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“Sometimes Saying Nothing . . . Says the Most”:
Apophysis, *Différance*, and the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

By
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of the Requirements for the Master of Arts
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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in the text and in citations:

- ADEL* *The American Dictionary of the English Language*. Ed. Noah Webster. 1828.
- EDL* *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* <http://edl.byu.edu.php>. Web.
- Fr* *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Variorum Edition, 3 vols.
Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1998. Print.
- J*
York:. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. New
Little Brown, 1960. Print.
- L* *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward.
Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1997. Print.

Introduction

After nearly one hundred years of publication and copious literary criticism, Emily Dickinson remains one of the most enigmatic figures in American literature and her poetry among the most inscrutable. In the deceptively simple ballad stanza, *x8a6x8a6*, which she appropriated from Isaac Watts's hymnal of 1720 (edited by Samuel Worcester in 1819 as *Watts & Select*), the song liturgy found in nearly every New England church and which Emily's mother owned (Miller 141-42), Dickinson can be, by turns, mysterious or playful or deadly serious or misleading or insightful or obscure, but, above all, puzzling. Page Richards' observation in *Distancing English: A Chapter in the History of the Ineffable* that inexpressibility itself is "founded in a combination of perfection and inadequacy: the human speaker falls forever short of meeting expectations demanded by the perfection of his or her subject" (3) could well have been written about Dickinson's poetry. There, "inadequacy and loss are just as prevalent to those who,

seeking perfection, are wrapped up in trying to express it or achieve it in the first place” (4).

Dickinson inhabits this unstable ground between perfection and loss, and her work is best understood as a string of negotiations, sometimes simultaneous, with one, the other, or both. Melville said, “It is hard to be finite on an infinite subject” (6). Dickinson confronted this problem as well as its opposite: seeking to be infinite on finite subjects. The means of discourse found in her letters and in her poetry reveals an unusual grasp of an unusual world; she is difficult and puzzling because reality is and because of how she writes it. Her poems are rife with both visual and audible puns, solecisms, unusual punctuation, and apparent contradictions. Dickinson uses these tools of the language of unsaying often to challenge her society’s commonly accepted versions of religion, of the divine, and of order. “As if the Sea should part” is a case in point:

As if the Sea should part
 And show a further Sea—
 And that—a further—and the Three
 But a presumption be—

 Of Periods of Seas—
 Unvisited of Shores—

Themselves the Verge of Seas to be—

Eternity—is Those— (Fr720)

The parting sea clearly recalls the biblical story in Exodus but just as quickly pushes past it; the language in this poem sends the reader off in several directions at once. The “Three,” the Trinity, is but a presumption in this poem. Dickinson’s speaker uses the antithetical senses of “Periods” in line 5 to serve her purposes: a period is at once a prolonged length of time and a complete stop. “Shores” in line 6 puns on “sure”: the traveler’s route offers no boundaries or certainties in either time or space. In “Seas to be” for “Cease to be” her speaker reemphasizes the prolonged stretch and simultaneous sudden stop. The whole stretch that goes on forever simultaneously ends with the pun. The last line adds to the linguistic anarchy by using the third person singular form of the verb “to be” to link “Eternity” and “those.” Her subject and predicate do not agree; grammar is neither prescriptive nor decisive, just like the nature of “Eternity.”

Dickinson’s pursuit of the ineffable places her within the centuries-old tradition of *apophasis*. In *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings* Michael Sells identifies apophasis as “a distinct dialectic of transcendence in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as utterly immanent” (6). In English usage, apophasis was regarded primarily as a rhetorical trope, “to mention by not mentioning,” especially during the seventeenth century, but by the nineteenth century apophasis was connected to negative theology, the *via negativa*,

the attempt to describe God by means of negation, that is, to speak only of what God is not to achieve a unity.” The apophatic tradition has understandably been allied with the approach of mysticism which similarly attempts to know God through means beyond individual perception or organized religion.

Sells traces apophysis in the West back to Plotinus (ca. 204/5-270 CE) whose *Enneads* offer an account of an ordered structure of living reality, which proceeds eternally from its transcendent First Principle, the One or Good, and descends in an unbroken succession to every level of being. The work also shows how the human self is able to ascend by a progressive purification and simplification to that union with the Good which alone can satisfy it. Thus, there are two movements in Plotinus’ universe: an outgoing from unity to multiplicity, the other a return to unification. Plotinus insists repeatedly, however, that the One or Good is beyond the reach of human thought or language. Language can only point the mind along the way to the One, not describe, encompass, or present It. In *Enneads* VI. 9. 3 he says, “Strictly speaking, we ought not to apply any terms at all to It; but we should, so to speak, run around the outside of It trying to interpret our own feelings about It, sometimes drawing near and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about It” (Armstrong VII, 315). The effort to “engage ‘the real’ in language leads to a continual turning back of language upon itself. The real is

unknowable, yet that unknowability, rather than resulting in silence, becomes the dynamic of a new discourse” (Sells 220).

Even earlier than the third century, the apophatic tradition is represented in the paradoxes of Plato’s *Parmenides*, for example, a dialogue devoted to the existence of the One. Typically, the conclusion of the dialogue is inconclusive: “It seems that, whether there is or is not a one, both that one and the others alike are and are not, and appear and do not appear to be, all manner of things in all manner of ways, with respect to themselves and to one another” (166b7-c5). Related to the self-referentiality of language is Aristotle’s definition of the Mind as “thought thinking itself” (*Metaphysics* XII, 7-9). St. Augustine’s (354-430 CE) much later *On Christian Doctrine* also testifies to the long tradition of apophatic discourse: “Have I spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable” (I. 6).

Although it is impossible to know if Dickinson read these texts, her early education at the primary school on Pleasant Street in Amherst was “ambitiously classical,” and the seven years she spent at Amherst Academy included instruction in classical literature and Latin (Farr 1). A more likely introduction to the techniques appropriate to the questioning of absolutes and to the self-analysis so prominent in her poetry came from her exposure to American transcendentalism that she found in

Emerson. Emerson's poetry, in particular, opened up for her spiritual ideas beyond the strict Calvinism of her time. "In its recalcitrant selfhood," Dickinson's poetry paradoxically seems to assert "the power, completeness, and sufficiency of self [but] also questions, exposes, and subverts such assertions . . . It is tempting to see Dickinson's retreat into the self as an accession to power, making limitation into expansion, intensity into extension, constrictive circles into infinite circumferences" (Wolosky 134-35). Her linguistic anarchy—the solecisms, oxymorons, puns, and paradoxes—gives voice to that which had no words, a goal similarly important to mystical theology. In fact, in "The Missing All': Emily Dickinson's Apophatic Poetics," William Franke places Dickinson firmly in this tradition: "If we focus on [her idiosyncratic religious faith] together with the poetry as having the character of a negative theology, much that is enigmatic, without ceasing to be so, begins also to make a clear kind of sense. I contend that Dickinson's poetry is best understood as a form of negative theology, or as what I will call 'Apophatic' discourse" (1).

Like Franke, I believe that apophasis occupies an important place within Dickinson's methodology, and it is for this reason that I have attempted to historicize her poetics in this introduction. Dickinson, however, is Janus-like: her poems not only look back to the techniques of mystical theology but her apophatic writings anticipate some of the major tenets of postmodern theoretical discourse. In particular, Dickinson's poetry

has in recent years been compared to the deconstructive philosophical/linguistic theories of Jacques Derrida.

Many have pointed out similarities between apophasis and Derrida's *différance*. In "Différance," Derrida himself addressed the issue:

the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have to delineate that *différance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.

Sells's position on apophatic discourse is one that seems informed by Derrida ("Paradoxes, aporias, and coincidences of opposites within apophatic discourse are not merely apparent contradictions. Real contradictions occur when language engages the ineffable transcendent, but these contradictions are not illogical."). But while Derrida insists that *différance* does not apply to transcendental signifieds, Sells thinks the rules of apophasis apply only to them: Of course, apophasis is not
Poetry,
 the only discourse that cannot name its subject.

drama—almost any form of art—risks [*sic*] being trivialized when its meaning is defined and paraphrased discursively . . . Apophatic texts have suffered in a particularly acute manner from the urge to paraphrase the meaning in non-apophatic language or to fill in the open referent—to say what the text really meant to say, but didn't. (3)

Différance is the something/nothing that creates all contradiction in all language and hence all meaning. In apophasis the subject of the discourse is the “non-object and nothing” from which proceeds particular feelings and understandings, and, indeed, differences (3). The distinctions do not seem to have much of a practical effect on how the two are deployed but rather where they might be applied.

Derrida addressed these similarities again nearly twenty years later in a speech “différentially” entitled “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” which he delivered at a conference on negative theology in Jerusalem in 1986. Once again, Derrida insisted that apophasis and deconstruction are distinct from one another in that apophasis asserts a “hyperessentiality” (79), the transcendental signified, a unity from which disunities flow, while in *différance* not unity but

continual deferral and endless distinction produce meaning. And differences make meaning possible.

In “Différance,” Derrida also attempts to define his terms:

What we note as *différance* will thus be the movement of the play [Difficulties appear very early on as one of the denotations of “movement” is play] that “produces” (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* which produces difference is before them in a simple and in itself unmodified and indifferent present.

