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Dickinson's Mastery

It is often taken for granted by puzzled scholars that Emily Dickinson is a difficult poet. Her poems resemble unsolvable riddles, and they have a peculiar quality that makes understanding seem beyond the reader's ken. "We seem always to be at the beginning of understanding what she is saying," Susan Stewart has recently written, perhaps because Dickinson's endings are seldom conclusive (266). Stewart observes how frequently Dickinson scholars "seem driven by a desire" to understand her work (and to understand *her*, the parenthetical so often implied). Consider Cristanne Miller's account of her enthrallment to Dickinson:

> The fascination of reading Dickinson's poetry is one and the same with the frustration of reading it . . . .The power of her words lies at least partly in their (and her) ability to give more than a reader can entirely understand but not enough to satisfy the desire to know. Regardless of how many times you read her best poems, and how many times you persuade others that you know what they "mean," you feel the tickle of unsolved mystery in the poem; you do not convince yourself that you have gotten to the bottom of it; the poem, like the poet herself, is never quite your own. (19)

I quote Miller in full because her remarks are exemplary of a critical approach to Dickinson as a poet who tempts our intellectual desire only to frustrate it, who resists our attempts to know *her* in a way we perhaps do not feel an urge to know (or own) other poets. The critical consensus seems to be that there is something particular about her poetry that resists critical consensus. Perhaps it is her notoriety as a recluse that has added to the oddity of her poems, or her disinclination to publish that gives the impression this poet is never quite our own. Despite the sheer abundance of paper—letters, manuscripts, fascicles—that

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might help a reader or scholar get closer to understanding her intentions, her work does not, as Miller concedes, "belong to us." Or perhaps what frustrates us is the great number of poems she produced, more than any reader could hope to master, and so thematically focused on death, dying, pain, grief, and immortality. "It sometimes seems as if the same poem of pain or loss keeps writing itself over and over," observes Sharon Cameron, evaluating the argument of earlier, less sympathetic critics who found Dickinson's work to be without development (*Lyric Time* 14). The mechanical, unconscious repetition of material – detached subjects, intense pain, experiences of and with death that may or may not be metaphorical – suggests an urge to turn these experiences over and over until they are mastered. We cannot attribute this compulsion to the poet, only to those who may, like Miller, read and reread Dickinson's poetry with frustrated fascination.

Where does the urge to understand her poetry end and the urge to know the poet herself begin? Consider the opening scenario of Virginia Jackson's work, *Dickinson's Misery*: "Suppose you are sorting through the effects of a woman who has just died and you find in her bedroom a locked wooden box. . . . What remains, you decide, must be published" (1). Jackson prompts us to imagine how we would read Dickinson if we did not assume what she wrote was poetry. Jackson interrupts the critical compulsion to puzzle over how to read the poems by instead proposing that lyric reading practices that disappoint our desire to "know" Dickinson's poems speak more to how we have come to name the lyric as a genre than they tell us about what she herself left behind. And yet, Jackson's use of the second person still betrays a certain indulgence for the Dickinson enthusiast: the fantasy of knowing her, of touching her things, of mastery over what she left behind. Jackson's intention is to decouple what we recognize as a Dickinson poem from the lyric reading practice that decontextualizes address, and to that end, the opening line of her book is a contextualized address that hails the reader of Dickinson who fetishizes her unknowability. The critical assumption is always—and indeed, the strength of Jackson's book rests on it—that Dickinson is unique among poets in the unknowability of her poems. Paradoxically, her attention to the historically situated Emily Dickinson and her material remains preserves the uncanniness of the poems we have made in her name.

