

Visiting Absence

by

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For the students and staff of NELP XXIX,
for bringing me closer to that in each of you that I most admire; for teaching me to read not only
with my mind but with my heart and with the fullest range of emotion.

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson was preoccupied by absence. Her poems are marked by gaps and dashes, by spaces both physical and metaphorical. While Dickinson inscribes absence into her own work, absence has also been done to her: gaps have appeared posthumously, have been inserted into her work during its transmission, have been perpetuated by those who read Dickinson's work biographically, have been made inevitable by our lack of knowledge about Dickinson's intent and by the loss of information over time.

Born out of a visit to the Dickinson Homestead in which I expected to find Dickinson's presence but found, instead, her absence, this thesis explores how readers respond to such absence, to Dickinson's exhausting and exhaustive openness. Defining absence broadly, defining absence not as or not only as the opposite of presence, defining absence not as or not only as an impediment but also as an opportunity, defining absence as a deliberate force that can be created, cultivated, controlled, I focus on how the reader experiences and extends absence in Dickinson's poetic corpus.

The introduction analyzes Dickinson's own treatment of absence in her poem "To fill a Gap." Echoing the poem's caution, "Block [a gap] up / With Other – and 'twill yawn the more –, " Chapter 1 discusses the ways in which contemporary poets Billy Collins, Galway Kinnell, and Adrienne Rich attempt to overcome Dickinson's absence by conjuring her presence, by locating her biographically or within themselves. Through their inevitably unsuccessful efforts, the poets, either implicitly or explicitly, move towards embracing Dickinson's words without demanding her presence.

Chapter 2 turns to Dickinson's own words, imposing them as a corrective against attempts to improperly fill the gaps in her work. Figuring the poem as a closed space characterized by openness, I discuss Dickinson's concern for the risks of poetry and her praise for its possibilities and trace through her work a trajectory of how the poem comes to life through the reader, addresses the reader, and creates a space for the reader's response. The literal and metaphorical absence of the poet facilitates the increased presence of the reader; poet and reader collaborate positively to construct poetic texts and imbue them with meaning. The conclusion examines the benefits of this "loosen[ing]" of both the poet's and the reader's "Spirit[s]."

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Short Titles

- F Franklin, R. W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Variorum ed. 3 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998.
(When a poem is initially cited, an F and the number assigned by Franklin follow in parentheses.)
- RTP* Longenbach, James. *The Resistance to Poetry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- “VH” Rich, Adrienne. “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson.” *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979. 157-83.
- LED* Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.

The Master

*Where the poet stops, the poem
begins. The poem asks only
that the poet get out of the way.*

*The poem empties itself
in order to fill itself up.*

*The poem is nearest the poet
when the poet laments
that it has vanished forever.*

*When the poet disappears
the poem becomes visible.*

*What may the poem choose,
best for the poet?
It will choose that the poet
not choose for himself.*

—Donald Hall

*Poetry incorporates seizure, silence, return, and recoil; it notes the pauses,
doesn't dismiss them.*

—Wayne Koestenbaum

Preface

I.

In the car, barreling down the dark new asphalt of the two-lane highways crisscrossing the Pioneer Valley, pelting past an unremarkable landscape of big box stores and national-chain hotels on the way to Amherst, I prepare to tell my parents that I want to take a separate tour of the Emily Dickinson Homestead. *This is going to be a spiritual experience*, my secular self thinks silently, *the closest I'll ever get to a pilgrimage*. I want to keep my visit pristine, free from my parents, the unbelieving voyeurs curious about Dickinson only because she fascinates me; want desperately to heed a friend's advice that "the house is wonderful, if you can get away from the tour guide," advice that since the moment I heard it has made me view my journey not as a trip to a museum of static relics but as a chance to connect, to draw myself even closer to the poems I read with the same fervor, attention, and reverence that the faithful reserve for scripture. I don't quite know how I will react but I expect emotion, expect tears to fill my eyes and spill over at the thought of finally uniting with Dickinson, finally standing in a space where she stood, finally seeing what she saw as she wrote.

II.

Up to this point, I have avoided looking at the map to place Amherst within the topography of Massachusetts; have avoided assiduously the large book, ubiquitous on the shelves of the libraries and bookstores that I frequent, that features full-color photographs of Dickinson's room, home, town; have refrained from finding images other than my own mental ones to accompany the poems and biographies I have read. Even now, I am cautious, slightly hesitant, fully aware that there is no turning back, that the concrete sights that replace my

abstract conceptions will replace them permanently. I worry: will seeing the Homestead change the poems?

III.

I purchase a ticket. As I wait for my credit card to authorize, I read the plaques explaining that the room in which I am now standing used to be the Dickinsons' kitchen. The tour begins downstairs, in a parlor almost clear of furniture. The guide gestures to portraits and photographs on the wall—some authentic, most facsimiles—as she describes Emily Dickinson's lineage, her prominent politician father and graceful mother. "Being a child of Edward Dickinson in the 1850s and 1860s was like being the Bush twins today," she says, explaining that the family entertained frequently and that the Dickinson children were often in the public eye.

By design, the first thing I see as I ascend the stairs is—in the middle of the hallway, encased in glass and floating on a headless, footless, wire-and-cloth form—a dress, long-sleeved, long-skirted, made of thick, darted, off-white fabric. It's a replica, the guide hastens to explain, adding that it cost over \$5000 to painstakingly construct. "We put it there," she says, "so that you can see how small she was."

At last, the guide leads us into the room on the right, Dickinson's own. Immediately I agree with Adrienne Rich's observation that it is the best room in the house, ample and light and calm, with windows that open onto the side pathway and onto a clear view of the street below. Gone, though, is the bureau, one of several identical dressers owned by the family and moved so long ago that scholars cannot even determine for certain which one belonged to her; gone is her small writing table, replaced with a similar model from the period; gone are her books; gone are her papers. All that remains is her bed, draped in a thin, white, quilted bedspread, starched and

perfectly creased. The guide explains that most of Dickinson's belongings are at the Houghton Library at Harvard, that the room was emptied when another family, unrelated to the Dickinsons, purchased the Homestead in 1916. I delay leaving the room, hoping that I can have it to myself even if for only a few moments. But I am unable to escape the tour guide; she beckons for me to move along even as I try to plant my feet firmly on the wooden floor.

We leave the house and follow the short path to the Evergreens, the mansion that Emily Dickinson's brother, Austin, and her sister-in-law, Susan, built next door. Unlike the Homestead, it has not been restored, has instead lingered, untouched, in desuetude. There, the rooms are dark, filled to the brim with landscape paintings and once-opulent furniture and brass candlesticks—the collected souvenirs of travel. The air is musty, forbidding. After we step outside, the guide concludes the tour and says that we are welcome to return to the Homestead to explore the gift shop or to use the restroom. I ask, trying but failing to conceal the pleading tone that creeps into my voice, whether we can go back upstairs. “Not unless you buy another ticket and go on a different tour,” she says cheerfully. “It's worth it—there are lots of different guides and each one of us gives a slightly different tour.”

IV.

I sit Indian-style on the lawn, my skirt enfolded around me, near the small gravel parking lot, waiting for my parents, watching the ever-darkening sky as a thunderstorm approaches, holding down the pages of my journal so that they don't crease in the wind as I begin to write:

Of course, seeing the house—even seeing the room—doesn't matter. I was expecting this to be a pilgrimage, but it's too mundane, too public, for that. Of course the space I create in my brain, the space where I imagine her writing and living is richer, may even be more accurate. Not that

I necessarily regret being here—not that I could have imagined not coming. But there’s something to be said for keeping some places sacred, mysterious, unknown. I didn’t succeed in getting away from the tour guide. I was expecting the Homestead to be darker, more austere, less colorful, more cluttered and oppressive. I was expecting it to look like the Evergreens (which I was expecting to be closer to it, so you could reach across with a basket). Maybe if I were alone upstairs it would be a place where poems come back to me. But it’s hard to imagine her there. Seeing how tiny she was, seeing her bed. And in many ways it’s not surprising—at least, it’s not definitive. I thought seeing the house would change everything—but it changes nothing. They’re not my poems, of course, but they echo so far beyond the space. (Maybe seeing the house is more important for people who believe the myth, so they can be dissuaded.) It’s like the house isn’t hers any more than the Johnson poems are, or the Franklin poems. But to think: I STOOD IN THE ROOM WHERE SHE WROTE ALL THOSE POEMS!!!!

That last sentence wouldn’t fool anybody, doesn’t fool me: I add it as an afterthought, hoping that I can, with the manufactured enthusiasm of larger handwriting and capital letters and superfluous exclamation points, placate my disappointment. The truth is that I don’t feel like I stood anywhere close to anywhere she was. The truth is that those poems don’t exist for me here. And even if they did exist here, they would exist not only here. (Only later do I realize that what feels, initially, like disappointment can be a site for joy, that to confine the poems to the spaces between the Homestead’s narrow walls would be to deny them the power of their universality.)

My parents approach, bubbly from their own tour. “I knew that she was a recluse, but apparently she exhibited warmth towards children and used to bake them cookies. So in many ways she was seeking human contact,” my mom says, surprised. “What was your theory on why she wore white?” my father asks. Without pausing for long enough to allow me to speculate, he adds, “You should have been in our group” and tells me about how their guide departed from the prescribed itinerary in order to show them the back staircase, the upstairs landing where Dickinson would eavesdrop on the conversations below. My mind fixates on that set of steps: I have read about them; I wish that I could have seen them; I think that seeing them would have changed, somehow, my experience of the Homestead. But I am glad that I didn’t go on my parents’ tour because I am jealous of their tour guide, would give anything to be her, a student my age who probably has a key to the house and can probably go stand in that room for as long as she wants, hours at a time, until Dickinson comes back.

VI.

In high school, I was taught that many of Dickinson’s poems are morbid because her bedroom window overlooked a graveyard. Today, I learn that the house near the cemetery is not the Homestead, where she dwelled from birth to age ten and from age twenty-five to her death, but a home on North Pleasant Street that was destroyed years ago, replaced by a Mobil gas station. Alone to explore Amherst, I make my way to the cemetery, to Dickinson’s former backyard, where she is now buried. I briefly contemplate buying flowers—daisies, perhaps, to commemorate the botanical nickname she sometimes gave herself—and bringing them to her grave. But I have never purchased flowers for anybody and am embarrassed to admit, even to myself, the impulse to do so now.

The cemetery is large, bordered on one side by a concrete wall that holds a mural featuring prominent men and women of Amherst. An image of Emily Dickinson—pale pink face, chestnut hair, blue dress with a white collar—is at its center: The portrait is clearly modeled on the famous daguerreotype, the only picture of her that remains. I am surprised to see her image in color.

After searching for what seems like several minutes, I find, enclosed within a black, wrought-iron fence and surrounded by the graves of her parents and siblings, Emily Dickinson's small tomb. The gravestone is made of marble and engraved with the epitaph "Called Back," a sly reference, one which rewards meticulous students of Dickinson's life, to her last letter, written just days before her death: "Little Cousins, Called Back. Emily." The marker is not the original, modest stone that bore, simply, the initials "EED" but a more ornate, early twentieth-century replacement.¹ It feels inauthentic and fraudulent—thick, too modern, and not at all decayed.

Atop the slab lie two dried flowers and several small stones. The flowers are purple, slightly faded, carefully dried, and pressed flat, as if they have lain for years inside a thick book. I recognize them: Indian pipes, the bloom that Dickinson called her "preferred flower of life" and that graced the cover of the first edition, published posthumously, of course, of her poems (*LED*, 173). I recognize the stones as a Jewish tradition. I am moved more by the sight of these small memorials than by the grave itself. Immediately I bend down and scan, feverishly, the pockets of dirt between the tufts of sparse grayish-green grass, looking for a pebble to uncover. I find one but am not sure whether the custom dictates that the stone should come from inside or outside the cemetery, so I leave it buried. I stare at the grave for a few more moments. I wish I

¹ Diana Fuss, "Interior Chambers: The Emily Dickinson Homestead," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10.3 (1998) 46n28.

were crying but feel not even the hint of tears. Afterwards, I write in my journal: *I had the cemetery all to myself on a perfectly hot, perfectly gusty afternoon, but I wasn't quite sure what to do there. I feel like I should say more here, but I'm not sure what.*

VII.

I went to the Dickinson Homestead, went to the scenes and surfaces of her writing, as many others have before me, to find her. Instead, what I found was—palpable, pulsing, polyvalent—her absence.

*Introduction:
“To fill a Gap”*

Dickinson herself was preoccupied with absence:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it –
Block it up
With Other – and ‘twill yawn the more –
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air –

5 solder an Abyss] Plug a Sepulchre –¹ (F647)

Even though “To fill a Gap” provides the singular appearance of the word “gap” in Dickinson’s poetic lexicon,² her poetry is, in fact, full of gaps. There are the gaps, the absences, created by the dashes that not only link but also sever and separate and create physical spaces. Geoffrey Hartman explains the ambivalent signification of the dash:

In many poems an idiosyncratic mark—dash, hyphen, or extended point—replaces the period sign and all other punctuation. It can appear at any juncture, to connect or disconnect, generally to do both at once. [...] It introduces from the beginning the sense of an ending and both extends and suspends it.³

Dickinson is defined by her gaps: even people who do not know her words know her dashes.

There are the gaps produced by the playful riddles that delay, and sometimes refuse, disclosure of the poetic subject: Dickinson delights in the jesting, obfuscating nature of riddles, stating,

The Riddle we can guess
We speedily despise –
Nothing is stale so long

¹ As I wish to depict as fully as possible Dickinson’s texts, as I consider her variants part of and essential to the body of the poems themselves, I include them where they exist in Dickinson’s poems. For more on reading Dickinson’s variants, see Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*.

² S. P. Rosenbaum, ed., *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964), 291.

³ Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 125-126. For more on Dickinson’s use of the dash, see also Paul Crumley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson*.

As Yesterday's surprise – (F1180)

Her use of the riddle echoes her use of the dash. As Dolores Dyer Lucas states, “Deliberately obscure, having an element of conscious deception, a riddle never really unites, nor does it sever cleanly either. It is ambiguous, neither separating nor uniting, but transitional in nature. This is a point peculiarly applicable to Emily Dickinson.”⁴ Delaying satisfaction, Dickinson's riddles provide a reward made greater by the effort required to reveal their “surprise.”

There are the gaps acknowledged by Dickinson in her own metapoetic commentary on the inability of language to represent nature and to convey experience:

To see the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie –
True Poems flee – (F1491)

There, Dickinson suggests that poems are as ephemeral as the natural phenomena that they attempt to depict. Her poems frequently acknowledge what she maintains is the permanent deficiency of language. For instance—following, ironically, a series of stanzas that enumerate, in vivid, precisely detailed, artfully evocative, original images, the beauty of a “Summer Day”—she writes,

‘Twas more – I cannot mention –
How mean – to those that see –
Vandyke's Delineation
Of Nature's – Summer Day! (F523)

Recalling the tapering, pointed collar popularized by the Dutch painter Anthony Van Dyck, the poem maintains that words are no substitute for sight, that poetry can capture only a brief, inadequate portion of experience.