Différance is the nonfull, nonsimple “origin”; it is the structured and

differing origin of differences. (286)

This space between the signifier and its multiple signifieds, this “difference” and “deferral,”

creates the movements which, depending on one’s perspective, either bless or plague language,

and they are the movements on which Dickinson capitalizes. Her manipulation of such principal

binary sets as perfection/loss, presence/absence, reason/feeling, nothing/all, and heaven/earth

structures her discourse.

As had mystics and apophatics before her (and like deconstructionist readers after her)

Dickinson used language to subvert and exalt meaning. In *My Emily Dickinson* Susan

Howe

asserts that “in prose and in poetry [Dickinson] explored the implications of breaking the law just

short of breaking off communication with a reader. Starting from scratch, she exploded habits of

standard human intercourse in her letters, as she cut across the customary chronological linearity

of poetry” (11). Dickinson’s poetics is about the movement between signifiers and signified, and

this is the site where she finds her voice. In *A Poet’s Grammar* Cristanne Miller suggests that

“Dickinson’s use of ‘Difference’ in ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ uncannily anticipates

Jacques Derrida’s idea of *différance* and of negative or deconstructive interpretation”

because

poems like this one have “no semantic or linguistic center, no focal word of origin or meaning,”

no controlling center (102). Dickinson’s texts are those of semantic contradiction, structures

where meanings cancel out each other. As she says,

A word is dead when it is said,

some say.

I say it just begins to live

that day. (Fr278A/J1212)

In its original format as part of a letter sent to her Norcross cousins thanking them for sending on

some unidentified passage, Dickinson asserts, “How long to live the truth is!” We can perhaps

read her excitement as a testament to the enduring power of words to sustain the truth.

But I

believe the poem contradicts that interpretation. A word “begins to live” at the precise moment it

is uttered because the speaker, occasion, and audience—the rhetorical situation—are unique. In

Derrida's terms, "the speaker-poet deploys a set of signifiers in an effort to construct a unique signified (the poem) that is 'anchorless,' that does not and *cannot* allude to a transcendental signified. Dickinson understood that the very act of trying to net reality with language pushes reality, like some mythic butterfly, ever farther away" (White, *Approaching* 163).

While Dickinson is certainly no mystic in the traditional sense of the term, I am suggesting that she has some clear affinities to the methodology of apophatic discourse. Her poems consistently and continually resist easy paraphrase or simple interpretation, very often towards the end of challenging accepted "truth" by revealing inherent contradictions. Her poetry, therefore, is more profitably approached from a related, but more modern, perspective. By analyzing Dickinson's style and content and by offering readings of a number of her poems, I

will ask the reader to understand her poetry in a postmodern theoretical context that makes deconstruction a viable reading strategy.

Silences

In April 1863 Emily Dickinson began a correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson that would last nearly a quarter of a century until her death in 1886. She would come to call him her “preceptor,” and he would go on to edit and help publish her poems. In one letter he asks her who her favorite writers are. Dickinson’s list includes Keats, the Brownings, Thomas Browne, and John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century artist and social critic who encouraged the realistic painting of humble plants. In *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* Judith Farr quotes Ruskin comparing the scientific to the poetic appreciation of plants:

[The scientist] counts the stamens, and affixes a name, and is content; the other [the poet] observes every character of the plant’s color and form; considering each of its attributes an element of expression, he seizes on its lines of grace or energy, rigidity, or repose; notes the

febleness or the vigor, the severity or tremulousness of its hues;
 observes its local habits . . . Thenceforward, the flower is to him a
 living creature, with histories written on its leaves, and passion
 breathing in its motions. (85)

Dickinson's experience as a botanist, which began with the herbarium she compiled as a girl and

continued in the conservatory her father had constructed in their family home as her interest matured, led her to approach her life and environment with both a scientific and poetic sensibility. Her numerous gardens on the family property and her frequent use of flowers as emblems and metaphors demonstrate how she easily moved in both worlds.

Fred White has called Dickinson, "the poet of the deliberately lived moment, of physical presence, of life's unstoppable movement" ("Dramas 104). The continuum of her life, like the

book of herbs and flowers she created, was measured probingly, deliberately where all the nuances of growth and loss were carefully catalogued. She did not limit her scrutiny; her lifelong habit of observation led her to conclude in a letter to Higginson in 1862: "My Business is Circumference" (l. 268). She adapted that phrase on two other occasions, for in a

letter to the Hollands she wrote, "My business is to love . . . My Business is to Sing." The guiding image evokes boundlessness: love is a condition without end, and in song the audible sound of the voice extends across a space the ear cannot measure. When, in

Dickinson's terms, individuals go "out upon Circumference," they stand on the edge of an unbounded and quiet space. It makes perfect sense that one of her most important investigations was into silence.

In *Emily Dickinson's Marble Disc*, Hiroko Uno quotes Swiss theologian Max Picard that "silence can exist without language, but language cannot exist without silence" (11). For Picard,

the silence of nature is a conflicting silence from the human point of view. It is a blessed silence because it gives man an intuitive feeling of the great silence that was before the world and out of which everything arose. And it is oppressive at the same time because it puts man back into the state in which the word might be taken away from him again into that original silence. (*Hermitary*)

Dickinson's dashes, ellipses, choice of soft consonants, and often her subject matter attempt to weave silence out of language, to find the meaningful silence that exists "out of Plumb of Speech" (Fr1120/J98). Uno says, "[Dickinson] delights in finding secret beauty and struggling to reproduce it in words, even if success is continually deferred to a point 'further off,'" and that "she believes that we can *feel* [emphasis mine] the meaning she most wants to express in the silences of the poetry" (19).

“Have you got a Brook in your little heart,” (Fr. 94, J136) explores the speaker’s private, silent “secret.” Written in 1859, the second year of Dickinson’s significant production, it is one of twenty she would write with “brook” as the central metaphor over the years. She had written only ten poems prior to 1858, forty-three that year, and would almost double that production to eight-three poems in 1859. This poem, composed so early in her career, stakes a claim to a quiet and beautiful inner experience which I would argue is at the heart of her writing endeavor and speaks to her oxymoronic reason for writing poetry: the joy of failing in attempts to speak silence. Rather than declare the importance of, or define “silence,” the speaker visits a place so subtle, so quiet that she must seek validation; confirmation of its existence from her reader and so begins with a question:

Have you got a Brook in your little heart,
 Where bashful flowers blow,
 And blushing birds go down to drink—
 And shadows tremble so—

And nobody knows, so still it flows,
 That any brook is there,
 And yet your little draught of life

Is daily drunken there—

Why—look out for the little brook in March,
 When the rivers overflow,
 And the snows come hurrying from the hills,
 And the bridges often go—

And later, in August it may be—
 When the meadows parching lie,
 Beware, lest this little brook of life,
 Some burning noon go dry!

The rhyme scheme remains a regular *xaxa* repeating the *o*-rhyme in stanzas one and three, but the meter varies irregularly from Dickinson's (and Watt's) standard ballad pattern. She adds an additional one or two beats in the first line of each stanza, and an extra beat in the third line of the third and fourth stanzas, making the quiet, private place she describes slightly irregular as well. In a silent commentary on the nature of the hidden brook, the poem remains regular in its irregularity throughout.

As the brook rolls along in this poem it gets smaller and smaller—going from a capital-B- brook, to "any" in stanza two, until it actually threatens to disappear ("go dry")

at the last—little, littler, littlest, gone. The “heart” is little; as is the “draught of life,” as is the brook itself in the third and fourth stanzas. The first stanza describes a place of such intimacy that the flowers are “bashful,” the birds “blushing” and the shadows “tremble.” In the final stanza “brook of life” puns on Book of Life: the pun at once adds to the sense of the mystical sublime while at the same time adding a sense of Derridean indeterminacy: the poem reckons the “brook of life” more important than Genesis’s “Book of Life,” which records the names of the saved. For the speaker, the brook represents the source of sustenance and meaning, and she seeks in quiet and solitude.

According to the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* (EDL)¹, brook’s primary meaning is, of course, the small stream. It has additional denotations of “living water; natural flowing current; [fig.] truth; knowledge; intelligence; [and] sublime thought” or “outpouring; outflow; [fig.] joy; pleasure; delight; refreshing scene; beautiful perspective.” While her *Webster* does not, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) cites another meaning Dickinson certainly would have been familiar with: brook as an intransitive verb going back to Old English, meaning to enjoy or endure and usually used with the negative as in to “brook no compromise.” The brook is at once the stream, a “sublime thought,” and, elliptically, a source of strength or enjoyment. Exploiting the multiple meanings of the word, Dickinson works to achieve an external description of an

internal state. Dickinson's speaker is supported and upheld by an inner silence, which she then brings out to the world. Her speaker brings an internal experience of quiet to unsettling future situations—the little brook in March when it suggests an overflow of emotion, and in August

¹ *Emily Dickinson Lexicon (EDL)* is a still developing on-line dictionary of alphabetized headword entries for all of the words in Emily Dickinson's collected poems drawn from the *Noah Webster Dictionary* of 1844 which the poet referred to as her "only companion" (L261). A team of lexicographers and reviewers has examined almost 100,000 individual word occurrences to create approximately 9,275 headword entries. when it signifies an inner deadness. Dickinson also removes the brook from its referent by creating an independent experience not physically connected to any time or place: the brook at once references and does not reference any external thing. She is a part of nature and nature is a part of her.