The uncanniness of Dickinson's poetry lies in how there is always something beyond our critical capacity that cannot be harnessed, a knowledge that exceeds the poem. Her poems are reluctant to arrive, as I will discuss, at a satisfying conclusion, even as they gather momentum toward it. Anne-Lise François attributes "the developmental impasse that critics almost invariably remark in Dickinson's

poetry" to Dickinson's shrugging off the demands of "heroic plot" and temporal linearity, ironically granting her the belated "heroic weight" of being "an early voice for modernism's ability to do without coherent structures of meaning" (172). But then, there is not the same "developmental impasse" in the critical literature on other canonical modernist poets. What is particular about Dickinson's rejection of closure? If the reader does not get to the bottom of the poem, as Miller notes, then the poem itself must not touch the bottom. There is a relentless downward drive in her poetry that makes the reader expect she is about to hit the ground, leaving her instead with the feeling of a vertiginous drop that lingers even after the poem ends. The Dickinson poem rejects narrative progression that would imply a completed experience or ordeal and embraces a regressive movement that undoes its own sequential logic. Even in her poems that appear easier to grasp, there remains a resistance against a critical summation that would render the case closed, as it were. I argue that the uncannily silent drive that moves her poems internally toward non-closure is an interpretive stumbling block, for the feeling it leaves in its wake compels a need for mastery to compensate for the loss of understanding. By refusing closure, she also leaves a remainder. This drive that operates formally in her poetry and thwarts our satisfied sense of an ending is the drive that Sigmund Freud identified in his 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the *Todestrieb*, or death drive. Although a resistance to closure may seem like a refusal of death's last word, reading Dickinson in terms of the death drive suggests that her poems are bound to an end they will never reach. Reading Dickinson with Freud, provocative though it may seem, reminds us that the role of the interpreter is always precarious, and that the material being interpreted always maintains an element of obscurity that cannot be mastered.[1] I therefore examine Dickinson's fraught publication history and the turn toward materialist reading practices as indicative of an urge for critical mastery over the afterlife of her poems. Because there has been so much written on what her poems are "about," and more recently how we read them, what remains to be determined is what is behind our desire to know, to master. It is my contention that this compelling effect comes from the formal force of her poetry, including her insistent thematic attention to death and her economization of words, rather than from a culture of reading practices.

For those familiar with the critical literature on Dickinson, it will seem commonplace to argue that her poems lack resolution even if they maintain a thematic focus. To name but a few critics who have engaged with the issue from various angles over the past century: Charles Anderson on her use of metaphor and riddle; Paula Bennett on Dickinson's ambivalence toward power; R.P.

Blackmur on the "disintegration of effect" following her first lines; Jed Deppman on the connection between the opacity of her poems and what he calls her "try-to-think" form; David Porter on her lack of a coherent poetics; Forest Pyle on her "radical aesthetic" that eradicates context after the first line; Gary Lee Stonum's account of her swerve before the sublime; Robert Weisbuch on what he calls her "scenelessness."[2] Indeed, Dickinson's difficulty is often credited as the very force that entices us to read on—difficulty as delight. In her reflective essay, "A Life with Emily Dickinson: Surprise and Memory," Suzanne Juhasz notes that in reading the poet, she often "found a complicated, obscure piece of writing that evades any real certainty in interpretation, largely because its language is surprising . . . because its commonplace words do not seem to add up or fit together" (85). In the face of a vast critical literature that offers a variety of approaches to Dickinson's difficulty, I do not intend to merely add one more to the list by proposing a psychoanalytic approach. Rather, I account for this critical insistence on her difficulty via a formal reading of her poetics of disinclination.

Mastery, moreoever, is a multivalent concept, bringing to mind topics as varied as the American slave trade, nineteenth-century religious revival, Massachusetts Puritanism, or even sado-masochism. And of course, there are the letters Dickinson wrote between 1858 and 1862 (her most prolific period) to an unidentified "Master," in which she repeatedly begs her "Master" to come to her, even as she makes the possibility of their union sound more like an eternally deferred reunion in heaven than a meeting on Earth. In terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, mastery is an impossible position; even as repetition compulsion strives for mastery, the act of reintroducing traumatic loss keeps the subject enthralled to loss. So it is not by writing "the same poem of pain or loss" over and over that Dickinson negotiates the terms of mastery, but rather by integrating this process of infinitely deferred achievement into the structure of her poems. I will discuss mastery as a formal issue, both in terms of the death drive itself and in my reading of her poems. I thereby argue that her repeated writing on death and the after-death signals a lyric mastery without a teleological drive toward the immortality afforded by a successful poetic career. By identifying the formal structure of the drive that runs through her poems, we may consider the aim of her poetic output in a new light. Hers is a peculiar poetics of letting go.