And then there are, of course, the gaps, the absences, that appeared in Dickinson's poetic corpus posthumously, the gaps made inevitable by our lack of knowledge about Dickinson's

⁴ Dolores Dyer Lucas, *Emily Dickinson and Riddle* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1969), 14.

intent and by the loss of information over time, the gaps inserted into her work during its transmission, the gaps created by editors and perpetuated by publishers, the gaps responsible for the schism between the thousands of poems—gathered and hand-stitched into little booklets, piled page upon page, scratched on the backs of envelopes and recipes—discovered in her bureau drawer following her death and the thick editions of uniformly-typed poems in which most of us encounter Dickinson’s work. There are the gaps, the absences, that Dickinson has inscribed into her own work and the absence that has been done to her. Certainly, the study of absence extends far beyond the poems themselves.⁵ While negotiating absence is an inherent and unavoidable feature of writing about Dickinson, I have chosen to focus not primarily on the gaps inserted by Dickinson and her editors but on how the reader experiences and extends absence.

It is “To fill a Gap” that ultimately reveals the polyvalent absences of this project: Dickinson addresses gaps in her content, enacts gaps in her presentation, and makes the lyric subject absent in her form. She does this throughout her poetic work and especially in “To fill a Gap.” The poem begins with an imperative delivered with the pragmatic, direct, spare, matter-of-fact language of a repair manual or assembly instructions. It involves its readers not only through the universal poignancy of its subject, the difficulty—and, perhaps, the impossibility—

⁵ The gaps and the absences that are an inevitable result of the process of publication and transmission have, like the gaps present in Dickinson’s own poetry, been well-documented. As R.W. Franklin writes, Dickinson’s texts can be considered “hybrid poems” constructed not only by the poet but, posthumously, by her editors. “Any approach that is exclusively author-oriented,” he cautions, “will fail editorially....If, then, we want the poems in a readers’ edition, we are forced to make decisions” (Jackson, 38). There can be no edition of Dickinson’s work in which an editor’s name does not appear alongside hers on the spine, and yet, of course, the presence of an editor has the potential to obscure the presence of the author. For a reading that foregrounds the physical, corporeal importance of Dickinson’s manuscripts, see Susan Howe, “These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Values” in *The Birth-mark*. For a reading of the fascicle groupings often lost in a chronological ordering of the poems and of the variants often excised from or unacknowledged in editions of Dickinson’s work, see Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*. For a study that asks, “How do we know that lyrics are what Dickinson wrote?” (17), that documents how the emergence of the lyric poem as a genre influences retroactively how we read Dickinson, and that questions whether “a text once read as a lyric” can be “unread” (6), see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*.

of recovering from loss, not only through the fundamental, relatable commonality of the experience with which it grapples, but also through its form of address. Dickinson casts her audience as her agents, her instructions applying to her readers, her “You” able to be read as a direct address, her words spoken not to a singular subject but to all those who come within their purview.

Often, poems by other poets, poems that are more detailed, more specific, more narrative in their structure, push us away at the same time that they pull us in. Often, while a poem speaks to us, while we can absorb and identify with its premise, we cannot find ourselves fully within its words. Often, poets close softly the door that allows us to enter into the poem entirely: we are not the speaker; we can connect to the idea of the poem but we know that we are not, that we can never be, the poem. There is no danger, no opportunity, of looking into the poem and finding ourselves reflected, no possibility for the words to be as smooth and transparent as a mirror. As James Longenbach argues, a poem’s refusal to lay bare its mysteries may be an asset. “Even when we read exclusively for story,” he says, “we never want to know the whole story, every *what* and *why* converted reliably into *this* and *because*. We enjoy semantic coherence when it feels sufficiently at risk. [...] [W]e’re pulled forward by incantation, drawn back to what resists our intelligence almost successfully” (*RTP*, 48-49).

Dickinson, for better or worse, most often does not allow us this distance. Her words give us no direction, do not propel us toward any specific, bounded, limiting, concrete meaning. Indeed, as Robert Weisbuch writes, her poetry is often “sceneless.”⁶ “When Dickinson’s poems pose as reportorial,” he explains, “the speaker does not proclaim, ‘I was there—this happened to me’; instead, the speaker implies, ‘I was somewhere—the exact place doesn’t matter—and this

⁶ Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson’s Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 18. Hereafter cited in the text.

analogy will constitute the meaning of that experience, minus the experiential trimmings” (Weisbuch, 19). We might assume, for example, that “To fill a Gap” is about death, that the lines derive their sharp poignancy from the finality, the irrevocability, of mortality, from the fact that the gap created by death of a loved one may never be filled. We might strengthen our assumption, clarify it, confirm it, almost, if we include in our interpretation the knowledge that, in Dickinson’s manuscript form, a superscript plus sign precedes the word “solder” and directs our attention to a phrase—“Plug a Sepulchre”—preceded by another superscript plus sign and centered directly below what most editors now consider to be the poem. Following the variant, we might therefore read the poem’s final lines as, “You cannot Plug a Sepulchre / With Air.”⁷ We might place this variant phrase back in the poem and place the poem back in its historical context, supplement its words with the fact that its manuscript was penned in 1863,⁸ at the height of the Civil War, and with the supposition that the speaker may, then, be referring to a specific—and specifically brutal—form of loss—a death in which the body is lost, unreturned, unable to be buried; a death in which no soldier’s corpse is present to “solder” the “Abyss;” a death in which closure is especially elusive.

We might do all this—and yet, there is nothing in the poem that insists that these are the only correct interpretations, nothing in the poem that forecloses other possibilities, nothing in the poem—no subjective speaker, no lyric or non-lyric “I”—that limits the frame of reference, that prevents us from viewing Dickinson’s words as a mirror in which we find reflected ourselves. Even though we may not know exactly what Dickinson meant, her meaning does not exclude us: her poem can be both specific to her and specific to us; the meanings can coexist. And thus, we can also—with nothing to forbid us from doing so, no restriction inherent in the lines—turn

⁷ R.W. Franklin, ed., *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1981), 753.

⁸ R.W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Variorum ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998), 634. Hereafter cited in the text.

Dickinson's words back onto themselves, make them self-reflexive, use them as a flashlight to illuminate our way of reading.

What do we do in the face of such absence? What do we do in the face of such exhaustive—and exhausting—openness? Often, what we do is turn to the details of the author's life; often, what we do is attempt to divine the author's intent. Except, in this case, the author is responsible for the absences, is also the "Other" whose gaping "O" enacts, widens, blocks with unsatisfying "air" the very gaps that have already bewitched us so. Dickinson's poem taunts us with this knowledge: the "O" in "Other" orthographically mimics her poems' expansive spaces, as does the sound in "solder", as does the "o" in "block" and the "o" in "more." Efforts to fill these spaces through biography fail because biography is inherently reductive, is no more substantive than air itself.

April Bernard examines the problem of biography in reading women poets. Though she is speaking of Sylvia Plath, her words apply just as well to Emily Dickinson: Both women, after all, have similar histories: the stigma of eccentricity, poems discovered in their rooms after their deaths, altered and re-ordered and published to greater acclaim than they had achieved or cultivated during their lifetimes; myths about their existence that permeate the popular culture. Bernard writes,

Just as the graves of one's great-grandfather should be kept tidy and bedecked with flowers to honor, to placate, his memory, so does a biography of a cultural ancestor seem a monument. Look how pretty it is, this large hardcover book. Look how we illustrate it with photographs, as the French do their family graves. And look, too, how it can be held in the hand. A dangerous dead ancestor? A dangerous bitch-goddess whose poems can annihilate? Nonsense! See—here she is, all tidied up between the pages of a book. I can put it right there on a shelf with a thousand other books, she's all squished in and can't get out. I can open it at any page I like, extract some small portion of her life, and then shut it again. The genie can't get out of the bottle even if she tries.

I can hold her in my hands, I can, oh my goodness, I can *summarize* her.

Odd how this fails to work, sometimes. Odd and wonderful how Sylvia Plath oozes out of the confines of her own work, out of the pages of any book written about her. Odd how dangerous and un placatable her ghost is.

Usually, the living can have power over the dead. Usually, the dead person's life has become a Story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end: it has become a thing. But with Sylvia Plath, her beginning, middle, and end have been so tampered with that the story can keep getting told again and again, differently each time.⁹

Dickinson has been made a bride in her white dress, has been made a widow, a spurned admirer, of a number of men, has been turned, by scholars such as Van Wyck Brooks, into a "Story." "Emily," Brooks explains,

usually 'elfed it' when visitors came. She was always in the act of disappearing. [...] [E]ven her oldest friends seldom saw her. While sometimes in the evening, she flitted across the garden, she never left the place by day or night. To have caught a fleeting glimpse of her was something to boast of, and a young girl across the way who watched at night for a light at her window was thrilled if Miss Emily's shadow appeared for a moment. There were nursemaids who thought she was a witch. They frightened the children by uttering her name, as if there were something malign in Miss Dickinson's queerness.¹⁰

Two pages of Brooks's fourteen-page chapter have passed with careful descriptions of the Dickinson men—"Edward Dickinson, the lawyer" and Austin, "the Squire's son"—and even the prominent male guests—Emerson, Samuel Bowles—who visited the "mansion" prior to this, his first mention of Emily Dickinson (Brooks, 316-317). When he does speak of her, Brooks addresses her with the patronizing and childish title "Miss" or even deigns to call her "Emily." He takes painstaking care to describe her, variously, as an elf, an apparition, a butterfly or bird

⁹ April Bernard, "My Plath Problem," *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, Ed. Molly McQuade (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2000), 95-96.

¹⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, "Emily Dickinson." *Literature in New England* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1944), 317-318. Hereafter cited in the text.

“flitting” through pastoral spaces, a hermit, a haunter of children, a “witch,” and an eccentric—but never as a human being and never (of course not) as a poised, deliberate, strong, independent woman. His feeble attempt at biography—not one citation appears in his entire essay on Dickinson, nor does he include a works cited page at the conclusion of his volume—does more to obscure, to reduce, to summarize Dickinson than Dickinson ever did herself.

Of course, not all biographies are as egregious, dramatic, and distorted as this antiquated, mid-century work that predates the start of most serious, credible Dickinson scholarship. And yet, the tendency to contain Dickinson “between the pages of a book” persists. Even contemporary poets yield to the temptation: Billy Collins’s speaker attempts to connect romantically with Dickinson’s biographical, mythical self; Galway Kinnell’s speaker attempts find Dickinson within himself; Adrienne Rich journeys through both conceptions. Through their efforts to conjure Dickinson in order to overcome her absence, they produce, instead, an over-presence, creating precise lyric speakers to compensate for Dickinson’s lack of them, filling in the gaps too much, filling in the gaps “With Other,” filling in the gaps with “Air” instead of with substance.

And so, the questions remain: what do we do in the face of such absence without necessarily giving face to Dickinson or reconstructing her in biography? What do we do in the face of such exhaustive—and exhausting—openness? “To fill a Gap,” Dickinson writes, “Insert the Thing that caused it –.” Except the attempt to fill a gap is a self-defeating exercise. Except her elliptical syntax both initially conceals and indirectly acknowledges the fact that “the Thing that caused it” is not necessarily the cog that fits. To fill a gap in the ground created by the movement of tectonic plates, the friction of fault lines, that causes an earthquake, insert not the thing that caused it (the earthquake) but the opposite of the thing that caused it. Do the

impossible: reverse time; push the plates into their former positions; stay them from shifting. To fill the gap in memory, to fill the gap in life, to heal the sadness created by a death, insert not the thing that caused it (the death) but the opposite of the thing that caused it. Do the impossible: resurrect the dead.

To fill a gap, then, in a poem created by Emily Dickinson, insert not the thing that caused it (the poet¹¹) but the opposite of the thing that caused it. Do what in this case is possible: insert the absence of Dickinson. Insert not her persona but read the poems in a way in which the personality becomes irrelevant; read the poems without reading the poet. Define absence broadly, define it not as or not only as the opposite of presence, not as or not only as a condition that results from the withholding of information or from the temporal erosion of information but as a palpable and deliberate force that can be created, cultivated, controlled. Make palpable the absence. Make absence not only a lack; make a gap not only a space; make both not impediments but opportunities.

James Longenbach writes, “The job of interpretation—what in fact we’re doing when we interpret—is to supply what a poem has appeared to omit [...] [O]ur continuing interest in a poem turns on its resistance to our efforts” (*RTP*, 85). Thus, simply by existing, my argument seems to turn on itself: if we succeed in filling in, completely, the gaps, interest is lost, mystery abandoned, gone. As a result, I wish not to supply definitive interpretations but to narrate and to interrogate the process of absence, to ask where and how the reader can locate herself within Dickinson’s poems. After all, while each individual reader can fill the gaps for herself, the gaps

¹¹ While the poet does not, of course, create all of the gaps directly, while some of the gaps in Dickinson are caused by what has been done to her and by what has been done to her work, she is responsible, indirectly, for the absences. For instance, Dickinson’s failure to specify how—or even if—her poems should be read and circulated after her death contributed to the climate of confusion and distortion that characterized early efforts to edit and publish her manuscripts.

cannot be filled, passive voice, in a collective way. While each individual reader can supply an associative reading, that reading cannot be definitive. The poem resists a definitive answer, resists it both because of Dickinson's conception of poetry and because poetry's job is to restrain that impulse, to resist interpretations that foreclose other interpretations. Where attempts to imagine and encounter Dickinson often serve only limit the depth and expansiveness of her work, Dickinson's own poems provide a corrective, open doors, teach us to dwell in infinite possibilities.

Chapter 1.
“Block it up / With Other – and ‘twill yawn the more – ”:
Poetic Constructions of Emily Dickinson

When faced, as we often are while reading Dickinson, with an “Abyss,” when overwhelmed by absence, when searching for an “omitted center,”¹ we turn, often, to biographical context. As Sharon Cameron states, Dickinson’s “life is now the primary text, the poems an explication of it.”² We find it difficult to dwell in Dickinson’s work without dwelling on her; we read Dickinson’s person as though she were a poem, read her body as a body of work containing multiple possibilities, multiple interpretations, containing, even, explanations, containing, even, answers. And when faced with a dearth of information, when unable to know for sure what we want to know, we invent. Cameron writes, “When we are baffled by the poems, we dismiss our confusion by embracing the myth, ready at hand, of Dickinson the half-cracked poetess” (*Lyric Time*, 12).