Likewise, "To Tell the Beauty would decrease" (Fr 1689, J 1700) deals with wordless internals. Of the nearly 1800 poems in Dickinson's *oeuvre*, Franklin is unable to put a date to an even 100, this one among them. He divined the date of origin by examining the changes in the poet's handwriting over time, but the only surviving version of this poem is a copy in the hand of Dickinson's sister-in-law, Susan. It is telling that,

absent physical evidence, one cannot tell when this poem might have been written: Dickinson remained faithful to her muse throughout. Uno maintains that, “Dickinson had to create the beauty and truth lurking in silence obliquely and silently” (23).

To tell the Beauty would decrease
 To state the Spell demean
 There is a syllableless Sea
 Of which it is the sign—
 My will endeavors for it's [*sic*] word
 And fails, but entertains
 A Rapture as of Legacies—
 Of introspective Mines—

The EDL defines “Spell” as both the way of “spelling a word,” and “the magically powerful formula of words”; it is at once the control of language and the control language has, the ability to create language and language’s ability to create reality. Her neologism “syllableless” triple puns on syllable, “syllabus” and on “sibyl, “the ancient Greek prophetess who gave voice (sometimes in a state of rapture) to the otherwise wordless teachings of the oracle. Dickinson’s neologism suggests at once an outline of a course of study, the absence of any words, which could make up such an outline, and the interpretation of the voice of silence. That “syllableless” defines “Sea” speaks to the

sea's vastness and silence. "Rapture" denotes bliss, sometimes of the earthly and sometimes of the ethereal variety. "Legacies" refer to a gift or a bequest; in this case something the speaker has left herself, "my will." "Mines" has the two senses, both the possessive pronoun and the "source of wealth or riches," and in this case they are "introspective": the speaker gains them by looking within.

A reader may have a difficult time parsing the subject and object in this poem. In a move seemingly designed to promote the linguistic indeterminacy Dickinson loved to create, the syntax seems to be more Latinate than English: "it" in line 4 refers ahead to the next four lines, not back to the previous lines. That her "will endeavors for it's word / And fails," proves (or suggests) to her the "sea" of such impossibilities. "It's" may or may not be an error: its as possessive or it's as contraction: "its" for the word she seeks; "it's" for the word she cannot find, and it, therefore, remains its own word, either a single, unspelled, unspoken word which signifies by lack of signification, which expresses by its inability to express.

Uno also notes the way the poet uses sound to help convey quiet: "Dickinson poems which describe a silence make repeated use of the consonant *s*. In "To Tell the Beauty would decrease," the many *s* sounds whisper hush and silence and so like the ocean's emptiness they still the heart and mind. All the puns, *double* and *triple entendres* work against easy interpretation and toward ambiguity (or beyond ambiguity to what

Derrida calls "undecidability"), away from speaking towards the final pun—the “introspective mines.” Finally, the dash at the ends of line even and eight: where one would expect enjambment between “Legacies” and “Of,” the poet has put a pause in the form of a dash. If a reader honors the dash, the legacy is of “introspective mines.” If one pauses at the dash, the “of introspective mines” refers back to “raptures,” making the “mines” parallel to “Legacies.” The “introspective mines” become a pursuit rather than a bequest, or, even better, both at once.

The silent signifiers continue in a poem Franklin dates to the second half of 1863, “Beauty – be not caused – It Is” (Fr654, J 516). Dickinson delivers yet another nonverbal communication about the silent, overlooked spaces. The poet plays with form—the poem is a visual pun: in a poem about “creases,” she creates creases.

Beauty—be not caused— It Is—

Chase it, and it ceases—

Chase it not, and it abides—

Overtake the Creases

In the Meadow—when the Wind

Runs his fingers thro' it—

Deity will see to it

That You never do it—

Once again, the first four lines are heavy with *s* sounds as the poet establishes the conditions for appreciation of the subtle. Two lines of this poem are “written” without signs, which become visible when they differ from adjoining signs. The creases are at once visible and invisible. They make the reader pause, but the enjambment at the end of line four creates a contradiction--a rush across the very point where the second crease creates pause. The dashes in the first line surrounding “be not caused” and after “Meadow” in line 5 once again create spaces that the reader is inclined to rush over, to miss. Is the “Meadow” in line 5 or line 7? How does one calculate the value of the empty space? The beauty seems both subtle and commonplace; the wind and the spaces the wind creates become discernible only in reference to grass in the meadow. This poem replaces Dickinson’s usual gait, alternating lines of seven beats with lines of six. She creates “creases” by the additional spacing before and after line four.

In the first line Dickinson asserts the primacy of “beauty.” What is that which is not caused, but simply is? According to Emerson, “Beauty is the Creator of the universe” (“Poet” 289). The way to apprehend it is to sit still and let it come to you. Appreciation requires patience and quiet. The internal “beauty” becomes externalized and vice versa. Watching the wind move the tall grass (an easily overlooked phenomenon) in the

meadow creates a beautiful experience, but attempting to control or capture the beautiful renders no experience at all. “Deity” frustrates any attempts to understand “beauty” intellectually or to control it. Chasing it ensures futility, chasing it not, joy. Dickinson uses language to “get a taste of what otherwise lies beyond experience” (White 166). Finally, Line 7, “fingers thro’it” makes it sound as if beauty has its fingers at the throat. If “beauty is the Creator of the Universe,” it has its fingers at Dickinson’s throat.

Both of Picard’s senses of silence, “blessed” and “oppressive,” are on display in 1865’s “There is no Silence in the Earth— so silent “(Fr 1004, J 10040) and the undated “The words the happy say” (Fr 1767, J 1750). Silence can be comforting or threatening. How can you tell the difference? Her signifier has no absolute meaning; its meaning can only be gleaned through the chain of signifiers. Thus the reader can feel the speaker’s unspoken joy in

The words the happy say
 Are paltry melody
 But those the silent feel
 Are beautiful—

And likewise the unspoken pain in

There is no Silence in the Earth—so silent
 As that endured

Which uttered, would discourage Nature
 And haunt the World.

Terrifying quiet takes center stage in “Death’s Waylaying not the Sharpest.” As she had in “A word is dead when it is said,” in “Death’s Waylaying” the speaker-poet’s references are to the here and now rather than to anything transcendent. As in “To Tell the Beauty . . .,” silence is a signifier. According to Franklin’s note, Dickinson’s uncle, Joseph Sweetser walked out of his home on 21 January 1874 and was never heard from again. This poem was sent with a single line of introduction, “Saying nothing, my Aunt Katie, sometimes says the most,” and seems to represent a unique communication and develop the more general observation in “There is no Silence in the earth –so silent,” written nearly ten years before.

Death’s Waylaying not the sharpest
 Of the thefts of Time—
 There Marauds a sorer Robber—
 Silence— is his name—
 No Assault, nor any Menace
 Doth betoken him.
 But from Life’s consummate Cluster,
 He supplants the Balm. (Fr 1315, J 1296)

In this poem the poet embeds gaps into the poem particularly in line 4: after “silence” comes silence in the form of dashes before and after the phrase “is his name.” I imagine Dickinson’s aunt was plagued by the two silences—one of her husband and one of those who, not knowing what to say, said nothing. The poem seems to suggest possibilities for Sweetser’s disappearance and they are painful” indeed: “Death,” “Marauds,” “Robber,” “Assault,” and Menace” are a chain of signifiers that refer painfully to each other, rather to anything known or understood. Missing from the communication are any attempts at assurance; rather, the poem offers understanding of and identification with Katie Sweetser’s plight.

The poet’s deep-seated ambivalence towards silence and sense is also on full display in “I felt a Funeral in my Brain,” (Fr340/J280), which Franklin’s detection places in the summer of 1862.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
 And Mourners to and fro
 Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
 That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
 A Service, like a Drum—

Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
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—

Helen Vendler calls this poem an “account of a nervous breakdown, indistinguishable from death because it so obliterates consciousness” (141). The meter is perfectly

regular, as is the rhyme scheme until the very last word; the poet abandons regularity only at the very last. As menacingly as the poem reads, think of it as an escape (albeit a painful one), and it feels differently. If “brain,” “sense,” and “Reason” are privileged over their unstated opposites (heart, intuition, feeling?), then the poem can be read as a response to the constraints of societal and religious (“Heavens’) orthodoxy. “Sense . . . breaking through” sounds military, as if the speaker had been under siege. “A Service, Like a Drum— / . . .beating – beating” sounds a little like the experience of a particularly bright child in a particularly dull class. The “treading – treading,” the “beating – beating,” and the “mourners” trooping “across [her] Soul” can be read as her speaker’s reaction to the dismal imposition of conventional wisdom. The only way out for the speaker is to be “wrecked,” and to fall through a what-must-have-appeared-solid “Plank in Reason.” The speaker and “silence” make a painful escape, akin to falling down a flight of stairs, but at the end are at least liberated from the constant droning of the orthodox, their “Boots of Lead” and what they claim to “know.” “Silence can either “bless” or “oppress,” as Picard pointed out. In “I felt a Funeral in my brain,” it is not the speaker’s enemy; it is her ally. By choosing signifiers that point several directions at once, the poem misleads the reader: death leads to life, entrapment to freedom. Hiding within one poem is another poem—within one series of signifiers, another.

Puzzles

In his 1992 *Aporias*, a Greek term for logical contradictions, Derrida explores the ultimate undecideables—death, language, and aporia itself. “What about borders with respect to death? About borders of truth and borders of property? We are going to wander around in the neighborhood of this question” (3). For Derrida, aporia proves his point—there are inherent contradictions in Western thought created by *différance*.