"DOWN, AND DOWN - "

Although many Dickinson poems begin declaratively ("'Hope' is the thing with feathers -" or "A Coffin - is a small Domain," etc.), it is difficult to define

exactly what each poem builds to after the opening assertion, and even more difficult to say where they conclude. There is, however, a sense in her poetry that it drives toward something definitive, and that each poem strives toward closure before breaking off, often with a precipitous dash. Her poems that recount a first-person experience follow a temporal progression insofar as a series of moments occur, but this series tends not to add up to a coherent experience. As Stewart attests, even the most insightful reader must resort to basic, introductory questions when dealing with a Dickinson poem: "Who is speaking? Who is listening? What are the parts of the poem? To what do the images refer? What is the significance of the poem's opening lines? What is the significance of its closure?" (253). In other words, it is a challenge to reveal what the poem is "about." For some, this may prove unsatisfying. For Blackmur, Dickinson's resistance to closure prevents her from arriving at a unity of psychological effect and therefore precludes the production of a "good poem." His assessment does bring a key component of Dickinson's lyric to light: "the movement of the parts is downwards and towards a disintegration of the effect wanted" (quoted in *Lyric Time*, 32). Dickinson's poems become less comprehensible as the poem wears on, as if there were some force in the poem that resists itself, that undoes the effect it establishes. Instead of moving upward toward a synthesis that integrates the poem's tensions and unifies the experience and the context, the poem moves downwards and leaves the tensions unresolved.

A poem such as "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," for example, describes an experience of downward disintegration, but does not necessarily make a claim that this particular experience is a metaphor for anything. The poem leaves unresolved the tension between the literal experience of a burial and the metaphorical question of what is being buried. Dickinson, it must be said, is usually explicit about what is and is not death. If you stand up, you are not dead. But if your face contorts and your eyes glaze over, then that is death (Fr355 and Fr339, respectively). What, then, are we to make of this funeral that occurs without a death?

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

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My Mind was going numb -

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

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

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

(Fr340)

It seems that sense breaks through, but the poem does not make sense of itself by the end—in fact, it finishes "knowing." The poem appears to depict a flaring up of some physical or psychic injury (or both) and the ensuing struggle between repressing the memory, as Cameron argues, or succumbing to it. Whatever pain is experienced in the poem, Cameron remarks that it "lacks an etiology," as the poem itself does not explain what is being repressed or account for the slippage between unconsciousness and death (97). Composed of one long paratactic sentence that does not conclude, the poem ends with a zeugmatic "then - ," operating both as an adverb and, more informally, as a conjunction that indicates a continuation before vertiginously dropping off. Dickinson's use of the coordinating conjunction "and" drives the sequence of events forward without implying a clear connection or coherence, even though "when" in the second stanza and "then" in the third and fifth stanzas make it appear that one event follows another. Each stanza ends with a line that suggests some loss of consciousness (sense nearly breaks through, her mind nearly goes numb) or some break before the next stanza picks up. In that break, the reader is left to fill in the blank of the disconnected stanzas. The parataxis is more psychological than grammatical, resulting in a psychic jump cut that jolts the speaker into the next stanza before consciousness is completely lost. Here, I turn to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's study of how poems conclude, *Poetic Closure*, to work through some of the grammatical patterns and irregularities Dickinson displays as her poems move toward the last line. A paratactic poem does not imply its own point of closure or resolve itself in a logical or otherwise expected conclusion. "Paratactic structure," she writes, "can be 'wound up' in a number of

ways—the point is that it does not wind itself up" (108). Something must be added to conclude the paratactic poem—or in this case, something subtracted. The loss of consciousness hinted at the end of each stanza is finally achieved in the final stanza, but the loss is not described. Smith points out that sequential poems offer a conclusion insofar as the last event of the narrative is relayed and "given stability with respect to the *other* structural principles by which the poem was generated" (124). Poems that narrate a search, pilgrimage, or journey, she continues, naturally conclude with an arrival or discovery. And indeed, Dickinson's poem ends when the speaker "Finished knowing - then - ." While the downward motion of the poem, reflected in the speaker's own drop through consciousness in the final stanza, does force the expectation of succession, the speaker never hits the floor, and neither does the poem.