Cameron’s tone is neutral, her observation matter-of-fact and empirical. She refuses either to condone or to rebuke this method of inquiry; in her view, it is simply an expected consequence of Dickinson’s “endlessly suggestive letters that are on the one hand held up as literary documents and, on the other, appealed to as if their assertions could command the authority of fact”; of the way in which the letters “share characteristic features of the poems” and “bear a frank confusion between the public and the private. If we have difficulty separating the life from the poetry, this is aggravated by Dickinson’s confusion of the two” (*Lyric Time*, 11-12). Cameron, too, blames Dickinson, excuses the perniciousness of this tendency by casting it as a perhaps unavoidable consequence of Dickinson’s habits.

¹ Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), xxi.

² Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 11. Hereafter cited in the text.

We assume that poets would be immune from this practice, would be the least likely readers to participate or condone violative gap-filling, and I turn to the poets because they, more so than many critics writing in the academic voice, are better able to, allow themselves to, capture the emotionality of reading Dickinson. However, contemporary poets, too, feel impelled to perform a poetic gap-filling that proves, in the end, to be merely a poetic “block[ing] up / With Other,” a poetic attempt to “solder an Abyss / With Air” that only makes Dickinson’s words “yawn the more.” I examine three such attempts, beginning with Billy Collins’s effort to construct and animate an idea of Dickinson’s “lyric voice.” Locating Dickinson within a separate, mythical, biographical self, Collins’s poem treats her as an elusive other; Galway Kinnell, while situating Dickinson historically, attempts to locate her within his own self; Adrienne Rich attempts both approaches. In these poets’ differing rhetorical strategies, in their frustrating and frustrated efforts, in their tangled intentions and meaningful but inevitable failures, we find insights that challenge, that push forward, our own readings of Dickinson.

I.

In “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes” (1998),³ a poem that plays with the voyeuristic fantasy to strip Dickinson but that ultimately acknowledges that such intimacy can never be fully realized, Billy Collins collapses the distinctions between Dickinson’s person and what he perceives to be the speaker of her poems, between physical intimacy with Dickinson and emotional and intellectual connection to her poetry, between mediator and reader. Collins begins his poem with a reference to the cape described in Dickinson’s famous poem “Because I could

³ For the full text of this poem, see the Appendix.

not stop for Death –” (F479). “First, her tippet made of tulle,”⁴ he writes, portraying Dickinson as owner and wearer of the garment. By directly echoing her phrase, “My Tippet – Only Tulle –,” Collins’s speaker assumes that Dickinson’s poems have a speaker who can be known and addressed and equates Dickinson’s person with that speaker, arguing implicitly that her poetic statements are autobiographical rather than fictional (F479). Collins’s speaker reinforces this stance throughout the poem, further referencing Dickinson’s work by depicting a “carriage,” presumably the carriage from “Because I could not stop for Death –,” and by alluding to the famous “fly buzzing in a windowpane” (ll. 37-38). The details that the speaker infers from Dickinson’s poems and applies, perhaps inaccurately, to her life coexist with confirmed biographical facts such as the “wooden chair” in her “upstairs bedroom,” the “orchard below,” and the “long white dress” that became her “habitual” clothing (l. 3, l. 15, l. 17, l. 6; *LED*, 448n5).

Though Collins’s speaker concentrates his narration on the external, physical items that determine Dickinson’s appearance and populate her milieu, his seamless interweaving of Dickinson’s life with Dickinson’s poems is also present in his description of her manner. Just as Dickinson’s “hair tumbled free of its pins,” black, metallic objects whose appearance resembles dashes, the speaker recalls that “there were sudden dashes / whenever we spoke” (l. 31, ll. 32-33). Dickinson’s embodied voice, then, shares the cadences of, sounds identical to, the voice of her poems. By using the pronoun “we,” Collins’s speaker suggests that the dashes exist not only in Dickinson’s speech but also in the spaces of the exchange between himself and Dickinson. Though the conversational relationship is not fluid but fractured and fragmented—a sense of schism underscored by the interruptive connotations of “sudden”—it is, nonetheless, a

⁴ Billy Collins, “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes,” *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (New York: Random House, 2002), 119, l. 1. Hereafter cited in the text.

conversation: the two speakers are able to communicate; the dashes not only rend but also stitch together.

By treating dashes as multivalent marks that characterize Dickinson's corporeal, audible utterances, that determine the pacing of dialogue with her, and that syntactically and visually structure her poems, Collins's speaker suggests that meeting Dickinson personally is equivalent to encountering her poetic work on paper. Despite distance both temporal and physical, a single elongated dash reaches across decades to simultaneously link and separate Dickinson and her contemporary readers.⁵

Just as Dickinson uses dashes to both create and commemorate gaps, to make physically, spatially, and sonically explicit the inability to fully represent the world's detail in speech and text, Collins, despite largely avoiding the dash in his own poem, chooses a form that, by calling up a set of expectations only to frustrate them, mimics the tensions in Dickinson's work. Collins structures "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" in the style, familiar to many contemporary readers, of a cinematic or novelistic narrative. He utilizes a linear temporal progression and foregrounds the chronology by beginning many of his lines with transitional words such as "First," "And," "Then," and "Later" (l. 1, l. 4, l. 6, l. 27). By drawing attention to the sequence of events, he draws attention to their progression, to the speaker's eventual movement from cataloguing Dickinson's garments and external deportment to sensing her essence. Additionally, the poem reads with the natural clarity and fluidity of figurative prose and is rich with detailed, concrete images—each item, from the "long white dress" to the "wide-board, hardwood floor," is deliberately and carefully placed and named, as if arranged by a meticulous set designer (l. 6, l. 19). The reverence that Collins's speaker attaches to these artifacts is evidenced by the way in

⁵ Distance remains, however, between Collins's speaker and his readers: while he undresses Dickinson, while he speaks to her, we remain on the outside of this communication. We note the speaker's boldness, a hubris so amazing, so absurd that we cannot help but assume that he is being at least somewhat facetious.

which he, like a cinematographer who zooms in before panning outward, allows his attention to linger, allows the accoutrements under his gaze to serve as symbols—allows them to serve also, in the bizarre frame of this poem, as trophies of his sexual conquest—and to represent larger truths about Dickinson's life and work.

In crafting a poem that pays tribute to the characteristics of cinematic and novelistic narratives, Collins indulges what Margaret Dickie calls “the habit of our times to read poetry as if it were prose.”⁶ However, while Collins adopts the conventions of plot, sequence, and framing common to prose and film, his poem fails to satisfy a crucial expectation engendered by those genres—that its characters be well-articulated. Instead, despite her position as the protagonist of the poem, Emily Dickinson fails to fully emerge in “Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes.” The incomplete characterization of Dickinson is apparent immediately in the poem's exposition: the first three stanzas concentrate exclusively on the removal of her tippet, bonnet, and dress, making no mention of her facial expression, her vocal response, or any other element of her personality that would indicate her reaction to her denuding.

If the version of Dickinson figured in the poem's opening stanzas is no more than a mannequin, a mute tailor's dummy from which items of clothing are stripped, then the woman whom Collins's speaker depicts in the fourth stanza is little different. “She was standing /,” he says, “[...] / motionless, a little wide-eyed, / looking out at the orchard below, / the white dress puddled at her feet” (ll. 14-18). The image of Dickinson as silent, immobile, gazing out her window rather than at the speaker in the moments preceding a sexual encounter, perhaps paralyzed, is an image indelibly associated with rape. Collins's speaker, however, attempts to curtail the specter of assault and misogyny with his syntax. By using the passive voice to narrate

⁶ Margaret Dickie, “Dickinson's Discontinuous Lyric Self” *American Literature* 60.4 (1988): 537. Hereafter cited in the text.

Dickinson's undressing—her tippet is “easily lifted off her shoulders and laid / on the back of a wooden chair;” the bow of her bonnet is “undone”—and by deferring until the third and fifth stanzas the inclusion of the personal pronouns, “my” and “I,” that indicate that it is he who is “part[ing] the fabric” and “proceed[ing],” Collins's speaker leaves open the possibility, however unlikely, that Dickinson is removing her own clothing (ll. 2-3, l. 5, l. 10, l. 23, l. 10, l. 23) . As a result, he masks the potential violence of the scene with its vagueness. While Dickinson does not protest or is not shown protesting, she also does not consent or is not shown consenting. Collins's speaker does not provide enough information about her character to allow his readers to discern her thoughts or her actions, and discomfort lingers.

The hazy uncertainty surrounding Dickinson's character evinces itself not only in the gaps that punctuate the speaker's portrayal but also in the simile that he uses to describe his own behavior. “I proceeded like a polar explorer / [...] / sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness,” he says, raising the stakes of the meeting by casting himself in the role of an intrepid pioneer, an adventurer charting previously uncharted territory (ll. 23-26). More troublingly, the trope of exploration suggests that Collins's speaker sees himself as traversing a landscape rather than engaging with a volitional human presence. The representation of Dickinson as an element of nature is underscored by the speaker's fixation with the large, looming “iceberg of her nakedness” and by his focus on material objects. His approach to Dickinson centers not on seducing her, not on warming her heart and mind to him, but on making her physically reachable, on removing the tactile obstacles—and they are obstacles: he notes the “complexity of women's undergarments / in nineteenth-century America” and enumerates an exhaustive array of “clips, clasps, and moorings, / catches, straps, and whalebone stays”—enclosing her body (ll. 20-

21, ll. 24-25). “It takes forever / before my hands can part the fabric / [...] / and slip inside,” he says, the word “slip” connoting a stealthy, sneaky penetration (ll. 9-12).

The speaker’s rendering of Dickinson’s non-responsiveness, his dehumanizing characterization of her as an environmental feature, and his foregrounding of the antique, socially-engineered “complexity” of “nineteenth-century” feminine apparel (a foregrounding that refuses to acknowledge the implicit fact that his task is made more difficult by Dickinson’s apparent refusal to help him disrobe her) simultaneously betray and attempt to compensate for his inability to grasp Dickinson’s core, responsive self. Try as he might to equate sexual intimacy with mutual emotional connection, Collins’s speaker can never fully know Dickinson. The difficulty of accessing her physically underscores his failure to fully access, represent, or even imagine her thoughts and feelings.

By projecting a persona that speaks her verses and conflating this with Dickinson’s documented, factual self, Collins’s speaker engages in another act of compensation, attempting to fill in the gaps in biographical knowledge about Dickinson with details from her poems. In doing so, he forecloses the possibility that she employs a fictive speaker or that the fiction of a speaker might not be relevant to reading her poems at all, thus narrowing the range of expression available to her. In addition, he aligns himself with Sharon Cameron’s observation that Dickinson’s life—or, rather the life that others have imagined and constructed—has become the primary text.

While “embracing the myth” is natural, common, and understandable, while it is a practice undertaken by not only Collins and his speaker but also by countless generations of readers, it is, nonetheless, fundamentally unsatisfying because it cannot provide, or even enhance, knowledge of or about Dickinson. Instead, as Margaret Dickie explains,

The brevity with which the lyric ‘I’ is presented in Dickinson’s poems should suggest that that “I” is not to be known in terms such as publicity and power that might define a character in a novel. [...] In a lyric poem, the “I” is known only in limited detail. For a lyric poet of consistent productivity such as Dickinson, this limitation is a deliberate choice of self-presentation, expressive of a particular sense of the self (of herself or a self) as shifting, changing, reforming. Such a self will be distorted in being described in terms appropriate for a real-life or novelistic character. (537-539)

Unlike Collins’s speaker, who clings desperately to his notion of a fully realized, fully articulate lyric “I”—or who, perhaps, acts out the very issues that Cameron and Dickie raise—but who insists, concurrently, that the “I” is autobiographical, Dickie views the lyric not only as a site for “self-presentation” but also as a forum for experimentation, for inhabiting different situations and voices and for conveying different pieces of a dynamic self or dynamic character. She describes an expansive and varied range of speakers, yet she maintains that, due to the boundedness of lyric form, each type of speaker is equally incomplete. Dickie’s caution against equating Dickinson with a poetic speaker works in tandem with the characteristics of lyric form to expose the inherent poverty of the Dickinson myth, of efforts to view Dickinson’s work through the lens of her historical identity: even if Dickinson intends to put forth an honest, accurate, unfragmented account of herself, she cannot do so within her poems.

Collins’s speaker’s choice to render Dickinson equivalent with the “I” of her lyrics, then, restricts her independence, forecloses her ability to step creatively outside of her self, shrinks both speakers, does a disservice to the poet and to her words. Dickinson is larger, more complex and contains more multitudes than any one poem can encompass, yet the lyric voice, through its potential for deliciously unresolved ambiguity, allows those multitudes to coexist without demanding that the reader choose between them. Nevertheless, even though the poems contain

no intrinsic pressure to arrive at a singular, concrete interpretation, Collins's speaker and many readers endeavor to smooth the intricacy of Dickinson's writings by placing them in the context of her life, by attempting to locate within them their author, fully-fleshed. Overwhelmed by what Ogden Nash calls "flickering indecision,"⁷ overwhelmed in the face of choice, we often—instead of turning inward, instead of performing self-reflexive, associative, potentially emotionally risky readings—resort to hanging, however temporarily and irresolutely, the poems on Dickinson's own life and experience in order to access them.

The paucity of information available about Dickinson and about her intent haunts both her poems and poems about her. Though Collins's poem functions in opposition to lyric characteristics and likens itself instead to prose and cinema, though his readers are schooled through his use of novelistic and filmic convention to expect a well-developed character, they, like Collins's speaker, can access only a static, single-frame, time-stopped image of Dickinson, a grainy, black-and-white, two-dimensional daguerreotype floating in her well-appointed room. The unsuccessful effort to use modern methods to conjure her and the consequent tension between Collins's chosen form and the inability to satisfy its tenets make Dickinson's absence more noticeable. Thus, "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" confronts its own limits: its failure to summon, or to adequately construct, Dickinson is the unavoidable result of the innately flawed way in which it tries to imagine her.

Collins seems at least partially aware of these limits, and it is this awareness that complicates intractably the question of the poem's tone. We read into the speaker's voice shades of self-mocking in order to placate the discomfort that hangs like a pall over the poem, that instills in us a sense of unease; we read into the tone shades of self-satire in order to anticipate and allow for the shift at the poem's end. And yet, the desire for intimacy with Dickinson,

⁷ Ogden Nash, "The Chipmunk," *Verses From 1929 On* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952), 455.

however uncomfortable or aggressive it becomes, seems too genuine to dismiss. Even if the approach is self-mocking, the desire is real. And so, if Collins is making a joke, it is unclear how or why he supposes that his readers would find it funny; the satire, such as it is, is subtle, unannounced. We remain unsure about the extent to which Collins's speaker is separate from Collins himself, unsure about whether Collins has created a speaker to mock our wish to connect with Dickinson or whether he is, simply, as deluded as the persona who narrates his poem.