Michael Calarco addresses Derrida’s exploration of aporia, the unsolvable puzzle, and its significance to his work. In a word seemingly made for *différance*, aporia has three meanings, two contradictory and the third referring to irresolvable conflict; it is the border impassable because it is impermeable, or impassable because it *is* permeable, or impassable because it is completely and irreconcilably unresolvable. Derrida uses a pun to get at multiple, simultaneous meanings: “Death and borders are figures of passage as much as nonpassage. Derrida captures this double sense in the variously translatable phrase: ‘*Il y va d’un certain pas,*’ ‘It involves a certain step/not,’ where *pas* in French

means both step and not” (Calarco). No border can maintain purity: the idea of death invades life; the other contaminates the self.

Dickinson also liked to “wander around” the same neighborhood, and she recognizes and takes advantage of the same issues. Death represents the uncrossable border we all cross, over which no one ever crosses back. According to the EDL, Dickinson makes over 300 references to death or dying in her poems. Indeed, many of her most famous poems deal with death and the pain of separation, “Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell” (Fr1773/J1732). But she also invokes death to kindle a sense of urgency: “that it will never come again is what makes life so sweet” (Fr1761/J1741). Likewise, she uses language both to confuse and clarify as she weaves her mysteries. Death and puzzles and the puzzle of language-- Derrida sounds a great deal like Dickinson

In an October 1870 letter to Higginson which she apparently never mailed, Dickinson begins with this brief poem:

The Riddle we can guess
 We speedily despise—
 Not anything is stale so long
 As Yesterday’s surprise— (Fr1180/J1222)

This poem suggests that her notoriously difficult style was a deliberate strategy in the manner of the *Zen koan*, a word puzzle in the Buddhist tradition designed to demonstrate the futility of reaching enlightenment through words or thought. Probably the most famous *koan*, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is typical of the genre in that it asks a question which has no answer at all. Dickinson’s puzzles communicate more than that, but as Susan Howe has said she “came just short of “breaking off communication with the reader . . . [and] exploded habits of standard human intercourse in her letters, as she cut across the customary chronological linearity of poetry” (11).

Dickinson and Derrida take long hard looks at the insoluble issues and find that they have to bend language to do it. In two letters to her friend Samuel Bowles written in early 1862, the poet registers her problems with language: “Because I could not say it – I fixed it in the Verse “(L251) and “The Old words are numb - and there a’nt any new ones” (L252).

Dickinson’s poetry reveals a deep interest in areas that do not yield satisfactorily to either the interrogations of science or the assertions of faith, and so she writes in a poem dated to the autumn of 1862 (Fr373/J501):

This World is not conclusion.

A Species lies beyond—

Invisible as Music—

But positive, as Sound—
 It beckons, and it baffles—
 Philosophy—don't know—

And through a Riddle, at the last—
 Sagacity, must go—
 To guess it, puzzles scholars

The only period in the piece comes after the first line: that the “world is not conclusion” is a conclusion. Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* had been published three years before; the reader infers the next step in development, whatever it may be, hides within the present one. In a poem which foregrounds sound, a silent sign hints at contradiction. “Philosophy,” “Sagacity,” and “scholars” must all stand silent in the presence of the aporia even as it intrigues. The speaker seems as confused as anyone else about its nature (It both “beckons” and “baffles.”). Her poems resist interpretation in some of the same ways life itself does. Some refuse to name their subjects; some hide one meaning behind another, and some distort the language to frustrate easy understanding.

For example,, Helen Vendler calls “It sifts from Leaden Sieves –“ (Fr291/J311) a poem “describing a snowstorm [which] nowhere contains the word snow . . . a ‘riddle poem’ asking the reader to guess the unnamed subject” (108). Franklin dates the earliest

version to the spring of 1862, so, barring a late freak storm, the poet recreates the scene from memory. In 1883, Dickinson sent a version, which omitted the second, third, and fourth stanzas and altered the fifth, to an editor at a Boston publishing house. Perhaps despairing of ever being understood, she entitled it “The Snow.” Within the riddle of the snow, she wraps another more complicated riddle on the nature of death and new life.

It sifts from Leaden Sieves—

It powders all the Wood.

It fills with Alabaster Wool

The Wrinkles of the Road—

It makes an Even Face

Of Mountain, and of Plain—

Unbroken Forehead from the East

Unto the East again—

It reaches to the Fence—

It wraps it Rail by Rail

Till it is lost in Fleeces—

It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack—and Stem—

A Summer's empty Room—

Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,

Recordless, but for them—

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts

As Ankles of a Queen—

Then stills its Artisans—like Ghosts—

Denying they have been—

The stanzas she omitted have the potential to challenge limiting the reading to being solely about one topic. “Face”(5), “Forehead” (7), “Joints” (14), “Wrists” (16), and “Ancles” [*sic*] (19) all refer to body parts and, in the case of “face” and “forehead,” seem to suggest the wool being pulled over someone’s eyes—a sense enhanced by the “Celestial Vail” (12). The entire effect creates an image of a death shroud covering a person from head to foot. All are equal in death—it “makes an Even Face / Of Mountain, and of Plain—.” “Fleeces” (11) has the dual meanings of sheep’s wool or hide and, as a verb, to rob or cheat, as death is sometimes said to do. The penultimate line also links

snow and death, by combining “Artisans,” for which the ADEL offers “snowflakes” as a figurative meaning,” and “Ghosts.” One word suggests beginning and the other endings.

“East” (9,10) takes advantage of the two senses of the word: in New England, the wind in a serious storm blows from the northeast, so the snow appears to be coming from that direction, and, of course the sun rises in the east, and thus has become a metaphor for new life and the messiah. Beneath the snow cover waits the promised resurrection: “So from the mould/ Scarlet and Gold/ Many a bulb will rise—“ (Fr110/J66). The structure of the poem also suggests life interrupted and the resumed: the third (and central) stanza concludes a thought in mid-stanza and begins a new one on the last line, “It flings a Crystal Vail,” which itself suggests interruption and resumption as it enjambes with “On stump – and Stack – and Stem –.” The rhyme scheme also suggests something slightly off, hinting at the poet’s irregular religious views: four of the five pairs (Field/Road, Plain/again, Room/them, and Queen,/been) are slant either because the rhyme is so slight, or the poet has matched words that look like they should rhyme but do not. The last line is ambiguous, as “denying they have been” could as well refer to the snow as to what the snow hides.

Dickinson’s subject also goes unspoken in “I like to see it lap the Miles—” (Fr383/J585), which Franklin also dates to the autumn of 1862:

I like to see it lap the Miles—

And lick the Valleys up—

And stop to feed itself at Tanks—

And then—prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains—

And supercilious peer

In Shanties—by the sides of Roads—

And then a Quarry pare

To fit it's sides

And crawl between

Complaining all the while

In horrid—hooting stanza—

Then chase itself down Hill—

And neigh like Boanerges—

Then—prompter than a Star

Stop—docile and omnipotent

At its own stable door—

When this poem appeared in 1891 in the second volume of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Higginson, it was no longer a puzzle; it appeared with the title “The Railway Train.” The poet’s father had been instrumental in bringing the railway to Amherst in 1853, several years before she recused herself from society, and she had traveled to Washington D.C. to visit her congressman father in 1854, so it is difficult to imagine she had never experienced train travel. But the title robbed the poem of much of its complexity and punch. Without the title, “it” (1) has no referent. Whatever “it“ is, the speaker personifies it repeatedly: it “laps,” “licks,” “steps,” and “feeds itself.” “It” is “supercilious,” and “peers” godlike into the “shanties” (and the lives of their inhabitants) and then “complain[s].” “Quarry pare” take advantage of the two senses of “quarry” and “pare,” the former as both the excavated site and as the prey, the latter to either divide or tear apart: her object either divides stone as might the railroad, or tears apart prey as might a beast of some sort after it has “peer[ed]” at them.

Once she has personified the object, the speaker combines some equine and some scriptural/religious references: “neigh” and “stable” come down on the four-footed side, while “Boanerges” (“Sons of Thunder ” is the nickname Jesus gave to James and John [Mark 3: 17], and which came to mean, by extension, a loud preacher) and “Docile and omnipotent” combined with “Star” and “stable” make a reference to the birth of Jesus. In addition to plays on words, the shape of this poem supports its subject. When the poem

calls for “a prodigious step,” the poem itself makes a prodigious step; lines are enjambed clear across stanza breaks. The dashes at the ends of six lines exaggerate the pauses at the end of the lines in which they appear, giving the poem a staccato feel.

When the editors gave this poem a title, they robbed the reader of the chance to question the meaning, to figure it out, to discover alternative meanings to the various words, which could propel the poem towards ambiguity or Derridean undecidability. The new conveyance seems to the speaker at once human, animal, and divine. Dickinson wants the reader to do with the poem what she wants him to do with life—look under the surface and beyond the obvious; the real danger is in thinking you understand things and thus misunderstand them.