Something, nevertheless, drives the poem toward its inconclusive finish. The hymn meter that alternates iambic tetrameter with trimeter pulls the poem along. The one metrical exception occurs in line 5, when the missing syllable reflects the loss of the sense that almost broke through, or when the treading mourners took a seat and one syllable was left standing and out of the game. Dickinson also employs tense in an unusual way—and not merely because the funeral and burial seem to come before any death in the poem. While the first two stanzas are largely composed in the continuous past, the tense shifts to the simple past in the third stanza, as the speaker moves from observing her pain to immediately participating in it. This is a peculiar past tense, in which a sequence of events is narrated as having happened. And yet, if the speaker "Finished knowing," from where does she report the experience? Falling off the precipice of "then - ," the poem also has an air of the present tense, as if the poem stops at the exact moment the speaker loses consciousness. Smith calls this temporal effect "simultaneous composition," in which "the poem is generated in accordance with the passage of time *during which* it is presumably being composed" (127). In Dickinson's poem, the diegetic experience of the speaker is synchronous with the utterance of the poem itself, allowing the speaker to feign ignorance about how and when the poem will end. The poem ends because "knowing" finishes, and without that cognitive ability, there is no more experience to recount. This effect of simultaneous composition suggests that the poem is more of an interior monologue than an "overheard utterance," to borrow J.S. Mill's famous phrase, so it does not necessarily have an addressee or audience. Nor does it necessarily have a point: "Not every sequence of thought is a 'train,'" writes Smith, "and not every train of thought reaches its destination" (141). In Dickinson's poem, the speaker loses her train of thought indefinitely, but we still do not know what it is she is thinking about.

The final "then - " suggests that what comes after the speaker "Finished knowing" is open ended, and can be interpreted both psychologically and epistemologically. Grammatically, the "then - " can function as a conjunctive adverb, qualifying the very moment that the speaker finishes and therefore suggesting that more is to come afterwards. On the other hand, ungrammatically, it can serve as the direct object of "knowing." In this case, the speaker stops having a sense of what comes next, or of temporality all together. To further complicate matters, in fascicle 16, there is a variant to "finished:" "Got through" (Fr280H53).[3] "Got through" is even more idiomatically undecidable than "finished," for it may imply either that "knowing" is worked through and over, or conversely, that it is finally achieved. Either way, what the "then - " does *not* suggest is that because knowing is finished, nothing more can be said, and the poem may come to an end. For that matter, her poem does not truly reach the end, even as it reaches toward it. Recall the strange fact that the poem begins with a funeral and burial before it depicts a death or loss. What if "then - " directs the reader back to the beginning of the poem, so that the funeral takes place after knowing is finished? How else could it plunge more than once? Furthermore, the only rhyme for "then - " in the poem is with "again" in stanza three, the pivot point where the poem shifts from the funeral to the loss of consciousness. The poem, then, has neither beginning nor end, and instead eternally returns, again and again, to a loss without origin.

The poem itself has "dropped down, and down" but does not hit the ground. Precluding the possibility of knowledge by not showing what "World" lies underneath the "Plank of Reason," the poem ends more unconsciously than consciously. "What we choose not to know," Cameron muses in her reading of the poem, "what we submerge, like the buried root of a plant that sucks all water and life toward its source, pulls us down with a vengeance toward it" (*Lyric Time* 98). There is a downward force in the poem that drags it to the end that never seems to come. In a way, the final stanza problematizes the whole poem, as each stanza moves further away from a legible metaphor and deeper into the recesses of unknowing. Knowing, then, is finished for the speaker as much as for the person puzzling over the poem's meaning. Just as the funeral conceit begins to cohere, space begins to toll, and the poem undoes its own interpretation. "All paths lead into darkness," warns Freud of the dark art of dream interpretation (481). Note that the path does not end in darkness, for we cannot know how far it stretches into the recesses. For Freud, the interpreter is always in a position of unknowing, the precise position in which Dickinson puts her readers. As Cameron points out, severing the experience described in the poem from a decipherable context

allows it to enjoy a certain autonomy from interpretation: "If [the poem] could be made palpable and objectified, it might be known and hence mastered" (98). By resisting the mastery of others, the poem in a sense masters itself, locks itself up, and swallows the key.