The unwanted, albeit inescapable, form of Dickinsonian absence that Collins encounters—an inability to sufficiently represent her born out of an inability to sufficiently know her—is not the only form of absence that permeates his poem. It is accompanied by a purposeful, cultivated absence, the product of a speaker who positions himself as a mediator standing between Dickinson and her readers, who establishes a sense of distance, who manipulates his audience's desires as he chooses which details to withhold and which to divulge. The speaker's awareness of his audience becomes apparent in the poem's fourth stanza, which begins with the words, "You will want to know" (l. 13). By addressing his readers directly within his text, by sharing information as though he is granting a request or performing a favor, he creates a space within the poem for them to inhabit and insists that the process of narrating and sharing the experience of undressing Dickinson is as important as—or even equivalent to—the act of denuding. Or, more cynically, he speaks as an obscene braggart telling other men about his conquest.

The speaker's openness towards his audience and his willingness to capitulate to the demands that he anticipates issuing forth from his readers appear to diminish, however, as the poem progresses. In lieu of continuing his linear, sequential account of "sailing" ever closer "toward the iceberg of her nakedness," he disrupts the forward movement by introducing an

element of reflection (l. 26). “Later, I wrote in a notebook,” he states at the beginning of the sixth stanza, providing a glimpse of his personal method of processing events and even including a simile from the notebook’s contents (l. 27). The generosity of the speaker’s self-quotation is countered by the tantalizing, teasing, implicit acknowledgement that accompanies it, an acknowledgement of the boundary between private and public, of the gap between what he experiences and what he chooses to relay. That the speaker mentions his notebook rather than simply opening the stanza with the impression that his intimate encounter with Dickinson “was like riding a swan into the night” makes his readers aware of the fact that they are not seeing everything, that the version of the his encounter that they receive is not pure but filtered and edited by him (l. 28). By exposing a segment of his inner life, the speaker foregrounds himself and draws attention to the choices about self-presentation that all writers, including Dickinson, must make.

At the same time that Collins’s speaker exhibits an awareness for the distinction between the private and public spheres, he manipulates their often nebulous contours. His playful approach is evident not only in his introduction of the notebook but also in his subsequent comment, “but, of course, I cannot tell you everything—” (l. 29).⁸ The speaker follows his words with a dash and then a description: “the way she closed her eyes to the orchard, / how her hair tumbled free of its pins, / how there were sudden dashes / whenever we spoke” (ll. 30-33). This singular dash serves the same complex function as Dickinson’s own dashes: it embodies ambivalence; it connects lines as it gestures to the space between them; it simultaneously marks the speaker’s declared reluctance to tell and links his statement to the stanza’s final four lines. In those lines, he, while perhaps refusing to disclose “everything,” lists enough personal details to prompt his audience to question the sincerity of his claimed reticence. By beginning the next

⁸ With this statement, the speaker parallels the reticence of the lyric poet.

stanza with the affirmative clause, “What I can tell you is,” the speaker casts himself as oblivious to the evocative power of the information that he has just shared (l. 34).

Despite the speaker’s wavering, despite the contradictions between his postured interposition and his observable behavior, between his stated refusal to disclose and his revealing admissions, his audience remains, at this point in the poem, beholden to him. While he declines to accede to every inferred query emanating from his readers, he nonetheless makes Dickinson at least somewhat accessible, nonetheless provides concrete images, and nonetheless willingly bridges chronological spans as he educates his readers about, for instance, conventions of nineteenth century feminine attire. He embodies his readers’ own wishes for emotional and physical connection to Dickinson and, thus emerges, in his role as a modern Casanova, as a figure to whom it is easy to relate, a figure less mysterious than the Dickinson shrouded in antiquated clothing and ever-expanding mythology. In satisfying, however indirectly and mischievously, the bulk of his audience’s curiosity, Collins’s speaker highlights his understanding of his readers’ perceived limitations: if they cannot insert themselves in history or converse with Dickinson or undress her, they hope, if nothing else, to live vicariously through biographies and first-hand accounts, through those who have met her or who can imagine themselves doing so.

By empathizing with his readers, by achieving the closeness to Dickinson that many of them wistfully aspire to and then conveying the experience through his poem. Collins’s speaker gains their trust and enforces his own importance. As quickly as he establishes his centrality, however, he begins to reverse it, begins to write himself out of his own poem. The speaker’s diminishment of his own role operates in tandem with the increasing contradictions of his stance: he moves from voluntarily gratifying the reader’s interest in the poem’s exposition—he even

prefaces one list of observations with the phrase “You will want to know” (l. 13)—to expressing reservations about which pieces of the encounter he can publish. With this shift, the speaker destabilizes the reader’s role as a confidant—a soft betrayal which, ipso facto, acts to gradually wean his audience members from their dependence on him, to force the audience to feel, still, like outsiders, eagerly absorbing whichever details he is willing to disclose.

The process of gentle detachment reaches its climax in the poem’s final stanzas, where the speaker implicitly retracts his earlier insinuation that people cannot experience Dickinson unless they do so through him, where he subtly, gently suggests that what he witnesses is no more sacred, no more intimate, than what readers can create for themselves. The speaker’s realization of the impossibility of the lyric encounter, a shift in thought that he imparts to his readers contemporaneously with its occurrence but that he gestures towards in his comic exaggerations and in his mock-heroic portrayal of adventure, comes as he uses a set of comparisons to describe Dickinson’s reaction as he removes her final piece of clothing: “I could hear her sigh,” he says,

when finally it was unloosed,
the way some readers sigh when they realize
that Hope has feathers,
that Reason is a plank,
that Life is a loaded gun
that looks right at you with its yellow eye. (ll. 42-47)

Dickinson’s sigh is, ostensibly, a sigh of release from tightness, a sigh of contentment, a sigh that seems to free not only her body but also her spirit. It is a response that, as Collins’s speaker notes, parallels the response of “some readers.” In his final lines, the speaker has swiftly altered both the focus of his commentary and the scene of epiphany. While previously he used the second-person “you” to address his audience, he now employs the third person “some readers,” retreating from the former all-inclusive term in order to differentiate a segment of the population.

As a result, he ironizes his earlier overtures to the insatiable voyeurs, to those who wish for physical intimacy with Dickinson. Instead of continuing to heed their pleas for details, he offers, in closing, what he sees as an incontrovertible fact. All, he proposes, that a wise, perceptive, sympathetic reader needs to do in order to connect with Dickinson, in order to experience the ecstasy of affirmation and to feel the truth and beauty of her words, is to read her poems. Collins's speaker has rendered himself unnecessary, has rendered even Dickinson's person superfluous and has replaced both with the poems themselves, with familiar lines and universal, ringing axioms that speak clearly, directly, and poignantly to their audience, that speak without the intercession of a mediator and without regard to the personal history, and posthumous distortions, of their author.

II.

While "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" begins with the word "first," begins with a series of images of undressing and unfolding and exposure, Galway Kinnell's "The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson" (1994) opens, instead, with an image of closing: "The lecture had ended when I came in," the speaker says,

And the professor was answering questions.
I do not know what he had been doing with her
poetry [...]⁹

Kinnell frames the poem with this detail, uses the past perfect progressive tense in the phrase "had been doing" to imply that the "doing" is not an isolated incident but a continually perpetuating process, and creates a speaker whose indignation seems too disproportionately vast to encompass only a lecture whose contents he did not even hear (l. 3). These decisions combine

⁹ Galway Kinnell, "The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson," *Imperfect Thirst* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1994), 23-25, ll. 1-2. Hereafter cited in the text. For the full text of this poem, see the Appendix.

to create the sense that the word “lecture” refers not only to a singular class session but also serves as a metaphor for the broader, decades-long discussion—a discussion drawing in scholars, critics, editors, poets, readers, and texts—about Emily Dickinson’s poems and person, a discussion that the speaker believes has “ended,” stalled, a series of “questions” that have “dwindled” both in the classroom and in literary culture (l. 1, l. 6).

The disdain for both the professor and his method of inquiry are immediately apparent: the “deconstruction” in Kinnell’s title seems to refer not only Derrida’s famous theory but also to a negative process of fracturing and fragmentation; the speaker favors the exchange of ideas and arguments over the professor’s preference for allowing a one-sided lecture format to fill the bulk of the class’s time; the speaker characterizes the professor as an interrupter, a dominating force who breaks in before the speaker is able to finish his comment and who, pleased by the sound of his own voice, keeps going as the speaker keeps still; the speaker describes the professor “kiss[ing] his lips together” in a smug and self-satisfied manner and fantasizes about calling him a “dope” (l. 22, l. 24, l. 48).

The speaker positions himself as an outsider—we are unaware, even, of whether he is a student in the course or a visiting bystander; he offers no biographical details—and yet, he seems initially as pompous, pretentious, and presumptive as the professor himself. After all, the speaker enters after the lecture’s conclusion and, claiming to have no knowledge of its content, is still brash enough to pose a bold counterargument to the first decontextualized utterance that he hears. Additionally, his statement that “I do not know what he had been doing with her / poetry” suggests, with diction similar to Collins’s poem, violence, sexual conquest and rape, suggests that the speaker’s presence imposes a corrective, suggests that he is a chivalric rescuer sweeping

in to save Dickinson not only from being cast as a “victim of reluctant male publishers” but also from becoming a victim of male academics (ll. 3-4, l. 5).

Even though the speaker’s presence initially seems unwarranted, intrusive, and overconfident, it is also democratic. The speaker’s ability to enter the classroom, to inject disagreement, and to shift, however slightly, the presentation from a lecture to a conversation implies that it is possible for any reader of Dickinson’s work to renew, reenergize, contribute to, and move forward the discourse about the poet. The speaker’s role changes as the poem progresses: humbled by his effort to summon Dickinson, he becomes more sympathetic, becomes not an arrogant antagonist but a wistfully disappointed, shy presence troubled by *l’esprit de l’escalier*. Unlike Collins’s speaker, who is enchanted by Dickinson’s foreign, mysterious, corporeal strangeness, Kinnell’s speaker crafts a version of Dickinson who, though cognizant of her historical context, dwells within his self, who speaks more firmly and courageously than he is able to. He employs Dickinson as a conscience-like figure, an engine of his own self-criticism.

The speaker’s efforts to recognize the social realities governing Dickinson’s existence come as he attempts to situate himself in opposition to the professor. Contesting the legend of Dickinson as a casualty of others’ assessments, he argues that she, though “passionate to publish,” was aware that the prevailing sentiment of the mostly male-dominated literary establishment would hinder the reception of her challenging, complexly subversive work and, thus, “vowed not to publish again” (ll. 13-14). The speaker peppers his remarks with erudite historical references, mentioning the Springfield *Republican* newspaper that first published, anonymously and against her will, her words and alluding to nineteenth century conceptions of

poetry (l. 7). As he prepares to recite the remainder of the poem—"Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man –"—that he has identified by its opening lines, the professor interjects,

"Yes [...] "'the Auction'—'auction,' from *augere*, *auctum*, to augment, to author..."

[...]

"In *auctum* the economy of the signifier is split, revealing an unconscious collusion in the bourgeois commodification of consciousness. While our author says 'no,' the unreified text says 'yes,' yes?" (ll. 16-17, l. 19, l. 23)

Rather than addressing the force of the speaker's comments, the professor—apparently, surprisingly, unacquainted with this well-known poem—digresses, seizes on the etymology of a single word and, as a result, renders familiarity with the poem—renders, indeed, the poem itself—unnecessary, irrelevant.

Once he utters these words, the tone of the poem shifts, and the balance of power in the interaction passes from the speaker to the professor. The professor's brief interjection—"yes?"—serves as a merely rhetorical question; he does not invite or allow dissent. And while the speaker wishes to dissent, he is unable to do so. Instead, stunned, almost, to speechlessness, he falters. He launches into a catalog of repeated disappointments, building to a satisfying moment, performing a crescendo, only to narrate, too, his letdown, only to explain that his fierce rebuttal occurred only in his imagination. Nevertheless, the speaker allows—as he does with each of the responses that he imaginarily issues—an instant of suspense in which he, enclosing his statements within quotation marks, leads his readers to believe that he spoke the words that he intended to speak. By doing so, he not only maintains for an added second the illusion of strength but also ensures that the reader's attention focuses more on the words themselves than on his inability to say them. He allows himself to state in triplicate what is essentially the same

line of reasoning, repeating to clarify, moving from attacking—even if only mentally—the professor to scornfully educating both him and his audience, and emphasizing the importance of his argument.

However, rather than chastising the professor aloud for “uproot[ing]” Dickinson’s “words,” rather than refusing, out of “loyalty,” to “recite her poem now,” the speaker confesses, “No, I didn’t say that” (l. 29, ll. 31-32). And rather than admitting that his silence was the product of a sudden bashfulness, of fear, or of intimidation, he insists that he shaped his behavior based on his perception of Dickinson’s wishes. He alters his notion of Dickinson, shifts from considering her as a historical figure whose words are rooted in her other words and in the reality of “Amherst in 1860” to viewing her as a timeless (l. 47). He says “that she would want me to finish [the professor] off with one wallop” (l. 23). And so he revises the tenor of his initial statement, removing qualifying phrases such as “it may not always be necessary,” removing the question, posed lightly, “Why not, first, try *listening* to her?” and modifying his tone to accuse the professor of “prefer[ring] to hear [him]self,” instead of the poet, “speak” (l. 29-30, l. 36). Except he does not state these words aloud, either; except he, once more, insists that he “held back” because of Dickinson, “held back – for I could hear her / urging me to put outrage in my voice and substance in my argument” (ll. 37-39).

By this point in the poem, the speaker has become a sorry character. Remorseful, disappointed in himself, he is unable to let the incident pass. He wakes “in the middle of the night,” haunted, and replays the encounter “many times” (l. 51). In a final act of self-flagellation, he discloses to his readers what happened “In reality” (l. 52). “I stood up,” he says,

and recited the poem
like a schoolboy called upon in class.
My voice gradually weakened, and the women
who had cried out for the poem

now looked as though they were thinking
of errands to be done on the way home. (ll. 52-57)

Kinnell's speaker has become a reciter who repeats Dickinson's words automatically, by rote. By delivering the poem plainly, feebly, without conviction, the speaker does a disservice not only to himself but also to Dickinson's words. He proves, almost, unworthy of them, his inability to boldly relay them weakening their force, blunting their influence. If Dickinson has trusted him with her legacy, if Dickinson is depending on him to lift from their static position on perhaps unread pages the words that she wrote, he has, he believes, failed her. His realization of his own insufficiency is evident in the poem's final lines:

As people got up to go, I moved
into that sanctum within me where Emily
sometimes speaks a verse, and listened
for a sign of how she felt, such as,
"Thanks—Sweet—countryman—
for wanting—to Sing out—of Me—
after all that Humbug." But she was silent. (ll. 60-66)

Despite the speaker's professed intimacy with Dickinson—he refers to her by her first name, claims that he can summon her reactions, insists that she exists in the deepest, most sacred space within his self—she refuses to speak, refuses to acknowledge the speaker's efforts. Instead, she leaves him to, as he did earlier with his own comments, imagine and fantasize about words that he wishes were spoken aloud.