Danger versus safety, risk versus security, and certainty versus indeterminacy are at the heart of a poem that in both content and form seem unlike anything else she wrote. It resembles her other work principally in her characteristic difficulty and ambiguity/undecidability. Written late in 1861, the passion of the speaker is palpable and discernible by confusion and a decided lack of clarity:

Wild Nights –Wild Nights

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

Futile— the Winds—
 To a Heart in port—
 Done with the Compass—
 Done with the Chart!
 Rowing in Eden—
 Ah, the Sea!
 Might I but moor—Tonight—
 In Thee! (Fr269/J24)

The meter appears decidedly, disturbingly irregular—lines of six syllables are followed by lines of three or of two, and at least half the lines begin in trochees—but Vendler points out that “Dickinson’s arrangements of these lines in dimeter quatrains obscures their basic construction as rhyming couplets” (93). While Vendler’s observation is accurate, the manuscript reveals that the poem appears the way the poet had organized it (Franklin, *Manuscript* 222). The rhyme scheme, so odd when looked at as quatrains, *xaaa*, in the first, becoming slant in the next, but with a close internal rhyme in “heart” (6) and “chart” (8), becomes perfectly regular as couplets. The poet has used meter and rhyme to obscure poetic diction in this piece. In “Emily Dickinson’s Wild Nights” James L. Dean deals with the problems he had in interpreting this piece:

Its meanings are slippery, a fact to which the great divergence in critical opinion eloquently testifies . . . The primary contrasts in the poem are between port (suggesting safety, the heart in repose, Edenic certainty, and inertia) and the sea (about which cluster ideas of wildness, darkness, winds, danger, and motion). These contrasts prepare us to find two different hearts: the first is secure and has no need of compass and chart; the second requires danger and ecstasy.

Dean cannot determine whether “Eden” and safety are positives or negatives for the speaker, whether, given the choice, she might not prefer to be on the more stimulating sea. Eden was the place humans were banished from for disobedience, and the speaker seems eager to return to the scene of the crime. Is the winds’ futility a positive or a negative? Do “thee” in line 2 and “Thee” in the last line refer to the same person? Dean cannot tell: “Finally, however, it is not the poem's verbal ingenuity or the boldness of its assertion that moves us. Rather, we feel the intensity of longing and desire as the speaker moves from a general wish for wild nights to an intensely desired, specific ‘Tonight.’ Dickinson shows us how separation enlarges desire, how intensity feasts on absence.” The poet creates an instance of the confusion generated by passion and intensity

Intense experience also characterizes a poem written in 1872 and found (according to Franklin) “on a scrap of stationery,” “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—”

(Fr1263/J 1129). In a work often taken as a self-reflexive poem about the poetic strategy for communicating the “truth,” Dickinson manages to hide a bolt of lightning in the first four lines:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind—

The poem begins with a bang, the spondees “Tell all,” and “Too bright,” the only two in the poem. The “slant” of line one combines with “Circuit” of the second line to form the bolt. What is a lightning bolt but a slant of electricity (circuit)? Line 3 offers another hint: “too bright.” The whole package together is the “Truth’s superb surprise”—everything is revealed in the momentary brilliance. In line five she reveals what she has been discussing all along, “As Lightning.” Four binaries occur in the eight lines: truth/lies, slant/circuit, dazzle/ gradually (further highlighted by the off, internal rhyme) and kind/blind—the clashes that create the lightning. The antonyms and the lack of

punctuation destabilize the language, challenging any single meaning. The problem with an “explanation kind” about lightning, of course, is that it can kill; the fairy tales about lightning are analogous to the fairy tales humans tell themselves about death. One could question the efficacy of the strategy. The last words “every man be blind,” reflect back on the whole—in Dickinson’s view, mankind is missing a bolt of lightning, missing the momentary illumination it can provide, missing the beauty within and without.

Once again, the poem is not simply about one thing. “Tell all the Truth” combined with “Circuit” and the last word, “blind” (blindfolded justice) are terms that recall the legal system (both her father and brother were lawyers). And the third meaning, a reflection on poetry and communication, work at once together and separately to disguise the poet’s meaning, to create multiple meanings, and to defeat easy meaning. Dickinson does not name the subject in this poem. If the truth be told, the truth cannot be told—but it can be danced with. For the woman who so loved words, the irony of forsaking words, even in the context of making them her medium, must have been delightful: “Because I could not say it—I fixed it in the verse” (L251).

Dickinson seems to embody Keats’s notion of “Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason . . . with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (1209). Walter Jackson Bate would

paraphrase and expand on Keats's insight:

Our lives are filled with change, uncertainties, mysteries; no one complete system of rigid certainties will explain it fully. We can only grasp and understand the elusive flux of life only by being imaginatively open-minded, sympathetic, receptive—by extending every possible feeler that we may have within us. But we can achieve this active awareness, only by *negating* our own egos. We must not only rise above our own vanity and prejudices, but resist the temptation to make our minds up on everything, and to always have a ready neat answer. (Bate 1209n)

In the same way Dickinson explores the power of absence, the force of the negative, and examines it “unflinchingly.”

Absence

Absence and presence are often defined with reference to themselves or each other; they either evade easy definition or are defined by what they are not. In their body of work both Derrida and Dickinson repeatedly explore the concepts of absence and presence. In their introduction to Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," Charles Kaplan and William Anderson summarize Derrida on the subject:

Derrida uses the word trace . . . to indicate that hidden within a sign . . . is an imperceptible imprint or trace of the radical other that difference

implies. Trace is an *absent presence* [emphasis mine] that a sign is not a stable match of signifiers with signified, . . . Instead, signifiers in the freeplay of *différance* achieve meaning through the hidden trace of their opposites . . . Once having exposed the error of the notion of “center,” or having “deconstructing the construct of centeredness, Derrida can also call into question the system of thought that depends on the concept of center or presence. (494)

Derrida’s aversion to central control would likely have had its origins in the experience of being a fifteen year-old Jewish boy in French Algeria during World War II. The controlling authority of the Nazis exercised through Vichy France had to give rise to a suspicion of central authority and a recognition of its tools. The further away one got from the center, the more clearly one could see it and the “play” in its supposed fixedness. Also, if one were a student of language, one could see the abuse of language to create illusion. His theory of *différance* served political and personal ideological ends; indeed, the political became personal and vice versa. Dickinson also invested in a variety of absences and called into question aspects of centeredness. She voluntarily separated herself from society, from religion and questioned, in theory and practice, the gender roles of her day. Arthur Habegger, in *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The*

Life of Emily Dickinson, wrote, “Accepting, embracing her exclusion from the public world, she redefined it as the freedom to be and do whatever she chose at home” (550).

When Higginson asked her if she ever missed visitors or the outside world, she answered, “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time . . . I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough” (L342a). Time apart she took as an opportunity. She would write negatively about company: “Society for me my misery / Since gift of Thee” (Fr1195/J11534), and positively about “loneliness”: “Of so divine a Loss / We enter but the Gain, /Indemnity for Loneliness / That such a Bliss has been.” (Fr1202/J1179). In 1867 her speaker attempts to convey the benefits of her singular state:

There is another Loneliness

That many die without—
Not want of friend occasions it
Or circumstance of Lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought
And whoso it befall
Is richer than could be revealed
By mortal numeral— (Fr1138/J1116)

“Lot” says more than it appears to at first blush. “Lot” is one of the most famous widowers/exiles/righteous men/incestuous fathers in Genesis, left alone by an act of God, which probably did not seem like much of a gift to him. The ADEL defines “Lot” as “that which, in human speech, is called chance, hazard, fortune; but in strictness of language, is the determination of Providence.” “Lot” then refers to both positive and negative interventions.

“Whoso it befalls” results from both chance and a gift from either “nature” or “thought,” or most curiously, “sometimes.” When the poem lists the possible sources for the other “loneliness,” where it appears to name two, it actually names three: the commas surrounding the initial “Sometimes” in “nature, sometimes, sometimes thought,” make “sometimes” its own category. In this context the word has no referent, no trace. Without context the word is a no word, an undecideable, a non-signifier that signifies by its lack of signification. “Loneliness” occurs in a silent place as the *s* sound surrounds it in “sometimes, sometimes.” She isolates “sometimes.” In its context you would think it modifies “nature,” but it does not. “Sometimes” is presented as “once,” so that if one pluralizes it, what is the effect? Has one defined “once” as “more than once”? “Sometimes” is utterly meaningless in this context. The poet cannot identify the source of the experience.

Isolation also became a quotient in Dickinson’s personal life. She notably absented herself from the most influential religious movement of her time, the Second Great Awakening, which swept across the United States from 1800 through the 1840s. Her biographer, Richard Sewall, sums up her non-participation: “She refused to follow her pious friends to the ark of safety when she was a girl, and later she openly confessed a scorn of doctrines” (238). She would express her “scorn” in the spring of 1863:

My period had come for Prayer—

No other Art—would do—

My Tactics missed a rudiment—

Creator—Was it you?

God grows above—so those who pray

Horizons—must ascend—

And so I stepped upon the North

To see this Curious Friend—

His House was not—no sign had He—

By Chimney—nor by Door

Could I infer his Residence—

Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler—

Were all that I could see—

Infinitude—Had'st Thou no Face

That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended—

Creation stopped—for Me—

But awed beyond my errand—

I worshipped—did nor “pray”— (Fr525/J564)

As noted earlier, it is difficult to overstate the importance of wordplay in Dickinson's poetry. According to Cynthia Hallen, “Martha Dickinson Bianchi reported that her aunt Emily read the dictionary ‘as a priest his breviary’” (qtd. in *EDL*, FAQ). A reader can safely assume that Dickinson's word choices are deliberate and calculated. Dickinson first used “period” (1) in a poem in the spring of 1863 and would return to it in thirteen poems in the next two years. She employed the word in its many and contradictory connotations. Here, the word suggests a beginning time and an end time—the speaker turns to “prayer” after all else fails. “Prayer” itself the poet puns with “Vast Prairies of Air” (12), as a comment on the futility of the practice.