CLICK LIKE A BOX

In "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain," the speaker does not narrate a story with a beginning, middle, and end so much as she describes a certain experience that is severed from context. The poem begins with "I Felt," and indeed, the poem feels as if pain speaks right through the speaker, rather than the speaker dictating and making connections between a sequence of events. This descriptive effect contributes to the uncanny use of metaphor in the poem and leaves the reader with a nagging uncertainty as to whether the poem is meant to be taken literally or figuratively—and what those distinctions even mean. When we speak of reaching closure, we mean that we have worked through an ordeal and made sense of the story. And yet a poem can tell a story without being a story. Even if a poem has a story to tell, it is not driven by an urge for storytelling, and the emphasis is still usually on a certain economy of language instead of the trajectory of narrative. Lyric poetry in particular is a genre often characterized by utterance in the first person in a moment in time, requiring no past to contextualize it or a future to make sense of its present.[4] A poem does not necessarily represent a self-identical speaker or a completed experience. While prose charges forward, ever accumulating pages in its wake, the poem bears back as it moves on, line by line, a kind of regressive progression in which momentum is built by interruption. Lyric meaning, therefore, is not necessarily generated at the moment of completion or by temporal contiguity. The uncanniness of the lyric occurs when sense breaks through amidst unfamiliarity: in the missing context, the uncertain speaker, even in the poem's typographic isolation against a mute white page. Dickinson's poems are of particular interest because they trouble what it means to tell a story by weaving a sequence of events with frayed ends sticking out. And yet, her poems have a certain downward tendency, resisting conclusion even as they inch closer to it.

I argue that this peculiar movement that works from within Dickinson's poetry to resist closure is not merely a rhetorical strategy or a poetic device; it is also in line with the Freudian concept of the death drive. The death drive is the instinct that strives for the reduction of tension, and to that end, drives the organism

toward an earlier, inorganic state. Masked by the libido, the death drive operates silently and unobtrusively, only manifesting itself through repetition compulsion and the "instinct for mastery" that both recreates and rehabilitates a previous state of precarious passivity (15). Even a seemingly pleasurable repetition marks the thwarting of satisfaction. Lee Edelman defines the drive as a movement toward realization that simultaneously seeks to undo itself, leaving a haunting remainder in its wake. It is this remainder, this excess that marks the impossibility of the drive reaching satisfaction. "Such a goal," Edelman writes, "such an end, could never be 'it'; achieved, it could never satisfy. For the drive as such can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds" (22). The "pulsion" that bears back on itself leaves a sense of dissatisfaction in its wake. We have already detected the haunting remainder in Dickinson's poetry, which insists on describing a sort of intransitive experience. If we have difficulty determining what her poems are "about," it is perhaps because this drive "holds the place of what the meaning misses," as Edelman argues, marking the absence of meaning even as it suggests its presence (10). It is thanks to this invisible drive that the reader feels that she has come close to satisfaction only to just miss it.

I have so far described a certain poetics of the death drive, of an aim that draws itself toward its close without resolving itself. The death drive does not operate in isolation, and so cannot be identified running through a poem like a given conceit or trope. This drive is what makes Dickinson's poems so insistent, what allows them to commence so declaratively yet not defensively (why should hope be a thing with feathers, for instance). It is crucial to read the death drive as an ateleological drive; in fact, the death drive has an asymptotic relation to death, nearing ever closer but never reaching its end. Just as repetition does not reproduce the first term being repeated, the death drive, an unconscious and therefore timeless operation, does not arrive at its destination. If the death drive actually brought the organism to death, it would have a forward tendency, toward the ultimate achievement of life. (Freud does not need to write, "The *end* of all life is death.") Instead, it manifests itself through repetition, through a backwards motion that nonetheless never quite touches back on base, never quite recaptures the original. The narrative that the death drive represents, therefore, is one without a true beginning and end. If the death drive can help us understand the inner working of poems, it is through the dual and dueling tendencies of poems both to offer a linear sequence that starts and stops and to disrupt that sequence.