While Billy Collins's speaker attempts to find Dickinson within her biography, within her embodied self, within the accoutrements of her home and physical appearance, Kinnell's speaker insists that Dickinson lives within himself, views her less as a person and more as words to reiterate in recitation, as a voice of reason and strength. Unable to overcome her silence, however, he, like Collins, conflates the poems' speakers with Dickinson herself, and he, like Collins, resorts to parody. While Collins's speaker attaches disproportionate, undue significance

to the relics of Dickinson's quotidian existence, Kinnell's speaker, perhaps unintentionally, mocks not her objects but her words. He quotes her phrase "Sweet – countrymen –, " and haphazardly sprinkles capital letters and dashes into the sentence, forming a caricature of her poetic voice that, rather than respecting her intentionality, exaggerates, turns into a cliché, her most distinctive technical traits (F519).

Though the speaker had earlier fought against uprooting Dickinson's language, he now engages in the very practice that he criticized. Kinnell's poem, thus, could be characterized by the words that the professor uses to characterize Dickinson's text: "what at first some of us may have taken as a simple outcry," a passionate appeal to respect Dickinson's volition and to engage with the conditions under which her poems were written, "we all now see is an ambivalent, self-subversive text," one which, attempts, even though it fails, to appropriate Dickinson (l. 59).

However, despite the poem's self-subversive conclusion, ambivalence remains. By citing for the benefit of his audience the substantive disagreement that he does not have the courage to voice to the professor, by explaining that, in sharp contrast to its benign, "quaint," contemporary meaning, "in Amherst in 1860" the word "auction" carried higher stakes, "meant / the slave auction," the speaker performs an educative function (l. 43, ll. 47-48). Even though he does not include Dickinson's full poem within his text, even though he, like the professor early in the poem, refuses to heed cries for "The poem!" even though he, by crafting his own internal version of the poet, shifts attention away from her poems, his words nonetheless implicitly urge a turning back to Dickinson (l. 20). Ultimately, Kinnell's poem is memorable not because of the speaker's narration of his actions but because of his insight, because of new ways in which we, after reading his words, can read Dickinson's poems. By sharing his analysis, by repeatedly referencing but not including the full text of "Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of

Man –” in his text, Kinnell encourages readers to locate the poem within Dickinson’s body of work. His speaker recedes, replaces his own primacy with Dickinson’s.

Paralleling Collins’s speaker, who, after stumbling aggressively, comes to find that his physical encounter brings him no closer to Dickinson than does reading her words, Kinnell’s speaker realizes that it is in Dickinson’s words that he, too, finds fulfillment. In a poem in which Dickinson is repeatedly obscured by voices who speak over hers and who appropriate her words, Kinnell’s speaker triumphs by listening for her. Since she would be speaking through him if she were to speak at all, it is in her absence, in her silence, that she is most fully present.

III.

While Billy Collins’s speaker wishes to enter Emily Dickinson sexually, while he “part[s] the fabric” of her dress “like a swimmer’s dividing water, / and slip[s] inside,” Adrienne Rich attempts to “enter her mind,” to study the emotional and physical landscape that surrounded Dickinson as she wrote (ll. 10-12; “VH,” 159). While Collins and Kinnell narrate singular points in time—Collins’s poem begins at the instant of undressing and offers no indication of how the moment came to pass; Kinnell’s poem documents a brief interaction of a mysterious, seemingly peripatetic speaker—Rich undertakes a journey that unfolds over years in her essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” (1975) and, later, in her poem “The Spirit of Place” (1980). Rich’s conception of Dickinson evolves: the literal journey of the essay becomes a metaphorical, spiritual journey in the poem.

Rich writes personally and candidly, unlike the poetic speakers employed by Collins and Kinnell, who disclose no identifying details and who use the first person point-of-view merely as a method of narration. She speaks self-reflectively, deploying autobiography as a rhetorical and political technique, as a form of protest against the silence that has been historically imposed

upon women writers. Unlike Collins's speaker, who attempts to unite with Dickinson through sensual, sexual intimacy, and unlike Kinnell's speaker, who attempts to unite with Dickinson by figuring her as a presence within himself, within his mind and body, Rich exhibits a desire to "connect" that is tempered by her knowledge of the temporal, social, and personal distance that separates her from her predecessor.¹⁰ "The methods, the exclusions, of Emily Dickinson's existence," she explains, "could not have been my own; yet more and more, as a woman poet finding my own methods, I have come to understand her necessities, could have been witness in her defense" ("VH," 158). She establishes, immediately, her ability to relate to Dickinson, speaking of her not only as a historical figure but also as a kindred spirit, a presence who has influenced her own conception of herself.

However, despite Rich's awareness of the difficulty of connecting with Dickinson concretely rather than only associatively, despite Rich's awareness of the fact that she cannot interact with Dickinson, can only fight, alone, a century later, parallel battles against the "unwritten and written laws and taboos underpinning patriarchy," her desire to connect is no less fervent ("VH," 183). She begins "Vesuvius at Home" with an image that attempts to bridge past and present: "I am traveling at the speed of time, along the Massachusetts Turnpike," she writes, conjuring the thought of rapid, fantastical flight into history only to destroy the illusion by grounding her journey in contemporary details ("VH," 158). The remainder of her exposition vacillates—similarly, irresolutely, almost arbitrarily—between descriptions of earlier eras and the intrusion of the present-day reality that undermines them:

Western Massachusetts: the Connecticut Valley: a countryside still full of reverberations: scene of Indian uprisings, religious revivals, spiritual confrontations, the blazing-up of the lunatic fringe of the Puritan coal. How peaceful and how

¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 161. Hereafter cited in the text.

threatened it looks from Route 91, hills gently curled above the plain, the tobacco-barns standing in fields sheltered with white gauze from the sun, and the sudden urban sprawl: ARCO, McDonald's, shopping plazas. [...]

From Northhampton bypass there's a four-mile stretch of road to Amherst—Route 9—between fruit farms, steakhouses, supermarkets. [...] There is new money here, real estate, hotels. ("VH," 158-159)

The raw landscape of the nineteenth century, a countryside sublimely beautiful but also dangerous, full of the potential for fierce, fiery racial and religious conflict, has been tamed, has been subdued, has been replaced by the homogenous, ubiquitous markers of suburbia. The vivid, unavoidable reminders of modern construction and modern wealth permeate Rich's narrative: she enumerates them repeatedly, with near-obsessive attention.

And yet, as Rich enters Amherst, she is able to slip into a reverie. She notes that the "center of town" has changed little since the "undergraduate years when I used to come there for college weekends" and "recognize[s]," after twenty-five years away, "the high hedge of cedars screening" the Dickinson Homestead ("VH," 159). "I ring at the back door," she says, "the door through which Dickinson's coffin was carried to the cemetery a block away" ("VH," 159). With this choice, with these words, Rich attempts to erase the chronological gap between her and Dickinson, attempts to sustain—or, perhaps, to craft—the impression that there had been no years between the moment that Dickinson left, for the last time, her home and the moment that Rich arrives.

Indeed, Rich ends her travelogue with the admission that

For years I have been not so much envisioning Emily Dickinson as trying to visit, to enter her mind, through her poems and letters, and through my own intimations of what it could have meant to be one of the two mid-nineteenth-century American geniuses, and a woman, living in Amherst, Massachusetts. ("VH," 159)

Through her endeavor, however futile, to collapse the near-century that has elapsed between Dickinson's death and her visit, Rich attempts purity, attempts to see Dickinson without the false representations of her "early editors and anthologists," without the distortions of "commentators" who "reduced" her words to "quaintness or spinsterish oddity," without the misrepresentations of those who labeled her "eccentric," without the myth perpetuated by generations of "legend-mongers" ("VH," 159, 162). In contrast to Collins's speaker, who by his very encounter with Dickinson presumably changes her, changes history, Rich wishes to be an unnoticed observer, wishes to look upon Dickinson, to learn about her, without altering her "genius" ("VH," 160).

Rich echoes the notion of static visitation in her repeated use of an entomological metaphor, writing, "For months, for years, for most of my life, I have been hovering like an insect against the screens of an existence which inhabited Amherst, Massachusetts, between 1830 and 1886" and writing later, as she enters, "at last," Dickinson's bedroom, "Here I become again, an insect, vibrating at the frames of windows, clinging to panes of glass, trying to connect" ("VH," 158, 161). Rich underscores both the screens—screens that are, of course, larger impediments for a small animal than for a human being—imposed by Dickinson's deliberate "seclusion" and those made inevitable by the passage of time. She portrays herself as the proverbial fly-on-the-wall, a benign, curious observer.

Her characterization of herself as an insect, however, betrays ambivalence. While an insect initially seems small and unobtrusive, it can also be undesirable, distracting, persistent, a pest—like, perhaps, the fly incessantly issuing its "blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –" at the moment of death (F465). Rather than being an overtly invited guest, rather than being a privileged correspondent, Rich becomes, potentially, an unwelcome presence. And even if she is

not unwelcome, she is certainly not significant to Dickinson: she cannot ask questions of her, cannot have a dialogue with her, cannot fully “connect” (“VH,” 161).

Rich’s effort to connect with Dickinson is further complicated by the fact that, though Rich hopes to “visit, to enter her mind, through her poems and letters,” she acknowledges that Dickinson’s historical, corporeal self deliberately does not always correspond to the selves imagined in her written work (“VH,” 159). Unlike Collins’s speaker, who insists that Dickinson’s poems are spoken by a person who can be identified and spoken to, who insists that Dickinson’s biographical self maps onto her poems, Rich maintains that “the art of poetry is an art of transformation” and asks “what single theory could hope to contain her?” (“VH,” 165, 163). Calling “metaphor” Dickinson’s “native language,” Rich views the page as a place to experiment with voices, to speak subversively, to resist the confines of patriarchal culture (“VH,” 161-162). She ends her essay with the caveat that “There are many more Emily Dickinsons than I have tried to call up here. Wherever you take hold of her, she proliferates” (“VH,” 183).

Rich’s visit to the Homestead is not without value: it grants her the credibility of first-hand observation and allows her, thus, to personally begin the work of decentering the Dickinson myth; it replaces frequently perpetuated assumptions about Dickinson’s life (such as the belief that she was cloistered in “hermetic retreat” in a damp, dark, forbidding space) with more accurate, factual statements (such as that Dickinson’s bedroom was spacious, “high-ceilinged,” “sunny”); and it, through Rich’s articulation of her wish to travel “at the speed of time”, to undo the posthumous mutilations of Dickinson’s life story and life’s work, physically enacts the near-insurmountable difficulty of undoing layers of legends (“VH,” 160, 161, 158). However, the existence of Dickinson’s ungraspable, infinitely multiplying selves acts to render Rich’s literal journey almost superfluous. Rich’s journey brings her no closer to Dickinson, fails to transform

Rich into anything other than an “insect” perpetually “hovering [...] against the screens of an existence” (“VH,” 158). As a result, Rich, like Collins, moves from envisioning an encounter with Emily Dickinson’s person to engaging, instead, with her words, moves from a description of physical spaces into an exploration of poetic ones, into a series of close readings of Dickinson’s poems. This outcome is foreshadowed, expected, inescapable: because society viewed Dickinson, and many other women, as “peculiar,” as “partially cracked,” because Dickinson, “too strong for her environment,” was also “practical” and volitional, the Dickinson that Rich is searching for may be at least partly absent from every space except her words, where her fierce, fiery, “unorthodox, subversive” thoughts are, in transformed form, fully present (“VH,” 160-161).

In some ways, Rich’s attempt, in “Vesuvius at Home,” to find Dickinson by visiting the scenes of her writing is closely aligned, though not in intent, to Collins’s speaker’s desire to encounter Dickinson personally. Seen from another perspective, however, the relationship that she refashions is closer in kind to the relationship that Kinnell’s speaker depicts. Where Collins’s speaker, through his insistence that his audience will “want to know” (l. 13) the details he uncovers, projects onto his readers the longing for intimacy, be it emotional or physical, with Dickinson, Kinnell and the later Rich exemplify a different approach: their versions of Dickinson are internal, more private. Removed are the shades of sexual violence, removed is the refusal to attribute agency to Dickinson as a person independent from her poems, but removed, also, is the universality of Collins’s attempt, however, uncomfortable or futile, to fulfill his and his readers’ voyeuristic wishes. Instead, Kinnell and Rich provide a template that readers, though unable to replicate these poets’ models exactly, can nonetheless approximate through their own experience, through their participation in this communal craving.

Rich's shift at the end of her essay anticipates "The Spirit of Place," a poem that pursues a broader re-visioning of her relationship to Dickinson. Enacting her definition of "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction,"¹¹ Rich begins with a literal re-visiting: she opens "The Spirit of Place" with a narrative that reenacts the initial journey of "Vesuvius at Home":

Over the hills in Shutesbury, Leverett
driving with you in spring road
like a streambed unwinding downhill
fiddlehead ferns uncurling
spring peepers ringing sweet and cold¹²

•

While the action is similar, the form, images, and conception of Dickinson in this poem are different from those of "Vesuvius at Home." Instead of the delicate layering of prose clauses, instead of the raw "psychic extremity," the rage and anger, of the poems she discusses, instead of the educative descriptions and the wish to combat the assumption "that Emily Dickinson, not patriarchal society, was 'the problem,'" Rich's poem adopts an even more deeply personal stance ("VH," 176, 183). Instead of the seamless fluidity of prose, her words, divided into, most often, tercets or quatrains and placed within five sections, enact mental fragmentation. They embody Rich's shifts in thought and setting and create, within and between them, space. This spaciousness is mirrored on the syntactical and lineal levels: Rich rarely uses punctuation, relies instead on physical spaces to mark caesuras. Though her techniques are different, though her poem differs visually from Dickinson's, her form mimics the absences found in Dickinson's

¹¹ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979) 35.

¹² Adrienne Rich, "The Spirit of Place," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), 297, ll. 1-5. Hereafter cited in the text.

work and forces readers to interpret the gaps, to make choices about how to read into and through them.

