1992:105 ff.

50. "Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?" [Letter 342b — Higginson quoting Dickinson]

51. Poem [315], "He fumbles at your Soul".

> Perhaps for the first time in Western culture, we find revealed the absolutely open dimension of a language no longer able to halt itself, because, never being enclosed in a definitive statement, it can express its truth only in some future discourse and is wholly intent on what it will have said; but even this future discourse itself does not have the power to halt the progression, and what it says is enclosed within it like a promise, a bequest to yet another discourse. . . . The task of commentary can never, by definition, be completed. And yet commentary is directed entirely towards the enigmatic, murmured element of the language being commented on: it calls into being, below the existing discourse, another discourse that is more fundamental and, as it were, 'more primal,' which it sets itself the task of restoring. There can be no commentary unless, below the language one is reading and deciphering, there runs the sovereignty of an original Text. [41]

The circle as informing metaphor: closure's confounding itself

Circumference thou Bride of Awe
Possessing thou shalt be
Possessed [. . .] [1620]

Little more need be said on the priority of the notion of "circumference" in Dickinson's work. The image of the circle, which both opposes the line and makes it immortal (i.e. unending — unable to "stop for Death"[52] as the line and especially the sentence does — in that it loops back on itself) is pervasive.[53] And this circle,

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52. Poem [712], "Because I could not stop for Death —"

53. See poems [160], [262], [378], [633], [797]; Poem [889], "Or a Circle hesitate / In Circumference", [1343], [1620] and [1642]; and Letter [268], "I could not stop for that — my Business is Circumference". It may be interesting to compare Evelyn Underhill on mystical ecstasy: "Psychologically considered, all ecstasy is a form — the most perfect form — of the state which is technically called 'complete

like the globe or universe it remembers for her is not only plane geometry, but also geography: three-dimensional, *our* sphere. Her interest in the Equator — as "the Line" or "*the* line" — is, of course, related to her interest in "our" circumference, our limits.

Emerson had written that the circle is the most basic element of human understanding.[54] And Augustine, allying the image with the aporia of the *un*thinkable, wrote: "God is a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere." Here was a circle whose fascination could hold us — literally — mesmerized between life and death: continually exchanging the fluid contents of knowing and unknowing, understanding and belief. Risking, of course, at the breaking of that spell, certain death (or birth into death) as

> Still at the Egg-life —
> Chafing the Shell —
> When you troubled the Ellipse —
> And the Bird fell — [728]

Remove the circle / ellipse of the shell, or spell, and the "bird" falls — down; we assume its death. This verge is attention; the "ellipse," the orbit of the bird describing that attention which holds it, it seems, between life and death in thin air, living the exhilaration of impossibility.

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mono-ideism,' that withdrawal of consciousness from circumference to centre, that deliberate attention to *one thing*." [363]

54. Though she refused to meet him, Dickinson seems to have read Emerson's essays attentively. See "Circles" in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 295-305. In this particular essay, Emerson refers immediately to Augustine, and makes the point that "[the circle] symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, *around which the hands of man can never meet,* at once the inspirer and condemner of every success" [my emphasis].

CHAPTER TWO

"Won't you ask that — / Of the low Ground" turning hierarchy on its side

Having taken the bonds off poetry's elements and proven it both out of doors and not out of doors, a delightful new order ensues, which will aid the poet in confounding yet more of our residual certainties.

When Emerson suggests:

> Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?[1]

I think Dickinson would understand that he has just defined and limited nature's "end," in effect answering his own question by the manner in which it was posed; and answering it in terms of the human. Though in some senses she too wants to interrogate "It"[2] and to some extent understands it as an "apparition," "our" situation in, or as, its centre and the question of getting its "end" would probably not interest her.[3]

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1. "Nature" 4.

2. As the following will I hope substantiate, it would be well worth tracking Dickinson's use of "It" — often capitalized throughout her work. Unfortunately, standard concordance practice considers this a "little word" — not worth documenting.

3. Whereas her refused religion seemed to have a great deal to do with structures of power and the invisible, her personal known acknowledged and investigated the

She rejects both the system — dear to empirical knowledge — and the structure of authority. A movement against hierarchy, or what Dickinson often calls "degree" (and seems to purposely confuse with other "heights")[4] is both a recurring subject, and an informing principle of her poetics.

The answer's question

In "Funeral in my Brain," partly quoted above, Dickinson remarks that self is "Silence," and "Being" is an "Ear." An ear is purpose-built to hear sounds; silence confounds it. Aporia is this condition of listening to nothing when one asks to hear. "If then He hear —/ This sums the Apparatus"[5] seems a subtle mis-statement. Prayers are made to elicit "answers," aren't they?

Self is confounded by being, capital B, in whose image it was made. Self "built" and wanting only to *hear* — what language wants most — hears *nothing*. And "nothing" is something very considerable to have heard.

> It is dead — Find it—
> Out of sound — Out of sight
> "Happy"? Which is wiser —
> You or the Wind?
> "Conscious"? Won't you ask that —
> Of the low Ground? [417]

Hierarchy laid low can topple the reason with it, or can follow, as readers of *King Lear*, Dickinson among them, would know, that toppling. Confounding begins

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visible without showing any signs of residual assumptions of hierarchical ordering, appears to *see* none around her. (For an interesting discussion of invisible power as ultimate power, and the assumption of power as "central" see also Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*.)

4. E.g. in "The Breaking of the Day/ Addeth to my Degree" Poem [155].

5. Poem [437].

immediately here. The poem's first word "It" — a referential pronoun — has no referent. Yet the news is dire: "It" is "dead." Some kind of corpse has been robbed of its gender and species; and the recognition at some point in our readerly groping that "It" need not be the corpse of a human is a considerable theological shock. In the disorientation of this discovery our options reel from God himself to the subhuman — there are occasions after all when the merest insect, a bee or fly (to choose two from Dickinson's field of vision) might attract this remark from an adjacent human. And the words, had, by her death, been spoken — though not yet published — of God.[6]

And in the same moment that this entire universe — God to fly and all that is in between — of options is invoked and suspended, helplessly, in attendance on the blandest of pronouns, another questions pricks us. Is this statement an answer to a question which perhaps precedes the poem? Is this answer the answer to *the* invisible question, the one which feels so torturously to precede our existence; and whose answer was "God"? Or is it an announcement? A simple, quotidian fact? Something's always dead.

Unless one knows the answer's question, it is itself as mystifying and uninformative as an answerless question, an aporia — or more so.

Whether or not "It is dead" is the answer to "What is dead?" — that question itself "Out of sound" and "Out of sight" we must in trying to answer, or just to orient ourselves, wonder who's speaking.[7]

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6. I am of course referring to Nietzche's famous pronouncement, "God is dead" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* written some time around 1883, three years before Dickinson's death.

7. See further discussion of "invisible" or missing referents below — itself pointing to the fractional nature of all knowledge and the fact of the truth as relational.

But before we can do this, another voice — or is it? — challenges "Its" "answer" emphatically with the terse, "Find it — ". With the urgent demand: "Find it —".

This verb, "Find", is one of the very few capitalized in Dickinson's poetry. Does this capitalization simply indicate another speaker, as it would if this were reported speech in a prose paragraph? But an answer in our language is not used to being challenged so. Especially an answer so redolent with assumptions of knowledge — "dead" is a trained man's word, a doctor's word; "dead" is a learned pronouncement; it is also the Law's extraordinary report to the living: "You are dead" — you are to die.

And dead means closure without recourse. It is dead; period. Or — wait a minute — means release of the spirit into its proper realm, ascension into Heaven — provided the answers to all our previous questions have been correct. Death, itself, the ultimate closure, is the moment of Christian dogma's truth test. . . . If this death is of a human. . . .

But covertly this demand, this abrupt, "Find it —" has stepped outside of the dialectic, too: it doesn't answer a statement with another, opposing (as an argument about Truth would be expected to do, playing on the same grounds) with "no, it isn't" or "yes, you're right," but rudely: "Find it —".

Nevertheless, with the referent, subject and speaker[s] of this perhaps monumental, perhaps insignificant exchange, or defiant monologue unidentified, we feel compelled by the tone — and the sheer "plunge," we're only five words into the piece — to press on in our reading. The best we can do perhaps in the event of such unforthcomingness on behalf of the poem is to remember who *we* are. Try to be Christian (I am assuming an audience of Dickinson's era) and read.

Gathering our wits and our faith about us, and assuming the human for a moment, read. . . . If So-and-so is dead, and we insist that they do not equal their

corpse, where are they? Here is a simple one, a Sunday school question. In Christian terms, they are now immortal — living in spirit form beyond death, as souls, whether in Heaven or in Hell; as though embodied, but without their bodies. One of the "Species" which "stands beyond" in Poem [501], "Invisible, as Music —/ But positive, as Sound".[8]

This spirit form of the dead (but "living," "positive") person/soul is expressly impossible to "Find — ". The "finding" we rely on (especially in empirical science, or empirical philosophies) to guarantee truth is missing. This seems a paradigmatic sketch of Dickinson's understanding of both knowledge and language, again, and of their intersection. Or, this is the puzzle which describes language's awkward status in our lives: the word is not the thing, the spirit is not flesh. As "Music" is "Invisible", but the iteration is "positive."

But we're in a certain culture and in a certain century, let's try our skills. Would an empirical mind have to say that "nothing" was dead? That death had in effect removed a thing from existence, making a "nothing" as it removed its personhood — its "iteration," (or definition?) in language terms? Dickinson insists on pointing up the error: "*It* is dead" — some*thing* is dead. Does, or can, death take personhood — signifier? — but leave "thingness" (a corpse) — signified? — behind?

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8. It may be worth noting that "Music" as abstraction has "Sound" as its earthly manifestation, its palpable and particular, "individual" instance. How does "Spirit" compare? That she commonly thought of the dead as existing somehow non-existently — as instances rather than abstract nouns — and possibly therefore capable of knowledge which she could not have is evidenced by:

   We do not think enough of the Dead as exhilarants — they are not dissuaders but Lures — keepers of that great Romance still to us foreclosed — while coveting / we envy / their wisdom we lament their silence / Grace is still a secret [Prose fragment 50]

Or if a person is dead, "Find" personhood — where has it gone?[9] Tell me *What* is dead, she is insisting. *Is* something dead — and if it is, is that the same thing or person who is at the same moment immortal? — As language can be "dead" and "immortal"? And how can we know what is beyond sound and light ("Out of sight — Out of sound") if we can know only by experience? We can't touch meaning in language, or personhood in spirit; nor does it inhere in what is written "about" — its "corpse," so to speak, — so how does it relate? The quotation marks with which Dickinson so ardently questions language as language in her early work, seem here to have been brought again to the surface; but this time the question is implicit.[10]

Or — calm down — is she only saying kindly, reassuringly, as one does with children: "You'll find it out of sight, out of sound — it is there, just beyond what you can see"? Trust me. It is there to be read.

Traditional church-defined concepts of flesh and spirit take the flesh for "low ground" and the "spirit," standing for deity, as rare air.[11] Whereas the question is later ostensibly, "Ask the ground if the dead are 'conscious'," it is also "'Conscious?' ask that of — inquire of, *and* request it of — the

9. Where is the "meaning" in a word as word? Is it embodied in the physical presence of the word? Conversely, is the signified in fact the soul and the corpse the signifier? If God, not language, has created the world, we must say no?

10. See for example, "Pine" in [797] discussed at the beginning of Chapter Three below. And "Make me a picture of the sun — / So I can hang it in my room — / And make believe I'm getting warm / When others call it 'Day'!" [188]; "You are sure there's such a person / As 'a father' in the sky". [215]

11. As she puts it in Poem [263]: "A single Screw of Flesh / Is all that pins the Soul / That stands for Deity, to Mine".

ground." Why not "ask" the ground to be conscious? — or *if* it is conscious? Why does man assume that consciousness is his alone? [12]

Leveling oneself on the ground is at the same time leveling oneself with the ground. Further, of course, anyone asking the "low Ground" a question is either assuming its consciousness — or so thoroughly convinced of her destitute aloneness in this world, *and* the impossibility of receiving any answer to her tormented questions about death that this is parallel to asking questions — and Dickinson spells out the absurdity for us — "Happy?" — of the wind. In effect, we have lost consciousness, as we know it.

Sobbing questions into the very ground — or howling them at the wind, one either abandons one's sense of inherent superiority (as Lear might have) over nature, and implicitly over other humans perhaps, or signals one's final rage at the impossibility of answers. Here the enactment of doubt — throwing oneself on the ground — is the discovery that the very "ground" of doubt is itself uncertain. What do we know of the ground?

12. The Church, and Emerson — still remembering his Genesis — boast: We walk on it; it is "low"; lower is lesser; whereas we are upright. Both hint that this uprightness is a moral achievement.

CHAPTER THREE

'Could I but ride indefinite'

> On the one hand a prohibition and on the other a fount of mystical ecstasy, abjection confronts the subject under its sway with the threat of dissolving boundaries. . . . By its inability to completely exclude the threatening material of the unconscious . . . abjection allows for a subject to be attracted to what might destroy it.[1]

> Vesuvius dont talk — Etna — dont — [Thy] one of them — said a syllable — a thousand years ago and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever — She couldn't look the world in the face, afterward — I suppose — [2]

I have been suggesting in the preceding chapter that thinking and the language we think in are inescapably mutually implicit, the one in the other, yet fail each other at significant moments, and that that fact may have suggested to Dickinson the tantalizing possibility of using those very limitations to achieve a momentary "Heaven" of the mind. In this chapter, I hope to trace Dickinson's experiments in enacting knowing in language in such a way as to catch understanding between categories — midway between noun and verb, between the known and the unknown, the knowable and the unknowable; or incapacitating it altogether — the task of the "apparatus of aporia" — so as to somehow make language, the mind's

1. Julia Kristeva quoted in Julia Steele, "An Outside for the Inside : a psychoanalytic reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," 76-79.

2. Dickinson's first Master letter, Letter [233]; material in square brackets indicates her correction (deletion).

instrument, throw thought beyond itself, to burst the mind with its own creature.

In the "pine-sea" poem examined below (page 45), Dickinson asks a question to which she appears to give a bewildering answer:

> Can the Dumb define the Divine?
> The Definition of Melody — is —
> That Definition is none [797]

Might it be possible to glimpse the *un*known, given our mind's sufficient "Capacity"?; to get beyond that place (or event, or place-event) where human knowledge and language stop[3] — to mount the multiple "horizons" we can stand upon to see God?;[4] to defy the "Capacity" of the language that seems to preclude it? At the moment of our "dumbness," in attempting to follow language — and logic — beyond themselves (pondering "the definition is that it is not," above, for instance), may we perhaps get "out upon Circumference" to glimpse what is beyond?

Poem [378], which I take as a document of these ideas and this experience of aporia as place-event, reads:

> I saw no Way — The Heavens were stitched —
> I felt the Columns close —
> The Earth reversed her Hemispheres —
> I touched the Universe —

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3. Exampled subtly in the long and short, long and short lines of unevenness and increasing puzzlement in Poem [662]: —

> Embarrassment of one another
> And God
> Is Revelation's limit,
> Aloud
> Is nothing that is chief
> But still,
> Divinity dwells under seal

where the failure of the human and the divine "conversation" or one-way "prayer" is implied.

4. Poem [564]"My period had come for Prayer —".

And back it slid — and I alone —
A Speck upon a Ball —
Went out upon Circumference —
Beyond the Dip of Bell —

And later she says of death — a limit — that:

By Death's bold Exhibition
Preciser what we are
And the Eternal function
Enabled to infer [856]

And this "inference," and the "apprehensions" she understands to be "God's introductions" in the pine poem, seem the achievement of language as a perceptual tool with the uncanny ability to force perception beyond its accepted limits.

Thinking happens at the level of the invisible[5] and in the "invisibles" of written language — structure and syntax. Dickinson's pleasure was that these somehow worked against the limitations of consciousness and thus of knowledge, both inherent and imposed. And I believe that her profound intuition was that if the limit of knowledge is that place-event which we assume to be very near the speechlessness of death (because life implies a struggle for knowledge and death the superseding of its necessity),[6] that place-event (which I believe she came to refer to as "circumference," or that limit which is not absolute, which is actually a "brink")[7] is available only through language, which blurs the fatal border with

5. On the power of the invisible — often linked with "Heaven" and near but not quite possible salvation — it is interesting to compare poems [282], [594], [774] and [1259].

6. A number of poems point to the fact that in the "fair schoolroom of the sky," a kind of "total" knowledge is inherent and *its pursuit therefore without interest.* See for example Poem [193], "I shall know why — when Time is over —".

7. Steele quotes Karma Lochrie's "utopian" suggestion that by transgressing these boundaries through abjection the possibility of a 'new speech' - – inclusive of that

this extraordinary syntax:

> The other, as a bird her nest
>
> Builded our hearts among
>
> Herself to her a music
>
> As bumblebee of June [14]

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which is not accounted for by the symbolic order — emerges, one which is 'limitless' and presumably feminine as opposed to masculine [Steele 86]. See, for example Poem [889]:

> Crisis is a Hair
> Toward which the forces creep
> Past which forces retrograde
> If it come in sleep
>
> To suspend the Breath
> Is the most we can
> Ignorant is it Life or Death
> Nicely balancing.
>
> Let an instant push
> Or an Atom press
> Or a Circle hesitate
> In Circumference
>
> It — may jolt the Hand
> That adjusts the Hair
> That secures Eternity
> From presenting — Here —.

And the ecstatic geographical jumble of Poem [1084], "[...]Element/Nor Implement, be seen —/And *Place was where the Presence was/Circumference between.*" (my emphasis). See also further under "Circle as informing metaphor": this "circle" as Heavenly has already been visited by both Emerson and Augustine.

As hopeless — as divine —[8]

Like eyes that looked on Wastes —
Incredulous of Ought
But Blank — and steady Wilderness —
Diversified by Night —

Just Infinites of Nought —
As far as it could see —
So looked the face I looked upon —
So looked itself — on Me —

I offered it no Help —
Because the Cause was Mine —
The Misery a Compact
As hopeless — as divine —

A heard syllable renders the hearer silent and hidden, "forever." The volcanoes are loaded guns which don't discharge.[9] Dickinson's "little force" which if focussed explodes and leaves her blackened, charred[10] sits to her portraitist.

In *Powers of Horror : an essay on abjection,* Kristeva develops her thesis that our culture and its systems and institutions are, in their primary function, a repression of the abject; and their first and most urgent demand is for separations and boundaries of all kinds. And she uses Plato's own words to prepare the way:

> 'It is hard to say, with respect to any one of these which we ought to call really water rather than fire, or indeed which we should call by any given name rather than by all the names together or by each severally, so as to

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8. Poem [458]. See a fuller quotation of this poem directly below.

