

THE POETRY OF EMILY  
DICKINSON

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Philosophical Perspectives

Edited by Elisabeth Camp

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## Interiority and Expression in Dickinson's Lyrics

MAGDALENA OSTAS

The act of observing the shape of her own inner world provides Emily Dickinson with an inexhaustible subject for poetry. Unlike other poets for whom a self-directed gaze is often occasioned or circumstantially forced, Dickinson has a permanent and vivid sense of the import and significance of her own inner experience, as if life and inner life were synonymous. Her poems give articulation and shape to an expansive range of thoughts, feelings, moods, happenings, ideas, and perspectives, and the kind of attention she pays to inner life is as likely to be meditative or reflective as it is to be critical. Dickinson has an out-of-the-ordinary capacity for impersonally concerning herself with herself, and the imagination and perceptiveness with which she records her own self-imaginings are the mark of her poetic imagination.

The argument I pursue in this essay is that Dickinson's poetics of inner life makes us see anew the long-standing philosophical problem of expression—words and the selves they bespeak. Dickinson's poetry invests itself in an understanding of subjectivity that rearranges the anchors and horizons we often turn to in thinking about how lives

and identities take on shape in expressive forms. For at the same time that poetry for Dickinson is the medium of reflectiveness, it is also the medium that takes her own interiority out of confinement, where it seems in fact to be useless to her. Poetry, strangely, forces this essentially inward poet to conclude that introspection leads to blindness and variations of ignorance rather than to self-knowledge and understanding. As a medium of expressiveness, poetry allows Dickinson to reach herself by giving her evidence of herself—not in general or comprehensively, but in allowing her to encounter the particular *what* and *how* of her own inner life as it takes shape outside of her. Poetry lets Dickinson turn herself inside out, but not so as to disclose the substance of her inner world but so as to be able to perceive and encounter it at all. Dickinson experiments with lyric subjectivity in uncommon ways, and she presents us with a new picture of a human subject unable to find comfort or satisfaction in continuing to pursue itself *in there*. This constitutes a deliberate hypothesis about what we are and how we come to know who we are.

In this creative conception of what it means to write in which words exhibit selves with concreteness and substance, Dickinson proves to be one of the best literary thinkers we have on the topic of self-expression. Her perspective on the concept of expression comes to us as ideas that take on life and course around within the lyric form, a perspective registered in what her readers often have called Dickinson's acts of poetic thinking.<sup>1</sup> Often the poet herself

1. The associations readers of Dickinson have made between her lyricism and her "thinking" often have been suggestive. Allen Tate, for example, registers the power of Dickinson's poems not to convey abstractions themselves but to give those abstractions sensuous form and illumination ("Emily Dickinson," 218–221). In a similar train of thought, Helen Vendler asks how Dickinson's attraction to tenseless thinking and the "philosophical stasis" of the mind relates to her "chromatic" and "serial" habits of writing ("Emily Dickinson Thinking," 49–50). And Jed Deppman rightly reminds us that the key to understanding the ideas alive in Dickinson's poems lies in finding the connection between her forms of mental

tells us that she is overwhelmingly occupied with the topic of human identity and its manifestation or incarnation in expressive forms like poems: how “The Outer - from the Inner / Derives it’s magnitude - ” (Fr 450, J 451; 1862), or how a word in actuality can be “made Flesh” and “breathes distinctly” (Fr 1715, J 1651). What literature and philosophy at their intersection can gain by engaging the idea that poems pursue and probe hypotheses about subjectivity and expression will concern me centrally in this essay.

It is important to register just how forcefully each one of Dickinson’s poems challenges the idea that expressive acts make visible, legible, or tangible a hidden and unencounterable realm of experience that stays on the “inside” until we precisely express it. The domain of this inward poet is so rarely confession or self-disclosure. Dickinson dislodges her image of words breathing and becoming flesh entirely from a logic of pressing thoughts or feelings outward from the inside. Instead, Dickinson’s verse is almost wholly absorbed by the project of attentively and microscopically recording our attempts and search for expression—the ways we “reckon” (Fr 533, J 569; 1863), “measure” (Fr 550, J 561; 1863), and “discern” (Fr 620, J 435; 1963) who we are and how the things and affairs of the world impact us. These are the poet’s courageous, vital, and deliberate attempts to give the inner life coherence and shape. Dickinson abandons the picture of poetry as a mirror for the mind or spirit, but