While “The Spirit of Place,” insists, in both structure and content, that gaps are permanent and inevitable, the opening sections of the poem attempt to bridge them. Rather than repeatedly referencing the modern urban development that has left an indelible imprint on the New England landscape, Rich limits her imagery to more universal descriptions of nature. While she notes changes in seasons, describing “spring peepers ringing sweet and cold,” “midsummer moonrise,” “cut corn,” “the work of winter,” “fog” and “sleet,” these cycles are steady and predictable (l. 5, l. 38, l. 108, l. 111, l. 125). The landscape remains fundamentally fixed, the natural features fundamentally similar to those that Dickinson herself observed, wrote about, and, in her garden, cultivated. Rich replaces the more temporary notion of visitation that she presented in “Vesuvius at Home” with the permanence of not only describing the landscape but also physically altering it. “Here in these hills,” she writes,

this valley we have felt
a kind of freedom

planting the soil [...] (ll. 42-44)

Her use of the pronoun “we” indicates her belief, early in the poem, that she can commune with Dickinson by engaging in similar activities, by working alongside her to spur growth and add beauty to New England’s “shadow-country” (l. 20).

By traveling to and inhabiting the area in which Dickinson dwelled, by interacting deeply with it, Rich carries on the process of “trying to connect” with Dickinson that she began to describe in “Vesuvius at Home” (“VH,” 161). Instead of driving to Dickinson, however, she drives with her; instead of serving as an inconspicuous spectator, small as an insect, she envisions conversing with Dickinson, addressing her directly, “talk[ing] yet again / of dark and

light, of blackness, whiteness, numbness,” embracing opposites and contradictions (ll. 6-7). She conceives of her project as a continuation of Dickinson’s efforts to work to change social circumstances while also ensuring “surviv[al]” by “practic[ing] necessary economies,” to

tak[e] on the world

as it is not as we wish it
as it is not as we work for it
to be

(“VH,” 160; ll. 60-63)

Rich characterizes herself and Dickinson as kindred activists. Just as she journeys to the same “hills” and “valley” that permeated Dickinson’s consciousness in order to diminish the physical distance separating her from her precursor, she works to diminish the temporal distance by highlighting present as well as historical oppression: she speaks not only of “male // dominion” but also of slavery, of “the spirit of the masters” that “calls the freedwoman to forget the slave;” she writes of “trying to clarify connect // past and present near and far” and acknowledges locales as disparate as Alabama and Botswana; she lists the horrors of “gangrape, lynching, pogrom;” she, staring at the night sky, notes that the stars “look violent to me” (ll. 56-57, ll. 25-26, ll. 48-51, l. 136, l. 132).

Like Kinnell’s speaker, Rich views Dickinson as a voice of strength and conscience, as an internal presence. By crafting a version of Dickinson who exists contemporaneously with her, Rich is able to extract Dickinson, somewhat, from her social context, to imagine how she would respond to current conditions and how she, perhaps like “fiddlehead ferns uncurling,” would thrive (l. 4). Rich, thus, allows Dickinson to transcend her position as a static, time-bound figure: just as Rich travels backward, “at the speed of time” to reach Dickinson, Dickinson travels forward, inflecting the present (“VH,” 157).

The notion of Dickinson escaping the strictures of her surroundings continues in the poem's third section, in which Rich moves from documenting her purely private encounter with Dickinson to visiting, once more, the Dickinson Homestead. Contrasting her seemingly surreptitious arrival in "Vesuvius at Home," where she "ring[s] at the back door" and silently traverses the house's hallways as she imagines Dickinson "listening from above-stairs to a visitor's piano-playing," and "watching, you feel, watching ceaselessly, the life of sober Main Street below," Rich arrives, this time, for a social occasion:

In Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst
cocktails are served the scholars
gather in celebration
their pious or clinical legends
festoon the walls like imitations
of period patterns

(*...and, as I feared, my "life" was made a "victim"*)

The remnants pawed the relics
the cult assembled in the bedroom [...]

("VII," 159, 161; ll. 65-73)

With these words, she criticizes the Dickinson myth propounded by the "scholars," by people like Collins's speaker, who have appropriated the spaces of Dickinson's existence for their own purposes, who celebrate not Dickinson herself but the "pious and clinical legends" they have created. These legends, she notes, literally "festoon the walls," paper over the surfaces in which Dickinson found "freedom" ("VH," 158). Instead of allowing their conceptions of Dickinson to change over time and with new information, instead of allowing, as Rich does, their conceptions of Dickinson to evolve, the "scholars" gather to commemorate a static figure. Rich's harsh diction describes violent possession—"the remnants" pawed with grubby hands—describes a reverence for "relics" that is not positively or beautifully spiritual but is instead evidence of an extremist "cult."

learning Dickinson's biography are ultimately irrelevant compared to appreciating the compressed energy, the compact force, of her language.

The steps of Rich's self-realization—steps that, deeply indented, are literally staggered, like a descending staircase—are steps that Kinnell's speaker gestures towards but fails to fully tread: Where Kinnell's Dickinson is "silent" within the speaker's self and within the speaker's poem, present only in words that are a but weak caricature of her own, Rich follows her assertion that Dickinson can be found only in Dickinson's words by quoting a long passage from one of Dickinson's letters (l. 66). Like Collins's speaker, like the "readers" who "sigh" upon identifying with Dickinson's words, Rich realizes that the place whose spirit she is seeking is the page itself (l. 43).

As "The Spirit of Place" continues, Rich extends the movement that only begins to unfold at the conclusion of "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes." Unlike Collins's speaker, who refers, always, to Dickinson in the third person, Rich addresses her directly, composes an elegy:

with the hands of a daughter I would cover you
from all intrusion even my own
saying rest to your ghost

with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands
open or closed as they prefer to lie
and ask no more of who or why or wherefore

with the hands of a mother I would close the door
on the rooms you've left behind
and silently pick up my fallen work (ll. 90-98)

Unlike Collins's speaker, who envisions a romantic relationship to Dickinson, Rich depicts herself as a "a daughter," "a sister," and, "a mother," as a person who is cared for by Dickinson, who exists as an equal in "mutual solitude," and who cares for her (l. 46). Rich defers to

Dickinson, writing, earlier in the poem, “Strangers are an endangered species” (l. 64). Because distance and privacy are commodities that Dickinson deeply valued but did not always have access to, Rich implies, respecting her means allowing her the precious privacy and strangeness that she sought. In her elegy, Rich grants Dickinson that respect, writing of her desire to honor Dickinson’s wishes but admitting that she is unsure of the content of those wishes, unsure whether Dickinson would want to be buried with her “hands / open or closed.” Rich’s awareness of Dickinson’s absence doubles the absence inherent in her apostrophe: She is conscious of absence in a way that Collins’s and Kinnell’s speakers are not.¹⁴

Unable to “cover” Dickinson “from all intrusion” despite her genuine and benign wishes to do so, Rich, in the end, “close[s] the door” on the poet. Writing that “this is my third and last address to you,” Rich, in the poem’s final two sections, enacts her promise to “pick up my fallen work” (l. 89). Instead of employing, primarily, the pronouns “me” and “you,” Rich shifts into “us,” “ourselves, and a “we” even less restrictive than her earlier “we.” Her words become more universal, move to embrace a community larger than, not limited to, herself and Dickinson. Instead of describing events and depicting concrete scenes, as she did earlier in the poem, to which her readers don’t have access, Rich shifts into an imperative voice, urging her readers to “force nothing, be unforced,” to “trust roots,” to “wait without sadness and with grave impatience” (l. 114, l. 117, l. 119). Instead of attempting to reconstruct, to recreate Dickinson, Rich honors her legacy, continuing, in different forms, the work that Dickinson began. Instead of searching for Dickinson only in the physical places that she inhabited, instead of finding Dickinson only in the scenes and surfaces of Dickinson’s writing, Rich finds that Dickinson has left her mark on Rich’s own poetry. Instead of “Block[ing]” “up / With Other” Dickinson’s absences, instead of falsely, inadequately “solder[ing] an Abyss / With Air –” Rich—like

¹⁴ For this formulation, I am indebted to Sarah Ensor.

Collins's and Kinnell's speakers begin, however tentatively, to do—comes to revere Dickinson's person and absorb her words without demanding her presence.

Chapter 2.
The Place of the Poet, the Place of the Reader in Dickinson's Poetry

Dickinson's poems perpetually foreclose entering into a presence, perpetually open up absence. They leave their readers wondering what kind of space the poems create for them to inhabit, leave their readers wondering how we enter into the utopian place / no place of Dickinson's poetry.

"Matty: here's freedom," Dickinson is said to have said to her niece, closing the door to her room and turning an imaginary key ("VH," 158). Within the walls of her bedroom, she found space; within careful, deliberate constraint, she found openness. Within her poems, we find the same openness—possibilities expanding, multiplying. Stepping into her stanzas, knowing, as Dickinson did, that the word "stanza" derives from the Italian word for room,¹ we, too, find freedom. Paradoxically, in these constrained and fairly regular stanzaic forms loom some of the vastest spaces imaginable; the poem is a closed space characterized by openness. Dickinson's words move from concern for the risks of poetry to praise for its possibilities; through her work emerges a trajectory of how the poem comes to life through the reader, addresses the reader, and creates a space for the reader's response.

For example, Dickinson writes,

Elysium is as far as to
The very nearest Room
If in that Room a Friend await
Felicity or Doom –

What fortitude the Soul contains
That it can so endure
The accent of a coming foot –
The opening of a Door – (F1590)

¹ "Stanza," *Oxford English Dictionary* (18 February 2006),
http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/cgi/entry/50236162?query_type=word&queryword=stanza&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=ITVb-rXY76p-3744&hilite=50236162

Though ostensibly taking as their topic the suspenseful unpredictability of mortality and the “Soul’s” capacity to “endure,” her words point, too, to a more specific, slyly metapoetic interpretation: the poem can be read as an affirmation of the human ability to bear poetic language and plot. The phrase “The accent of a coming foot” alludes to the meticulous sonic pacing animating the metrical feet of poetry, and the theme of visceral, nearly fatal power echoes Dickinson’s earlier statement that “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry”² and the plaintive lament of a poetic speaker who wishes for the “Art to stun myself / With Bolts – of Melody!” (F348).

Implicit in the desire to “stun myself / With Bolts – of Melody!” is the knowledge that language can be animated. In 1862, Dickinson wrote,

A word is dead, when it is said,
Some say –
I say it just begins to live
That day (F278)

Encased in a letter to her cousins of which no original copy survives, copied first by a cousin to a separate sheet and then transcribed, once more, from that transcript, published first as prose rather than poetry, then copied as poetry and published as poetry (Franklin, *Poems*, vol. 1, 297), the words contain a number of questions: what does it mean to say a word? When does the act of saying happen? Is saying an act of speech? Is saying the same as writing? Is a word said when it is printed? If a word falls on a piece of paper and nobody but the author is there to see it, nobody is given it, does it make a sound? In a culture of letter and manuscript circulation, of private, silent, solitary reading, the written word may displace the spoken, may signify the absence of a word being said aloud. But the written word may still be figured as an utterance; the absence of a speaker does not necessarily correspond to the absence of something heard.

² Thomas Higginson, “Emily Dickinson’s Letters,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 68.4 (Oct. 1891): 444-456. Hereafter cited in the text.

Raising more questions than they answer, Dickinson's words themselves nevertheless prove their argument, show their veracity through the history of their transmission. Taken as Dickinson's own thoughts, they acknowledge, accept, allow for a loss of authorial control. They affirm that, once birthed, once released into the world, words are independent creatures able to convey meaning outside of their composer's intent. Taken as speaking themselves, reading the "I" not as a human speaker, not as the author's voice but as a word asserting its own opinion, they show that this process is inevitable. Dickinson's words—not fixed but mutating, shifting at the hands of her editors and her interpreters—live on, circulate still, spark speculation, and stimulate discussion. The original utterance is but a springboard, the beginning but not the endpoint of analysis.

Furthermore, words, once loosed, not only begin to live but live forever, are immortal. Words, once loosed, are capable of being possessed by successive generations of readers, each reader deploying for her own purposes their immense potency. Dickinson writes,

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Opon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it's pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master's Head
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
 None stir the second time –
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
 Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
 He longer must – than I –
 For I have but the power to kill
 Without – the power to die –

5 in] the – 16] Deep] low 18 stir] harm 23 power]art (F764)

As Susan Howe catalogues, Dickinson's speaker has been figured, variously, as "A Soul finding God;" "A Soul finding herself;" "A poet's admiring heart born into voice by idealizing a precursor poet's song;" "Dickinson herself;" "The American continent and its westward moving frontier," "The savage source of American myth;" "The United States in the grip of violence that threatened to break apart its original Union;" "A white woman taken captive by Indians;" "A slave;" "An unmarried woman (Emily Bronte's Catherine Earnshaw);" and "A frontiersman's gun."³ Adrienne Rich adds another possibility: "I think it is," she maintains, "a poem about possession by the daemon, about the dangers and risks of such possession if you are a woman, about the knowledge that you cannot live without the daemon once it has possessed you" ("VH," 172-173). I wish to layer onto these readings yet another, to argue that the speaker of this poem is not the daemon who inspired it but rather the poem itself. I wish for my reading to exist without excluding any of these other readings, wish to echo Rich's caveat that "I do not pretend to have—I don't even wish to have—explained this poem, accounted for its every image; it will reverberate with new tones long after my words about it have ceased to matter" ("VH," 174).

Indeed, the poem takes as its very subject these ever-renewing reverberations. It begins with an image of potential energy, the "Loaded Gun" deliberately poised with injurious capability but tucked quietly "In Corners"—tucked, perhaps, between the pages of a book, piled,

³ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, (Berkley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), 76-77.

perhaps, between other manuscripts. While Dickinson's words provide no indication of just how long the "Gun" has "stood," just how long it has waited for the "Day / The Owner passed – identified – / And carried Me away –,” the use of the preposition “till” indicates that the conversion from potential to kinetic energy commences at the moment that the owner arrives. The owner can be thought of as the reader herself, as a reader who takes possession of the words, the “Life,” of the poem. The term—“identified”—that begins this process can be seen not only as fulfilling the conventional definition of labeling and classifying an item but also as identifying associatively. “Identified” can be read as “identified with,” the emotional connection between reader and poem cementing and strengthening the relationship between the two, making more powerful the link between the poem and its interpreter. The poem's hold on the reader enables the reader to carry it away: the poem exists not only on the page, not only in the “Corners” where it has previously dwelled but also in the reader's memory, the reader's consciousness.