As a noun, “Art” (2) denotes both a “power” and a “method,” and as a verb is the second person of the verb to be. The speaker comments on the notion that “prayer” can grant power over what she addresses. “My Tactics missed a rudiment -- / Creator -- Was it you?” (4). “Rudiment” denotes “the original of anything in its first form. Thus in botany, the germen, ovary, or seed bud, is the rudiment of the fruit yet in embryo; and the seed is the rudiment of a new plant” (ADEL). The plant then becomes the rudiment of the seed. In Dickinson’s beloved botany, the rudiment is part of a circle rather than a freestanding initial event. The “Creator,” rather than being endlessly deferred, becomes part of the cycle—“essential,” but not “hyperessential.” As noted above, Derrida’s use of this term refers to the “transcendental signified,” a unity from which all things flow, while in *différance* continual deferral and endless distinction produce meaning.

In stanzas three and four, the speaker looks but does not find--how Derridean that “no sign had He” (9). But in not finding what she thought she was after, she finds different gifts—“Silence” (17) and “Creation” (18). She is “awed” and discovers the distinction between to “worship” and to “pray”: in the EDL the former suggests to “venerate without words; praise instead of petitioning; give thanks for blessings without asking for anything further”; the latter to “ask; request; urge; entreat; beg; importune.” The speaker prefers silence in the presence of the “Silence.” “Creation stopped—for Me --” echoes her own,

“Because I could not stop for Death— / He kindly stopped for me —” (Fr 479 /J712) written only a few months before—“Silence,” “Creation,” and “Death,” the recipe for aporia.

She had not altered her opinion much by 1882:

Those—dying then,
 Knew where they went—
 They went to God’s Right Hand—
 That Hand is amputated now
 And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief
 Makes the Behavior small—
 Better an ignis fatuus
 Than no illume at all— (Fr1581/J1551)

In this nine-line poem, “God cannot be found” sits dead center, but in a poem with amputation as an important metaphor, the stanza break cuts off at the wrong place. The empty space after the central line suggests both the vacuum that has been left and the place where “God” is hidden. For Dickinson, it would have to have been science and observation would have cut that hand off. When Galileo had peered through his telescope more than two centuries before and discovered that there was no there there, it did not spell the end of “Belief,” but rather made “the Behavior small.” The light of Heaven became a false light, an “ignis fatuus.” The speaker pays a price for her frank assessment: “Perception of an object costs / Precise the Object’s loss -- (Fr1103/J1071).

Heaven goes, but earth remains. There is no outside the text, but there is “another Loneliness.”

In the same poem Dickinson observes that the “object absolute, is Nought -- / Perception sets it fair.” In “Water is taught by thirst” written in the summer of 1859 (Fr93/J135), she creates binaries that do not favor one side over the other, as the value resides in what is “taught,” and presence reveals itself in absence through enhanced perception:

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land—by the Oceans passed.
Transport— by throe—
Peace— by its battles told—
Love, by Memorial Mold—
Birds, by the Snow.

Three of the six lines end in periods and three in dashes. The more tangibles “Water,” “Land,” and “Birds” earn periods, while the less tangible “Transport,” “Peace,” and “Love” merit dashes. She links the more ephemeral qualities more closely to one another. “Birds” come last. Are they a sign for the poet of the previous three intangibles? The speaker teaches and learns values not in absolute terms, but by their equally valuable absences.

Gain and loss seemed to have been on the poet’s mind that summer. “Success is counted sweetest” (Fr112/J67) exacts an even more graphic price for an even clearer understanding:

Success is counted sweetest

By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

In a slight variation from ballad meter, she alternates lines of seven syllables with lines of six until lines seven to nine add an extra syllable, destroying the rhythm and muddying the price and cost of victory. The poem begins with an iamb, “Success,” but then defers and defers and defers to “sorest need” (4), “defeated – dying” (9), “forbidden” (10), and “agonized” (12) and ends where it began with another iamb beginning line eight. The poet separates “dying” from the rest of the poem with dashes on either side—the only ones in the poem. “Forbidden” suggests “forbidden fruit”; like Adam and Eve, the dying man has paid a steep price for knowledge. She repeats “clear” at the moment of victory and of defeat. If the goal is “to comprehend a nectar,” the poet suggests failure as the surest path.

In the summer of 1862, the poet looked for new ways to express the “power / Of Opposite”:

The Zeros [*sic*] taught us – Phosphorus
 We learned to like the Fire
 By playing Glaciers—when a Boy—
 And Tinder—guessed—by power

Of Opposite—to balance Odd—
 If White—a Red—must be!
 Paralysis—our Primer—dumb—
 Unto Vitality! (Fr284/J689)

“Zeros / “Phosphorous,” “Fire”/Glaciers,” “Eclipses/Suns,” “White [an absence of color]/ “Red [a presence], and “Paralysis/Vitality.” The lessons learned are from examination of the “text,” of her “business . . . circumference,” not from anything outside her text.

“Satisfaction—is the Agent / Of Satiety— / Want— a quiet Commissary / For Infinity” (Fr984/J1036). Although “Infinity” seems as if it would be found “outside the text,” Dickinson will locate it inside. Her larger point here seems to be that hunger drives fulfillment, that palliatives thwart it, that “narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul —“ (Fr373/J501).

Nor can satisfying conventions satisfy the soul. In commenting on “What Soft – Cherubic Creatures—,” Vendler “wish[es] we had more of Dickinson the social satirist” (283). The first “Women’s Rights Convention” of 1850 followed on the heels of the

Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and took place in Worcester, Massachusetts, less than fifty miles from her home. Lucy Stone spoke at the event:

We want to be something more than the appendages of Society; we want that Woman should be the coequal and help-meet of Man in all the interest and perils and enjoyments of human life. We want that she should attain to the development of her nature and womanhood; we want that when she dies, it may not be written on her gravestone that she was the "[relict](#)" of somebody. (Kerr 60)

The following year, Wendell Phillips addressed the group: "When woman has enjoyed for as many centuries as we have the aid of books, the discipline of life, and the stimulus of fame, it will be time to begin the discussion of these questions: 'What is the intellect of woman?' 'Is it equal to that of man?'" (Phillips 228). While Dickinson ignored the convention (and seemingly the entire movement), the woman who would claim, "All me say 'What' to me" (L271), did cast a decentering eye on marriage and on women who sought to achieve status through it, content to be "appendages to society":

I'm "wife"—I've finished that—
That other state—
I'm Czar—I'm "Woman" now—
It's safer so—

How odd the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse—

I think that Earth feels so

To folks in Heaven—now—

This being comfort—then
 That other kind—was pain—
 But Why compare?
 I'm "Wife"! Stop there! (Fr225/J199)

The meter and rhyme scheme support the irony in this piece. The rhymes, five slant out of six in the twelve-line poem, suggest ill-matched couples and perhaps the poet's estimate of the chances of a good match. The meter goes from alternating lines of three and two feet in the first stanza, to a boring, repetitive trimeter in the next six lines, before ending abruptly in two final two beat lines. While the poet and the reader realize otherwise, the speaker initially has no doubt that becoming "wife" will elevate her to the power position "Czar" and capital *W* "Woman," but almost as soon as she has said it, she begins to backtrack. Behind her wedding veil, her "soft eclipse," the life of the "Girl" looks "odd," but if the speaker stops herself before she thinks about it too long, "But Why compare? / I'm "Wife"! Stop there!" If this, her new state is "heaven" and "comfort," then the unmarried state must have been "earth" and "pain." But while the speaker feels one way about it, the poet feels quite another; she says elsewhere, "The Fact that Earth is Heaven – / Whether Heaven is Heaven or not" (Fr1435/J1408). The last line beginning, "I'm 'Wife'" leaves the speaker right where we found her: in a thorough misunderstanding of her life and station.

Dickinson also, in the words of Uno, “invested negative experience . . . with positive sensibility in her poetry” (147). One of her most famous poems, which Franklin dates to late in 1862, questions the value of being “somebody”: “I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are you –Are you—Nobody—Too?” (Fr260/J288). The dashes around “nobody” make the speaker’s situation isolated, precarious. As in “Have you got a brook in your little heart,” (“nobody knows, so still it flows,”) her speaker finds value in humility, in being “nobody”: “nobody” notices what “somebody” might overlook. Her speaker also admires the bird who “shouts for joy to Nobody / But his seraphic self” (Fr1484/J1465). “Nobody” is sometimes the subject and sometimes the indirect object of what she knows.

She also invests heavily in negation and in the power of absence in this poem she sent to Susan Dickinson in 1883:

By homely gifts and hindered words
The human heart is told

Of Nothing—

"Nothing" is the force

That renovates the World— (FR 1611/J1563)

The first thing one notices about this six-line poem is its irregular shape. “Of Nothing—“ sits dead center. The irregular shape disguises a perfectly regular 8/6 ballad meter and a

pair of close slant rhymes (words/force, told/World) that manifest themselves once the meter is discovered. This poem also recalls *King Lear*: Cordelia's utterance of "Nothing," which draws Lear's retort, "Nothing will come of nothing" (I.1.88 – 91), which itself echoes the classical philosophical formulation *ex nihilo nihil fit*, "[Out of nothing comes nothing](#)." The near rhyme "words," "force," and "World" blur any distinction between the signifiers: "Nothing" is the "words," "force," and the "World." For Derrida the "no-thing" *différance*, which "has neither existence nor essence [and] derives from no category of being," "renovates the world."