While lyric poems use rhyme schemes and metrical patterns to organize, structure, or otherwise master their tensions, their temporal interruptions and metrical irregularities disrupt the stasis of the poem. Incomplete phrases, forced rhymes, skipped beats, extra syllables – all are recognized prosodic devices that create tension without disrupting or de-composing the poem. Tension can be reduced or smoothed over, but it cannot be eliminated short of death. Dickinson's poem moves "down, and down - ," to borrow her words, but we cannot see the bottom.

Dickinson's poetry betrays an awareness of an internal force that drags one toward inertia, toward a nothing without end. The drive works both thematically and formally in her poems. Writing poems that explicitly resist closure is a form of self-mastery that does not disallow interpretation, but instead remains radically open for interpretation. This open possibility does not necessarily generate a positive feeling in the reader; the uncanny feeling lingers that something is left over, that something hasn't clicked. Smith considers William Carlos Williams's contention that a poem should not, as W.B. Yeats recommends, "click like a box," observing that modern poetry exhibits a "tendency toward anti-closure" (237). Unlike earlier forms of poetry that would sum themselves up in couplets or codas, the modernist poem resists reaching its own conclusion, or in other words, "even when the poem is firmly closed, it is not usually slammed shut" (237). A Dickinson poem can always spring back open even after a strong reading because there is something in the box—and formally, her poems do often take the shape of long boxes, like coffins—that cannot be contained.

We have also seen how Dickinson troubles the distinction between the literal and the figurative, and so to that end, let us consider the death drive in a more literal sense:

> Because I could not stop for Death -
> He kindly stopped for me -
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
> And Immortality.
>
> We slowly drove - He knew no haste
> And I had put away
> My labor and my leisure too,
> For His Civility -
>
> We passed the School, where Children strove
> At Recess - in the Ring -

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
We passed the Setting Sun -

Or rather - He passed Us -
The Dews drew quivering and Chill -
For only Gossamer, my Gown -
My Tippet - only Tulle -

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

(Fr479)

Compared to some of her more perplexing verse, this poem is more easily grasped. Because of its seemingly clear narrative, it has been anthologized widely and is likely to be the high school student's introduction to Dickinson. Death catches the speaker unawares, and at first, she has an ironic appreciation for his politesse. But as they ride on, the night grows colder, the rhyme scheme loses steam, and before long, the meaning of death dawns on her. The children, grain, and setting sun the carriage passes in the third stanza are common representations of stages of life, the twilight of which leaves the speaker alone with the possibility of her own death. In her reading of the poem, Helen Vendler spells out that "[t]he point of the poem is to describe the moment when the concept of personal 'Immortality' was shocked into disappearing from the speaker's consciousness," leaving her with "Eternity" instead (226). "Immortality" ends the first stanza, while "Eternity" ends the last. Dickinson does not use the words interchangeably, and their positions in the poem are telling. Eternity is the condition of being without time, while immortality is the condition of being without death. With its suggestion of vanquishing death, immortality has the ring of either a biblical promise of a heaven that waits after life ends, or after the achievement of a heroic goal. It also evokes the fantasy of (pro) creating a masterwork that will live forever in fame. Eternity, too, is not without Christian implications and serves as another term for the kingdom of God. But in this eternity, the speaker finds that the only timelessness that exists is still an

earthly one—she repeats “Ground” twice to stress the point. Here and elsewhere, the skeptical Dickinson treats the belief in or hope for immortality as a naiveté only believed by one who does not take the threat of death seriously.[5]

Immortality is granted the only full stop in the poem, and the long sentence that follows portrays the speaker’s disabuse of the concept. By the final stanza, she has realized not that she had reached the destination of heaven, but that she had been galloping all along “toward Eternity - ,” and with one final dash, the poem keeps reaching toward it. The drive toward death does not begin at some arbitrary moment of injury—we are always in the carriage. When the speaker qualifies, “Or rather - He passed Us - ,” we see that the sun is still ahead, time is still going forward, while the speaker begins to be divorced from it. Indeed, she and her suitor pause at what can only be her burial plot, but the poem pauses as well, and does not decide whether or not the speaker is in the ground or in the carriage, dead or moving toward death. Like “I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” the poem brings its speaker to the brink of—something, eternity, whatever that may be, the meaning of which escapes her. These downward experiences follow the logic of the death drive: inexhaustible, internal, relentless.