The bond between the poem and its reader develops further as “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” continues. Dickinson's middle four stanzas document this deepening relationship: the poem uses the pronouns “We” and “Our” to imply that he and his reader⁴ act in concert, form a unit. Simultaneously, though, he characterizes himself as uniformly obedient to the interests of his “Owner,” explaining that he “guard[s] [his] Master's Head,” that he “speak[s] for Him,” and that he is the “deadly foe” with whom his Master's enemies must contend. Unlike the typical servant-master relationship, however, the relationship between the poem and its reader appears to be mutually beneficent: the poem delivers his words in a proud, boastful tone, depicting the fierce volcanic reaction he summons with his “smile,” taking on the role of an assassin, and explaining that “‘Tis better” to “guard [his] Master's Head” “than” to share a

⁴ Though I use mostly male pronouns in this discussion, I do not wish to limit the putative gender of either the poem or the reader.

“Pillow” with him. The poem derives satisfaction from pleasing his Master; the reader, using the poem as his agent, reaps rewards as well. Allowing the poet’s words to “speak for Him,” the reader, who has “identified” with these words but is unable to craft them himself, is able, nonetheless, to harness the poem’s power in order to fell enemies and elicit “repl[ies]” from “Mountains.”

The dependency of poem on reader and reader on poem comes to a cryptic climax in Dickinson’s final stanza. “Though I than He – may longer live – / He longer must – than I –,” the poem explains, acknowledging that, even though words are, indeed, immortal, even though the printed word outlasts its author and has a lifespan longer than any one generation of readers, readers “must” encounter the poem in order to invest it with meaning and to guarantee its circulation. Even the savage, violent “power” of the written word “to kill” is diminished, first by Dickinson’s variant use of “art” for “power”—a usage that suggests a more delicate, less potent function for poetry; a usage that replaces the balance, the equivalence, created by the repetition of “power;” a usage that implies that this fate is a curse, that the poem would, if given the choice, exchange “the art to kill” for the power to die”—and then, even more significantly, in the face of the greater power of the reader. Dickinson uses the word “but” to underscore the relative insignificance of the poem in relation to the heightened significance of its reader: after all, it is the reader who gives the poem meaning, and it is successive generations of readers who do not allow poems “to die,” who instead make possible multiple interpretations, multiple, continual incarnations, of the poet’s words.

The vivid allegorical statement of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –,” with its emphasis on the pernicious power of the written word, becomes a fierce admonition in a poem

that, though composed almost a decade afterwards (Franklin, *Poems*, vol. 2, 722; vol. 3, 1093), can be thought of as a corollary, a complement, a companion:

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

Infection in the sentence breeds
And we inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria –

2 stimulate] consecrate 4 Maker] Author
Revision: 6 And] canceled; may inserted after we (F1268)

Of course, Dickinson can hardly be accused of dropping her meticulously crafted words carelessly onto the pages she painstakingly copied. Instead, her knowledge that even “pretty words” can be dealt “like Blades” and her awareness of the fact that speech—though it can be fought, contradicted, complicated by further speech—can never, once uttered, be rescinded may be the primary force motivating her care (F458). The already high stakes of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” are, though expressed differently, paralleled in this poem: while the direct, fatal power of a gunshot, the agency of deliberate action, and the immediacy of consequence are absent, the singularity of a bullet wound is replaced by the slow wasting away of disease and “Despair,” by a parasite lying dormant before it unexpectedly strikes, by the continuing contagiousness of an “Infection” that “breeds,” expands, replicates itself, passes from victim to victim over “Centuries.”

Both poems purposefully remove almost all traces of the author’s presence. The author seems to abdicate her position of importance almost immediately once pen touches paper: we know that the gun has been loaded, that the poem has been written, but we are not given even a glimpse of the actor behind the action. Similarly, the “Maker”—or, to use Dickinson’s variant,

the “Author,”—lies confined in an impermeable coffin, “folded in perpetual seam,” “Wrinkled” like decaying paper, trapped, unable to escape. Unlike the immortal words that, either by being “carried [...] away” in the reader’s mind or by spreading like an “Infection,” have the power to escape the pages on which they were written, unlike the words that retain their eternal youth, their “Maker” lies aged, “wrinkled,” powerless to defeat the ravages of time.

In contrast to the ambivalence of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –,” where sheer “power” is tempered by “art,” where a forceful, ecstatic, even erotic “smile,” exists alongside images of brutality, where violence contains shades of justice (the variant “harm” for “stir” suggests that the speaker may acting righteously to vanquish a “foe,” that vigilante retribution may be appropriate), “A Word dropped careless on a Page” provides a more explicit caution. Dickinson’s speaker replaces the possibility of positive poetic inspiration with the awareness that words can be transmitted even without their maker’s intent, that words “May stimulate an Eye” long after their author’s eyes have permanently shut.

Dickinson is acutely conscious of the poet’s role in shaping “discourse” for “Centuries” and “Age[s]” hence:

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

Inhere as do the Suns –
 Each Age a Lens
 Disseminating their
 Circumference – (F930)

The poem constructs the poet as one who guides with an invisible hand, entering only to evoke an atmosphere, to create a setting, to “light but Lamps” before receding. Rather than wishing for celebrity—Dickinson herself shunned such publicity, wrote to Thomas Higginson that “If fame

belonged to me, I could not escape her [...]. My barefoot rank is better”⁵—poets disappear over time, can even, as Dickinson did, make “Themselves – go out –” during the course of their own lives. However, despite its impermanence, the position of the poet is nonetheless essential, contains both pleasure and obligation:

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles Us by Contrast
To ceaseless Poverty – (F446)

Dickinson notes, placing the poet in an exalted stance, casting the poet as a seer with heightened ability who “Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings” (F446). It is a view prevalent in many of her poems: she lauds the visionary, even prophetic, abilities of the poet, writing,

I reckon – When I count at all –
First – Poets – Then the Sun –
Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
And then – the List is done –

But, looking back – the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole –
The others look a needless Show –
So I write – Poets – All –

Their Summer – lasts a solid Year –
They can afford a Sun
The East – would deem extravagant –
And if the Further Heaven –

Be Beautiful as they prepare
For Those who worship Them –
It is too difficult a Grace –
To justify the Dream –

12 Further] Other – / final 13 prepare] Disclose
14 worship] Trust in / ask of –

14 For] to –
(F533)

⁵ Emily Dickinson, “[Letter 265],” *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol 1. ed. Jahan Ramazani. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 871-872.

Through their capacity to craft rich, “Beautiful,” often pleasing images, through their capacity to summon with their words the seasons and the heavens, poets not only derive self-satisfaction but also serve a social function, “prepar[ing]” their readers for future experiences, describing what their readers presumably lack the depth of observation and lingual talent to describe themselves, and forming phrases that readers identify with and hold within their minds.

With great power, however, comes great responsibility. Offsetting the joy of delighting readers, offsetting the skill of enchantment, are the “power to kill” and the associated duty to employ words wisely and judiciously. As her famous statement—“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”—demonstrates, Dickinson often conflates the artistic force of poetry with its potential for injury (Higginson, N/A). The poet simultaneously bears the thrill and the burden of knowing that her words will outlive her. While the poet’s personal presence, like the poet’s life, like a lamp at evening’s end, is extinguished, the wicks of words remain, man-made materials as fixed as the stars of the solar system, capable of being lit and relit by an ever-widening community of readers.

While I have, thus far, focused less on the role of the reader and more on the place of the poet, the power of the written word, and their associated and often weighty responsibilities, Dickinson’s body of work also presents ways in which the literal and metaphorical absence of the poet facilitates the increased presence of the reader, ways in which poet and reader collaborate positively to construct poetic texts and imbue them with meaning. In “To hear an Oriole sing,” perhaps the poem in her corpus that most explicitly conveys the importance of the reader’s response, Dickinson addresses the community of readers directly:

To hear an Oriole sing
 May be a common thing –
 Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird
 Who sings the same, unheard,
 As unto Crowd –

The Fashion of the Ear
 Attireth that it hear
 In Dun, or fair –

So whether it be Rune
 Or whether it be none
 Is of within.

The “Tune is in the Tree –”
 The Skeptic showeth me –
 “No sir! In Thee!”

11 none] din (F402)

Through the use of quotations, Dickinson incorporates the “Skeptic,” or reader, gives him or her a space within her syntax. In contrast to the first three stanzas, their seemingly speaker-less assertions uttered matter-of-factly by an unidentified, unannounced, almost inhuman source, the last stanza uses the first-person pronoun “me,” turning the poem’s final lines into a conversation. In so doing, it mimics internally the implicit, unseen exchange between author and reader. By presenting no lyric “I,” Dickinson foregrounds the priority of the reader, lets other voices speak in her poems.⁶

While the “Skeptic,” unable and unwilling to accept the interpretive freedom granted him, points to the melodious “Oriole” and attempts to demonstrate, to prove, to not tell but show, he is denied the poem’s last word. Instead, the poem itself steps in, serves the educative function, forcefully, emphatically issues a rebuttal in the form of “me.” This imperative response (“No sir! In Thee!”) explains how words are meant to be processed, understood,

⁶ For this formulation, I thank Sarah Ensor.

interacted with: the poem gives permission for the reader to judge, for himself, the merits of what he hears; Dickinson elevates the importance of her audience by capitalizing “Thee.” In addition to placing the reader in a more prominent position, the poem raises the stature of the poet, the bird-like singer of lyrics. The use of the word “only” to modify “divine” serves to bridge the distinction between the poet and God, to make the divine seem not that distinct, not that distant, from the “common,” earthly pleasures that parallel it.

While the poet, like the Oriole, “sings the same, unheard,” the poet is aware of a listener, and the poem exists differently due to the listener’s presence. Just as poems become part of their readers, just as poems “inhere” deeply and are “carried [...] away” in their readers’ minds, so too does the audience become a part of the poem. Just as the ear whose “Fashion[s]” change with trends, time, and thought is anything but a static listener, so too is the poem anything but a static text. In “I dwell in Possibility –,” Dickinson trades the absolutist, entirely reader-centric view of “To hear an Oriole sing” for a more subtle, nuanced middle ground, casting the creation of poetry as a collaboration between author and reader:

I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous of Windows –
 Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
 Impregnable of eye –
 And for an everlasting Roof –
 The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
 For Occupation – This –
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise –

8 Gambrels] Gables –

(F466)

The dwelling Dickinson inhabits exists in both the physical and mental terrains, exists not in one precise locale but in many real and imagined places, exists not only for the author but also for her readers. While “I dwell in Possibility” is abstract and an independent clause, a dash connects it to the dependent clause “A fairer house than Prose –.” The suspense within the dash, between the lines, creates a riddle, suggesting, for a moment, that the poet can define and characterize possibility. The definition, however, is indirect and occurs via comparison: “A fairer house than Prose –” situates the poet with a home, indicates that she, in fact, lives within the broad, unlimited spaces of poetry, their possibilities too varied and numerous to be limned, and that she will live on, eternally, through poetry. By using the poetic devices of metaphor and riddle rather than the more colloquial, quotidian language of prose, the poem enacts and enforces its own argument. Each adjective and noun carries multiple meanings, makes possible multiple images.

By labeling poetry a “Fairer house than Prose –,” Dickinson foregrounds the belief that her art is simultaneously more beautiful and more equitable than other forms of written expression. The poem’s first two stanzas catalog the features of poetry, unfold an extended metaphor that mirrors, in its loving and careful attention to detail, and subverts, in its focus on an incorporeal space rather than on the human body, the blazon used by male poets to portray their lovers. The opulence of verse, its rich descriptive ability, is apparent in the phrase “Of Chambers as the Cedars.” There are as many intimate rooms, or stanzas, of poetry as there are biblical cedars, their interiors as lavish as cedar palaces and the temple of Solomon.⁷ Like the ancient architecture that Dickinson’s diction recalls, the “House” of “Possibility” swells to

⁷ The profusion of cedars during biblical times is evident from the following passage: “And cedars made he [the king] to be as the sycamore trees that are in the vale, for abundance” (1 Kings 10:27, *The Holy Bible, King James Version, Electronic Text Center*, ed. David Seaman. October 1995. (18 April 2005), <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer>
[ew2?id=Kjv1Kgs.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=10&division=div1](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer)>. For more on the use of cedars in biblical architecture, see Lytton John Musselman, “Cedars of Lament: The King of Bible Trees,” *Bible Plants*. 4 Feb. 2005. (17 April 2005), <http://web.odu.edu/webroot/instr/sci/plant.nsf/pages/cedaroflebanon#N_1>.

mythic proportions: its “Chambers” are “Impregnable of Eye,” indicating that the human powers of sight are unable to fully process the infinitude of poetry; its “Roof” is “Everlasting” because it is unbounded, is the “Sky” itself.

While Dickinson employs the diction of royalty—echoing the regal association of “Cedars,” the word “chamber” also connotes a “reception room in a palace”⁸ and a place where a “person of authority, rank, or importance receives visitors”⁹—to amplify the significance of the poet, to rank the poet among the powerful leaders of society, she, as in “To hear an Oriole sing,” simultaneously enhances the rank of the reader as well. The fairness of poetry extends not only to its alluring artistry but also to the balance, the exchange, between the poet and the reader, the power, the empowerment, shared. By encouraging interpretation, by creating spaces in which the reader can enter and “dwell,” the house of poetry opens itself to guests. Dickinson’s words make this explicit: the “numerous” “Windows” let the writer see outside and the reader see inside; similarly, the “Superior” number of “Doors” allows the poet and her readers to enter and exit freely the realm of verse.

In the poem’s final stanza, the overture to the audience becomes even more explicit with the words, “Of Visitors – the fairest / For Occupation – This –.” The poet not only invites “Visitors” to share in her occupation, her profession, her career as a poet but also to literally occupy, “Dwell in,” physically enter her poetic texts. Her summons, however, appears, initially, imprecise and temporary: the pronoun “This” is unspecific and lacks an antecedent, making it unclear exactly which area she wishes her readers to inhabit. Set off on both sides by dashes, “This” is detached from “Visitors” and refers instead to the lines that follow it, “The spreading

⁸ “Chamber,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, (18 April 2005), http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50036424?query_type=word&queryword=chamber&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=0NJn-AUBHTD-23&hilite=50036424.

⁹ “Chamber,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004) (18 April 2005) <http://www.answers.com/chamber&r=67>.

wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise –.” Rather than continuing the extension of her work to her readers, the poet swiftly withdraws the welcome mat from her home’s front door. The pronoun “my” explicitly asserts her presence while making no further effort at inclusiveness. The poem’s final lines betray an author conflicted, an author ambivalent, about her relationship to her readers. While she insistently foregrounds her position as a poetic subject, she also acknowledges that, no matter how wide she spreads them, her hands are “narrow.” Her tacit recognition of her own limitations echoes the plea in an earlier poem for “More hands – to hold – These are but Two –” but refuses, this time, to ask for help (F293).