9. Cf. Dickinson's much-analyzed Poem [754], "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —"

10. "I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize — my little Force explodes — and leaves me bare and charred —" Letter [271].

> use language in a sound and trustworthy way. . . . Since, then, in this way no one of these things ever makes its appearance as the *same* thing, which of them can we steadfastly affirm to be *this* — whatever it may be — and not something else, without blushing for ourselves? It cannot be done.' [Plato quoted in Kristeva 1984:239]

Second Apparatus of Aporia : "Heaven is so far of the Mind", the word "dog" cannot bite.[11]

In Poem [370] Dickinson states, with bold irreligion:

> Heaven is so far of the Mind
> 'Tis vast as our Capacity

Dickinson's interest in knowing as a continuous thought process, rather than as a producer of static truths, and her adoption of language as the only device available to examine it, seems to have been based on her recognition that this "device" and its subject so nearly inhabited each other. And that where they did *not* fit, where they spilled each other's bounds, was the site of greatest difficulty and of greatest interest.[12]

> By my Window have I for Scenery
> Just a Sea — with a Stem —
> If the bird and the Farmer — deem it a "Pine"
> The Opinion will serve — for them — [797]

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11. "[O]ne of the principal emphases of Saussure's *Course in General linguistics* . . . was . . . picturesquely expressed [by W.D Whitney and William James as] 'the word *dog* cannot bite'." [Genette 360]

12. See, for example, language failing thought hugely — thought seeming so much larger in all senses — in the poem used as the frontispiece to this thesis, Poem [581]:

> I found the words to every thought
> I ever had — but One —
> And that — defies me —
> As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

The quotation marks around "Pine" in [797] are, as suggested above, a graphic trace of hundreds of such invisible marks in her work. It is thus that the worth of a word in a farmer's wordbook is fixed, Dickinson like some indulgent anthropologist allows. But not before she has made the language blithely double-cross itself, "defining" *Pine* as "a Sea — with a Stem —" just for instance, just for the moment, just from a certain window; then chucked such a spanner into this whirling works as to bring the machinery of Christendom to a standstill: what would a *bird* want with (*our*) language? Birds have no souls; if they had souls they would have language, which is the medium of prayer, the elite channel between man and his Creator, no? And if birds have souls, then the relation of farmer to (domestic) bird — given the ordinary activity of farm life — is that of slaver and murderer. And in that case, what does the farmer's wordbook give for "bird"?[13]

"God grows above";[14] or, Eye fits

It seems that there are in Dickinson — incessantly, continuously, and in every part — descriptions of two contrasting but complementary experiences: that of abjection, the feeling of the physical body as *de trop*,[15] hyperconsciousness of its superfluity; and the absence of consciousness of body. In mystical trances, Evelyn Underhill points out that we not only do not but *cannot* attend to our body.[16] It

13. Strangely, one of the most potent images in all of Dickinson's work also concerns this murderous relation between a bird and a human, and that bird's doubtful "word": "If you saw a bullet hit a Bird — and he told you he was'nt shot — you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word" (first Master letter; Letter [233])

14. Poem [564], "My period had come for Prayer —".

15. The term is Sartre's from *Being and Nothingness*.

16. "None of its messages reach him: not even those most insistent of all message which are translated into the terms of bodily pain" [Underhill 358].

seems hyperconsciousness of the body as superfluity is abjective; unconsciousness of the body is ecstatic.

It is with even greater insouciance that Poem [563], addresses another descriptive term — "I" — that narrow moniker of the self. The result might be read as relevant to our use of any word at all:

> I do not doubt the self I was
> Was competent to me —
> But something awkward in the fit —
> Proves that — outgrown — I see —

And the poem ends there, on "see — " as though the eyes, or perhaps just seeing, alone may have outgrown the "self." Perception has ballooned beyond its organizing principle; seems to look back on and be it at once; "— outgrown —" is an impossible word here. It reads, "I am outgrown I." It is a terrible sentence: "outgrown" should leave an "outgrower" and an "outgrown," not collapse them. On the other hand, the self, which now seems to be sight, seems to have left self behind, but "awkwardly." What it sees is self, "outgrown" its "fit."

Earlier in this same poem, Dickinson has giggled in passing at the language's silly anthropomorphism which commonly makes time "run":

> I could not prove the Years had feet —
> Yet confident they run
> Am I, from symptoms that are past

and creates a dire little moment at the enjambment of the second and third lines, when we realize that it is not the Years' (silly) feet that are "confident," but the speaker, voicing one of our culture's most hallowed platitudes; cartoon feet become revered authorial voice — which until we complete the transition appears to be asking "Am I?". (Four lines later she casually refers to her own half-metonymic feet, and we feel the wrench as our "eyes" refocus — again.)

Nothing could better call attention to the awkwardness which signals the language's lack of "fit," word to thing, at the most elementary level, and the conse-

quent unresolvable "overflow"; the excess for which language has no accepted mechanism and desperately wishes to consider irrelevant.[17]

"Because I could not say it — I fixed it in the Verse —"[18]

A Word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria [1261]

Pressing awkwardly on, a full two syllables after achieving its "grand finale" rhyme ("mal-air"), Poem [1261] proves language's poor fit, its awkward materiality, bulk, tendency to spill, at the same moment that its more patent content delineates language's awesome, and perhaps awful potency. Rendered forever "live" by inscription (albeit in suspended animation without a reader), the potency of writing is, it seems, endless. Active, language carries in its very structure (sentence) its germ of meaning. This "germ" may lodge itself in new hosts (readers). The "bad air" or bad song (*the* Mal aria), infects us with Desp*air*.

Curiously, this world seems comically self-referential at the same moment

17. Compare Jean-Francois Lyotard, also writing, broadly speaking, on time: "*The system has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it.* But the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think — if one claims to exclude it, if one doesn't give it an outlet, one aggravates it. Discontent grows with this civilization. Foreclosure along with the information." [*The Inhuman* 2, my emphasis].

18. Letter [251]: "Because I could not say it — I fixed it in the Verse for you to read."writing not speaking

that it threatens us with the dire consequences, the "risk" of reading (and writing?). The germ-bearing word has been dropped, like an object (another plane of existence is surely implied, where words are objects.[19] Words as objects "dropped careless" lead us to consider Dickinson's sense of language as *material*[20] and dangerous.

It's not surprising that the complexities required of such a device are not available in language as spoken. Language written — inscription — is of another order altogether than language spoken.[21] I think it is clear that Dickinson saw that language could re-create the experience of thinking (rather than describing it) only in written form.[22] A written language which could so replicate our thought processes, could then be seen as making rather than holding knowledge. Its subject is itself — as this poem's content patently concerns writing.

The "Wrinkled [paper-like, manuscript-like] Maker" has long since been buried in "perpetual seam" [or perpetual seeming] — a permanent fold. "Wrinkled" seems also to inescapably suggest death by "wrinkle" — death by puzzlement; as we speak of putting a "wrinkle" into something, problematizing it, or of wrin-

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19. Is this as dangerous as the "yellow fork" dropped from the "Tables in the sky"? ("The Lightning is a yellow Fork/From Tables in the sky/By inadvertent fingers dropt/The awful Cutlery" [Poem 1173]) is the reader's necessary question.

20. See also Letter [515], "I washed the Adjective" — *nothing* could speak more strongly for Dickinson's assumption of the materiality of language!

21. Compare Letter [470]: " . . . a Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one" reversing our common assumption that it is the voice that is inflected; and Poem [662], "Aloud is nothing chief".

22. See Helen McNeill on this subject in her book, *Emily Dickinson*, Chapter 4, "The Spoken and the Written," in which she states, "Dickinson's dislike of spoken language arises, then, from what she considers to be two different schema of signification: spoken, public language consists of certitude, fixed perspective, convention . . ."

kling the brow. This Maker has been embalmed by what she created and is now buried in it — literally interred in her own puzzle[s] or, more generally, her own puzzlement. She rises out of the text to infect the reader who "opens" her text. . . . "Seam" refers to mining and sewing.

Apparatus of Aporia Three: Self-combustion in language takes the mind out with it

He scanned it — staggered —
Dropped the Loop
To Past or Period —
Caught helpless at a sense as if
His Mind were going blind —

Groped up to see if God was there —
Groped backward at Himself
Caressed a Trigger absently
And wandered out of Life. [1062, complete]

Self-saving perhaps succeeds self-"murder" in this poem — in which, typically, we are given no foothold, no clue as to context. Here, Dickinson seems to sketch the utter edge of knowledge, absolute "helpless" conundrum. The sexual release ("Caressed a Trigger") and the bloodless, "poetic" wandering exit from "his" seemingly language-based trials ("scanned it," "helpless at the sense" and the curious "Dropped the Loop / To Past or Period" — which might be a description of getting lost in a syntactical maze) suggest rather a kind of ecstasy than tragedy has been achieved.

This display of "exhilarating impossibility" or aporia as poetics and heuristics, is the instrument of absolute intellectual collapse (*in case* faith is there to catch one, as one "bursts" the *mind's* "fleshly Gate"?)[23] in the erotically charged

23. Poem [277], "What if I say I shall not wait!".

"delicious throe" of a "little death."

Aporia as desire as aporia:

> '. . . the object always desired and never attained, the object that causes the subject to desire in cases where [she] can never gain the satisfaction of possessing the object' [Kristeva quoted in Steele 79]

> Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night
> Had scarcely deigned to lie —
> When, stirring, for Belief's delight,
> My Bride had slipped away — [518]

Deferred conclusion,[24] the play of Eternity in the moment, and the ecstatic sensual awareness of that moment — as though Time were palpable, "Belief's delight" — give Dickinson's poetry much of its erotic potency, its "push" of joy.[25] And words like "dazzle" and "bewilder" often denote the extremes of knowledge and language as they confront the great unknowable, Love.[26]

In her essay, "The Rejection of Closure," Lyn Hejinian quotes Luce Irigaray on the import of desire's description on the description of all else:

> It is really a question of another economy which diverts the linearity of a project, undermines the target-object of a desire, explodes the polarizations of a desire on only one pleasure, and disconcerts fidelity to only one discourse. [27]

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24. "Most of our Moments are Moments of Preface", Letter [641]; *vs.* "I guess I won't send that note now, for the mind is such a new place, last night feels obsolete", Letter [354]

25. See poems [252] and [276].

26. See e.g. poems [319], [323], [393], [1129].

27. In *Raddle Moon* 4:34

Though in fact the daily rigour of these her "spiritual exercises" might have nearly abashed Calvin himself, Dickinson's delight in the sensual facts of her mortal "period,"[28] of her "little Tippler"'s [29] freckle-bosomed[30] life in the world might have otherwise impressed him. In fact, as we've traced above, she not infrequently seems to find a kind of sensual pleasure, a "delicious throe" in the very depths of doubt. And this pleasure is asserted both in contrast to the horrifying stasis it opposes (in Poem [414] "Dungeon's luxury of Doubt" stands in for life, opposing "Gibbets, and the Dead") and for its own sake.

And Faith, which in Poem [766] and implicitly throughout, is Love's substitute,[31] can be just its giddy equivalent: it

> Slips — and laughs, and rallies —
> Blushes, if any see —
> Plucks at a twig of Evidence —
> And asks a Vane, the way [501]

Even the horrifying "Tooth" only "nibbles" at the soul: and are we mistaken that it "nibbles" — amorously? "nibbles" — its peculiar food?[32] "nibbles" — so as to

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28. Life as "period" — both as duration and cessation.

29. Poem [214], "I taste a liquor never brewed"

30. Many instances of "freckles" — see for example: [1094] [1737] — the glory of the flesh exposed to sun, a refusal to cover that flesh against the sunlight/sight. Dickinson is quite content to give up language for the world, sees so little distinction: "Existence has overpowered Books. Today I slew a mushroom." Letter [413] And "I find ecstasy in living; the mere sense of living is joy enough" in Letter [342a] from Higginson to his wife. When Higginson has asked her whether she regretted having nothing to do she replied, "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time," then paused and added, "I feel I have not expressed myself strongly enough." [Letter 342a]

31. "Love" is supplied as the variant for "faith" throughout Poem [766].

32. Compare "A Word made Flesh," Poem [1651]. Doubt, like language, is

give pleasure, not pain? And this ecstasy, this loss of self, or mind, is sense of another order. Again:

> Much Madness is divinest Sense —
> To a discerning Eye —
> Much Sense — the starkest Madness [435]

But *this* sense of "Sense" — nearly conventional to readers of Shakespeare — is not only the sense of a person, but also the "sense" of mad sentences. Mad language might be divinity, if you stare at it long enough — or can read.

Silence as an ultimate, written

> Could mortal lip divine
> The undeveloped Freight
> Of a delivered syllable
> 'Twould crumble with the weight [1409]

Rae Armantrout, a contemporary American poet, speaks of many kinds of "human silence" in an article called "Poetic Silence."[33] Of those which she confesses are hardest to define is

> The silence which waits for an unknown response. Picard says of a poet he admires, "He leaves a clear space into which another can speak. He make the subject his own, but does not keep it entirely for himself. Such poetry is therefore not fixed and rigid, but has *a hovering quality ready at*

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particular to the human mind — every other being (or Being), we know is either beyond them, or incapable. We assume that God does not doubt; we assert that the angels don't; animals can't; Satan is pure doubt (it is his definition) in a binary universe; he provides God's antithesis so that humans who understand in terms of such opposites may grasp God's meaning, and be confounded by either his lack of omnipotence, or his tolerance of evil — in other words, be led to Doubt. . . .

33. In Bob Perelman, ed. *Writing/Talks*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

any moment to belong to another." [32 emphasis mine]

The syntactic irresolution which opens the poem to its reader's uses can also be seen to render it as writing doubly silent: as non-speech, and as nearly or entirely non-communicative.[34] Dickinson again and again speaks of the "end" of language and the silence or absolute sound she assumes is beyond it.[35] And imitates it by the nearly non-communicative density of her work, or, again, by its "total

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34. Foucault makes reference to a belief in the opposition between spoken and written language : " . . . the spoken word . . . is stripped of all its powers; it is merely the female part of language. . . . [I]ts intellect is passive; writing on the other hand, is the active intellect, the 'male principle' of language. It alone harbours the truth." [39] However objectionable this may seem, it is essentially parallel to what Kristeva [1984] is saying. It is the *sound* of language that she relates to the feminine. In a letter home to his wife after their first meeting, Higginson quotes Dickinson as confessing, "Women talk; men are silent. That is why I dread women." [Letter 342a]. Also, Claude Levi-Strauss's claim, — in *Tristes Tropiques* (mentioned in Barbara Johnson, in her essay, "Writing" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* Lentricchia and McLaughlin, eds. 48) that the function of writing is to enslave. And cf. Harold Coward in *Derrida and Indian Philosophy.*

35. Wordlessness is noted in [183], [293], [296], [322], [921], [743]; silence is a feature of: [216], [280], [338], [358], [503], [564], [609], [619], [790], [855], [1004], [1159], [1251], [1252], [1273], [1296], [1389-v], [1402], [1650], [1651]; and [1467] has an "overflowing" word. The subject of "dumbness" occurs in: [207] "When Night — descending — dumb — and dark — "; in [281]; in [295] "When Speech went numb —"; in [672]:

> The future — never spoke —
> Nor will He — like the Dumb —
> Reveal by sign — a syllable
> Of His Profound To Come —

And in [302], [417], [496], [515], [577], [672], [689], [1046], [1160], [1385] as well as in the previously mentioned "Can the Dumb — define the Divine?" [797]

Some poems which address the issue of speechless are: [254], [568], [581], [734] and [1204]. And, again, a soundlessness "beyond" is alluded to in our [417]: "It is dead — Find it — / Out of sound — Out of sight"

sound" or rejection of closure and its "permanent" ambiguity, or "temporary permanence"[36] reflecting the speechlessness or "babble" of human confoundment.

> I know that He exists.
> Somewhere—in Silence—
> He has hid his rare life
> From our gross eyes [338]

Silence, in other words, is to speech-as-language as "rare" life is to "gross" perception.

Significantly, silence is valued for its undifferentiated potency, its total potentiality, and is the image of God.[37]

> There's Ransom in a Voice —
> But Silence is Infinity.
> Himself have not a face.

Poetry should come as close to this utter potentiality, Dickinson seems to suggest, as it can (" . . . as Space sat singing/To herself — and men —" [760]). In fact, it should be just that uncanny container — the "House of Possibility" — where writing keeps performing its own context, every moment freeing language from its tendency to repress knowledge at the same moment that it documents that repression. Alternately, or additionally (if we are not limited to one "world"), the poem's aporia and its *limitlessness* combined (or effecting one another) should render the reader permanently "at sea"[38] — silence's physical complement, and Dick-

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36. Refer to Letter [962], quoted above, Chapter 1.

37. Poem [1251]

38. E.g.: "*Say* — Sea — Take *Me!*" [162]; "on the Strangest sea" [254]; The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea — / Forgets her own locality" [284]; and

> This pattern — of the Way —
> Whose Memory drowns me, like the Dip
> Of a Celestial Sea [944]

and

inson's image of surrender to a vastly unfirm world.[39]

How — technically — Dickinson renders the reader "at sea" is examined briefly in the following pages.

This is the place they hoped before
Where I am hoping now
[. . .] Before them lies escapeless sea —
The way is closed they came. [1264]

Which question shall I clutch —
What answer wrest from thee
Before thou dost exude away
In the recallless sea? [1633]

39. See her joking "we dignify our faith when we can cross the ocean with it; though most prefer ships", Letter [209], and Poem [1425]: the "inundation"

In which the soul at first estranged
Seeks faintly for its shore
But acclimated — pines no more
For that Peninsula —

PART II

CHAPTER FOUR

Devices, or: "Ruin is formal — Devil's work"[1]

Poetry might be its devices.[2] As the spider "Himself himself inform",[3] so the poem. The following are some of the physical, structural or mechanical components of Dickinson's poetic apparatuses designed to hold her aporias active, alive in language, punctuation, syntax and prosody: confoundment in a confounding matrix.

Cardinal in the "ruin" proposed is perhaps the endlessness, the palpable, unthinkable excess, the "overflowing word"[4] that language and reading themselves imply. In *After Babel*, George Steiner notes Wittgenstein asking

> where, when, and by what rationally established criterion the process of free yet potentially linked and significant association in psychoanalysis could be said to have a stop. An exercise in 'total reading' is also potentially unending [quoted 131].

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1. Poem [997], "Crumbling is not an instant's Act".

2. Cf. Victor Shklovsky, one of the leading Russian Formalists: "A work of literature does not exceed the sum of its stylistic devices" (quoting himself in *Poetics Journal* 1:5); and Wittgenstein: "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information" (quoted Perloff 187).