Dickinson discovers what Derrida doubts—presence—in absence: in the white of her dress, of her beloved India Pipe plants (*Monotropa uniflora*), in silence, in solitude, in not asserting what she cannot know. "This timid life of Evidence / Keeps pleading—'I don't know'" (Fr725/J696) . At the same time, she continues to search for new ways to assert her personal not-political center. "Dare you see a Soul at White Heat" (Fr401/J365) is another exploration of nothingness from the summer of 1862:

Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?

Then crouch within the door—
 Red—is the Fire's common tint—
 But when the vivid Ore
 Has vanquished Flame's conditions,
 It quivers from the Forge
 Without a color, but the light

Of unannointed [*sic*] Blaze.
 Least Village has its Blacksmith
 Whose Anvil's even ring
 Stands symbol for the finer Forge
 That soundless tugs—within—
 Refining these impatient Ores
 With Hammer, and with Blaze
 Until the Designated Light
 Repudiate the Forge—

Again, her speaker locates the sublime in the ordinary, a place easily overlooked. She must hide herself, "crouch within the door" and presumably make no noise to witness the transformation, to discover the presence in absence as the "ore" become "vivid" and go past "Red" (presence) to "White (absence). "Unannointed" refers both to a process in annealing and to "not anointed with oil; not prepared for coronation; not ceremonially set apart as royalty by having been washed, clothed, and anointed with oil." Christ means the Anointed One, so unanointed has the connotation of earthly not heavenly, human not divine. In addition to being colorless, and available only those who will "crouch"—the humble—can see how the Blacksmith's "Stands symbol for the finer Forge / That soundless tugs—within—," perhaps similar to the "noiseless noise in the Orchard—that I let people hear" (L271). Dickinson sought to express the experience of the presence she found in absence.

Presence

In deconstruction, “presence” is a constantly dividing unity of opposites, an impossible totality, an imaginary wholeness. Derrida writes in *On Grammatology*: “Making enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ”proximity,” “immediacy,” ”presence” . . . is my final intention of this book” (qtd in Lucy103). The transcendental signified is just one more sign among many to be deconstructed, but one more significant in its role in maintaining a controlling center. Take, for example, these comments Thomas Bainbridge Macaulay, a British minister to India, makes in his 1835 “Minute on Indian Education”:

A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education. I believe that the present system tends not to accelerate the progress of truth but to delay the natural death of expiring errors . . . [if we support teaching of Indian culture], we are a Board for wasting the public money, for printing books which are of less value than the paper on which they are printed was while it was blank—for giving artificial encouragement to absurd history, absurd metaphysics, absurd

physics, absurd theology—

This “intrinsic superiority” of one “metaphysics” over another was the sort of thing that inspired Nietzsche’s ire as well: “What then is truth? A moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding” (Rivkin 263). Nietzsche was attacking the kind of “truth” Macaulay represented—an assumed superiority deployed to establish the hegemony of one group over another. Macaulay’s argument appeals to a presence that exists outside the text when there is, in fact, no “outside the text.”

Reexamining Plato’s contradictory uses of the term *pharmakon* in his *Phaedrus*—remedy, poison, drug recipe—Derrida demonstrates that it is impossible for signification to be absolutely present, that it always remains just out of grasp, that contradiction is as much the rule as the exception. Spoken and written language remain at a remove from the speaker; signification exists only in the mediation, and Derrida demonstrates that only through [language](#) can signification be achieved. Absence becomes a [form](#) of presence. The question then becomes, on which side of the divide is Dickinson’s poetry located? Does she appeal to “hyperessentialities” outside the text, or is her focus textual; is she in fact a postmodern writer?

Dickinson’s life serves as her text, which she examines “unflinchingly.” When

disease threatened her eyesight, she had to spend eight months in 1864 with her cousins in Boston with her eyes bandaged, unable to read or write. Sight is taught by blindness and home by exile. In “I heard as if I had no Ear” (Fr 996/J1039), Dickinson again moves away from the realm of “hyperessentiality” into a close reading of her own experience.

I heard, as if I had no Ear
Until a Vital Word
Came all the way from Life to me
And then I knew I heard—

I saw, as if my Eye were on
Another, till a Thing
And now I know ‘twas Light, because
It fitted them, came in.

I dwelt, as if Myself, were out,
My Body but within
Until a Might detected me
And set my kernel in.

And Spirit turned unto the Dust
 "Old Friend, thou knowest me,"
 And Time went out to tell the News
 And met Eternity—

In the first quatrain the “Ear” is stimulated by a visit from a “Vital Word,” an obvious allusion to the opening line from the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Dickinson moves the “Word” from heaven to earth. “All the way” suggests a significant distance, but “Life to me,” no distance at all:

Surgeons must be very careful
 When they take the knife
 Underneath their fine incisions
 Stirs the Culprit—*Life!* (Fr156/J10)

“No Ear” can imply either stone deaf, hearing nothing at all, or tone deaf, missing the music of life. Next, she turns to the “Eye.” To have an eye “upon another” idiomatically is to be looking outward, not to have no eyes. To have your eye on something implies a certain level of concentration or intention, as to have your eye on a piece of property. The poem implies, however, that in order to see, one must have one’s “Eye” on oneself, one’s concentration on oneself. She refers to “light” as a

“Thing” which, in some way or another, again not described, brings her new sight, or insight. “Light fitted them,” made them “suitable,” or “prepared them,” according to the ADEL. Finally, sensation itself is given a new lease by what she describes as a “Might.” The poet goes from a life of banality (or torment) to one of energy. All this leads to a union of the tangible and temporary (“Dust”), to another commodity, intangible but of unknown temporality, “Spirit.” The poem recounts a rebirth and a celebration. Before this event, the speaker only *thought* she knew life. The verbs (except when the Spirit is being quoted) are always in the past tense. Each of the first three stanzas begins with very simple subject-predicate constructions—“I heard,” “I saw,” and “I dwelt.” Each of these constructions is followed by a comma, which gives the reader pause, and then the negation of what has just been said. After “I heard” comes its negation: ‘as if I had no ear;’ likewise “saw”: “as if my eye were on another”; and “dwelt,” followed by “as if myself were out.” At the quarter turn of the first three quatrains, the speaker is exactly at zero.

Each stanza, then, presents a reversal; first the “Vital Word,” and then “Light,” and finally “a Might” enliven the speaker. The encounters lead to the paradoxical affirmation in the fourth and final stanza, when “Spirit turns unto the Dust.” What is “Dust” except the inanimate stuff of the human body (“Man, remember thou art dust.”)? In the course of the lyric the

speaker has been reanimated, rejuvenated. The final couplet joins “Time” and “Eternity.” According to the EDL, among its connotations “time” has the sense of “measure of the passing of minutes and hours; measure of linear temporality,” and “eternity,” “endlessness; a space or period of time felt to be endless.” The poem unites the measurable and immeasurable; it illuminates the paradox and leaves the speaker “a little newer for the term / Upon Enchanted Ground” (Fr1157/J1118),

Dickinson employs assonance, enjambment, and subtle shifts in the rhyme scheme to once again hide her meaning in plain sight. In the first quatrain, the long “I” sound is heard seven times in twenty-eight syllables. The second has four and the third five. In the last quatrain, the sound all but disappears, only showing up once in the word “Time,” and this just before “time” merges into “Eternity.” An apparent celebration of self becomes a disappearance of ego. Each of the first three stanzas begins with a trochee (I heard, I saw, I dwelt) with the emphasis on I. The unuttered “I” sound is the homonym “aye”: the speaker is saying yes to life and to her new awareness. She uses enjambment twice:“(were on / Another” and “because / It fitted them”) to both keep her meter intact and give her quatrains a kind of glide, as if a rough patch had been smoothed. She also challenges her *xaxa* rhyme scheme with slant that replaces close rhymes in the third quatrain. Her experience could not be contained in the established order, even the disordered

order of poetry. Once again, the poet's word choices heighten ambiguity. In the third stanza, "a Might detected" the speaker. "Might" has dual meanings of both power and possibility; the word at once suggests and doubts a "hyperessentiality." When heard rather than seen, a third meaning emerges in the homonym, mite. So the power and the possibility is also a little, tiny bug whose *modus operandi* is to burrow within, where he can "set the kernel." "Kernel" itself has multiple variations in sense; its first denotation is a seed, the secondary is "a nucleus or core," and finally an "inner being." The process for self-discovery involves possibility as opposed to certainty. "faithful be/ to Thyself,/ and mystery—All the rest in Perjury" (Fr1606/J1768).

In an 1864 poem sent to her brother, she locates precisely that which she cannot name:

"Soto"—Explore Thyself—
 Therein—Thyself shalt find
 The "Undiscovered Continent"—
 No Settler had the Mind—(Fr814/J832).