There is, however, another, a different, a more inviting way to read this poem; We, the community of readers, can locate ourselves in the “I” of “I dwell in Possibility –.” We can read the poem in such a way that what is situated is not the author but the reader. We can acknowledge that the poem provides a template for how the reader can occupy a poet’s work. We can recognize that the inclusion of the reader in “To hear an Oriole sing” is broadened here, that the reader has become not merely a momentary presence restricted to, bounded by, quotation marks but, instead, the poem’s speaker. We can observe that it is not only the poet but also the reader who dwells in possibility, that it is not only the poet who welcomes visitors but also the reader who acknowledges the suitability of the poetic space for visitation. We can see that the poet uses the same word—“fairer,” “fairest”—to describe both the “House” of “Possibility” and the readers who inhabit it, bringing closer in proximity the text and the presence of the reader, suggesting that they may be one and the same, impossible to distinguish. We can notice how, now, the ambivalence of the final lines has yielded to unqualified pleasure, the reader’s “narrow Hands” widened by the poem’s vastness.

When Dickinson asserts, “I dwell in Possibility,” then, she communicates her own perception of both her domestic and her poetic space, a perception that shatters the false notion of eccentric hermeticism of her poetry and life and replaces it with a broader vision. She enlarges the space of her physical and metaphorical poetic room by mapping it onto an expansive mental territory, by allowing it to encompass all of the “Possibility” that poetry contains. It is a direct contrast from the cry of another of her poems, “They shut me up in Prose –” (F445). Instead of the enforced, involuntary action of a third-person “They” and the language of “Captivity” (F445), Dickinson chooses her domain, beginning her poem with a bold “I” and replacing images of imprisonment with notion of “gather[ing] Paradise.” Instead of closing doors, Dickinson, her soul strong enough to endure the “accent of a coming foot,” to endure and embrace both the pleasures of poetry and its potential for injury, opens them not only for herself but also for her readers, for our ideas about what poetry is and can be.

Conclusion:
“A loosened Spirit”

What should we do in the face of Dickinson’s absence? What should we do in the face of Dickinson’s exhausting—and exhaustive—openness? Turning to Dickinson’s own words provides a model for coping with the gaps within and between them. Through her poems, Dickinson shows her readers that absence is not a negative force, is not or is not only a lack of presence. Instead, absence provides an opportunity for different forms of presence: the literal and metaphorical absence of the poet facilitates the increased presence of the reader, allows the reader to “Occup[y]” the space of the poem, to collaborate with the author to construct the poem and to infuse it with meaning (F466). The dearth of specific context and the ability of language to speak for itself—to “[begin] to live” at the moment that it is uttered and to live eternally “Without” ever possessing the power to die”—serves to make words more universal (F278, F764).

Efforts—always ineffective, never ceasing—to create a consistent account of Dickinson’s complex and multifaceted life, mind, and poetic corpus, efforts to read her poems by reading her person or to read her person by reading her poems, efforts to “solder an Abyss / With Air –” instead of with substance, only make her gaps “yawn the more,” only limit the possibilities inherent in her work. Dickinson writes,

He ate and drank the precious Words –
His spirit grew robust
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust –
He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book – What liberty
A loosened Spirit brings –

8 A] The

(F1593)

We do not know why she uses the pronoun “He” or whether “He” is a universal label that operates at the exclusion of “She.” But we do know that male as well as female readers experience ecstasy and affirmation as they imbibe Dickinson’s “precious Words”: we forget our poverty and our mortality in the presence of Dickinson’s posthumous “Bequest of Wings;” we “dance” to the rhythms in her “Book;” we celebrate the “Liberty” that we grant ourselves when we dismiss our earthly concerns.

But we know, too, that male as well as female poets cede to the temptation to animate Dickinson’s words by performing a poetic gap-filling. Billy Collins encounters Dickinson’s mythical self, Galway Kinnell attempts to locate Dickinson within his own self, and Adrienne Rich attempts both approaches. All three fail; all three come to realize, either subtly or overtly, that demanding Dickinson’s presence is not only futile but also unnecessary, that it is within Dickinson’s “precious Words” that we find sustenance.

Instead of turning to the insinuations and speculation that surround Dickinson’s life and work, we must loosen our persistent grasp on her person. The final lines of “He ate and drank the precious Words—” insist on this through their deliberate ambiguity: “loosened Spirit” can refer to both the reader’s “Spirit,” loosened through its encounter with poetry, and to the poet herself, to “A”—or “The”—“loosened Spirit” that “brings,” or “Bequests,” her words to her readers. It is only when we allow Dickinson’s “precious Words” to speak to us on their own terms that we can receive the gift that her “loosened Spirit” brings, that we allow her to enable us to speak more clearly, more beautifully, to ourselves.

Epilogue

*Did Our Best Moment last –
 'Twould supersede the Heaven –
 A few – and they by Risk – procure –
 So this Sort – are not given –*

*Except as stimulants – in
 Cases of Despair –
 Or Stupor – The Reserve –
 These Heavenly moments are –*

*A Grant of the Divine –
 That Certain as it Comes –
 Withdraws – and leaves the dazzled Soul
 In her unfurnished Rooms –* (F560)

During the months in which I have researched, thought about, written these words, so many best moments. They are absent from my text and yet infuse it—here an adjective garnered from a conversation that I hold, precious, in my memory; there a verb that sparkles with layers of allusions, with the currency of others' uses; throughout, all around, the silences, the spaces, the gaps filled with emotion. They constitute an absence of detail that is not an absence of presence, a lack of explication that is not—that is, in fact, the opposite of—a lack of beauty.

Like Adrienne Rich, I undertook a literal journey to the scenes of Dickinson's writing in order to "[try] to connect" with her ("VH," 161). Like Rich's journey, mine brought me no closer to Dickinson. Instead, it made me realize, forced me to realize, what I had, in fact, always known—that Dickinson's words are not confined to their pages, are not confined to the contexts in which they were written, are not confined to her person, to her place, to her time; that Dickinson's words exist within me, exist within the people whom I think of when I read them.

"Wonder –" Dickinson writes,

*is not precisely knowing
 And not precisely knowing not –* (F1347)

It is wonder that gives Dickinson's words—that gives, indeed, all poems—their beauty. When we know not precisely what they mean, we revel in their texture, in their complication, in the process of unpacking them, of reading meaning into them by reading them with and onto other poems, other people. And when we know what they mean, when they describe so precisely what we have also felt, we revel, too.

“Wonder,” James Longenbach writes, “matters because we must ultimately become unable to bear it. We leave the theater, we return to the ordinary world, so that we might again feel bored with ourselves” (*RTP*, 103). Unable to bear the mystery of poetry, we sometimes distort its power, limit its range. Unable to bear its often devastating power, we must sometimes, as Longenbach writes, resist, turn away, retreat, return to a world made more “Divine” by poetry, made more “Divine,” too, by its withdrawal, by its absence.

And so my “Soul” dwells “In her unfurnished Rooms,” “dazzled”....

*Appendix**Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes*

By Billy Collins

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

Then the long white dress, a more
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl
buttons down the back,
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever
before my hands can part the fabric,
like a swimmer's dividing water,
and slip inside.

You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the orchard below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,
catches, straps, and whalebone stays,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything—
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,
how there were sudden dashes
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst

that Sabbath afternoon,
 nothing but a carriage passing the house,
 a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
 when I undid the very top
 hook-and-eye fastener of her corset

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
 the way some readers sigh when they realize
 that Hope has feathers,
 that reason is a plank,
 that life is a loaded gun
 that looks right at you with a yellow eye.

The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson
 By Galway Kinnell

The lecture had ended when I came in,
 and the professor was answering questions.
 I do not know what he had been doing with her
 poetry, but now he was speaking of her
 as a victim of reluctant male publishers.
 When the questions dwindled, I put up my hand.
 I said the ignorant meddling of the *Springfield Republican*
 and the hidebound response of literary men,
 and the gulf between the poetic wishfulness
 then admired and her own harsh knowledge,
 had let her see that her poems
 would not be understood in her time;
 and therefore, passionate to publish,
 she vowed not to publish again. I said
 I would recite a version of her vow,

Publication – is the Auction
 Of the mind of Man –

But before I could, the professor broke in,
 “Yes,” he said, “‘the Auction’—‘auction,’ from *augere*, *auctum*, to
 augment, to author...”
 “Let’s hear the poem!” “The poem!” several women,
 who at such a moment are more outspoken than men, shouted,
 but I kept still and he kept going.
 “In *auctum* the economy of the signifiers is split, revealing an unconscious

collusion in the bourgeois commodification of consciousness.

While our author says 'no,' the unreified text says 'yes,' yes?"

He kissed his lips together and turned to me

saying, "Now, may we hear the poem?"

Without rising to my feet, I said,

"Professor, to understand Dickinson

it may not always be necessary to uproot her words.

Why not, first, try *listening* to her?

Loyalty forbids me to recite her poem now."

No, I didn't say that—I realized

she would want me to finish him off with one wallop.

So I said, "Professor, I thought you

would welcome the words of your author.

I see you prefer to hear yourself speak."

No, I held back—for I could hear her

urging me to put outrage into my voice

and substance into my argument.

I stood up so that everyone might see

the derision in my smile. "Professor," I said,

"you live in Amherst at the end of the twentieth century.

For you 'auction' means a quaint event

when somebody coaxes out the bids

on butter churns on a summer Saturday.

Forget etymology, this is history.

In Amherst in 1860, 'auction' meant

the slave auction, you dope!"

Well, I didn't say that either,

although I have said them all,

many times, in the middle of the night.

In reality, I stood up and recited the poem

like a schoolboy called upon in class.

My voice gradually weakened, and the women

who had called out for the poem

now looked as though they were thinking

of errands to be done on the way home.

When I finished, the professor smiled.

"Thank you. So what at first some of us may have taken as

a simple outcry, we all now see is an ambivalent, self-
subversive text."

As people got up to go, I moved

into that sanctum within me where Emily

sometimes speaks a verse and listened

for a sign of how she felt, such as,

"Thanks—Sweet—countryman—

for wanting—to Sing out—of Me—

after all that Humbug." But she was silent.

The Spirit of Place

By Adrienne Rich

—for Michelle Cliff

I.

Over the hills in Shutesbury, Leverett
 driving with you in spring road
 like a streambed unwinding downhill
 fiddlehead ferns uncurling
 spring peepers ringing sweet and cold

while we talk yet again
 of dark and light, of blackness, whiteness, numbness
 rammed through the heart like a stake
 trying to pull apart the threads
 from the dried blood of the old murderous uncaring

halting on bridges in bloodlight
 where the freshets call out freedom
 to frog-thrilling swamp, skunk-cabbage
 trying to sense the conscience of these hills

knowing how the single-minded, pure
 solutions bleached and desiccated
 within their perfect flasks

for it was not enough to be New England
 as every event since has testified:
 New England's a shadow-country, always was

it was not enough to be for abolition
 while the spirit of the masters
 flickered in the abolitionist's heart

it was not enough to name ourselves anew
 while the spirit of the masters
 calls the freedwoman to forget the slave

With whom do you believe your lot is cast?
 If there's a conscience in these hills
 it hurls that question

unquenched, relentless, to our ears
wild and witchlike
ringing every swamp

II.

The mountain laurel in bloom
constructed like needlework
tiny half-pulled stitches piercing
flushed and stippled petals

here in these woods it grows wild
midsummer moonrise turns it opal
the night breathes with its clusters
protected species

meaning endangered
Here in these hills
this valley we have felt
a kind of freedom

planting the soil have known
hours of a calm, intense and mutual solitude
reading and writing
trying to clarify connect

past and present near and far
the Alabama quilt
the Botswana basket
history the dark crumble

of last year's compost
filtering softly through your living hand
but here as well we face
instantaneous violence ambush male

dominion on a back road
to escape in a locked car windows shut
skimming the ditch your split-second
survival reflex taking on the world

as it is not as we wish it
as it is not as we work for it
to be

III.

Strangers are an endangered species

In Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst
 cocktails are served the scholars
 gather in celebration
 their pious or clinical legends
 festoon the walls like imitations
 of period patterns

(...and, as I feared, my "life" was made a "victim")

The remnants pawed the relics
 the cult assembled in the bedroom
 and you whose teeth were set on edge by churches
 resist your shrine

 escape
 are found
 nowhere
 unless in words
 (your own)

*All we are strangers—dear—The world is not
 acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted
 with her. And Pilgrims!—Do you hesitate? and
 Soldiers oft—some of us victors, but those I do
 not see tonight owing to the smoke.—We are hungry,
 and thirsty, sometimes—We are barefoot—and cold—*

This place is large enough for both of us
 the river-fog will do for privacy
 this is my third and last address to you

with the hands of a daughter I would cover you
 from all intrusion even my own
 saying rest to your ghost

with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands
 open or closed as they prefer to lie
 and ask no more of who or why or wherefore

with the hands of a mother I would close the door
 on the rooms you've left behind
 and silently pick up my fallen work

IV.

The river-fog will do for privacy

on the low road a breath
 here, there, a cloudiness floating on the black top

sunflower heads turned black and bowed
 the seas of corn a stubble
 the old routes flowing north, if not to freedom

no human figure now in sight
 (with whom do you believe your lot is cast?)
 only the functional figure of the scarecrow

the cut corn, ground to shreds, heaped in a shape
 like an Indian burial mound
 a haunted-looking, ordinary thing

The work of winter starts fermenting in my head
 how with the hands of a lover or a midwife
 to hold back till the time is right

force nothing, be unforced
 accept no giant miracles of growth
 by counterfeit light

trust roots, allow the days to shrink
 give credence to these slender means
 wait without sadness and with grave impatience

here in the north where winter has a meaning
 where the heaped colors suddenly go ashen
 where nothing is promised

learn what an underground journey
 has been, might have to be; speak in a winter code
 let fog, sleet, translate; wind, carry them.

V.

Orion plunges like a drunken hunter
 over the Mohawk Trail a parallelogram
 slashed with two cuts of steel

A night so clear that every constellation
 stands out from an undifferentiated cloud
 of stars, a kind of aura

All the figures up there look violent to me
 as a pogrom on Christmas Eve in some old country
 I want our own earth not the satellites, our
 world as it is if not as it might be
 then as it is: male dominion, gangrape, lynching, pogrom
 the Mohawk wraiths in their tracts of leafless birch

watching: will we do better?
 The tests I need to pass are prescribed by the spirits
 of place who understand travel but not amnesia

The world as it is: not as her users boast
 damaged beyond reclamation by their using
 Ourselves as we are in these painful motions

of staying cognizant: some part of us always
 out beyond ourselves
 knowing knowing knowing

Are we all in training for something we don't name?
 to exact reparation for things
 done long ago to us and to those who did not

survive what was done to them whom we ought to honor
 with grief with fury with action
 On a pure night on a night when pollution

seems absurdity when the undamaged planet seems to turn
 like a bowl of crystal in black ether
 they are the piece of us that lies out there
 knowing knowing knowing

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