3. Poem [1138], "A Spider sewed at Night"

4. Poem [1467], "A little overflowing word". See also "You cannot fold a Flood — / And put it in a Drawer —" Poem [530].

Syntax and grammar:

> Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —
> We can find no scar,
> But internal difference,
> Where the Meanings, are — [258]

"Bad grammar": Dickinson bent the English language like possibly no one else had until her time. Only Shakespeare (from whom she claims to have learned more about everything — not just writing — than anyone else) can compare to her.[5] A few of her obvious fascinations are the myriad malleabilities of English's parts of speech and their potential, skillfully misused, for a kind of "fifth column" of internal havoc.

In such fundamental psychoanalytic truisms as "The consequence of [the Oedipal] fantasy is that the child becomes that father of himself and a husband to his mother"[6] and in such mystical "commonplaces" as "Julian of Norwich's description of humanity's endless gestation in the womb of Christ, who is also 'beclosyd' in the womb of his mother," [ibid 48] I see near-perfect reflections of Dickinson's "impossible" confusion of "parts of speech," provoking confounding aporias.

Mistakes with number: Poem [858] uses the grammatical mis-construction "Ourself am" to positively acknowledge the relation of lovers — love's internal confoundment of *and* illustration of coupling's uncanny "two in one" — and to show

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5. See Letter [757] to her sister-in-law, Sue Dickinson, "Dear Sue — With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living — To say that sincerely is strange praise." And in Higginson's letter home on their first meeting, he reports, "After long disuse of her eyes she read Shakespeare & thought why is any other book needed." [Letter 342b]

6. Steele 15.

how a mere two words can gainsay received structures and ideas, and paralyze the mind, leaving it, in effect, no way out but "up."

"Ourself" itself is moreover singular where we might have expected "ourselves" — perhaps putting us in mind of the "royal we" whose prototype is God. And this "royal we" perhaps has bearing on what seems the same experiment reversed in "Himself have". And in another instance, a remark like "Philosophy dont know" (Poem [501], "This World is not Conclusion.") suggests that philosophy may actually be "philosophies," robbing philosophy of its particular claim to "Truth."[7]

Nouns of multitude: Dickinson also plays with plurals, and nouns of multitude to emphatic philosophical end, as in "a Dew"[8] and "a Hay" and which teach us to see instances — particularities — where we wish to see a unity: perhaps eventually to see "a man" or even a woman, where we are taught to see the generalized "Man." Even "As all the Heavens were a Bell" [9] seems to compress multiple Heavens into a single "Bell". These are potent miniature provocations of the question of oneness and twoness alluded to above.

It is also useful to note in passing Dickinson trying out the effect of the opposite "error" in "Largest Dews of Morn".[10] (See also "Twoness," Appendix Three.)

Repetition: Doubling and repetition of individual words, or concepts, similarly drive reading outside language, as in:

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7. Poem [1251], "Silence is all we dread." ("But Silence is Infinity./ Himself have not a face."), showing how the one can be many, just as our concept of "God" — the Three-in-One — must.

8. Poem [328], "A Bird came down the Walk —"

9. Poem [280], "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

10. Poem [648], "Promise This — When You be Dying —"

Germ's germ be where? [998]

and, again:

Himself himself inform. [1138]

Uninflected verbs: Dickinson's uninflected verbs, alternately startle the reader and leave this most agentive of parts of speech open, unspecified as to its object, amongst any number of surrounding nouns and pronouns. Poem [675] contains four such forms: "The Attar from the Rose/Be not expressed", "Rose decay", "This Make", and "the Lady lie". These mistakes of number and inflection because they are typical of the young, the uneducated, and foreign speakers, may make us think the speaker either "primitive," awkward, "mad," or childlike.[11]

Missing referents: As has been detailed above, many poems begin with precise or emphatic reference to an assumed but absent and irreplaceable referent. (See again discussion of poem [417], page 34 ff. "It is dead — Find it" in this context). This tactic imitates a riddle by leaving referents to be guessed by the reader.[12] Other examples include, Poem [972] "Unfulfilled to Observation", Poem [602], "Of Brussels — it was not", Poem [840], "I cannot buy it — 'tis not sold —"(See also below, page 74 under metaphor).

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11. Deleuze, in "The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud" cautions against our chain of preconceptions:

> The presence of esoteric words and portmanteau words has been pointed out in the rhyming chants of little girls, in poetry, and in the language of madness. Such an amalgamation is troubling, however. A great poet can write in a direct relation to the child that he was and the children that he loves; a madman can produce a great body of poetry in direct relation to the poet that he was and has not ceased to be. This is no way justifies the grotesque trinity of child, poet, and madman. . . . We must note the different functions and depths of *non-sense*. . . . [277]

12. Compare the complex and ambiguous, "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —/ In Corners — till a Day", Poem [754], with the riddles in Appendix Two.

Modifier confusion: "Could mortal lip divine" [1409] has "lip" modified first by "mortal" and then, cheekily, before the line turns and its rôle as a verb becomes clear, by "divine."

Confusing prepositions: Even a three-word statement such as "Unfulfilled to Observation" [972] defeats our comprehension. The "wild" word here is "to" which interrupts our assurance. "By" is probably the preposition we are looking for, or even think we read, but it is not there. "To" has no certain meaning, used this way, though we *can* read "Incomplete to Eye," assuming "eye" metonymic of "sight," without fatality.

The poem in its entirety reads:

> Unfulfilled to Observation
> Incomplete to Eye —
> But to Faith — a Revolution
>
> In Locality
> Unto Us — the Suns extinguish
> To our Opposite —
> New Horizons — they embellish —
> Fronting Us — with Night.

The use of the hollow "to" continues throughout, making any reading a presumption — and considering the subject matter, a presumption involving mighty assumptions. It also distracts us from the fact that there is again no referent. We are never told *what* is "Unfulfilled to Observation".

Another example is the curious,

> Reveals the fact that One is rapt
> Forever from the Eye — [282]

where "from" replaces "by" which forces us to ask — in the space of a single word — questions about the eye's controller: what is "behind" the eye?; and tips the reading as a whole — as ever — off kilter. (See also the confusion of the single word "outgrown" *without* modifier in Chapter Three.)

When Higginson complained, Dickinson answered: "You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large — Because I can see Orthography — but the Ignorance out of sight — is my Preceptor's charge —" [Letter 271]. And it's a relatively safe bet she wasn't entirely referring to Higginson.

Gender confusion: The "boy Emily," "Uncle Emily"[13] is also inclined to trouble her work with other "gender confusion" using subtle mistakes with referents to lead us astray — in Poem [732], e.g., the "wife" is logically "Himself."

PUNCTUATION:

The *Dash:*

> The power to contain
> Is always as the contents
> But give a Giant room
> And you will lodge a Giant [1286]

The most visibly unconforming, most notorious and most pondered of Dickinson's devices, the dash, seems to have been first tried by her about the age of 22, and adopted emphatically after about 27. And little wonder: about this time she seems to have discovered in her experiments its potential as discontinuity, relational truth and polysemy rendered visible. Her dashes blow up her poems from inside — alternately with the "inspiration" which is breathing, and with typhoon-like deconstructive force — either way making room for giants, for silence, for "total sound," shaking the reader's ground, and bringing her work astonishingly close to the more contemporary "field," the abandonment of the left margin, the loosing of the language of the poem over the page. They *push* the work open.

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13. Of her nephew, Ned, she says, "He inherits his Uncle Emily's ardour for the lie." [Letter 315]

And they are *living*, in the poem, much as the soul perhaps lives in the flesh, or breath is in the body before speech — as "other"; the dashes are nearly non-language marks, living amongst language.

> From Blank to Blank —
> A Threadless Way
> I pushed Mechanic feet —
> To stop — or perish — or advance —
> Alike indifferent —
>
> If end I gained
> It ends beyond
> Indefinite disclosed —
> I shut my eyes — and groped as well
> 'Twas lighter — to be Blind — [761]

It is these dashes that her editors, until recently, have found most troubling.[14] They are certainly what Higginson meant in part when he referred to Dickinson's "spasmodic gait,"[15] for they destroy the comfort of reading, taking the sing-song out of the "songs" they inhabit and frequently work against all ideas of the melifluousness of poetry, pricking the reader to *read what else* her experience of reading might offer. And not incidentally adding to that call to attend to the language itself and its rampant unsteadiness which is significant at many levels of Dickinson's poetics and prosody (see also under "Rhythm," page 77).

> Get Gabriel — to tell — the royal syllable —
> Get Saints — with new — unsteady tongue —
> To say what trance below [195]

14. I might suggest that these editors are unconsciously repressing the enormity of her achievement, which is identical with the enormity of the liberty and responsibility she is offering her readers.

15. "You think my gait "spasmodic" — I am in danger — Sir —", Letter [265].

What the dashes enact in the poem, their agency, is worth close attention. A mysterious apparatus, a problematic thread, dropped from another realm, Dickinson's dashes work to severally connect, impede and authorize the elements of her poem, turning each word or phrase so bracketed into an independent agent. And are leaps and are intended to draw attention to what is being leaped over, and to our (complacent?) leap of faith in our own ability to think linearly. Dash implies danger, the bridge, or plank, across a chasm.

A single Clover plank
Was all that saved the Bee
A Bee I personally knew
From sinking in the sky —

'Twixt Firmament above
And Firmament below
The Billows of Circumference
Were sweeping him away — [1343]

Dashes both force and invite participation by the poem's reader at the same moment that they (or because they) serve to obscure, by disorienting the reader, some of the poem's *prima facie* — and some of its subversive — information[16] causing the phrasing, the syntax, or word order they participate in to lose a good deal of its determinacy. At the same time they work for the reader as breath, making some poems readable which would otherwise be dense enough to choke us:

For this — accepted Breath —
Through it — compete with Death [195]

16. Cristanne Miller has a thorough and very interesting discussion of this in her book, pp.28 ff. If this is the female component of language it is appropriate that it represent both the "repressed" (recoverable), the "unacceptable" (in terms of the language in which it is) — and the unrecoverable: the trace of that thing which may not be written in that language, which it would destroy that language to attempt to write. (I am again taking off from, or arriving at Suzette H. Elgin's remark, quoted in at the beginning of this paper.)

Read for itself alone, as a graphic device, the dash is both a sign for the gap and its covering. It is both the indicator of the unbridgeableness of the known and the unknown *and* the "plank" of "reason"[17] on which we stand, to which we trust the weight of our experience; in other words, that vision of language identical with reason. The gap — which is perhaps a well,[18] perhaps a bottomless pit (cf. again Jonathan Edwards' pit of hell beneath the floorboards of the church in which he was at that moment speaking); perhaps the "black hole" of the overflow, or unsaid, in language; or the liberating access to other "Worlds" "at every plunge," the access to absolute space, become absolute sound or wordless total meaning — is signalled by the physical "hole" in the text, and its marker-cum-covering, at once concealing and emphasizing its existence. These are chasms, but these are also bridges. The content of those chasms is unknown; the security of those bridges is unguaranteed.[19]

At an extreme, these dashes can be seen as the thought "drop[ped] . . . for a Quick —"[20] — for quick, not dead: for life; for a "holiday" from language which necessarily perhaps flips us into "life," the languageless, (if this world of Dickinson's can be so divided).

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17. Poem [280], "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain".

18. A number of poems use "well" imagery. Poem [271] has:

> A hallowed thing — to drop a life
> Into the purple well —
> Too plummetless — that it return —
> Eternity — until —

19. It's interesting that Dickinson's manuscripts show that a lot of her dashes as she wrote them tip at what might be considered an alarming angle for a "plank" of reason!

20. Poem [708], "I sometimes drop it, for a Quick —".

The interruptive dash: Dickinson's dashes can nearly completely interrupt the process of reading. Dashes that impede the "flow" of the reading — which facilitates construction of meaning, in which the reader is typically unaware she is participating — force a pause. For example, the inexplicable

> Quaintly infer — Eve's great surrender —
> Urging the feet — that would — not — fly [503]

provides "holes" to allow the reader's perhaps enormous "quaint inference" to supply the pause. The dashes beg the unsaid to fall: for the repressed in language and thought to begin to fall from reader into text without the reader's being able to stop it. Or, in fact, to well up out of the text itself. (And perhaps this is the same thing?) This is a living act of "interpretation" or hermeneutics — the Text is still manifesting itself as it is read: a reversal of the accepted exegesis of "antique volumes,"[21] very likely providing a quite "other" reading than that would insist upon.

An interruptive dash makes an audible pause, and a space. Its effect is in two dimensions: the aural and the spatial, or graphic. And that space is *not* a line, which might prescribe its own plane to whatever posed itself as fill, but a hole — perhaps a crevice, or a "fold."[22] And while language is falling into or welling out

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21. Dickinson's reference to the Christian bible in Poem [1545], "The Bible is an antique Volume / Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres".

22. French feminists critics have made much of such lacunae — not normally so blatantly "underlined" as these — as the sign of the female, or the feminine principle at work in writing. This reading would certainly not be out of place here: it suggests that the female (read: the "voice," song, Heaven, and finally unknowing) *cannot be written* but must exist in the active spaces — what American writer Diane Ward has called the "lively negative space," after Keats' negative capability — in the language of the Father; and must be "demonstrated" in the encounter of language with non-language — perhaps its twin, opposite, fulfillment; a mechanism whereby the dumb potential of language is ecstatically released. See also Erin Mouré on the use of "fold" as potent metaphor for the

of the gap that the dash both *signals* and silently, inscrutably, fills, the reader is aware of either eclipsed "recoverable" text, or blotted, or unsayable, "unrecoverable" text. The parallels with the known or knowable and the unknown or unknowable are ceaseless, enwebbing.

It wafts this sordid Flesh/ Beyond its dull — control.[23]

"Swung" dashes: Other interruptive dashes can seem to operate like two-way arrows, indicating something about the phrases either side of them — like a logical, or chemical or alchemical symbol signifying that reading can back up, go in reverse. (For example, "There's Ransom in a Voice — / But Silence is Infinity." And see further below under "Float"page 71)

The connecting dash: Dashes can "cool" the heat of the compression of the line, connecting what might otherwise be left scattered by Dickinson's "little force" exploding in disparate unconnectable realms, and insisting on the relation of any and all parts of life, of the poem; as though — Emily played the piano — such marks instruct *legato*. At an extreme these dashes might be read as hyphens, making monstrous Germanic mega-words of her texts.

The "basting"[24] — to mix metaphors appropriately — of such dashes is well illustrated in poems such as [742] below, where the trees are "sewn" to the sun and to the morning and these are sewn to the wind, and finally all to God:

The Sun upon a Morning meets them —
The Wind —
No nearer Neighbour — have they —

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feminine principle in "The Anti-Anaesthetic," an unpublished talk given at the Kootenay School of Writing, Vancouver, May 1988.

23. Poem [1431], "With Pinions of Disdain".

24. Poem [1442] suggests: "To mend each tattered Faith / There is a needle fair
Though no appearance indicate — / 'Tis threaded in the Air —"

But God

Or, in an early love poem, where "Summer—Sister—Seraph" [18] are twined about one another in a little infinity, like a Victorian hair bracelet.

Such dashes can allow for a spare, elegant, exceptionally one-directional, unambiguous reading — we're soothed by a sense of the *lack* of missing material. But the exercise we participate in as we loop one element to the next is in defiance of religion and of science.

Authorization:

God grows above — so those who pray
Horizons — must ascend — [564]

Are these dashes the trace of the writer's pausing, of the void again, as it occurs in the instance of "saying" or "telling," constructing meaning amid infinite possibility, which is the situation of the writer, and thus the trace of process, a kind of "*author*ization" — giving a visible, active author to the work? Or, especially in the case of those dashes that more resemble check marks in her hand-written manuscripts, are they her own authorization of whatever the poem has just achieved? — confirmation in the above, of her temerity and insight at the phrase "God grows above"? or, reading through an unbarred line break, "so those who pray [/]Horizons — must ascend —"? Or of the leap from the idea of "horizon" to "horizons" and from thence to the idea of "ascending" these (still live).

It seems that the boldness required in the writing and therefore the reading of such work might need affirmation, and a breath, at each step. Certainly, the potency of each increase in fruitful or delirious ambiguity, and the potential at each manoeuvre — each new heaping — for the destruction of the swirling autonomous (or as Dickinson might say — anonymous)[25] whole, needed a steady and a sure hand.

End dashes:

> To stop — or perish — or advance —
> Alike indifferent —
> If end I gained
> It ends beyond

There's often a dash, an arrow, at the end of a Dickinson poem.[26] Meaning we should continue, or that she *would* continue? Meaning "stop — or perish — or advance —"?

Far from atomizing her poems, dashes within, and especially at the ends of, her pieces — as anyone trying to take "examples" from Dickinson's work soon learns — *so* link her lines that it's impossible to excerpt without deleting meaning. It doesn't altogether work to point to the line, to point to Dickinson — though she is so acute. The experience of reading Dickinson teaches the reader to read her; and each and all poems read tend to change the reading of any other poem. Dashes at the end of stanzas — and more especially (or more radically) at the end of poems — invite further and more complex linking, and an interchange of elements and materials. These pieces end by leading, (or again, by *not* leading, by throwing the reader on her own resources to continue). They lead into the world at large, or out of it, or point to the reader, and at all other Dickinson poems. [27]

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25. "Anonymous delight to know" Poem [708], "I sometimes drop it, for a Quick —".

26. Fifty-seven of seventy poems from 1863, chosen arbitrarily, end in dashes.

27. Perhaps especially to those of the same fascicle or grouping; see again, Sharon Cameron.

"Could I but ride indefinite"[28] : tactics of floating and slippage

Floating or "swing" terms: In a number of poems, the "forward" sense is so dense and forbidding, that the reader is seduced into reading "backwards" for sense. In others the spill of meaning from one stanza to another nearly defeats the meaning being made in the stanza which looks to be closing. In Letter [459A], containing the lines "Nature is a Haunted House — but Art — a house that tries to be Haunted", the swing term "— but Art — " can be read to belong to both preceding and succeeding parts of her sentence; making two complimentary and contradictory thoughts. And in

> Him — to regale — Me — Only —
> Motion, and am dumb. [1160]

"motion" and "dumb" follow a floating complex of elements, suggesting their uses.

Slippage: The dashes increase — but are not the sole providers of — slippage, "misleading" readings. An early poem uses the tempting line break to startle the reader and at least double the meaning of the surrounding lines:

> Night is the morning's Canvas
> Larceny — legacy —
> Death, but our rapt attention
> To Immortality. [7]

Does this inform us that "Night is the morning's Canvas"? — a pretty sentiment. Or that "Night is the morning's canvas larceny"? — a less inviting thought. Or does Dickinson posit that each new morning is dusty with preordainment, antiquity, not fresh, predetermined: "Night is the morning's canvas legacy"? — leading us to "*stop* for Death" [29] in our rapt attention to the Idea of immortality. Or is

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28. Poem [661], "Could I but ride indefinite".