experimentation and the seeming necessity of recording these experiments in poetic language (*Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*, 57). In the try-to-think-death poems, Deppman argues for example, the taking on of a particular poetic perspective allows Dickinson to record what he calls “the permanent impotence of thought before death,” since choosing to inhabit the space beyond death is a perfectly good thing to do in poem (*Trying to Think*, 204). Deppman might say that, unlike philosophy, poetry lets you *do* that—that is, take on such a perspective—without appearing silly, mad, or just morbid, and that the thought embodied in such a poem is inextricable from the poem’s ability compellingly to take on this unique point of view on life at all. The question of why Dickinson pursues the project of thinking in the medium of poetry thus has meaningfully intrigued critics of all kinds.

she also importantly disavows the idea that the same mind or spirit, as if out of desperation, might instead settle for describing the futility or impossibility of reaching for such descriptions. On the contrary, Dickinson takes inspiration from the kinds of understanding we occasion when we “count” (Fr 533) and “wonder” (Fr 550) aloud about ourselves.

Self-understanding, therefore, only surfaces in Dickinson's poems through the creative act itself. In “I would not paint - a picture - ” (Fr 348, J 505; 1862), to cite one example, Dickinson asks us to imagine three times how receptiveness is the foundation of the process of artistic creation. She first posits that she would rather be a beholder than a painter, allowed to dwell on and wonder about the picture rather than apply paint. She continues to say in the poem's second stanza, analogously, that she would rather be a listener than a musician, “Raised softly” like a “Balloon” by the music rather than playing an instrument. Then Dickinson's metaphors for receptive and creative activity collide and merge in the poem's final stanza when she imagines herself into the position of poet and reader at once. Being “a Poet” in this final moment entails being able to “stun” not her audience but her own self “With Bolts - of Melody!” Such a capacity simultaneously to be the stunning poet and the one stunned Dickinson calls an “Art,” elevating the ability to encounter her own words with the force of astonishment and true surprise to a poetic skill. The image suggests that she hears the words as they make an entry into the world, suddenly concrete, as though they had not issued from her own pen and voice. This conception of writing functions as a strong countercurrent to an understanding of lyric that necessitates a singular, coherent voice that presses its interiority outward. Writing poetry in “I would not paint - a picture - ,” contrastingly, has the power to show Dickinson things she otherwise did not know and could not have known and would otherwise not have come to know had she not written *just*



*this* poem. In this way, poetry for her is revelation and understanding: Poets All (Fr 533).

Since poetry for Dickinson so often appears as a medium of self-encounter that guides her to new forms of self-understanding, her lyric experiments frequently demand bending out of shape the first-person point of view and the integrity of the human body in extraordinary ways. This inclination to split, bisect, haunt, and disunite the self is familiar to many readers of Dickinson's poetry, and sometimes it registers for Dickinson's readers as indicative of an essential alienation, a symptom of radical withdrawal, or a mark of the poet's detachment from her own existence.<sup>2</sup> Yet Dickinson's refusal to give human subjectivity a basic integrity or oneness is not necessarily the sign of a self unable to inhabit its own life easefully. For instance, the distanced point of view that Dickinson's lyrics often manage to construct onto the experiences that their speakers record—the sensations that arise within them, the movements of mind, the contents of consciousness—is what allows the poems to impress themselves as forms of perceptive description or lucid observation and not at all alienated utterance. In moments where she takes palpable delight in being or becoming "Nobody" (F 260, J288; 1861) to herself, Dickinson demonstrates how life can be even more compelling of attention when it appears "So still - so Cool -" (Fr 129, J80; 1859) and words arrive without being asked, "unsummoned in" (Fr 1243, J 1955; 1872), to capture or describe our experience. In poems like "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr 340, J 280; 1862) or "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -" (Fr 867, J 937; 1864), the speaker's self-splitting certainly betokens mental despair or breakdown, but this is not the only

2. See, for example, Geoffrey Hartman's representative comment that in her self-observations Dickinson manages to "elide the agony of self-consciousness" because her "slightly apart" perspective on herself is essentially "spectatorial"—that is, bizarrely unmoved by her own self-directed gaze ("Language from the Point of View of Literature," 350).