WHAT REMAINS

The drive in Dickinson’s poems that resists closure can only operate within the confines of the poem itself, or otherwise they would conclude before they even began. To that end, every now and then, her poems do come to a full, punctuated stop:

> My life closed twice before its close;
> It yet remains to see
> If Immortality unveil
> A third event to me,
>
> So huge, so hopeless to conceive
> As these that twice befell.
> Parting is all we know of heaven,
> And all we need of hell.
>
> (Fr1773)

Squarely refusing any optimistic account of immortality, Dickinson claims that the only afterlife of which we can be certain is our life after our loved ones have died.

"Immortality," instead, is the life that stretches on unbearably without the loved one. Here we may see an example of her late style, if there ever was one—this poem is perhaps one of Dickinson's last, but one of many that take up the idea of hopelessness in relation to immortality.[6] I would propose, however, that this poem is exemplary of a slow evolution in her work, a drift that reflects her changing relationship toward death and the afterlife. In the poem, the two closings of life are deaths that "befell" others, and yet they also belong to the speaker, though the third *close* will also be afforded to her. The semicolon is a fitting punctuation for the end of the first line, for its grammatical mark is composed of a period on top of a comma, a stop and a continuation that closes one complete thought even as the sentence continues. Even if the speaker lives on, surviving, part of her life ends with each closing of another's life. We need not wait for death to get a taste of hell, for we feel it each time a tie with a loved one is severed. This argument echoes an earlier poem, "I cannot live with you":

> And were You - saved -
> And I - condemned to be
> Where you were not
> That self - were Hell to me –
>
> (Fr706)

As Vendler argues, what Immortality has to "unveil" is not heaven but apocalypse, from the Greek *apokaluptein*, or uncovering (520). Immortality does not reveal any mystery but an ultimate loss. For Dickinson, the Christian covenant that we will all be reunited in the afterlife is an insufficient promise, because it is "hopeless to conceive" of an afterlife that simply resembles the same life left behind. Death may be the limit of experience and knowledge, but it is pointless to imagine it as being a continuation of life on an astral plane. While the poem may seem to embrace closure by coming to a full stop, it in fact argues against its possibility by projecting the pain of loss into the afterlife.

Dickinson's poems are replete with mentions of eternity and immortality. A search through the digital *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* shows that while the two words can be synonymous (as they sometimes are in Dickinson's poems), there is a certain slant of difference between them. Immortality's first definition is "eternity," and all ensuing definitions relate to a sense of perpetual paradise and triumph over death; eternity encompasses these meanings but has as its first definition, "duration or continuance without beginning or end." In this narrow definition, immortality is yoked to time, whereas eternity is atemporal. The naïve speaker of "Because I

could not stop for Death" assumes that immortality is the end game, that after death comes infinite life and that her ride will go on indefinitely. But instead, she is left with an eternity that does not allow for a sense of time, or for a sense of victory. The *Lexicon* also provides a significant connotation for immortality, as found in Dickinson's poems: fame, or figuratively, publication. Two of her poems, both written in the productive year of 1863, are frequently cited as examples of her interest in immortal glory over earthly fame and fortune: "Publication - is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man - " (Fr788), and the following poem:

> Some - Work for Immortality -
> The Chiefer part, for Time -
> He - Compensates - immediately -
> The former - Checks - on Fame -
>
> Slow Gold - but Everlasting -
> The Bullion of Today -
> Contrasted with the Currency
> Of Immortality -
>
> A Beggar - Here and There -
> Is gifted to discern
> Beyond the Broker's insight –
> One's - Money - One's - the Mine -
>
> (Fr536)