29. Poem [712], "Because I could not stop for Death—".

the swing term "Canvas"? to be replaced — as we watch the poet thinking aloud — by first "larceny" then "legacy" then "death" — in which case the final choice reads: "Night is the morning's death, [but is *or* but for] our rapt attention to immortality." As dashes permit the reader to move backward through the poems sense, so the poem itself seems to have reversed time: Morning is normally Night's "death."

Slippage also has rhythmical implications — or another type of reading altogether may perhaps be given the name "slippage." It is the erotic rubato of the momentarily withheld completion. In certain lines, the dash falls just before the last word, forcing a pause and giving an unmistakeable 3/4 rhythm, a musical phrasing, to the stanza — a pause and necessary slide into the next line which are potent. For example:

> Yet why so little sound — Myself
> Unto my Seeming — make? [692]

Another sort of slippage occurs where sense runs over its formal limit, the line, and especially over the formal limit of the stanza. Dickinson often defeats the closure of the "end-stopped" or paragraph-like (prosey) stanza, the convention of stanza as unit, by playing with enjambment, and by employing her non-signifying dashes to force the reader to acknowledge the spill from one "frame" into the next, and from that frame back to the earlier.

In Poem [280] there is a comma at the end of a stanza. It is my sense that this not only implies the necessary continuation of the thought or meaning, it refers to conventional grammar, forcing recognition of the unit as *sentence* — and therefore insisting on the subversion of "real life" (as represented by the prose sentence) as opposed to a private realm, where stanzas wear dashes — something "real life" can afford to ignore.

Object lessons: That we do not know exactly *what* the dashes intend us to do or think, how they wish us to read, is probably one of their most salutary capacities.

They make the process of reading as indeterminate as the meaning of that reading. We are thrown back on our own resources as readers.

Capitalization:

Capitalization, one of the greatest of Dickinson's mysteries, is perhaps — like the dashes she uses — of greatest import *as* an *un*answered puzzle.

> and 'Spring' — they say, Who is she — going by the door [Letter 187]

Capitalization is potent and pervasive in that it affects the rhythm of reading — capital letters causing an infinitesimal pause and emphasis, perhaps dictated by the respect they indicate or stress — and is emblematic of a kind of naming which preoccupies the poet. Capital letters serve to acknowledge nouns *as* names — the names we've given to things. For example, in Poem [978], "It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon", capitalized words and phrases are: Single Noon, Flower, Red, Noon, More, Day, Same Locality, Sun, Nature's, Sum, Yesterday, Flowers, Zones, Hands, Resemblance, Flower of the Earth, Great Nature's Face, Me. Each of these capitals questions language's habits at the same moment that they seem to give respect (an anti-hierarchical gesture) to what are in English, mere *things*.[30] It is also interesting that writers working with received, visionary inspiration often use such capitalization.

Poem [410]

> And so of larger — Darknesses —
> Those Evenings of the Brain

30. It is also interesting to consider what relationship capitalization might bear to a news headline. The "Bulletins . . . from Immortality" in Poem [827], "The Only News I know", might come like this — with random, or headline-style capitalization (especially in such lines as "Of His Profound To Come —" where each word is capitalized).

shows the impact of capitalization combined with dashes. And the "affinity" — comparable to slant rhyming — that one capitalized word has for others near it.

METAPHOR, METONYMY, METALEPSIS

In language's figural potential, the by-now-anticipated tactics of disruption and destabilization continue.

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise [1129]

Whether and how one element resolves into the other has been a standard for the success of a metaphor. The great "slant" of the metaphor, verging from the known towards the unknown, traditionally delimits the field of the "intended." Such limitation is not in Dickinson's interests, being too nearly allied with its blood-relations the euphemism, Biblical exegesis and the riddle — each a "Circuit" in that their (unsought?) return voyages may be by a slightly different route than the outward bound one.[31]

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31. Compare however the one-directional intent of #25 of the Exeter Book Riddles:

> I'm a strange creature, for I satisfy women,
> A service to the neighbours! No one suffers
> At my hands except for my slayer.
> I grow very tall, erect in a bed,
> I'm hairy underneath. From time to time
> A beautiful girl, the brave daughter
> Of some churl dares to hold me,
> Grips my russet skin, robs me of my head
> And puts me in the pantry. At once that girl
> With plaited hair who has confined me
> Remembers our meeting. Her eye moistens. ["Answer": onion]

With poem [1332]: "Pink — small — and punctual —" which is cast as a riddle and could bear a sexual reading. (See also further translations in Appendix Two.)

And in this respect, Dickinson is as unmetaphorical as any poet who ever wrote. She appears especially to defy the primary pedagogical device of her refused religion — the one-to-one allegorical reading; and when Death, for instance, is personified, such personification is not elaborated on, leaving Mr. Death — scandalously — as something of a free agent.[32] And posing the reader the question of what might be *known* by a hierarchical, "pointing" comparison, in which one element intends to "swallow" the other.[33]

Another couple of scoffs at the practice of metaphorization might be read into:

> I leaned upon the Awe —
> I lingered with Before — [609]

Metalepsis: Helen McNeil introduces an interesting — nearly defunct — usage into her discussion. Metalepsis is defined as the fault of letting meaning travel back and forth between the two terms of the metaphorical comparison, in such a way that it is not clear which is the "definer" and which the "defined"[34] and is — I think — apparent in the astonishing metaphorical and syntactic maze of:

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32. In "I could not stop for Death/ So he kindly stopped for me" Death is unremarkable except in his mode of transportation. The whole focus of the poem is on the remarkable opening statement, "I could not stop for Death."

33. Patterson notes a lack of symbols/symbolism in Dickinson's writing after 1865 — and attributes it to dire causes. This is an opinion based on the notion that symbolism is an essential of poetry. In 1865 Dickinson was 35; it's conceivable that symbols as such began to pale for her; she was becoming a maturer thinker and had found far richer ground for exploration. Writing, she had established for herself to be *entirely* "symbolic," perhaps. Thinking was inherent in syntax and various structural devices; she had no further need of symbols, except as objects for her continuing experiment with language.

34. Interestingly, George Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), states: "the sense is much altered and the hearer's conceit strangely entangled by the figure *Metalepsis*," and he calls it a characteristically female trope — devised to "please

Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves — go out —
The Wicks they stimulate —
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns —
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference — [883]

Or perhaps in the anti-metaphorical shell game of:

It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon
The Flower — distinct and Red —
I, passing, thought another Noon
Another in its stead [978]

Compounded by the repeating of "another" — just what the poem's proposed: "*another* another noon" — this becomes a classic Dickinson aporia.

Odd figural uses: Dickinson's wondrously apt oddities are too numerous and dissimilar to go into in any depth here, but tend, like her argumentation, to steer clear of the foreseen and especially the well-worn "path" (to name one of the offenders) of utilitarian pedagogical equation, and to veer to the surprising — the truly "awakening."

She speaks of "The Chemical conviction" and the "faces of the Atoms" (both in [954]); or of "atom's tomb" [376]; and of her love's "unsown Peninsula" [474]. Others include the eerily sexual "Go manacle your icicle/ Against your Tropic Bride" [1756]; the exact "Hope is a subtle Glutton" [1547]; and "A Mob of Solid

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women." The OED calls it a "rhetorical figure mentioned by Quintilian consisting in the metonymical substitution of one word for another which is itself figurative."

Bliss" [1532]. Combined with other aporia tactics, such as these imbue our exhilarating difficulties with comedy or lyricism or metaphysics themselves perplexing.

False or misleading parallels: A favourite device. Poem [313], mentioned above, (page 23) "builds up" to its assertion, "'Faith' bleats — to understand" by a series of what can only be described as "false parallels" nearly defeating itself as it "drop[s] full Music on"[35] us at the end. We are asked to hold stable the relational import of "as defeat whets victory," and as "the reefs make dear the coast beyond," and "as the beggar can *define* a banquet," and "as parching makes wine itself" and make meaning using these little tools — with which we can only produce the completely inadequate understanding of faith implied by the very phrase we're attempting to comprehend.

Category mistakes: Helen McNeil points to a related "trick" — Dickinson's fondness for "category mistakes" as puzzlers. The Wind is a "footless Guest" it is useless to offer a sofa to in Poem [436]; and news is topical; immortality should be equivalent to eternity, its opposite, but

> The only News I know
> Is Bulletins all Day
> From Immortality [827]

Rhythm: Related to the intellectual effect of both emphasis and confoundment is its result in rhythmic terms. Dickinson comments on her "spasmodic gait" at least twice. In replying to Higginson's criticism of her sense of meter, she tells him, "You think my gait 'spasmodic' — I am in danger —Sir —".[36] Though Higginson would likely have taken this as an apology, not an explanation, in fact the

35. Poem [315], "He fumbles at your Soul".

36. Letter [265]

note reads just as clearly: "My gait is spasmodic because I am in danger." In poem [875], she says more explicitly:

> I stepped from Plank to Plank
> A slow and cautious way
> The stars about my head I felt
> About my Feet the Sea
>
> I know not but the next
> Would be my final inch
> This gave me that precarious Gait
> Some call Experience [875]

It's dark outside; there's no mention of sight; someone is walking on a pier above the water; that pier, like life, might end at any time. If "experience" (life) is a stumbling, precarious thing, which assumes a great dazzling "paradox" (our head in the stars/ heavens, feet in the sea/ earth at its least stable) and Dickinson is living writing or writing living, writing will have to stumble too.

Variants and alternate wordings: Susan Howe reminds us in her preface that

> Ralph Franklin's edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* now shows that her carefully marked variant suggestions for wording certain poems are quite deliberate.

To take Dickinson at her word, as Howe suggests, seems to threaten an exponential increase in the number of possible readings of such poems as [498] which contains eight variants (some single words, some phrases) in 24 lines. It is for this reason that according to one of her most careful readers, Sharon Cameron,[37]

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37. In her — book-long — attention to these variants, Cameron notes that they are not used uniformly, and that though sometimes "at the metrical level, one word *or* another must be chosen. . . . [a]t the semantic level, complying with this imperative is impossible." She notes further, "[t]he relation among variants is that of proximity on the fascicle page — proximity in which aspects of the same thing are ambiguously multiple, and therefore critically problematic, even when

In Poem [640] however:

> [. . .] that white sustenance —
> Despair

Is also:

> [. . .] that white privilege —
> Despair

And

> [. . .] that white exercise —
> Despair

and could be considered to be a definitive (undefining) move against both "unity" as an ultimate value — the "single version" (of Reality, of Truth), or final resolution of the many in the One, and against the single flat plane of language which allows only one word in one place. Just as syntax slips, revealing language, so variants reveal writing in its lack of completion, in process, — "eternally" — and does us the favour of forcing us to ask: "which version is true?"; answering it: "each" and perhaps "all."

The relation of language to its signified: is implied in a great deal of what Dickinson wrote, and patently informs much of her thinking on other subjects.

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they are not contradictory." [Cameron 1992:42] "Another way to describe the dilemma is that, since Dickinson refuses to choose among the variants, she disallows us from doing so." [42] Cameron feels that it is not possible to read several variants "at once. Though this recognition of impossibility is of course not surprising, its lassitude is alarming. I strongly disagree and feel that this is a disappointing show of lack of imagination on the part of such a skilled and dedicated reader as Cameron. (It is interesting to note that Susan Howe in her own writing practice, has effectively precluded any such lack of gumption in her readers by writing the words on top of each other. And to pencil in variants over type in a Dickinson poem as I have on occasion, is quite thrilling "play," which I feel confident would not discomfort its originator.)

The Asterisk is for the Dead,
The Living, for the Stars — [1647]

Another Victorian author, Lewis Carroll, had one of his characters, Humpty Dumpty, proclaim "when *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more, nor less."[38] Dickinson tries a similar — disorienting — experiment in poem [1739] ("Some say goodnight — at night —/ I say goodnight by day — /[. . .]/ For parting, that is night,/ And presence simply dawn"). And it must be granted that she is making a thoroughly *logical* adjustment to the language.

As noted above, page 38 Dickinson's early work shows her persistent objectification of the language she uses. She distances herself from the transparent, the rational and from the closed system of "targeted" interpretive reading. Poems 199-271 are full of quotation marks — as though every word written is questioned as a word, including, in Poem [227], "Emily" — the ultimate questioning of naming.[39] Later she begins to use italics in roughly the same way. There's some suggestion in the rest of her work that this early examination is not abandoned but rendered implicit.

Words, neologisms, transubstantiation of parts of speech, etc.:

Bind me — I still can sing — [1005]

Dickinson wrote of her re-creation of language in her own image:

I found the words to every thought
I ever had — but One —

and

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38. *The Annotated Alice* 42.

39. This question of "Emily" is echoed in questions about naming throughout her work. See, for example, [70]: "Arcturus is his other name — / I'd rather call him 'Star'"; and poems [288], [298], [1126] and [1139]. And is implied by her determined, particular capitalizations.

To Races — nurtured in the Dark —
How would your own — begin? [581]

Wherever she can, or whenever she needs to, Dickinson creates or modifies words to fill the lacks of language and/or confound it and her reader. Not surprisingly, her contributions are idiosyncratic and ungrammatical and often work to render meaning considerably less determinate. Some of her tactics and inventions can be summed up as follows:

The "-less" words: Dickinson seems particularly fascinated throughout her writing life with language's uncanny and tantalizing capacity to "give" a thing and take it away at the same moment, or to define by negating. Of her own coinage there are *reportless, perceiveless, retrieveless, escapeless, failless, noteless, overtakelessness, phraseless, recordless* (also used by Emily Brontë), *repealless, stopless, arrestless, bindless, competeless, conceiveless, corrodeless, costumeless, cureless, cypherless, degreeless, desireless, divulgeless, effaceless, fameless, fadeless, footless, latitudeless, leagueless, graspless, keyless, measureless, pangless, penniniless* (Johnson apparently considers this an "obvious misspelling" and has made it "penniless"). In fact, such a list nearly reiterates her principal concerns.

Some of her other more inventive coinages — some with considerable "awakening" power are her many "ungrammatical" comparatives — *terribler, acuter, audibler, distincter, infiniter, hugest, likest, perfecter, supremest, tritest, vastest, admirabler, ancienter, austerer, chillest, culpabler, dusker, excellenter, fataller, fruitlesser* — which challenge the rules of logic language likes to assume concurrent with itself.

And logical awkwardness is sometime abetted by phonic or rhythmic awkwardness, And sometimes awkwardness seems indulged in for the sake of its capacity to defeat writing's potential as speech — the wretchedly unmellifluous "severer", "fataller" and "fruitlesser" are hard to say all alone. The line "Unconsciousness of Perfectness" is one of only four lines in a fifteen-word poem.

In combination, these can be overwhelming on many different levels at once, bursting sense and sensibility at one go:

> A Marrowless Assembly
> Is culpabler than *shame.* [1274]

Or

> The perfectist communication
> Is heard of none

Puns: Perhaps no one could read Shakespeare with Dickinson's admiring attention and survive without feeling the influence of his love of word play. Apparently the "little Tippler" in Dickinson couldn't escape the sheer fun of a pun, not to mention its capacity to derail. In "Because I could not stop for Death" [40] Dickinson's persistent playing with "pall,"

> the Man of the Appalling Trade

and

> Pallid innuendoes

lighten the poem's morbid load and speaks to the essential whimsy of its characterization and intent. Again, Poem [974]'s "quick Calamity"'s pun on "quick" as "life" flips any near-understanding of a single line into a tailspin, while underscoring the poem's ultimate intent. As she does so often, Dickinson makes us read backwards here: such obvious punning sends us back to such oddities as "I am a rose",[41] which seemed inexplicable in her terms previously, and makes us smile at Poem [263]: is "[. . .] the soul/ That stands for Deity" the soul that "puts up with" deity?

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40. Poem [712].

41. Poem [19].

"Super puns" are created from the few words in our language which also mean their opposites: "ravelled", Poem [992], and "impregnable," Poem [657], complicate meaning beyond a reader's ability to hold the resultant multiples in her mind.

Rhyme: Rhyme "slips" too and asserts the fluidity of the poem by allowing contents of one stanza to speak directly and tacitly to another. In Poem [708],

> I sometimes drop it, for a Quick —
> The Thought to be alive —
> Anonymous Delight to know —
> And Madder — to conceive —
>
> Consoles a Woe so monstrous
> That did it tear all Day,
> Without an instant's Respite —
> 'Twould look too far — to Die —

the rhyme is internal, or "slant" — *know* in line three answers to *Woe* in the first line of the second stanza — and shows ghostly line breaks, new phrasings. The surreptitious linking of knowledge with "woe" is also accomplished. In the same way "divine" and "define" get nearly dangerously mixed up in "Can the Dumb — define the Divine" [797].

"Chiming" — related to slant rhyming — also disrupts meaning:

> You may have met Him — did you not
> His notice sudden is — [986]

The "wrong" reading, "did you note" is insinuated into our "aural memory" of what we've read by the word "notice" in the next line.

Unexpected or incomplete rhymes — or provocative rhymes, as above — and rhythms may eventually, or immediately, work to force the reader to compensate for the aural sense of hanging on a cliff edge by reading past the visual queues (end of stanza, end of verse) to find other ends.

Wrong facts / the "lie": Finally poetic licence, formally allowing poets to "lie" — in order to assert a greater truth — might have been disputed by Plato but, declared once and for all by Sir Philip Sidney, was fairly traditional by Dickinson's time. Its inherent capacity for destabilization not surprisingly attracted her. She says of her nephew Ned that he'd inherited "Uncle Emily's ardour for the lie" — proving her point as she noted it. And even more nonchalantly states:

> Frequently the woods are pink — [6]

Oblivion or absorption?[42]

And all this provokes in us a *loss of faith*. And loss of faith prepares us for the important aporia, the perpetual (often blissful) doubt, which becomes another faith — that of the tantalizing "Capacity" language seems to have within it for a glimpse of the beyond, for throwing us beyond both our capacity and its own, by some inherent liberation we afford the one the other.

Dickinson seems to have surmised that the vehicle for a perpetual re-definition of the problem of knowing — which is the problem of belief — was a human invention: language. In [784], she comments,

> The Grave — was finished — but the Spade
> Remained in Memory

The spade is the means to dig another grave or to insist that this one is further and further excavated, in search of its secrets — and this *is* what these poems will do. Not merely "haunting," they can create, in memory, more poems or more readings of the poem. The spade, it turns out, once it has dug a grave, is itself a *memento mori*, an exceptional incentive to both the enjoyment of life and a goad to the anguish occasioned by the lack of knowledge of that which is beyond the grave. It is also the tool — or seems to be the tool — to go farther.