way Dickinson splits selfhood. While "The first Day's Night had come -" (Fr 423, J 410; 1862) also takes madness as its theme, for example, the poem also interrogates selfhood from a perspective that discovers discontinuity between a past and a present self from the point of view of feeling such a discontinuity in the present tense. When Dickinson writes in the poem "That person that I was - / And this One - do not feel the same -," she registers a feeling or *sensation* that is incited by her "giggling" brain, one that bursts the continuity of time and identity. It is as though the poet were recording the outline of a thought experiment intended to spook herself. Similarly, what Dickinson calls "yawning Consciousness" in "I never hear that one is dead" (Fr 1325, J 1323; 1874) confronts the speaker not as a repository of thought but as an encounter with a gaping blankness that the poet needs courage just to "dare" to stage. Dickinson's readiness to break up and sunder selfhood in these ways can be understood as a form of conceptual play from a point of view that comprehends just how uniquely poetry as a medium (unlike traditional philosophical discourse, for instance) allows her to use self-splitting as a form of serious, forceful investigation. Dickinson sees that poetry lets her express her innermost desires and lets her outline the contours of her own mind *only because* it lets her come to lay eyes and ears on them at all, especially since they are not always apparent to her as her very own discrete and recognizable "feelings" or "thoughts."

Dickinson's insight into how we come understand ourselves in expressive acts can be difficult to apprehend within the terms of some of our own contemporary thinking in literature and philosophy about writing and identity. One could argue further that Dickinson's verse actually seems to resist some of the threads of thinking that make up the history of reading her poetry, for the history of reading Dickinson has been dominated by two alternatives for understanding her experiments with writing and inner life: she is either the remarkable transcriber and translator of inner experience, or she is

the messenger who reports on the frustrations and final impossibility of such transcriptions. In the most important scholarship that highlights Dickinson's concentration on human interiority, her poetic fixation on the self's inner life casts her in the role of transcriber of the inner world. Dickinson has been understood in this way as a poet who writes in the Romantic tradition of the neurotic soul, as a cultivator of consciousness of religious severity, as a poet whose dedication to inner scrutiny anticipates the psychoanalysts, and as a poet of privacy who harbors a real terror of exposure.<sup>3</sup> Yet anyone who has read Dickinson knows that her self-occupied poetics of the self—strangely—is anything but self-absorbed. Her poems are personal yet wholly impersonal, and the tradition of scholarship that takes Dickinson as the poet of interiority misses the ways her lyrics are feats of formal perspective and impassive attentiveness too.

In an interesting way, the emphasis on Dickinson's fixation on inner life persists in strains of criticism that deny her the status of the poet of inwardness and that trace, instead, how Dickinson's verse registers the impossibility or emptiness of simple self-consciousness. In these lines of criticism, Dickinson still looks within and pays full and constant attention to the inner world, but the self that she finds there is not clearly enclosed, easily transparent, or self-evidently present at all. In other words, this line of reading suggests that Dickinson looks for and does *not* find a picture of her self in the landscape of her own interiority: critics argue that she writes with an alienated distance from her actual body, that her sense of outsideness marks her own life as "other," that she occupies a position of homelessness and subjective dislocation, and that she is an essential ironist of the human

3. See Wells, *Introduction to Emily Dickinson*; Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*; Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*; and Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others*.

subject.<sup>4</sup> What these studies have in common with the contrasting lineage that does take Dickinson to be a poet of interiority is the simple but consequential observation that the inner world occupies the poet unreservedly. They differ only in the philosophical apparatus they employ to understand how the poet's interior explorations are motivated and in what kinds of insights they ultimately culminate.

Some of Dickinson's most insightful contemporary readers can steer us toward avenues of reading outside these alternatives and help us understand more deeply Dickinson's own conceptual investments as they come to unfold in her beautifully contorted experiments with lyric subjectivity. Sharon Cameron, for example, confirms that Dickinson poses the question of the "visibility of interior experience" in inventive ways.<sup>5</sup> Cameron argues that the kind of interior transformations that Dickinson's speakers undergo precipitate an abandoning of unified poetic utterance and that the self's coming to see itself as other is thus a habitual enactment in the poems: "These interior transformations, the ones we are supposed to know and be in control of because they are ours and happen inside us, we frequently fail to know precisely because they are ours and happen inside us. Dickinson, without the aid of her own poems, suffered the same confusion."<sup>6</sup> Cameron underscores here that poetry for Dickinson is the medium in which both feeling and cognition become acquainted with their own shape and their own histories—that is, in which they essentially come to recognize themselves. This is so thoroughly the case that emotions and thoughts appear to make little sense to

4. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*; Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*; Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson*; and Deppman, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*.

5. Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 26.

6. Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 47. For a compelling extension of this argument, see also Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*, 186.

Dickinson without the benefit of the tentative coherence that poems can give them.

Like Cameron, Virginia Jackson can help us see how important it is for Dickinson to write and think beyond the familiar alternatives of self-revelation or self-effacement that the broader history of reading her lyrics seems to hold out. Jackson reminds us that Dickinson's poems are not the "temporally self-present" or "unmediated" lyrics of the soul they so frequently are taken to be and that they are anchored essentially to the circumstances of their origination and circulation.<sup>7</sup> Jackson criticizes interpretations of Dickinson's verse that wipe out the contingent details that animate and frame her poems ("referents, genres, enclosures, circumstances, addressees, occasions, secrets"<sup>8</sup>), and she argues that Dickinson's speakers too often collapse into a generic and universal idea of a lyric voice. In the corrective she offers to the notion that Dickinson's lyrics are forms of "a private language addressed—lyrically—to all of us,"<sup>9</sup> Jackson draws attention to the ways Dickinson's lyrics suspend, confuse, or (in all the best cases) creatively reanimate classic questions about the self's relationship to its forms of expressiveness.

Dickinson in these ways thinks *through* her poems, continually using them to interrogate how the self can make or create itself—in effect, arrive at itself. There are striking connections between this unique poetics of the self and several strains in contemporary philosophy, aesthetics, and literary criticism that reconceive the concept of expression in an analogous way. For philosophers and literary theorists often inspired by the later Wittgenstein like Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor, Richard Eldridge, Garry Hagberg, and Charles Altieri—as for Dickinson—self-knowledge is not merely bound to

7. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 9.

8. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 98.

9. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 165.

creative expression but is rather continuously made up of it.<sup>10</sup> One might say that the defining thread in this contemporary line of thinking about subjectivity is the insight that we elucidate ourselves to ourselves in expressive acts, and we acquire awareness of ourselves only as we become visible in our triumphs and tangles of words. It is as if there isn't that much to us before the moment of making ourselves known, which turns out to count for nearly everything. The self for these philosophers and literary critics is never conceived as an inner space permeated by a set of thoughts, a concrete feeling, or a perceived mood. Here is Charles Taylor on this important point about selfhood: "A human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation; it is not just a matter of copying an external model or carrying out an already determinate formulation."<sup>11</sup> Richard Eldridge similarly emphasizes the constructive role of expression in the constitution of the self: "Instead of recording an external reality that is given, speech and other expressive activities release a human identity that is wedded to aspirations that thereby come into articulate existence."<sup>12</sup> And Garry Hagberg gives an insightful account of human expression also grounded in an understanding of expressive activity as a creative form of self-knowledge:

Knowing oneself is thus not a matter of introspecting, in the metaphysical sense of the term, on the inner object contained in one's private Cartesian interior. It is, rather, a matter of introspection very differently understood, a matter of reflecting on oneself

10. See, for example, Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, *The Claim of Reason*, and *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*; Taylor, "Language and Human Nature" and "Theories of Meaning," and *Sources of the Self*; Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature and Literature, Life, and Modernity*; Hagberg, *Art as Language*, "Autobiographical Consciousness," and *Describing Ourselves*; and Altieri, "Towards an Expressivist Theory of the Affects," and *Reckoning with the Imagination*.

11. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 375.

12. Eldridge, *Persistence of Romanticism*, 56.

and one's actions—one's words, deeds, gestures, thoughts, second thoughts, hopes, fears, aspirations, doubts, wishes, needs, and countless other things that take a central (or perhaps informatively peripheral) place when recalling the actions and utterances and the context within which they took place.<sup>13</sup>

What philosophers like Taylor, Eldridge, and Hagberg find important in their reconstruction of the concept of "expression" is the idea that attempts to grasp the self as an abstraction have to fail because they in effect extricate the self from the actual horizons and cares of its very own life. For these philosophers, you have to see yourself and see what you do and create *out there* before you are willing to say what motivates you, what kind of shape or horizons you have, and who you are.