In the sixteenth century Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto traveled into the center of what would become the United States and became the first European to cross the Mississippi River. Why does Dickinson choose him as a metonymy for exploration? Two syllables do not seem necessary for the meter: trimeter except for an extra

syllable in the third line. Columbus would have worked, making the poem 7/6/7/6. LaSalle would have maintained the meter. She picked "Soto" for another play on words: in music, literature, drama, and rhetoric, *sotto voce* is a sign denoting emphasis attained by lowering one's voice rather than raising it. Quietly seeking quiet, the end is the means. She connects "Thyself— / Therein—Thyself" with the digraph *th* and capitalization. Even as she brings the three words together, she isolates "Therein," with dashes pointing to an internal journey. "Undiscovered Continent" echoes Hamlet's "undiscovered country"; this territory dwarfs even death.

A few months before she had urged self-discovery on her brother, she would give voice to what such probing had unveiled to her: in "One Blessing had I than the rest" (Fr767/J756), she offers in ballad meter a hymn to her experience. The rhyme scheme remains *xaxa* throughout, but the rhymes themselves suggest contradiction. Prayer/despair and the slightly slant cold/Soul and no more/defer in the third and fifth stanzas seem odd combinations—at odds with each other but consistent with other contradictions employed in the piece. As in T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," the exploring in this poem "will be to arrive where we started": *all our exploring*

One Blessing had I than the rest

So larger to my Eyes

That I stopped gauging—satisfied—

For this enchanted size—

It was the limit of my Dream—

The focus of my Prayer—

A perfect—paralyzing Bliss—

Contented as Despair—

I knew no more of Want—or Cold—

Phantasms both become

For this new Value in the Soul—

Supremest Earthly Sum—

The Heaven below the Heaven above—

Obscured with ruddier Blue—

Life's Latitudes leant over—full—

The Judgment perished—too—

Why Bliss so scantily disburse—

Why Paradise defer—

Why Floods be served to Us—in Bowls—

I speculate no more—

Do the two “Heaven[s]” (13) suggest both the sky and the home of God? Both are eclipsed by the seemingly conflicted “ruddier” (suggesting red or rosy) with another color “Blue.” But “ruddier,” with another sense of healthy or vibrant, also modifies “Life’s Latitudes.” In the EDL “latitudes” denote both “extent; range; scope; margin within which variance is tolerated,” and “freedom; leeway; absence of limit or restriction.” It is play (*jeu*) in other words. “Life’s Latitudes” (15) surprises the speaker with its vastness and with the liberation it brings. “Life” seems superior to either of the “Heaven[s].”

The odd juxtaposition, “ruddier Blue,” follows the even odder “Contented as Despair” (8): for the speaker, the peace immobilizes as much as depression does. Much like the poet’s life, the circumstance appears one way from the perspective of outsiders, quite another from her own. “A paralyzing Bliss” (another seemingly conflicted pair), not “despair” has led her to her choices. The speaker has discovered a “new Value in the Soul—/ Supremest Earthly Sum—.” With “Sum,” the poet gives the final line of the central stanza to yet another pun: “sum” being both the “value or worth” and the Latin for “I am.” She rhymes “sum” with “become” in the central quatrain: the speaker’s goal to achieve elusive “presence.” Her experience liberates her from “Want – or Cold” and from “The Judgment,” either of others or of the Last. The greatest value is discovery of

the self, the “Undiscovered Continent.” The speaker has chosen neither to “defer” “Paradise,” nor “scantly disburse” “bliss,” but to take the “Floods” where she finds them.

Dickinson repeatedly bends her away from “Paradise defer[red]” and towards the experience of her own life. In one of the 100 poems Franklin cannot date because no copy exists in her own hand

That it will never come again
 Is what makes life so sweet
 Believing what we don't believe
 Does not exhilarate.

That if it be, it be at best
 An ablative estate—
 This instigates an appetite
 Precisely opposite. (Fr1761/J1741)

The poet finds the life she has, “so sweet,” but casts doubt on what everybody around her avers heaven, the absent, “ablative estate.” “Ablative” has two senses “transient, or temporary” and, from Latin grammar, the case which often indicates “moving away from a place.” Her poem casts doubt on a heavenly life hereafter: she thinks it either passes, which runs counter to the prevailing view, or, closer to the Platonic view, a place we

come from. Either way, we do not want to go—we want to stay, “an appetite / Precisely opposite.” So Dickinson, born 100 years before Derrida, was similarly determined to make “enigmatic what one thinks one understands,” and does so by taking full advantage of *différance*.

Conclusion

The uncanny similarities in both style and substance between Dickinson and Derrida have become increasingly clear in researching and writing this thesis. Barbara Johnson, in her introduction to Derrida's *Disseminations*, apprises the reader that to “translate an author so excruciatingly aware of the minutest linguistic difference is an exercise in violent approximation” and that “syntax has been the greatest stumbling block” (*xviii*). She also expresses her regret that “many of the word plays, alas, have been lost” (*xix*). She adds her challenge was “to present dissemination in a disseminative way. In a sense, the very success of such an attempt would be a sign of failure” (*xxxiii*). In the Introduction to EDL Cynthia Hallen summarizes Dickinson's *oeuvre* as “present[ing] a close-knit diction that she crafted with allusions, ambiguity, antithesis, circumlocution, definitions, figures, idioms, kennings, metaphors, polysemy, puns, symbols, and synonymy.” One bleeds for the Dickinson translator.

While they are both transcendental-signifier averse, they have each “wandered around” in that neighborhood. In a posthumously published series of interviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Derrida makes some curious comments. That he grants that

life is "irreducible to what I say" should come as no surprise; that is more or less the point of the deconstructive exercise. What does surprise is his statement that

everything I oppose, so to speak, in my texts, everything that I deconstruct—presence, living, voice and so on—is exactly what I'm after in life. I love the voice, I love presence, I love . . . ; there is no love, no desire without it." Though he is "constantly denying in my life what I'm saying in my books or my teaching, "this does not mean "I don't believe in what I write." (qtd in Leithart).

Later in the same interview, he says that what he has done, he has been compelled to do, by "*Necessité*," a translation of the Greek *ananke*, which capitalized became the personification of destiny. In fact, in his collection of poems *Tout la Lyre*, Victor Hugo employs the term as "love." What seems at first an obvious contradiction should instead be taken as one more deconstructive act: what drives him and where he wishes to go are one and the same thing; what he denies, he desires.

Dickinson, too, saw love as both a source and a goal, as heavenly but earthly too: "Love Marine and Love terrene—/ Love celestial too" (Fr1674/J1637)—a human divine estate. In 1865 she writes:

Love—is anterior to Life—

Posterior—to Death—

Initial of Creation, and

The Exponent of Earth— (Fr 980/J917)

In four lines the poet throws “Love” and “Life” for a linguistic loop. While “anterior” has the simple sense of coming before, the EDL includes its secondary meaning of “more important.” “Posterior,” meaning subsequent, also has interesting possibilities for the logophile: when the preposition “to” follows, it gains the sense of “beyond; surpassing,” and the figurative designations “farther-reaching than; beyond the limit of; out of the grasp or control of”; “Love” eludes the grasp of “Death.” “To” follows “posterior” in this poem, but after a dash: the gap is enough to simultaneously suggest and resist the inference. In the ADEL, “initial” denotes beginning but also “incipient; as, the initial symptoms of a disease”; love is a kind of disease. It is also the “first letter of a name”: “Love” has carved its “Initial” on “Creation,” has marked it.

“Exponent” also offers multiple meanings with ample opportunity for ambiguity, the first meaning, “function,” suggesting both a result (e.g. “price is a function of supply and demand.”) and purpose, including “transcendent purpose.” The EDL also lists the “mathematical” definition for “exponent” of “root” ($2 = \text{the root of } 4$). “Root, of course, would also catch the eye of a botanist: the purpose becomes a rudiment. The purpose becomes the cause; the transcendent, earthly; the metaphysical, physical. Robert Frost

echoes the sentiment in “Birches”: “Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better.”

Finally, in a poem from the spring of 1863 her speaker addresses a lover or an intimate. The opening quatrain makes reference to both language (“the Alphabet—the Words”), but finishes with a biblical reference to “Revelations,” the last book of the Christian Bible. In the experience of the “whole of Love,” the speaker must move beyond both language and belief. “Diviner than the Childhood’s” seems to recall “Wordsworth’s “Ode (“There was a time”), but seems prospective rather than retrospective and “Ignorance” “even Diviner” than the Child’s implied innocence in Wordsworth’s poem. What the speaker cannot express she found not in that place from which she might have come, but from where she is now; what she seeks in herself she discovers in the mirror another provides. The last two lines sum up her feelings on the difficulty in either interpreting (“expound[ing]”) or expressing either “Love,” “Wisdom,” or “Truth.”

We learned the Whole of Love—

The Alphabet—the Words—

A Chapter—then the mighty Book—

Then—Revelation closed—

But in Each Other's eyes
 An Ignorance beheld—
 Diviner than the Childhood's—
 And each to each, a Child—

Attempted to expound
 What Neither—understood—
 Alas, that Wisdom is so large—
 And Truth—so manifold!

And in a late letter after her mother's death in 1882, Dickinson responded to an expression of sympathy from her cousins:

We don't know where she is, though so many tell us. I
 believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker—that the
 One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power to surprise that
 which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence . . . (L785)

In the penultimate sentence Dickinson expresses some measure of belief, but in the last returns to what she can only be sure of, "silence." Even on the occasion of her mother's death, she was unwilling to "reach" for "Prayer" when "Presence—is denied [her]" (Fr623/J437).

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