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42. "Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?" [Letter 342a]

"A Word made Flesh is seldom" — her language's result

A word made flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength —

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He —
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology. [1651]

Word made Flesh: to commun[-icat-]e with, or mutually consume (as in completely in*corp*orating the one in the other), the verb incarnate as she proposes to do — in practice pursuing knowledge to its limit in language — was to use one's *own* "tooth" to nibble at one's own soul[43] — to use one's mortality (mind) to nibble at one's immortality (language). Seen as a description of writing-as-knowing, this might read: to consume[44] one's only means of knowing anything at all in the process of knowing it (writing falling short at each word of its intended knowledge — all the while pointing at its goal)[45] but at the same time *being* knowing,

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43. See poem [501], "This World is not Conclusion.", on the "tooth" which "nibbles" on the soul.

44. Destroy *and* internalize. Ingest, she notes "to our specific strength" only as individuals (readers?) [1651].

45. See Poem [1109], "The transport of the Aim — "

equalling only itself, swallowing only itself. This "nibbling" was therefore not surprisingly both considerable delight, considerable pain, and a possible definition of a human life.[46]

Dickinson's radical poetics might thus be read simply as desperate necessity, consequent on a profound apprehension of the nature of language, as well as the recognition of truth as a relational structure implicit in it, and not incidentally by her discovery of the means of her own salvation and absolute — if uncomfortable — liberty. For it is perhaps worth positing that writing was more than an intellectual and spiritual experiment for Dickinson.

To thus redefine human spiritual questing, normally seen by organized religion as its province, as a language problem had social and theological implications. Dickinson's writing practice — which she seems to have numbrously celebrated with little declarations of independence[47] — was also her bold experiment in challenging not only the limitations of mind, but the limitations and especially the presumptions of the ruling and defining institutions of her day by achieving her *own* salvation, at (literally) her own hand, by writing her own ticket to "heaven on earth,"[48] and — not incidentally — immortality; and by dissolving the house of her father, and the "dungeon"[49] or prison she felt herself in, at the hands of her society, which condoned her life within his walls, and sanctioned no other for her. (See further under Appendix One.)[50]

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46. This poem, of course, can be read in a number of ways; this reading is not prescriptive.

47. See, for example, poem [508]: "I'm ceded — I've stopped being Theirs — "

48. Or, rather, "*going* all along" — the excitement of going exceeding, significantly, the being there.

49. See e.g. poem [414] — in which the "dungeon" is comparative "luxury".

50. However complicit Dickinson was in this, as it did also afford her what she

Flesh made word: Christ could replace language if God *could* thus "condescend"[51] the way that our language can "consent" (that erotically charged "yes"), or if condescension were as between equals — if it could *be* consent. Condescension doesn't work like language which is "Flesh made Word."

Poem [460] has:

> I'm often thirsty — but my lips
> Are so high up — You see —

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needed to write and "protected" her from public life, which seemed genuinely painful for her — though this "illness" is probably of the sort her "preceptor" Elizabeth Barrett Browning had suffered from.

51. As one condescends to one of inferior social rank, Dickinson would have meant, with perhaps a sneer at monarchy?

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

The "wild words"

Because it is not incidental to a woman's life in particular that knowledge represents power in society, and that, frequently, to describe is to know is to own, Dickinson's recognition and use of those little "wild" words, beyond the aspirations of either ownership (being neither substantive or agentive) or "care," as being of tremendous subversive power seems especially fitting. This was the vocabulary appropriate to a pagan, a woods dweller, a descendent of Eve's "yes" to uncertainty (the *knowledge* of good and evil, of the One and the many, of the Ideal and the actual as unresolvable, or irreducible).

In this sense, to write the unknown in the language of the Father represented a vital — literally life-giving — interest to Dickinson. What was unknowable represented a kind of freedom — in that it had the power to give her back her life — otherwise unavailable to her as a woman, and a "nobody"[1] as defined by both the church (she was agnostic) and by society (she was unmarried): without hope of possession or self-possession.

Urged, then, by the galling limitations of church, law and society on the one hand, and by an intuition of language's repressed potential on the other, to seek her own salvation — Dickinson wrote. To the greatest extent she could imagine, perhaps to the extreme of subversion implied in Suzette Haden Elgin's "hypothesis" that "for every culture there are *languages* it could not use because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction," I think Dickinson's "loaded Gun" rendered poetry the enemy of knowledge, ownership and overlordship (see "Hierarchy on its Side,"

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1. Cf. her famous line, "I'm nobody! Who are you?" in Poem [288].

page 33 ff.) of all kinds, in favour of a world defined as undefined, open, unstable, unownable and eternally mutable. And in doing so, writ her sex large: precluded the world that could write her out, or describe her "still," as well as providing the most thoroughgoing challenge to the authority of the purveyors of Truth — the church, the state, the law, pedagogy — imaginable.

APPENDIX TWO

Riddle

Compare the following from *The Exeter Book Riddles*

I'm strong and pointed. Shuddering I die,
a violent release. For my reputable master
I'll plunge below the plimsoll line,
well and truly engineer an opening.
A desperate man stands behind me and develops me
himself; he carries a cloth. A southerner sometimes
helps me out of a hot spot (a real hole),
sometimes he gets me into a fix
and there, quickly, quickly ....
What am I called? [#62; answer "penis"]

with

I'm a strange creature, for I satisfy women,
A service to the neighbours! No one suffers
At my hands except for my slayer.
I grow very tall, erect in a bed,
I'm hairy underneath. From time to time
A beautiful girl, the brave daughter
Of some churl dares to hold me,
Grips my russet skin, robs me of my head
And puts me in the pantry. At once that girl
With plaited hair who has confined me
Remembers our meeting. Her eye moistens.
[#25 (alternate translation); answer "onion"]

and

I sank roots first of all, stood
Near the shore, close by the dyke
And dash of waves; few men
Saw my home in that solitary place, but each dawn, each dusk,

Dark waves surged around me, swirled
And made me sway. Little did I think
That I, mouthless, should ever sing
To men sitting at the mead-bench,
Varying my pitch. It is very puzzling,
A miracle to men ignorant of such arts,
How a knife's point and a right hand
(mind and implement moving as one)
Could cut and carve me — so that I
May send you a message without fear,
And so that no man in this wide world
Will ever know what words we share.

[#60; answer "reed"]

I know a creature in the field with one foot
and derring-do. It does not range widely
or ride very far, nor can it fly
through the bright air, or embark on some ship
with nailed sides; nonetheless
it obliges its master on many occasions.
it has a heavy tail and a little head,
A long tongue but not one tooth;
part of it is iron; it passes through a hole
in the earth. It eats nothing, drinks no water,
frets for no doffer, and yet often carries
liquid aloft. It boasts neither life
nor gifts fro a lord, but still obeys
its owners. Three fitting runes
form its name : *Rad* is the first.

[#58; answer (probably) "a well-draw"]

with Dickinson's "answerable" riddle-poem, Poem [313]:

It sifts from Leaden Sieves —
It powders all the Wood —
It fills with Alabaster Wool
The wrinkles of the Road

It scatters like the Birds —

Condenses like a Flock —
Like Juggler's Figures situates
Upon a baseless Arc —

It traverses yet halts —
Dispenses as it stays —
Then curls itself in Capricorn,
Denying that it was —

APPENDIX THREE

"Twoness"

The unanticipated other, or the prisoner's saving intuition of the unbound other, be it only the spider in her cell, represent unparalleled lovers in the mix-up of aporia: the Two-that-are-One and the One-that-is-Two — paralleling the Christian koans of the Three-in-One — and Christ as God and Man, "God is a distant — stately Lover" [357] — haunt Dickinson's poems.

Dickinson believed, if she believed anything, that she was composed of the traditional parts: flesh and the intangibles — heart, mind and soul, in roughly ascending order of intangibility. A thorough tracking of these terms in her work shows that she uses these words throughout her poetry, and proves that she has a clear idea of their boundaries. She does not equate heart with soul, nor mind with soul, though they are indissolubly linked and interrelational — as one would expect — e.g.:

> The mind lives on the Heart
> Like any Parasite
> If that is full of meat
> The Mind is fat
>
> But if the Heart omit
> Emaciate the wit
> The Aliment of it
> So Absolute [1355]

— and persistently refers to an additional autonomous, but linked "other," usually some "voice" or incorporeal self. "Tim" of Poem [196] may be read, as can the "loaded Gun" of Poem [754], as her Other's or twin's voice, as is the seemingly dissociate music she may hear in place of space. See e.g. poems [510] and [760]. In "Funeral in my Brain", she remarks that self is "Silence" and "being" is an "Ear." And

Yet why so little sound — Myself
Unto my Seeming — make? [692]

though a "loaded Gun" cannot be considered "incorporeal" precisely; and perhaps no more can the many small birds which stand in this stead. This being and not-being, being and being again, mirrors the slippage and collapsing, doubling, shifting elements of her poems, and the devices that keep them relentlessly in motion.

Alternately, the "One" becomes multiple in a way that parallels her use of ambiguity and multiple, "swing" terms as poetic devices. And often it is difficult to tell whether one has become two or two are one.

Examples of this biological-grammatical confounding begin very early in her work. In Poem [5]

Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown
Shall in a distant tree
Bright melody for me
Return. [5]

"Return bright melody *in*" and not "return *with* bright melody *from*" a distant tree, as we would expect. If we were expecting a pretty this-equals-that metaphor, what we get is confounding.

Other examples of twinning:

The other, as a bird her nest
Builded our hearts among

Herself to her a music
As bumblebee of June [14]

create other "geographic" conundrums — this instance compounding the madness with Dickinson's pointed, and often-used, reflexive, "herself to her" two-in-one/one-in-two form — exacerbates the problem of comprehension posed by each poem as subject and as object lesson to the reader. (For other examples of "twinning" of different sorts, see poems [581], [1354], [384] and [1295].)

AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

of the "unspeakable"
— reading around Dickinson's aporias —

. . . of this infinite murmur opened near us, underneath our common utterances which seems an eternal spring.

Blanchot,
The Space of Literature 181

Speak to do through more, but end. See by small love, huge by becoming havoc.

Fiona Templeton,
"Economic in Karinda"
Big Allis 5:54

Heaven cannot be expressed or represented: the mind can grasp it only by recognizing its own limitations and the necessity of coming to terms with it .

Nadia Tazi,
"Celestial Bodies: a Few Stops on the Way to Heaven"
Zone 2:519

DICKINSON PRIMARY SOURCES

Bianchi, Martha Dickinson and Hampson, Alfred Leete, eds. *Poems.*

Franklin, R.W., ed. *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson.* Cambridge, Mass., and London : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981.

Photostats of her original manuscripts (only those bound into fascicles).

Franklin, R.W., ed. *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson.* Amherst, Mass. : Amherst College Press, 1986.

Johnson, Thomas, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts. Cambridge, Mass. : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1951, 1955.

Johnson, Thomas, ed. *Selected Letters.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1986.

DICKINSON SECONDARY SOURCES

Bennett, Paula. *Emily Dickinson: Woman poet.* London : Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.

———. *My life, a loaded gun: female creativity and feminist poetics.* Boston : Beacon Press, 1986.

Cameron, Sharon. *Lyric time: Dickinson and the limits of genre.* Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Including chapters: "Representation, death and the problem of boundary" "The mourning that is Language" "Time and the lyric."

Cameron approaches the issues of Dickinson's "fusion" images, her many "formulations on death" which she feels are "explicitly sexual."

———. *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's fascicles.* Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Cameron allows us back to the fascicles themselves, as written, as handwriting. She points to the monolithic tone and approach of much of the Dickinson criticism written since 1890.

Cameron asks the question, with the fascicles spread before her, "What if?" What if "this way of reading her poetry belies the way it was written, or, once written, put together (both internally structured and made contiguous?" [3] What if these works are "not alien"? At least "not alien in the way that we had supposed?" [4] she discusses reading fascicles as units, and whole fascicles as sequential; reading so as to use information from one poem to inform the following/preceding poem. [100 ff., e.g.]

She also speaks quite urgently in her introduction of Dickinson's works as *"embodying"* rather than "thematicizing" the issue of identity. This "embodiment" parallels my insistence that these poems work as object lessons in — embodiments of — aporia and that their ultimate "event" is outside the poem, and in fact outside (a problematic term in itself) language itself.

Cody, John. *After Great Pain: the inner life of Emily Dickinson.* Cambridge : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

Susan Howe calls this book, "the rape of a great poet" [Howe 27]. Cody applies psychoanalysis to Dickinson the woman. He apparently considers Dickinson to have been mad, and sees her work as a defense against psychosis.

Dobson, Joanne. *Dickinson and the strategies of reticence: the woman writer in nineteenth-century America.* Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1989.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson, strategies of limitation.* Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1985.

Homans, Margaret. *Women writers and poetic identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontē, and Emily Dickinson.* Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1980.

Howe, Susan. *My Emily Dickinson.* Berkeley : North Atlantic Books, 1985.

Howe, one of the great contemporary readers of Dickinson, titles her book, *My Emily Dickinson*; and manages throughout a balance between her sense of Dickinson's "audaciousness" and her "humility" and "hesitation."

In Howe's reading, Dickinson

> audaciously invented a new grammar based on humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking. '*He* may pause but *she* must not hesitate.' — Ruskin . . . . *He* might pause, *She* hesitated. [21]

Howe's scholarship is passionate, unorthodox, and idiosyncratic; and an authentic "peer" reading. Howe completely lacks the strange condescension (poet-as-pet, or "grist for my mill") which often permeates literary scholars' work. She does not patronize Dickinson; and her sensitivities as a visual artist and a practicing poet whose work has been for many decades been influenced by her reading of Dickinson makes her alive to elements in the work which have escaped others.

Howe's very "New England" reading of this New Englander is instructive, too. I believe that Howe, because of her particular biography, can read in Dickinson what others could not notice.

Juhasz, Suzanne. *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the space of the mind.* Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1983.

Here is a quite standard "feminist" approach to Dickinson.

> Does Dickinson's example, like that of many talented and ambitious women in her own and other centuries, tell us today that only by giving up the world (that flawed and oppressive patriarchy) can we, as talented and ambitious women, know a world in which we can truly create ourselves? The world of solitude, I mean: the world of the mind. It is surely one path, and Dickinson's life there clearly demonstrates how viable, admirable, successful it can be. . . . For it tells us something, even if we do not willingly choose solitude, about the power of the creative imagination in respect to women's peculiar problems in a sexist society. We have to create ourselves, because, as we know the patriarchy is only too willing to do it for us. . . .

Juhasz's book contains some interesting reflections on Dickinson the woman; and its interpretive strategies and attentions were useful and fairly provocative to me when I first encountered her work. However, I now find that they seem to miss the essential elements — or at least those that cur-

rently interest and perplex me, and which I find most important — and fail to read the poems fully.

Juhasz, Suzanne, ed. *Feminist critics read Emily Dickinson.* Bloomington : Indiana University Press, c1983.

The result of a symposium on Dickinson's work. Largely disappointing.

Leyda, Jay. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson.* New Haven : Yale University Press, 1960.

Loeffelholz, Mary. *Dickinson and the boundaries of feminist theory.* Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Lucas, Dolores Dyer. *Emily Dickinson and Riddle.* Dekalb, IL : Northern Illinois University Press, 1969.

McNeil, Helen. *Emily Dickinson.* London : Virago, 1986.

Miller, Cristanne. *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar.* Cambridge, Mass. and London : Harvard University Press, 1987.

Miller's book launches itself with Suzette Haden Elgin's "hypothesis" that "for every culture there are *languages* it could not use because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction." This speaks directly to the "unspeakable."

Miller's enduringly useful and interesting book looks carefully at many stylistic influences (the Bible, 17th century writers, hymns, American Plain Style, Emerson, and other women writers) and at many kinds of stylistic device. She refers also to Eric Auerbach's discussion of the Bible's "grandeur" — especially in Genesis — which he attributes to its language's compression, and his equation of this concision with attempts at that meaning which appears to be beyond the normal reach of language: "paratactic syntax is suited to a focus on 'matters concerned with the inner life'" [quoted 32].

Nancy Partner. "'And Most of All for Inordinate Love': Desire and Denial in *The Booke of Margery Kempe*" in *Thought* 64:254-267.

Patterson, Rebecca. *Emily Dickinson's Imagery.* Edited, with an introduction, by Margaret H. Freeman. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1979.

Patterson has made herself famous (and infamous) by her investigation of internal evidences in Dickinson's letters and poems of her lesbian sexuality, and she begins this newer book — a fairly systematic thematic investigation of Dickinson's imagery — with a chapter entitled, "The Boy Emily." I've found the whole book interesting and quite useful, but this chapter in particular has allowed me to read Dickinson in a new context, especially as I feel the same degree of erotic drive behind these poems — "there is no more erotic poetry in the English language" — as Patterson does.

Porter, David. *Dickinson: the Modern Idiom.* Cambridge, Mass. and London : Harvard University Press, 1981.

Susan Howe finds David Porter "one of [Dickinson's] most thoughtful critical interpreters." [Howe 1985:17]

Preminger, Alex, ed. *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics.* Enlarged edition. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1974.

Rosenbaum, S.P., ed. *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1964.

Sewell, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson.* New York : Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974.

Small, Judy Jo. *Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme.* Athens and London : The University of Georgia Press, 1990.

Stonum, Gary Lee. *The Dickinson Sublime.* Madison, WI and London : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

> The aim of this study . . . is to identify the conception of poetry motivating Dickinson's literary enterprise and binding her writing into what I argue is a coherent body of work. That conception is a version of the romantic sublime, the most important and distinctive features of which are an affective understanding of poetry, a complexly motivated practice of postponing the normally climactic moment of the sublime, and an orientation both ethical and rhetorical toward provoking the reader's imagination without dictating to it. . . . I examine

> Dickinson's beliefs about language, art, and authorship proposing that they can collectively be subsumed under her commitment to a rhetoric of stimulus [and examine] what is distinctive about Dickinson's version of the sublime, finding it mainly in her strategic postponement of finality or closure. [ix]

BACKGROUND READING

Adams, Hazard. "The Difficulty of Difficulty" in Alan C. Purves, ed. *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature.* Albany : State University of New York Press, 1991.

Arensberg, Mary, ed. *The American Sublime.* Albany : State University of New York Press, 1986.