The parallel idea about selfhood that animates Dickinson's lyrics is that what might be understood as one's "self" or "Being" is not something in one's physical possession or within one's palpable inner sensory range. Dickinson is never clear about who she is, and so she turns toward her own utterances to try to find out. Put simply, this means that for Dickinson the shape of a self cannot be grasped in a single moment, and it also cannot be understood from the inside. The self in this way is not a substance or a thing but a "wherein" of activity. In her poems Dickinson shows again and again that the nature of selfhood demands that we look for, reach toward, glimpse, feel out, and come to see our selves as those selves manifest and contort in various outward expressive forms, each one revealing and shrouding an ever-developing human identity in a different way. We will see this unique dynamic of self-encounter closely as it unfolds in three different poems: "I felt my life with both my hands" (Fr 357, J 351; 1862),

13. Hagberg, *Describing Ourselves*, 105.

“One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted - ” (Fr 407, J 670; 1862), and “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - ” (Fr 591, J 465; 1863).

The way poetry seems to let Dickinson apprehend her very being and sketch an outline of herself from the inside can be her explicit topic in a poem. In “I felt my life with both my hands,” for example, she imagines forms of self-investigation concretely:

I felt my life with both my hands  
 To see if it was there -  
 I held my spirit to the Glass,  
 To prove it possibler -  
  
 I turned my Being round and round  
 And paused at every pound  
 To ask the Owner's name -  
 For doubt, that I should know the sound -  
  
 I judged my features - jarred my hair -  
 I pushed my dimples by, and waited -  
 If they - twinkled back -  
 Conviction might, of me -  
  
 I told myself, “Take Courage, Friend -  
 That - was a former time -  
 But we might learn to like the Heaven,  
 As well as our Old Home”!

(Fr 357, J 351; 1862)<sup>14</sup>

Here Dickinson makes material the impulse to take oneself as an object of inspection. “Who is this, and what is this body?” her speaker

14. Texts for Dickinson's poems are from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). References to this edition appear in the text abbreviated as *Fr*, followed by the poem's number.



seems to ask. There are two parts to the speaker figured in the poem, the physical part that is unanimated and seems suddenly strange, and the conscious part that is dynamically wondering about its own lifelessness, eager to probe itself so that it can come to recognize itself again. The temptation for readers of the poem, therefore, has been to understand Dickinson's feeling-her-own-life straightforwardly, that is, as a set-up or scene in which she makes contact with her own body using her senses. Because Dickinson's speaker describes seeking out who or what she is in these stanzas, the poem decidedly does capture an essential sense of disorientation and dislocation. The speaker's confusion can be read as a symptom of some tribulation or even a serious trauma, so that she seems to emerge out of a difficult experience directly into the first line of the poem on the page, reaching out for and trying to feel her own life with her hands, seeking a renewed link to her own experience.

For readers of "I felt my life with both my hands" who exemplify the line of reading in which Dickinson's speaker is allowed to encounter herself, the speaker posthumously examines her own body: she first lays hands on her corpse, then sounds out abstract markers of her identity ("Being," "name"), and finally stirs and prods her own face for familiar signs of vitality.<sup>15</sup> In this interpretive scenario Dickinson's speaker seems to stand hovering above her deceased self. Reading the imagery in the poem like this conjures a sense of mock-Gothic irony that recalls the more overtly ironic poem "One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted - " (Fr 407, J 670; 1862). In the humorous sustained metaphor that structures that poem, the self's division unfolds as a parody of Gothic tropes that cast the proverbial chilling stranger within one's chamber as a part of oneself, the part capable of disrupting the whole. Robert Weisbuch describes Dickinson's

15. Farland, "That Tritest/Brightest Truth," 382-84.

stranger within usefully as her sense of “internal externality.”<sup>16</sup> In “One need not be a Chamber” the poet appears to take pleasure in tracing out the analogy that occurs to her between the mystery of the corridors in a “House” and those in a mind or “Brain,” and she reaffirms the parallel when she writes that the “Assassin hid in our Apartment” is actually “Ourself behind ourself, concealed - .” The fact that strangeness turns out to be immanent makes “One need not be a Chamber” in the end a comical poem, because Dickinson’s image for a divided self (a too-literal specter in a haunted house) makes it impossible to register her picture of self-haunting with seriousness. The poem thus manages to suspend the difficult implications of its own hypothesis about identity because its caricatured ghost, a figure supposed to symbolize a central part of ourselves or to capture a distressing but real condition of selfhood, in actuality distances the stranger within completely.