Armantrout, Rae. "Poetic Silence" in Perelman, Bob, ed. *Writing/Talks,* Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

> There is an aesthetic effect I am attracted by, interested in, which has been difficult for me either to explain or define. I felt it had something to do with empty space left in a work, or following one, a kind of palpable stoppage, a silence that was a gesture. [31]

Armantrout investigates the "types of human silence." Her categories are interesting; as is the casual "human" in her proposed taxonomy. Beginning her enumeration, she suggests, "There is silence which admits mistakes. The silence which concedes personal limit, or finitude. The silence which indicates the presence of the ineffable." She immediately makes the link to Heidegger, quoting: "'The earth appears as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by its nature undiscloseable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up.'" [31-2]

The political enters, appearing to follow what might be labelled 'mystic,' above: "There is the silence which is silenced by the presence of another'." Then the next definition (they should rather be called descriptions) seems to combine them: "The silence which waits for an unknown response. Picard says of a poet he admires, 'He leaves a clear space into which another can speak. He make the subject his own, but does not keep it entirely for himself. Such poetry is therefore not fixed and rigid, but has *a hovering quality ready at any moment to belong to another.*" [32 emphasis mine]

Armstrong, Paul. *The Challenge of Bewilderment.* Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1987.

Artaud, Antonin. *Antonin Artaud : four texts.* Clayton Eshleman and Norman Glass, trans. Los Angeles : Panjandrum Books, 1982.

Translations of selections from *Oeuvres completes*: "to Georges le Breton" (draft of a letter); "Artaud the momo"; "To have done with the judgment of God"; "The theater of cruelty" and an open letter to the Reverend Father Laval.

———. *The death of Satan, and other mystical writings* Alastair Hamilton and Victor Corti, trans. London : Calder and Boyars, 1974.

———. *Selected writings.* Susan Sontag, ed. ; Helen Weaver, trans. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, c1976.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World.* Hélène Iswolsky, trans. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1984.

If Judith Butler's thumbnail sketch of life in Western society is accurate and women are "given" the bodily sphere (and then "disavowed") and men the "mental" disembodied sphere, Rabelais claiming the body may be effectively paralleling Dickinson's tactic of claiming — conquering, conquering via — the mind. To compare their "revolts" or seemingly polarized revolutions is instructive. Certainly the release of energy both apparently work toward is perfectly comparable.

Read through Bakhtin, how do Rabelais' tactics parallel Dickinson's? Carnival in real time — in the matter of what is read — vs. "carnival" in language in the reading of the writing. "Hyperrealistic" fiction does the same things to the mind that logical aporia do — information overload. If Rabelais is getting beyond-and-into the body by removing its mystery(s), complexifying and demystifying it at once; Dickinson is getting beyond-and-into the mind/language by her aporia tactics, complexifying and demystifying the language at once; indicating too at every moment the body's simplicity and its *inability* to get beyond self.

Bartram, Michael. *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: aspects of Victorian Photography.* London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985.

Bataille, Georges. "Mysticism and Sensuality" and "Sanctity, Erotism and Solitude" in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Mary Dalwood, trans. San Francisco : City Lights, 1962.

> I shall try here to examine the question . . . whether fear is not precisely what does underlie 'sex'; and whether the connection between 'mystic' and 'sexual' has not something to do with the gulfs of terrifying darkness that belong equally to both domains. [222]

Evelyn Underhill and William James in their studies of mysticism refute this "connection." And Bataille seems to refute it a few pages later: "Let us be quite clear. Nothing is further from my thought than a sexual interpretation of the mystic life such as Marie Bonaparte and James Leuba have insisted on." [224] This is useful to me as it suggests that it may be possible to understand sexual feelings and mysticism as having a common "ancestor" as it were without confusing them in their "evolved" states.

Bataille refers to a study [*La Signification du Symbolisme Conjugal*] by Father Louis Beirnaert, which considers the "comparison implicit in the language of the mystics between the experience of divine love and that of sexuality," emphasizing the "aptness of sexual union to symbolise a higher union" [quoted 223].

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. New York City: Semiotext(e), 1987.

> Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible. We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite to the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us . . . more and more things have fallen into the abyss of meaning. [63]

Baudrillard sees ecstasy as the opposite of passion. " . . . the obscenity . . . of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of *that which no longer contains a secret* and is entirely soluble in information and communication" [22]

Bays, Gwendolyn. *The Orphic Vision : Seer Poets from Novalis to Rimbaud.* Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1964.

Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberg and Jill Mattuck Tarule, eds. *Women's Ways of Knowing: the Developments of Self, Voice and Mind*. New York : Basic Books, 1986.

Bell, Rudolph. *Holy Anorexia*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. New York : Pantheon, 1988.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York : Schocken Books, 1969.

Berg, Barbara J. *The remembered gate: origins of American feminism: the woman and the city, 1800-1860*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1978.

Bernstein, Charles, ed. *The Politics of Poetic Form*. New York : Roof Books, 1990.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln, NE : University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

Blanchot is especially interesting on the encounter between writer and language. He posits first the "space" which calls to it a book, seeming to use the author as a vehicle:

> [a] book, even a fragmentary one, has a centre which attracts it. This centre is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed centre which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain and more imperious. He who writes the book writes it out of desire for this centre and out of ignorance. [frontispiece]

And

> Mallarmé whom sterility tormented and who shut himself into it with heroic resolve also recognized that this deprivation did not express a simple personal failing, did not signify that he was deprived of the work, but announced his encounter with the work, the threatening intimacy of this encounter. [177]

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights: authoritative text, backgrounds, criticism*. Edited by Sale, William M., Jr. and Dunn, Richard J. New York : Norton, c1990.

Emily Brontë was one of Dickinson's favourite authors and *Wuthering Heights* may be read as a tale of dark "semiotic" and unspeakable forces brought to the surface through an abject love relation, causing "revolution" not to say great harm to the established orders and those who lived in the symbolic. (Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror*, below.)

Susan Howe: "I call *Wuthering Heights* a poem."

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York and London : Routledge, 1990.

Butler deals intelligently and comprehensively with the problem of essentialism, and the essentializing tendencies of studies which indulging in the "gendering" of concepts. I have felt cautious about my discussion (following Kristeva recently, who Butler "trashes" here, but also, pre-Kristeva, following my own — acculturated — "instinct" earlier) of the "feminine" *as* the "unspeakable" — or the unspeakable, or unknown *as* "feminine."

Bynum, Caroline. *Fragmentation and Redemption : essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion.* New York : Zone Books (MIT Press), 1991.

Cameron, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory.* Basingstoke, Hampshire : Macmillan, 1965.

> On the one hand, women may use the male-controlled language, whose meanings are fixed according to men's experience; if they do, they falsify their own perceptions and experience by putting everything into a male frame of reference. This is alienation. On the other hand, women may try to discuss their experience in an authentically female way. In this case, they soon encounter the lack of a suitable language, and fall silent. [93]

Cf. Kristeva (below) who suggests that women who try to express themselves in an "authentically female way" commit suicide or go mad.

Campbell, Joseph. *Hero with a Thousand Faces.* (Bollingen Series XVII) New York : Princeton University Press, 1949.

Campbell explores the "quest" narrative, which has surprisingly provocative resonance with the "unattainable" in language.

Carroll, Lewis. *The Annotated Alice*, Martin Gardner, ed.; Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1965.

Céline, Louis-Ferdinand. *Death on the Installment Plan*. New York : New Directions Press, 1971.

Read as supplement to an investigation of Kristeva's notion of the abject, as laid out in her *Powers of Horror*. Céline's *Death* is perhaps opposed to Dickinson in some respects: as to content, the lid's off; everything's here (or says it is). The blurred boundaries of the body (feces, urine, blood, vomit) and the blurred edges of the subject (crowds, hallucinations, death, confusing one mother with another, drunkenness). It is instructive to have this very different means (and only "incidentally" male-authored?) of writing the "unspeakable."

It would be interesting to compare in these two writers' works — and Rabelais'— the rapturous "metaphorical" use of the body's desires — or simply its physical self — to indicate a "merging" which necessitates that the self be removed from self (or context)? Orgiastic "transcendence" again imitates the information overload that logical/syntactic aporia reproduce. See also under Bakhtin.

Coward, Harold. *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1990.

Coward reports that the transmittal of religion in language is against certain Indian practices.

Darragh, Tina. "Howe" in *In the American Tree*, Ron Silliman, ed. Orono ME : The National Poetry Foundation, 1986.

Deleuze, Gilles. "The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism*. Josué V. Harari, ed. London : Methuen, 1980.

The importance of this essay to my present pursuit is in its unlinking of "madness, child-rhymes and poetry," the triad that haunts Dickinson scholarship; and its discussion of surface and depth (see also Genette's estimation of Valéry below) which is vital to discussion of language and object relations.

It also, as salutarily, contains a passage by Deleuze warning against bad psychoanalysis — or literary criticism — which might function as a caution against bad psychoanalytical readings :

> Bad psychoanalysis has two ways of deceiving itself: it can believe that it has discovered identical subject matters, which necessarily can be found everywhere, or it can believe that it has found analogous forms which create false differences. In doing either, psychoanalysis fails on both grounds: those of clinical psychiatry and literary criticism. Structuralism is right in reminding us that form and content matter only within the original and irreducible structures in which they are organized. [294]

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia.* Translated from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minnesota : University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology.* Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Diehl, Joanne Feit. *Women poets and the American sublime.* Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1990.

DiPrima, Diane. "HD: some Notes on Vision." Bound xerox. New Poetics Program, New College of California. n.d.

DiPrima's talk at the New Poetics Program, New College of California. DiPrima discusses HD's "romantic thralldom" her "courage of the tenuous" — speaking of that which can't be proven.

Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture.* New York : Doubleday/ Anchor, 1977.

Historical background on Dickinson's time and culture. Makes an interesting relation between the clergy and women and the ways in which they are differently marginalized.

Eco, Umberto. "Overinterpreting texts" in *Interpretation and overinterpretation.* Edited by Stefan Collini. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Helpful in the same way as Deleuze's caution above, as a brake on Wittgenstein's endless "analysis."

Edwards, Jonathan. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Bradley, Beatty, Long and Perkins, eds., *The American Tradition in Literature*, fourth ed., vol. 1. New York : Grosset & Dunlap, 1974. Pp. 93-113.

Elam, Helen Regueiro. In Alan Purves, ed. *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature.* Albany : State University of New York Press, 1991.

In this book, Elam elaborates her very useful theory of death as metonym for difficulty; and difficulty as metonym for death.

> American culture does not take well to the idea of difficulty. . . . Products are either fixable or disposable, and even mental disorders are perceived in terms of therapeutic closure or cure. Difficulty is there to be overcome, disposed of, certainly not to become the invisible partner of our daily lives. [73]

She continues,

> thinkers like Lacan and Derrida have drawn theory into a path of speculation [following Heidegger] that specifically rejects the possibility of metatheory, of classification, understanding in the sense of seeing 'the whole' from some privileged point of view. [82]

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson on Transcendentalism.* Edward L. Ericson, ed., New York : Ungar, 1986.

Fenellosa, Ernest. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.* San Francisco : City Lights Books, c. 1936.

Fetterley, Judith. 'Reading about Reading', 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in *Gender and Reading.* Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

———. *The resisting reader: a feminist approach to American fiction.* Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1978.

Fetterley, Judith, ed. *Provisions: a reader from 19th-century American women.* Edited with an introduction and critical commentary by Judith Fetterley. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1985.

Fischer, Norman. "Corbett's *Collected Poems* and Dahlen's *A Reading*" in *Poetics Journal* 6. Berkeley, 1986.

Flynn, Elizabeth A. and Patricino P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading: essays on readers, texts, and contexts.* Baltimore and London : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* New York : Vintage, 1973.

———. *The Order of Things.* New York : Vintage, 1973.

Foucault's "archaeological" approach gives an overview of the relation of words to things, meaning and knowledge over time; the passages quoted in the body of this thesis hark back to a time when the Book of Nature could still be read and language was "primary." The "futile yet fundamental space" in which literature thereafter exists (cf. Blanchot) here assumes an historical perspective.

Fish, Stanley. "Literature and the Reader: Affective Stylistics" and "Interpreting the Variorum" in *Reader-Response Criticism: from formalism to post-structuralism.* Tompkins, Jane P., ed. Baltimore and London : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism.* Translated by Katherine Jones. New York : Vintage Books (Random House), (c1939) c1967.

Freud, Sigmund and Breuer, Joseph. *Studies on Hysteria.* Trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud. New York : Basic Books, [1957].

This illness — hysteria — is named for the female as it was once thought due to a "disturbance of the womb" [Gk hustera = womb] (Concise OED 586). Breuer insists that it is not to be described as an "ideational" illness, that is, an illness caused by ideas, but both men seem to work on this theory, both in documenting and in treating the disease. Breuer diagnoses the hysteria as caused by a "monotonous family life" and "insufficient intellectual occupation." [Breuer on Fräulein Anna O. 41]

Frau Emmy von N., a patient of Freud's "seemed not to have accepted the category of 'indifferent things'." [84]

> We [Breuer and Freud] had learnt from our observations on Frau Cäcilie M. that hysteria of the severest type can exist in conjunction with gifts of the riches and most original kind — a conclusion which

is, in any case, made plain beyond a doubt in the biographies of women eminent in history and literature. [103]

To wish to become "senseless". . . .

Gallop, Jane. *Feminism and psychoanalysis : the daughter's seduction*. London : Macmillan Press, 1982.

———. *Reading Lacan.* Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1985.

Genette, Gérard. "Valéry and the Poetics of Language" in *Textual Strategies: perspectives in Post-structuralist criticism*. Josué V. Harari, ed. London . Methuen, 1980.

Gershman, Herbert. *The Surrealist Revolution in France*. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1974

> . . . certain symbolist poems, the hermetic works Mallarmé and the unstructured *Illuminations* of Rimbaud, which, having no overt, immediately accessible meaning, offer the occasion for a leap into the unknown, indeed encourage it, and so half open the door to reverie — and revelation. [21]

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: the wonder of the New World*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Greenblatt's grounding focus is on the concept — and the experience — of wonder, abandonment of self, or of prior judgement, of "fusion" or a fusional relationship with the thing or event with the resultant inability to judge it (stand back, separate). Cf. Kristeva on the relation of judgement and symbolization.

Heidegger, Martin. *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*. Krell and Capuzzi, trans., San Francisco : Harper & Row, (1975) 1984.

Heidegger explaining that long ago we mistranslated the Greek verb *to be* and never recovered. Compare Fenollosa on the Chinese character, or Whorf on Hopi sense of space/time, past/present. Here are what seem to us now "blurred boundaries" (cf Kristeva's abject as feeling 'lost' in space and time), and Heidegger's bid at what is truly unspeakable in our language[s].

———. *On the Way to Language*. Peter D. Hertz, trans. New York : Harper & Row, 1971.

Heidegger [speaking of a poem of Höld rlin's],

> . . . The final stanza . . . speaks in a more oppressing way. It forces us to the *unrest* of thought. Only this final stanza makes us hear what according to the title, is the poetic intent of the whole poem: Words. [141, my emphasis; cf. Hejinian "Language itself is never in a state of rest" directly below].
>
> Is anything more exciting and more dangerous for the poet than his relation to words? Hardly. Is this relation first created by the poet, or does the word of itself and for itself need poetry, so that only through this need does the poet become who he can be? All of this and much else besides gives food for thought and makes us thoughtful. Still, we hesitate to enter upon such reflection. . . . [141]

Hejinian, Lyn. "The Rejection of Closure" *Raddle Moon* 4:33-44.

———. "Two Stein Talks," in *TEMBLOR: Contemporary Poets* 3:128-139.

Hildegaard of Bingen. *Symphonia : a critical edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum [Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations]* with introduction, translations, and commentary by Barbara Newman. Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1988.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1985.

Jakobson, Roman. "On Realism in Art" in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, Michigan Slavic Materials, 2 (Ann Arbor, 1962).

———. "Words and Language" in *Selected Writings*. The Hague : Mouton, 1971.

James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in human nature*. New York : Doubleday, [1902]

These are the texts of the Gifford Lectures in Natural Religion which William James delivered in Edinburgh in 1902. James deals with questions of the neurotic origins of religion, arguing that this origin does not invalidate

religious feeling (cf. madness); and its supposed sexual origins (rejects, "disproves" this supposition). These self-consciously scientific lectures balanced in my reading Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* published ten years later and from the perspective of a philosopher of religion.

I began to reread this book — and Underhill's — to begin at the beginning of the psychological study of religions and the so-called religious personality.

Religion is primarily of two parts according to James, which he spells out in list form on page 455: "1. An uneasiness; and 2. Its solution." [455] That is, we believe that there is something wrong with us; and religion saves us from that wrongness.

James' description of the "sick soul" which Underhill describes as "the mood of the penitent; of the utter humility" [99] This "sick soul" might compare with Kristeva's "abject," though the latter appears to have no "solution." Both terms point up the difference Dickinson's understanding of the "question" and her proposed devices to enable her to fully live in its lack of resolution.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Part i: "Critique of Aesthetic Judgement." Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1952.

Kennard, Jean. "Ourself behind Ourself: A Theory for Lesbian Readers" in *Gender and Reading*. Flynn and Schweickart, eds. Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

———. *Tales of Love*. Leon Roudiez, trans. New York : Columbia Univerity Press, 1987.

> Narcissism projects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation. Without that solidarity between emptiness and narcissism, chaos would sweep away any possibility of distinction, trace, and symbolization, which would in turn confuse the limits of the body, words, the real and the symbolic [24]

Sartre says consciousness projects an emptiness and also that love imputes an emptiness to its love-object, hoping to appear to it as what it needs, plenitude.

I keep marking "cf Dickinson" in the margins: there's something here (the mysticism of the 12th century and the troubadours possession of the Word, if not of the flesh, their very passionate, jouissance of the word in their songs).

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art.* Edited by Leon S. Roudiez ; translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York : Columbia University Press, 1980.

———————. *Powers of Horror : an essay in abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York : Columbia University Press, 1982.

Dickinson's relation to abjection provides a useful (*one* useful) way of looking at her work. Kristeva says of Céline's *Journey to the End of Night*, which she reads at length in this book, that it

> discusses in nearly explicit fashion, although within the constraint of 'scientific' repression, the enigma constituted, for reason, by the feminine. It will have been necessary, so it seems, for Céline's reason to come up against that obstruction to make it possible, beyond the foulness of abjection, for his two unyielding protagonists to appear — death and words. [160]

Death and words are also Dickinson's two "unyielding protagonists" no matter how dissimilar her work may seem. In "Neither Subject nor Object" Kristeva remarks, "Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself." [1]

I must make clear that I do not intend these remarks as a reflection on Dickinson herself but as a way of approaching her work: I don't want to psychoanalyze the dead, I think it's an ugly thing to do. But it's interesting to cast some of her tropes, devices against Kristeva's interpretations / analyses. It is the *work* which I see quite consciously creating situations Kristeva might find abject or abjecting without itself becoming abject as work. The reader experiences abjection : the work is not abject but agentive, creating abjection so critical as to provoke a breakthrough.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva examines her notion of abjection and pursues its elaboration in the writing of Céline. Its thesis is the unspeakable, and

how that is feminine, and how our society is built on a rejection of this feminine, or maternal, element.

Powers of Horror approaches the areas of the impossible, the intolerable, the unthinkable and the unspeakable which I feel constitute the great power of much of Dickinson's poetry. The most important chapters for my purposes are: 1. "Approaching Abjection" which details her understanding of abjection, its sources and uses (the breakup of the 'archaic dyad,' the mother-infant continuum;[1] our rejection of the unclean including our own wastes as non-self, etc.), its relation to the individual and to society as a whole (abjection of self, purity and the sacred) contains such helpful areas of consideration as "As Abjection — So the Sacred" and "Outside of the Sacred, the Abject is Written; Chapter 2. "Something to be Scared of" elaborates the "horrific" aspect of abjection; Chapter 8. "Those Females who can Wreck the Infinite" relating abjection to the maternal more specifically and continuing her investigation of its importance for Céline (begun in chapter 6); and 10. "In the Beginning and Without End". See further below.

> . . . what is *abject*, . . . the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses . . . . A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. [2]
>
> There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. [5]
>
> Mystical Christendom turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God, witness Elizabeth of Hungary who 'though a great princess, delighted in nothing so much as abasing herself.' [5]

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1. "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled." Dickinson to Higginson [Letter 342b]. In fact, Dickinson nursed her mother through a "hopeless illness" [Letter 593] til her death.

> Essentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory. [5]

Freud's uncanny on the other hand has everything to do with recognition, with "shadows" of memory. Compare Céline (chapter 10), his trying to get beyond language, and Dickinson who avoids the signifier; which is not her aim. She is not trusting of the signifier, but puts her faith in the structure of language. The mere noun believes in itself, but syntax can be made to destroy itself, destroy reason and understanding, rationality and thus "let out" what language can't name.

The abject is all about the blur, the erasing of borders. Kristeva even speculates [7] that it puts the whole notion of the unconscious into question. If there is no definite line between contents that are normally repressed (which constitute the unconscious) and conscious contents in a mind, can we really speak of an unconscious? Kristeva posits that "[s]ince they make the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant, borderline subject and their speech constitute propitious ground for a sublimating discourse ('aesthetic' or 'mystical' etc.) [7]

> The abject has only one quality of the object — that of being opposed to the *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain 'ego' that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. [1-2]

From here abjection is defined as

> A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of

> a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of culture. [2]

_____. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller ; with an introduction by Leon S. Roudiez. New York : Columbia University Press, 1984.

Though this text is largely theoretical and concerns, when it does come to talk of poets, solely men's writing, the revolution I see outlined here is absolutely that which I see available to women (though Kristeva would not agree — see *Powers of Horror* where she suggests that women go mad or kill themselves attempting the/their semiotic). And the concept of the *chora*, which precedes the semiotic has lately been very valuable in my thinking about Dickinson's devices, her urge to fling herself at what seems a palpable "unknown," and the fact that she chose language in which to do this.

It is interesting to watch a psychoanalyst and linguist wrestle with the articulation of the place-event which seems to be before or behind or above our consciousness. Kristeva refers to the "kinetic functional stage of the semiotic" [27] at which moment there is no "subject" as such, and therefore no cognition.

She quotes Plato before her:

> 'Are we talking idly whenever we say that there is such a thing as an intelligible Form of anything? Is this nothing more than a word?' [239]

and adds her own parallel question,

> Is the platonic *chora* the 'nominability' of rhythm (of repeated separation)? [239]

Fairly soon comes the phrase "receiving membrane" (without "antecedent") the "receptacle" seems to be growing flesh. . . . Plato's receptacle is described as moving its contents and the contents in turn moving it [winnowing analogy seems to be more about separation, but this moving the mover is different].

She talks about this as Plato's "confining" motility "in an apparent attempt to conceal it from Democritean rhythm," in "ontology and amorphousness" [26]

In approaching what seems an equivocation in her last sentences, she seems in a footnote [239, footnote 13] to be nearing the conversation physicists have about wave/particle physics, the quantum physics: how the "receptacle" can be

> mobile and even contradictory, without unity, separable and divisible: pre-syllabic, pre-word. Yet, on the other hand, because this separability and divisibility antecede numbers and forms, the space or receptacle is called *amorphous*: thus its suggested rhythmicity will in a certain sense be erased, for how can one think an articulation of what is not yet singular but is nevertheless necessary? All we may say of it, then, to make it intelligible, is that it is amorphous but that it "is so such and such a quality" not even an index or something in particular ('this' or 'that'). Once named, it immediately becomes a container that takes the place of infinitely repeatable separability. This amounts to saying that this repeated separability is 'ontologized' the moment a *name* or a *word* replaces it, making it intelligible.

Here the semiotic *chora* becomes a place "where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his [sic] unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him." [28]

The semiotic necessitates accepting Freud's assumption of the unconscious. It's worth quoting in full her particular wording of what follows from this:

> We view the subject in language as decentering the transcendental ego, cutting through it, and opening it up to a dialectic in which its syntactic and categorical understanding is merely the liminary moment of the process, which is itself always acted upon by the death drive and its productive reiteration of the 'signifier'. We will be attempting to formulate the distinction between *semiotic* and *symbolic* within this perspective, which was introduced by Lacanian analysis, but also within the constraints of a practice — the *text* — which is only of secondary interest to psychoanalysis. [30]

We shall see that what the speaking subject is no longer considered a phenomenological transcendental ego nor the Cartesian ego but rather a *subject in process/on trial* [*sujet en procès*], as is the case in the practice of the *text*, deep structure or at least transformational rules are disturbed and, with them, the

possibility of semantic and/or grammatical categorial [sic] interpretation. [37]

Derrida "in his critique of phenomenology and its linguistic substitutes," (in *Of Grammatology*) [40]

Husserl's "hyle" and Hegel's "force" and Plato's *chora* are all apprehended through what she terms "difficult reasoning," but are *"lost as soon as [they] are posited"* [32]. This moment of understanding which must defeat itself is the moment at which I believe Dickinson's work flings itself.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: a selection*. New York : WW Norton & Co., 1977.

> Writing is distinguished by a prevalence of the *text* in the sense that this factor of discourse will assume in this essay a factor that makes possible the kind of tightening up that I like in order to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult. [146]

Text itself appears to be the vehicle which makes difficulty possible, which makes access to the text difficult.

Laing, R.D. *The Politics of Experience; and The Bird of Paradise*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1967.

Lentricchia, Frank, and McLaughlin, Thomas. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Lochrie, Karma. *Margery Kempe and translations of the flesh*. Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

Longinus. "On the Sublime" in *The Major Critical Statements*, Charles Kaplan, ed. 2nd ed. New York : St. Martin's Press, 1986.

The connection between strong emotion and the disruption of language is made early in the history of rhetoric. Perhaps it is this kind of connection that had made the inverse conclusion so automatic — that disrupted language necessarily indicates a disrupted, "dangerous" mind:

> The disturbance of the proper sequence of phrases or thoughts . . . is the surest impress of vehement passion. For as those who are really angry, or in fear, or indignant, or who fall under the influence of jeal-

> ousy or any other passion . . . are seen to put forward one set of ideas, then spring aside to another, thrusting in a parenthesis out of all logic, then wheel round to the first, and in their excitement, like a ship before an unsteady gale, . . . For he often leaves suspended the thought with which he began, and interposes, as though he struck into a train of reasoning foreign to it and dissimilar, matter which he rolls upon other matter, all drawn from some source outside, *till he strikes his hearer with the fear that an entire collapse of the sentence will follow, and forces him by mere vehemence to share the risk with the speaker . . . . the whole [made] a great deal more impressive by the very hazard and imminence of failure* . . . [76-77]

This last phrase particularly interests me, though the disorder of the symbolic by the emotive is worth further thought. The way the "risk" of the speaker passes to the listener strikes me as important to the relation between text and reader, the way we use a poem. (A reader takes no necessary risk in reading a poem; but if she allows herself to become engaged in it, the risk the language takes — perhaps under some duress from "beneath" — may pass to her.)

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: reflections on time*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1991.

The sublime meditated upon; Kant's sublime meditated on; the "bowlderization" of Kant by humanism. (On the pretext of a return to Kant, all "they" do is to shelter the humanist prejudice under his authority.)

In "Introduction: about the Human," Lyotard looks humanism in its many faces seeing that certain questions are not asked:

> . . . always as if at least man were a certain value, which has no need to be interrogated. Which even has the authority to suspend, forbid interrogation, suspicion, the thinking which gnaws away at everything. [1]

He continues,

> What *value* is, what *certain*[2] is, what *man* is, these questions are taken to be dangerous and shut away again pretty fast. It is said that they open the way to 'anything goes,' 'anything is possible,' 'all is worthless.' Look, they add, what happens to the ones who go beyond this

> limit: Nietzsche taken hostage by fascist mythology, Heidegger a Nazi, and so on . . . Even what may be worrying in Kant from this point of view, what is not anthropological but properly transcendental, and what, in the critical tension, goes so far as to break up the more or less presupposed unity of a (human) subject, as is the case — to me exemplary — of the analysis of the sublime or the historico-political writings, even that gets expurgated. [1]

Here are Dickinson's questions: value, certainty, "man"; her danger. And here is the system that refuses to recognize, so coyly, its own limits:

> The system has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it. But the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think — if one claims to exclude it, if one doesn't give it an outlet, one aggravates it. Discontent grows with this civilization. Foreclosure along with the information. [2]

Here is "the system" again, a system forgetting something which has "escaped" it. I had thought to gather all these similar sounding phrases from their various sources. The "unknown guest" which "agitates" the subject, "sending it delirious" but "also making it think" . . . Here's the description I might have used for what I see as Dickinson's use of aporia.

In "Can Thought go on without a Body," Lyotard asks about the relation of thought to thinker, in a way that somewhat parallels my questioning whether syntax might exist as a mechanism devoid of content.

Marks, Elaine and I. de Courtivron (eds.) *New French Feminisms*. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

Martin, Stephen-Paul. *Open form and the Feminine Imagination: the Politics of Reading in Twentieth Century Innovative Writing* . Washington DC : Maisonneuve Press, 1988.

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2. I've altered the translation which Geoffery Bennington and Rachel Bowlby have as "*sure*" here to "*certain*" as it is obviously meant to parallel the sentence preceding it: "But always at least as if man were a certain value . . ."

McCaffery, Steve. *North of Intention*. Toronto/New York : Roof/ Nightwood, 1985.

In a phrase that has haunted me for years, McCaffery notes,

> It is precisely their resistance to aberrant decodings that imposes a devastating qualification on the emancipatory scope of 'open' texts. [in "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader" 28]

Mitchell, Juliet. *Psychoanalysis and feminism.* New York : Pantheon Books, [1974].

Mouré, Erin."The Anti-Anaesthetic." Unpublished talk given at the Kootenay School of Writing, Vancouver, May 1988.

Nead, Linda. *Myths of Sexuality: representations of women in Victorian Britain.* Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Nelli, René. "Love's Rewards" in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, part 2. *Zone* 4. New York : Urzone, 1989.

Nelli re-examines the confusion between the female and nature, looking specifically at courtly love and the intrinsic mystical value of "female ritual nudity" in India, as an incarnation of nature. Given the Garden, Adam names before he eats.

Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: unraveling the double bind.* Bloomington and Indiana : University of Indiana Press, 1993.

"Unnameable drives are not impossible. Rather, they are 'real' in a way that ruptures the Symbolic." ["Behind the Mirror Stage" 19]. Kelly Oliver's work provides an excellent way into Kristeva.

Kristeva's point in *Revolution* according to Oliver is that revolution in language *is* political/ethical revolution. This may be a missing link in the feminist thesis of writing one's way "out." Dickinson writes the semiotic not into the sounds and slippages of her text but into the gasp the mind makes figuring impossible syntax.

Paglia, Camille. *Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson.* New Haven : Yale University Press, 1990.

Paglia purports to reveal the pervasive sadism in Dickinson's work. I find her argument neither convincing nor particularly thoughtful, and feel that

her reading of Dickinson is driven by her own careerist agenda — by a mere desire to shock. It took me many months in the presence of this book to realize that Dickinson's face has been used; it is simply gauded on one side: as though precisely the "makeover" Paglia has proposed come to life. My argument against this is simply that to — as usual — use "evidence" in the poetry to "disclose" the mysterious character we call Dickinson is not useful and merely follows (rather than overturns or scandalizes) traditional scholarly attention to women's work, and perhaps Dickinson's in particular.

Whatever can be said against the tone and scandalmongering going on here, however, I believe that Paglia's intuitions concerning the violence, or violent energy (I would be more inclined to read it sexually than sadistically), not-quite-buried in the work are valid, and are precisely the focus of my own attention.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Radical Artifice.* Chicago : the University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Perloff's book is useful as an almost journalistic account of the various avant garde practices over the centuries and the philosophies that have guided them: Lucretius "clinamen" — the "deliberate imperfection" — the "error or bend" [144]; Cage's aesthetic of "interpenetration and nonobstruction" and the "situation of decentering" where "each thing is the center"; "such non-intentionality, as Cage has repeatedly explained, must be understood as a form of discipline" [150]. The attention to the word as material, the Russian Futurists' "word as such" [17]

Poe, Edgar Allen. "The Domain of Arnheim" in *Introduction to Poe* Eric W. Carlson, ed. Atlanta, GA : Scott, Foresman and Company, 1967.

A short story by Poe which speaks of cleanliness as perfection, as the most desirable. All decay and all physical suggestion of death is kept out of Arnheim; and the palace does not touch the ground but floats above it. On first reading this story, I described it as the only truly frightening of Poe's stories for me; and guessed that it was one especially frightening to women. I had been largely interested rather than moved or terrified by Poe's descriptions of putrefaction, death and near death and not-quite-death; his gothicly human structures. All these blurred borders seemed more comforting than frightening. The absence of death in Arnheim I found suffocating, really terrifying.

In Kristeva's terms, the rejection of those blurs, that putrefaction, is a rejection of the abject which does indeed imperil women and should certainly genuinely terrify them as a kind of "political allegory." Poe is interesting to me in general in the context of this work because of his more typical focus on women/woman, and on death — and most especially on that not-quite-death, that tantalizing region between which also fascinated Dickinson — in her work and even in her life ("One of [Dickinson's] stranger performances — it can be traced in her correspondence following the death of any friend or even the friend of a friend — was a quasi-scientific effort to gather death-bed evidence of posthumous survival." [Patterson 112]).

That Dickinson dismissed Poe as a writer makes him perhaps even more interesting. Over and over I notice that she does in the very body of language what Poe, for instance, attempts (crudely, perhaps, in her view) to express in the content, the actual physical "events" of his stories.

Quartermain, Peter. *Disjunctive Poetics: from Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe.* Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Retallack, Joan. "Post-Scriptum—High-Modern" in *Daedalus.* Xerox only. [Cambridge, Mass., etc.] : American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Russell, Bertrand. *Mysticism and Logic.* London : Allen and Unwin, 1959.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology.* Translated by Hazel Barnes. New York : Philosophical Library, 1956.

There is no way to speak in passing about this book as a whole. However, the "key to special terminology" at the back of this edition suggests an interesting link between Kristeva's abject and Sartre's "nausea" and "nihilation."

> *Nausea.* The 'taste' of facticity and contingency of existence. 'A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness.' On the ground of this fundamental nausea are produced all concrete, empirical nauseas (caused by spoiled meat, excrement, etc.) [631]

> *Nihilate.* A word coined by Sartre. Consciousness exists as consciousness by making a nothingness arise between it and the object of which it is consciousness. Thus nihilation is that by which consciousness exists. To nihilate is to encase with a shell of non-being. [631-32]

This glossary is immensely useful in both reading the book it serves and in thinking about such slippery areas as "ecstasy" and "negativity" Also included here are useful descriptions of some of Husserl's terms (e.g. noema and noesis) employed by Kristeva in her *Revolution.*

Sartre's understanding of what he calls "pre-reflective consciousness" might be useful. "First," says his editor, "he follows Husserl in holding that all consciousness is consciousness of something; that is, consciousness is intentional and directive, pointing to a transcendent object other than itself. Here is the germ for Sartre's later view of man's being-in-the-world, for his 'ontological proof' of the existence of a Being-in-itself which is external to consciousness. "Most important of all, there are in Sartre's claim that consciousness infinitely overflows the 'I' which ordinarily serves to unify it, the foundation for his view of anguish, the germ of his doctrine of 'bad faith,' and a basis for his belief in the absolute freedom of consciousness." [xii]

A consciousness which cannot properly be called "individual" and which can be described as "infinitely overflow[ing] the 'I' which normally serves to unify it, and which can give rise to anguish" — which for Sartre is the vertiginous feeling we have "before our recognition that nothing in our own pasts or discernible personality insures our following any of our usual patterns of conduct" [xii]

Sartre's understanding of what he calls "imagination" is interesting too. He focuses on imagination when asking the painful question how can we "see" something that is not there, and answers with a double "nihilation" (*néantisation*). This same act of imagination is essential in the project of "throwing thought beyond language" I see Dickinson engaged in. I don't see where he asks the same question about language, and am interested to know how these two may be related.

Hazel Barnes points to the correspondence between Sartre's 1937 novel *Nausea* and the "total volume of *Being and Nothingness*" which she suggests is its "only full exposition." [xvi] Because this is an example of literary language going ahead of philosophical enquiry, showing the way, and because Sartre's "philosophical" prose sounds like Céline, and is a fascinating example of the "too much" [*"de trop"*] of the abject "in action,"[3]

> We were a heap of living creatures, irritated, embarrassed at ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason to be there, none of us; each one, confused, vaguely alarmed, felt *de trop* in relation to the others. . . . In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees, to *locate* them . . . each of them escaped the relationship which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself and overflowed . . . . And I — soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts — I, too, was *de trop*. . . . Even my death would have been *de trop*. *De trop*, my corpse, my blood on these stones, between these plants. . . . And the decomposed flesh would have been *de trop* in the earth which would received my bones, at last; cleaned, stripped, peeled, propre and clean as teeth, it would have been *de trop*: I was *de trop* for eternity. [quoted xvii]

The idea of excess is essential to abjection; essential to repression, both "primary" (which I associate with the Kristeva's semiotic) and "secondary." The words "confused" "vague[ly]", "embarrassed" "soft" "weak" "obscene" "overflowed" are markers of abjection. It is fascinating to see Sartre's discussion go on without explicit reference to language, or to the feminine.