“I felt my life with both my hands,” in contrast, takes up the implications of Dickinson’s vision of selfhood with consequence. The most valuable way to evacuate the poem of the image of a speaker feeling her own lifeless corpse is to remember that in the opening stanzas Dickinson does not in fact purport to feel her body but instead her “life” and “spirit,” and then later her “Being.” We can certainly retain the sense that the poet makes literal, material contact (“felt”) with herself in the poem’s opening moment, but there is no reason at all to think that what she feels is unanimated flesh. Further, the hypothetical sensation of making contact with one’s own no-longer-vital body carries an array of resonances fundamentally different from how we might imagine the sensation of once again coming to feel one’s-life. The latter is actually a heartening feeling that conveys the speaker’s sudden *self-understanding* through an image of touching something with one’s hands, immediate and palpable. Dickinson’s

16. Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, 140.

speaker suddenly feels-her-life in the sense that her own experience, at times seeming to her faraway and vague, suddenly becomes vivid and accessible again. The opening image of touching one's life conveys a feeling of brightness and relief and not morbid alienation. That the speaker reaches out to touch her life because she does not know "if it was there" similarly need not mean that she has grown cold and needs to take a pulse on her existence. We might instead understand the images Dickinson builds in the poem, most directly in its second line, as a form of questioning directed not at the *whether* but at the *what* of her life: she reaches out to feel not just *that* her life is there but pursues the deeper question of its physical shape and abstract meaning. As Dickinson reaches out to herself in this poem, she does not ask, "Am I still alive?" but rather "Who in the world am I?"

It turns out in "I felt my life with both my hands" that Dickinson's speaker is not split into an observed- and observing-self at all. On the contrary, the process of the speaker's feeling-her-life slowly begins to empty the poem of its sense of self-division, since what the speaker experiences is a tangible reawakening of the link between the two parts of herself. The gradual arrival of self-recognition and gladness for again coming into contact with her own experience is the central feeling that the poem strives to convey: she *felt her life* with both her hands, she reports in the first line, as if surprised that experience could again yield such a familiar sensation. The subtleties of Dickinson's play with first-person perspective are thus both more simple and more complex than the truisms about self-division in her poetry would suggest. This poem's opening image makes us see not only that the self can feel intensely unfamiliar to itself but also that this sense of being unfamiliar to oneself is a more simple or primary feeling than the paradoxically more difficult ability to "feel-one's-life." The latter for Dickinson seems to be a remarkable and unusual sensation worth dwelling on. Strangely, conveying this surprising sense of oneself as familiar necessitates an image of inhabiting two bodies

at the same time, but in the interest of illustrating that the subject is not “split” but precisely comfortable again, however tentatively or momentarily. The speaker in the poem, in other words, stages the transition between feeling strange to herself and once again feeling like an inhabitant of her own life.

What precipitates self-recognition in “I felt my life with both my hands” is a series of images in which the speaker handles the parts of herself that appear to have taken on a life of their own: first touching and handling her life as if it were a tactile object; then deliberately taking up her “Being” in active, circular mental ruminations; and finally speaking and asking aloud after the “Owner’s” name, which she confesses she might not recognize as her own if she were to hear it. It makes sense that the parts of the self that Dickinson’s speaker finds out in the world at first alarm or surprise her. For ways like this of coming to identify with one’s own external expressions press the question of how things made up of materials, sounds, or words can still be said (as Dickinson puts it in the poem) to be “of me” at all. I am not made up of materials, sounds in the air, or words on the page—and yet I am. How does the Soul settle into places other than my body? Dickinson professes, as a poet, an essential wonder and astonishment at the fact that selves can be made up of words and things, and that we can thus at times apprehend ourselves outside ourselves. Dickinson’s images capture the state that confronting our own lives and selves from without can precipitate, and they acknowledge that such confrontations with signs and pieces of ourselves laid out in the world can sometimes bring a knowledge so new and unfamiliar that our older self (as in Nietzsche) has to die in order to make room for a fully transformed self-understanding.