In "Concrete Relations to Others: First Attitude toward Others: love, language, masochism," Sartre's *de trop* comes back. Love is described as the self trying to prove itself super-abundant and the Other nothing, such that the other gives the "consent of [its] freedom, which I must capture by making it recognize itself as nothingness in the face of my plenitude of absolute being" [372] and continues,

> Someone may observe that these various attempts at expression *presuppose* language. We shall not disagree with this. But we shall say rather that they *are* language, if you prefer, a fundamental mode of language. . . . Language is not a phenomenon added on to being-for-others; that is, it is the fact that a subjectivity experiences itself as an object for the Other. In a universe of pure objects language could under no circumstances have been 'invented' since it presupposes an original relation to another subject. In the intersubjectivity of the for-others, it is not necessary to invent language because it is already given in the recognition of the Other. I *am* language . . . . It is in this

3. I've left "propre" in place of the translator's odd "proper" teeth.

> sense — and in this sense only — that Heidegger is right in declaring that *I am what I say*. [372-73]

. . . . Then surprisingly, he remarks casually,

> Of course by language we mean all the phenomena of expression and not the articulated word, which is a derived and secondary mode whose appearance can be made the object of an historical study. Especially in seduction language does not *aim* at *giving to be known* but at causing to experience. [373]

There is much discussion of "seduction" and what Sartre calls "fascination" (which he remarks "*is* transcendence" [374]) which there is not space to go into here, but which strongly echo my mapping of the desires and compulsions of Dickinson's project.

Near the end of his book, Sartre announces the end of ontology and the beginning of psychoanalysis

> The information which ontology can furnish concerning behaviour patterns and desire must serve as the basic principles of existential psychoanalysis. This does not mean that there is an over-all pattern of abstract desires common to all men; it means that concrete desires have structures which emerge during the study of ontology because each desire — the desire of eating or of sleeping as well as the desire of creating a work of art — expresses all human reality . . . . Indeed this is the point where ontology must stop; its final discoveries are the first principles of [existential] psychoanalysis. [575]

Scholes, Robert. *Protocols of Reading*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1989.

> Reading as transformational. How does the transformation work? (cf Derrida *Of Grammatology* 157 ff) [78]

Schweickart, Patrocino. "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Flynn and Schweickart, eds. Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

> [Feminist criticism] is a mode of praxis. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways, the point is to change the world. [39]

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein.* London : J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd. [1921] 1960.

Shelley articulates as perhaps no one else ever has the "impossible" come to life; the "monstrosity" of the unfulfillable desires which language either represents or engenders in us; and the compassion (a kind of longing tenderness) of the abject or monster. Frankenstein's creature is rejected by "the world" as an embodiment of the abject. "He" embodies the desire which is defined by that rejection. His is a perfect aporia; the creature of a grotesque, Faustian desire for knowledge, he/it must exist — always already — in the melancholic, agonizing echo of the "exhilarating impossibility" that originally animated him without hope of solution.

Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique," *Russian Formalist Criticism: four essays.* Leman and Reis, eds. Bison Books. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

Silliman, Ron, ed. *In the American Tree.* Orono : University of Maine (National Poetry Foundation), 1986.

Smith, Philip. *Language, the Sexes and Society.* Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language.* London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.

Steele, Julia. *An Outside for the Inside: a psychoanalytic reading of The Book of Margery Kempe.* SFU : MA Thesis, 1993.

This thesis provided another important point of access for me in my efforts to read Dickinson in light of Kristeva.

> According to Kristeva, the experience of abjection is revulsion that represses an underlying attraction. [8]
>
> [Kristeva states that abjection] accompanies all religious structurings. [11]
>
> Margery seeks to include in language what language seeks to exclude, namely 'the feminine' . . . demonstrat[ing] a subject's desire to articulate and possess the unnameable. [11]
>
> [Sara] Beckwith . . . states that her argument in 'A Very Material Mysticism' is 'that mysticism is very often the site of self-making rather that self-dissolution as it is often represented as being' [13]

It is also an exemplary use of psychoanalytic theory in reading which holds the distinction between text and author; using theory to encounter the text in certain ways, to examine the import and the devices of a text, without presuming to psychoanalyze the author as an individual.

Steele introduces the concept of "an outside for the inside," and the practice of "affective spirituality" — an anti-intellectual, body-based spiritual practice which centres on fantasies of fusion with members of the Holy Family — and its special importance, historically, to women mystics [3].

I believe this, following somewhat from Sharon Cameron's arguments, is what Dickinson is trying to provide herself and her readers with — with the additional and crucial complication that she is attempting it in a medium which many consider symbolic and therefore inherently masculinist.

Here is a description of a poetics that attempts to bring the semiotic to the surface of a text, so as to indicate or imitate or provide a model for a "revolution" which might overturn or inform (at the least) the symbolic order. Steele's "outside for the inside" of affective spirituality "provides a framework within which a mystic can experience and articulate unconscious desires . . . ."[3]. Steele quotes Nancy Partner ("'And Most of All for Inordinate Love': Desire and Denial in *The Booke of Margery Kempe*" in *Thought*, volume 64, 254-267), arguing that the "'plot of [Kempe's] is desire seeking its satisfaction'" and that this "unconscious plot" is a vehicle through which "'denied desires and repressed knowledge . . . threaten to break through consciousness . . . " [3]

Steele holds that

> what saves Margery from this dark plot, which could conceivably push her into madness, is the 'Word'. As we shall see, Margery's faith provides a containing framework for experimenting with the dissolution of her own subjectivity [3]

Does the "Word" also make a containing framework for Dickinson's dissolution of the word? So much of what Steele brings into her thesis on mysticism is pertinent read as language-related. If a mystic could torment her language instead of, *or as*, her "body," would the result be the same? I call Dickinson's poems "spiritual exercises" and mean not only that they tone

the spirit but that they "exercise" the spirit in the older sense that they make it work, nearly emotionally.

> According to [Clarissa] Atkinson, affective piety is characterized by the absence of a 'particular theological stance, except the primacy of love over reason in the knowledge of God . . . .' [8]

(Compare Kristeva's "breaching" *syntax* in prosody, in Chapter 7 of *Revolution in Poetic Language*).

> [Angela's vision of] the Word which touches her and embraces her anticipates Hélène Cixous's vision of the subversive potential of women's language. . . . The female mystic who speaks from the place of abjection seeks to return language — and words in particular — to Aristotle's definition of words as 'symbols of that which suffers in the soul.' [Lochrie, quoted 10]

Steig, Michael. *Stories of Reading*. Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

> Most teachers of literature have had the experience of students protesting that it spoils a poem to analyze it; this may reflect intellectual laziness, but I think more often it is an expression of genuine anxiety, as though one might find out something one is afraid of knowing. [29]

Further in this essay ("Response, Intention, and Motives for Interpretation") Steig confronts the problem of "infinite regress" remarking that "It seems likely that the fear of just such a regress is one source of the impulse to ground one's interpretations in some system of ideas, and it is even possible that the fear of eternal indeterminacy motivates the deconstructionist embrace of that feared thing [31] In a later essay, "Coming to Terms with [Maurice Sendak's children's story] *Outside Over There*," Steig quotes Sendak's 'mystical' assertion, "The only way to find something is to lose oneself" [quoted 207]. This story concerns nearly explicitly mother-infans relations, the dark, "going backwards" across the threshold of a window into an unknown territory. Steig also quotes radically different reactions to difficulty in a text: "The more it is enjoyed, the more the book yields up its secrets" [Ethel Heins, commenting on Sendak's *Outside Over There*, quoted in Steig 202]. In the same group of quotations is Susan Hankla's "cri de couer,"

(Steig's description) that "too much is left unexplained." Why this cry of pain and/or outrage, or this jouissance, when understanding is tested?

Stein, Gertrude. "Stanzas in Meditation" in *The Yale Gertrude Stein.* Richard Kostelanetz, ed. New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1980.

Probably Stein's most important work, her "Stanzas in Meditation" are "rooms" in meditation, as Dickinson's are "haunted." Stein's very unlike and like project and her like and unlike handling of language has given me something to work against when talking about Dickinson's poetics.

————. *How to Write.* Barton, Vt. : Something Else Press, 1973.

Steiner, George. *On difficulty and other essays.* Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1978.

The "reasons" for difficulty in writing, its origins, and what it accomplishes is one of the necessary preoccupations of this bibliography. Steiner's position is best enunciated when he remarks that Coleridge "an etymologist, often as violent and arbitrary as Hölderlin, who attempts to break open the eroded or frozen shell of speech in order to compel to daylight and release the dynamics, the primal crystallizations of perception that may lie at the roots." [21] I would venture that this "crystal" is not what a woman would imagine coming forth from the fissures she'd made in language, nor why she would make those fissures. He makes a taxonomy of the types of difficulty, of which the political and 'tactical" difficulties are most germane to my research.

> Contingent difficulties arise from the obvious plurality and individuation which characterize world and word. Modal difficulties lie with the beholder. A third class of difficulty has its source in the writer's will or in the failure of adequacy between his [sic] intention and his performative means. I propose to designate this class as *tactical.* The poet may choose to be obscure in order to achieve certain specific stylistic effects. He may find himself compelled towards obliquity and cloture by political circumstances: there is a very long history of Aesopian language, of 'encoding' and allegoric indirection in poetry written under pressure of totalitarian censorship (oppression says Borges is the mother of metaphor). The constraint may be of a purely personal nature. The lover will conceal the identity of the beloved or

the true condition of his passion. . . . But there is also, and often decisively, an entire poetic of tactical difficulty. It is the poet's aim to charge with supreme intensity and genuine of feeling a body of language, to 'make new' his text in the most durable sense of illuminative, penetrative insight. . . . There have, throughout literary history, been logical terrorists who have taken the implicit paradox to its stark conclusion. The authentic poet *cannot* make do with the infinitely shop-worn inventory of speech, with the necessarily devalued or counterfeit currency of the every-day. He must literally create new words and syntactic modes: this was the argument of practice of the first Dada, of Surrealists, of the Russian 'Futuro-Cubist' Khlebnikov and his 'star-speech'. If the reader would follow the poet into the terra incognita of revelation, he must learn the language. In effect, to be sure, this language of the occult is autistic. A secret tongue will not communicate outward, and if it loses its mystery, if it is acquired by many it will no longer contain the purities of the unprecedented. The position of the radical but working poet is, therefore, a compromise. He will not forge a new tongue but will attempt to revitalize, to cleanse 'the words of the tribe' (Mallarmé's famous formula gives pointed summation to what is, in fact a constant compulsion in poetry and poetics). He will reanimate lexical and grammatical resources that have fallen out of use. He will melt and inflect words into neological shapes. He will labour to undermine, through distortion, through hyperbolic augment, through elision and displacement, the banal and constricting determinations of ordinary, public syntax. . . . [33-35]

Stewart, Susan. *Nonsense: aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature.* Baltimore and London : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

In pursuing the subject of "difficulty" in reading and writing, I became very interested in the concept of "nonsense." Susan Stewart begins her book with the important assertion of the value of nonsense in constructing sense. Sense she notes is measured by nonsense — nonsense is sense's limit. Without this nonsense, limit, sense would threaten to be infinite, regressive, unmanageable. She makes use of Wittgenstein's formulation of meaning as use "[for a large class of cases, though not for all, in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus] the meaning of a word is its use in the language." [20] And [Wittgenstein:] "when a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it

were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation." [quoted in intro]

Heidegger gets boffed with: "the irony of etymology" that words must shore up words, words define and give validity to words. "The word bringing evidence to itself as a word" she points out, really is a kind of nonsense:

> The word lifted out of history has only itself as recourse. The word becomes its own last resort. And this is the beginning of nonsense: language lifted out of context, language turning on itself, language as infinite regression, language made hermetic, opaque in an envelope of language.

Strang, Cationa. *Low Fancy*. Toronto : ECW Press, 1993.

Strang's "translation" of the mediaeval Latin *Carmina Burana* which employs extraordinarily dense language is instructive. It is my contention that the work of the Objectivists in the U.S. and, more recently that of the so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers — both poetry and theory — has enabled readers to return to Dickinson with new eyes, new ears and new notions of what a poet's project of in language might be.

Styron, William. *Darkness Revealed*. New York : Random House, 1990.

Styron talks about his experience of depression and his understanding of the condition of suicide. He describes depression as typically "indescribable" — a "feeling in my mind [of] a sensation close to, but indescribably different from, actual pain." [16] and as " . . . that famous 'slant of light' of Emily Dickinson's, which spoke to her of death, of chill extinction." [45]

Tazi, Nadia. "Celestial Bodies: A Few Stops on the Way to Heaven". In *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, part 2. *Zone* 4. New York : Urzone, 1989.

> Heaven cannot be expressed or represented: the mind can grasp it only by recognizing its own limitations and the necessity of coming to terms with it. [519]

The Exeter Book Riddles. Kevin Crossley-Holland, trans. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1979.

Touponce, William. "Literary Theory and Difficulty" in *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, Alan C. Purves, ed. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1991.

> [Barthes] distinguishes between pleasure (*plaisir*), which is linked with a consistence of the self, of the subject, which is assured in values of comfort, relaxation, ease — for Barthes it was the entire realm of reading the classics — and *bliss* (jouissance), *the system of reading, or utterance, through which the subject, instead of establishing itself, is lost.* The great majority of the texts we know and love consist roughly of texts of pleasure, while texts of bliss are, according to Barthes, extremely rare, primarily because of *the historical and institutional tendency of reading in culture to recuperate any loss of meaning.* [67-8 my emphasis]

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: a study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness.* New York : E.P. Dutton & Co., [1911], 1961.

(See also above, under William James.) To read Underhill's criticism of James' "celebrated 'four marks' of the mystic state" [Underhill 81] was to begin to trace my own assumptions and the meaning I apply to the term "mystic" and why I began to think in terms of mysticism at all when thinking of the "unthinkable."

Underhill calls the 'Mystic Way' a

> liberation of a new, *or rather latent,* form of consciousness, which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called 'ecstasy,' but is better named the Unitive State. [81, my emphasis]

Such matter-of-fact remarks as " . . . no responsible student now identifies the mystic and the ecstatic" [vii, preface to the twelfth edition] chasten me and educate my assumptions. Both James and Underhill deal with the assumption that religious feeling has a sexual basis. Ecstasy is the common term. Perhaps romantic rather than sexual ecstasy would parallel religious feeling? Underhill in her 1930 preface refers to the debate amongst scholars of the psychology of religion on the "line" between "'active and 'infused' operations of the soul in communion with God."

Following Kristeva's intuitions about semiotic language, it is interesting to hear Underhill speak of

> The peculiar rhythmical language of genuine mystic dialogue of this kind . . . the self, wholly absorbed by the intimate sense of divine companionship, receives its messages in the form of 'distinct interior words' [278]

She quotes St. John of the Cross commenting on the first lines of his "Dark night of the Soul":

> The soul . . . calls the dim contemplation by which it ascends to the union of love . . . secret . . . . the natural operations of the understanding and the other powers have no share . . . The soul can neither discern nor give it a name, neither desires so to do and besides, it can discover no way nor apt comparison by which to make known a knowledge so high . . . . So that even if the soul felt the most lively desire to explain itself, and heaped up explanations, the secret would remain a secret still. Because this interior wisdom is so simply, general, and spiritual, that it enters not into the understanding under the guise of any form or image perceptible to sense. Therefore the sense and the imagination — which have not served as intermediaries, and have perceived no sensible form or colour — cannot account for it, nor form any conception of it, so as to speak about it; though the soul be distinctly aware that it feels and tastes this strange wisdom. [quoted 353].

It is interesting to compare St. John's mystical encounters with Stephen Greenblatt's descriptions of the process of "marveling" or wonderment [see above under Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*]:

> The soul is like a man who sees an object for the first time, the like of which he has never seen before; he perceives it and likes it, yet he cannot say what it is, nor give it a name, do what he will though it be even an object cognisable by the senses. . . . How much less then can that be described, which does not enter in by the sense. . . . Inexpressible in its nature, as we have said, it is rightly called secret. [quoted 353]

It is interesting too to compare descriptions of "primary narcissism, or Dickinson's "out upon Circumference" [378] with John of the Cross's next description, of the soul being "hidden" within "mystical wisdom":

> . . . it sometimes happens that this wisdom absorbs the soul and plunges it in a secret abyss wherein it sees itself distinctly as far away, and separated from, all created things; it looks upon itself as one that is placed in a profound and vast solitude whither no creature can come, and which seems an immense wilderness without limits. And this solitude is the more delicious, sweet, and lovely, the more it is deep, vast, and empty. There the soul is the more hidden, the more it is raised up above all created things . . . .This abyss of wisdom now lifts up and enlarges the soul, giving it to drink at the very sources of the science of love. Thereby it perceives how lowly is the condition of all creatures in respect to the supreme knowledge and sense of the Divine. *It also understands how low, defective, and, in a certain sense, improper, are all the words and phrases by which in this life we discuss divine things* . . . [354]

Watten, Barren. "Russian Formalism & the Present" in *Hills* 6/7:50-73. San Francisco, 1980.

Discussion of Khlebnikov (Xlebnikov) and *"zaum,"* or 'transrational language.' So Brik saw *Zaum* as more than a device used by the Futurists; *it is a basic response to unassimilated content.* [56 italics mine]

Weinstein, Norman. *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of Modern Consciousness.* New York : Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. *Language, Thought, and Reality.* John B. Carroll, ed., Cambridge, Mass. : The M.I.T. Press, 1956.

Stuart Chase in his introduction to Whorf, quotes Julian Huxley who summarizes Whorf's "evolutionary" approach to what language use can do to/for our minds: "the evolution of verbal concepts opened the door to all further achievements of man's thought" and says Whorf "goes so far as to venture that adaptation through the culture, depending, of course, on language may be displacing the biological processes of evolution." [vi] I recognize traces of this approach in my own feminist analysis of Dickinson.

Williams, William Carlos. "The Work of Gertrude Stein" ["written with the "silent co-authorship of Louis Zukofsky" according to Peter Quartermain] in *Selected Essays.*

> The goal is to keep a beleaguered line of *understanding which has movement* from breaking down and becoming a hole into which we sink decoratively to rest. [117]

Understanding as a hole, as "decorative" stasis vs. understanding as moving, restless, still inquiring, not quite understanding. The struggle, the suggestion of the mind's continual expectation of further understanding seems (this *is* Williams) characterized as a "male" agent which might *itself* become female (the "hole") which incapacitates.