Dickinson motivates the impulse to speak in “I felt my life with both my hands” by suggesting that she doesn’t feel her life at all in the space before the poem begins, so that the occasion for poetic utterance is explicitly the desire to convey the sudden and surprising

ability to feel-one's-life. In the poem the occasion for speaking—diegetically—is no-longer-knowing-oneself and consequently telling us that she then *does* come to feel her life, more and more, over the course of the poem. The comfort and relief that self-recognition brings enter the poem only as she agrees to make explicit the urge to reach out and touch her life with her hands and turn it “round and round” in her head, giving the impulse toward self-investigation a series of beautiful poetic figures that make the longing concrete. This impulse, again, doesn't betoken an empty self but, instead, confirms the speaker's confusion and curiosity about the paths her own development has taken: my life slipped out of my reach, but now I can feel it again, and with my very own hands!

Dickinson's powerful attention to a difficult dimension of selfhood in this poem gets lost in logical, corporeal impossibilities and an inevitable ironic overlay as long as her speaker is thought to confront her own corpse (or, in other poems, really witness the funeral in her own brain, or actually live to convey the truth of a posthumous fly). As Kathleen Anne Peterson reminds us, Dickinson's first-person voice is characterized by far-reaching formal manipulations through which the poet speculates about just how far she should expand the terrain subjectivity is allowed to inhabit.<sup>17</sup> Like the mysterious image of dissipating mist in the air that Virginia Woolf uses throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* as a metaphor for human identity, Dickinson's own cryptic representations of selfhood can be difficult to access because of the conceptual stretches they necessitate and physical impossibilities they insist on. How can a person with a human body be mist-like? How can I touch my life with my own hands? How can you hear something after you die? Dickinson's images for untethered selfhood thus demand a form of “referentless”<sup>18</sup> or

17. Kathleen Anne Peterson, “Supposed Person: Emily Dickinson and the Selflessness of Poetry” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2006), 24.

18. Porter, *Dickinson*, 123.

“sceneless”<sup>19</sup> reading, one that is indifferent to the contextual continuities a scene calls for and that is simultaneously deeply interested in circumstantial human experience.

Like “I felt my life with both my hands,” Dickinson’s famous poem about hearing a fly buzz the moment of her own death seems to demand that we split the speaker up into a body and an attendant mind curious about that body’s experience. Dickinson’s speaker seems to straddle life and death in “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - ,” placing one foot tentatively in the world of the afterlife and keeping the other behind so as to be able to register the sound of the buzzing earth-anchored fly:

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -  
 The Stillness in the Room  
 Was like the Stillness in the Air -  
 Between the Heaves of Storm -  
  
 The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -  
 And Breaths were gathering firm  
 For that last Onset - when the King  
 Be witnessed - in the Room -  
  
 I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away  
 What portion of me be  
 Assignable - and then it was  
 There interposed a Fly -  
  
 With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -  
 Between the light - and me -  
 And then the Windows failed - and then  
 I could not see to see -

(Fr 591, J 465; 1863)

19. Weisbuch, “Prisming Dickinson; or, Gathering Paradise by Letting Go,” 200.

The temptation to understand the scene in this poem as a faithful description of the moment of dying is especially strong because the rules of the human body do not outright exclude the contortions of perspective that the physical context requires. It is possible, in other words, that the buzzing of a fly is the last thing the speaker hears before she dies and that the only puzzle to account for is her desire and posthumous ability to report back and write the poem with the fly's buzzing at its center. It is also possible that when we begin dying, the human sense of hearing clings to the world more adamantly than our other senses, surpassing them all in duration by just a little, and that the ability to hear is thus under some empirical understanding the last sense to go. It is conceivable that Dickinson's speaker is not technically alive as she continues to hear the buzzing of the fly. Perhaps in fixating on sound, Dickinson has described more accurately what it might be like the moment when the body passes away.

But it is also possible that Dickinson wants to remind us in this poem that a part of seeing our own existence is glimpsing that existence from the outside and taking seriously the revelations that such discomfiting and dislocating perspectives can return. In the same way that for Dickinson we cannot hide our selves from the world and stash them away inside our heads or torsos, as though our souls were secrets or tightly wrapped packages, the world similarly cannot hide the realities of living a life from us. All we have to do is explore anyway, defiantly in verse, the terrains that our bodies cannot visit. Letting us imagine and inhabit spaces that we normally do not encounter is the domain of things like poems, novels, daydreams, and conversations with other people. There is no reason to think that such imaginative crossings should expand our sense of who we are and what the world is in ways that are always comfortable or secure. And understanding that we cannot hold on to who we imagine we are, Dickinson shows, can be as terrifying as imagining death.

In "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" the figure of the fly usurps a set of competing conjectures about death, and it thus has the force of a "truth" that is fundamentally harsh. But its harshness does not lie in its qualities as a figure, as though flies were severe or otherwise menacing creatures, but instead from its power to replace so instantly a set of deep-rooted expectations and beliefs. Weisbuch, for example, maintains that the fly is a "dramatic disappointment" since the poem also evokes "the King" that we would actually hope to witness on the deathbed.<sup>20</sup> Helen Vendler reads the insect as a deliberately hostile image, a counter-picture to a "winged Psyche-soul rising like a butterfly from the discarded body," and she maintains that Dickinson's uncompromising deflation of ascension approaches blasphemy.<sup>21</sup> Kirkby's reading of the fly as a signal of the decomposition and decay of the physical body suggests that the harsh truth of death comes immediately to the dying, as fast as an insect automatically darting to the site of carrion.<sup>22</sup> In all of these cases, the fly's force stems from its capacity to unsettle the most common hopes about other sounds and other images we might make out while passing to the other side. Dickinson's fly can certainly be read as a polemic that instantaneously defeats the myths she has faithfully been taught.

There are also other ways to understand the image of the fly at the center of Dickinson's famous poem. The fly's irritating buzzing, irreducibly fixed onto and emanating from this world, also reminds Weisbuch that Dickinson's stress when she imagines the moment of death falls on the world we will lose rather than on what we are supposed to gain in another life.<sup>23</sup> The fly's energetic buzzing attracts the speaker's mind and senses without her effort or acquiescence—part annoying disturbance amidst "Stillness" that she cannot shoo away,

20. Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, 100–101.

21. Vendler, *Dickinson*, 268.

22. Kirkby, *Emily Dickinson*, 102.

23. Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, 101.



part emblem of the ordinary vitality of this world we normally do not notice. It is worth remembering that it is constitutive of Dickinson's imaginary about hearing the sound of the fly that she has already died, so that it is not quite right to say that "she hears" it. Instead, we might say that her body registers the buzzing of the fly, and that her mind becomes aware that her body can hear it and reflects on its impression, as though she weren't exactly the person hearing the sound. This is an important distinction between simple hearing and understanding-that-one-hears, a distinction Cameron underlines when she observes that the fly comes forward in the poem as a figure that the speaker has not yet had the chance (and will not have the chance) to invest with the usual meanings and symbolic weights, so that it does not, strictly speaking, relate to and affect "her" and instead just stumbles and buzzes around her body.<sup>24</sup> Michael Clune brings into focus this fact about the poem's communication of sensory experience when he writes that "the speaker recounts a state in which experience is happening, but that experience's relation to her has been severed," so that there is "no sense of experience as the experience of a particular person" and instead only "the subjectlessness of absorbed listening."<sup>25</sup> What is remarkable about Dickinson's poem from this point of view is her ability to recount first-person experience as if it were not her own first-person experience.

In "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" Dickinson is actively curious about what happens to her body without her. That Dickinson would posit and affirm her body's ability to register the world without her supervision or assistance, and that she would find her own pictures of this strange receptive ability so compelling, tells us a lot about the way she imagined the human subject and the world of its interiority. She has no hesitation about abandoning her own insides.

24. Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 113.

25. Clune, "How Poems Know What It's Like To Die," 637-639.

As Dickinson tells us later, she was in fact “afraid to own a Body - ” and “afraid to own a Soul - ,” partly because such “Possession” in this life was not “optional” (*Fr* 1050). Since she was in effect stuck and did not have the option of disowning her Body or her Soul, she set out instead to trace out and understand what she owned. Dickinson quickly found that she could not actually see herself when she looked within, and so she looked more intently than any other poet for herself in places other than in her heart and in her mind. Her lyric “I” set out adventurously for views of her body and soul from without, and she found signs, reflections, and figures of herself in the world as she expanded the terrains her own human perspective was allowed to traverse. The insights these perspectives on her own existence returned made her at once ever less certain about and increasingly in awe of what poems have the ability to reveal.

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