One reading of this poem would suggest that being monetarily compensated for writing poetry (that is, publication) is a poor reward compared to what the afterlife offers, which, according to Miller, is what "Dickinson herself prefers" (189). Miller reads this poem as an indication of Dickinson's attitude toward her fame to come, not "Money," but "the Mine," a personal source of wealth that, one supposes, is also immortal. This interpretation is in line with Miller's understanding of Dickinson's poetic immortality; she quotes Shira Wolosky's assessment that Dickinson's "deadline was not publication but immortality" in noting that, "[w]ith over eleven hundred poems copied into sets and booklets, she knew she had preserved a body of work that would last" (188). Never mind how we know that "she knew"—such a reading does not take Dickinson's religious skepticism seriously enough, and indeed, the poem is syntactically strange enough to disprove any reading of the poem as being internally self-consistent. Cameron approaches this poem with less pathos in *Choosing Not Choosing*. "It is not, for instance, clear whether 'Slow

Gold - but Everlasting - ' . . . refers to the compensations of 'Time' or those of 'Immortality,'" she points out. "By association with the previous line the tenor of the metaphor would be 'Immortality,' not 'Time,' but in light of the following it would be 'Time' rather than 'Immortality'" (*Choosing* 26). Moreover, the pun on "the Mine" does not suggest that one sort of work is proper to Emily Dickinson herself, the poet and person. As I have argued, few of her poems end on a note that illuminates the lines that came before. Instead, they work from the inside to undo whatever interpretation seems the most ready to hand.

This inability to determine a stable reading of the poem reflects a century of disagreement over how we are to interpret Dickinson's disinclination to publish and how we are to receive the editorial decisions about her work. Generations of editors have chipped away at the early editorial changes to return to her original manuscripts, seeking to reduce the tensions caused by unwelcome interference by deferring to her own mastery. If merely getting a Dickinson poem into print is an act of interpretation, we can see why this poet in particular is, as Stewart has it, always "overinterpreted" even as she is "underinterpreted" (253). As Domhnall Mitchell observes in his study of Dickinson's manuscripts, *Measures of Possibility*,

> Are the physical appearances of Dickinson's drafts related to economies of scale, or were they meant to influence the meaning of the poem? For many critics, the endless appeal of Dickinson's work lies precisely in its ability to provoke such questions while refusing to provide definite answers to them. But again and again, one runs up against the problem of intention in Dickinson's works; again and again, intention in Dickinson is irrevocably bound up with issues of manuscript status and appearance, as well as genre. (17)

Mitchell pinpoints the relationship between materiality, intentionality, and meaning as he opens up a new question for contemporary scholarship: Dickinson's generic status. We have no more settled on what Dickinson's poems are "about" then we have settled on which words to read in each poem. In fact, the past era of Dickinson criticism has largely stressed the materiality of her poems, proposing that the graphic elements of her manuscripts and other material remains leave enough to puzzle over before we even approach tropes or speakers.[7] Jackson's work pushes the issue of materiality further as she questions how it is we know that Dickinson meant to write poetry. What interests Jackson is not determining who Emily Dickinson really was, or her intentions for her manuscripts, but how we read what she left behind. My interest, however, is less in *how* we read her "poems" but rather the more elusive question of *why* we are compelled to read them as poems, or any scrap of writing she left behind, as sites of difficulty.

It is worth returning to Jackson's beginning: "Suppose you are sorting through the effects of a woman who has just died and you find in her bedroom a locked wooden box . . . .What remains, you decide, must be published" (1). When we read Dickinson, we are reading leftovers, remainders. They have not been explicitly passed down, but they have survived her. Again, the logic of the death drive allows us to read these curious remainders, sprung from a "locked wooden box," as missives that survive without a recipient or a projected endpoint. The death drive is always "what remains." Since so many of these remainders are personal letters and notes, what we readers and critics have access to is the undead Dickinson, one that bears traces of the person who once lived but that goes beyond her life. And indeed, now that her manuscripts have all been digitized, they enjoy a more permanent quality online. If her "deadline" (in both senses of the word) was not "publication but immortality," as Wolosky proposes, then we must think of immortality in light of the death drive. As Edelman explains, the immortality of the death drive entails "a persistent negation that offers assurance of nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future. Instead, it insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order's truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance" (48). The death drive survives biological life not to carry on some memory of a subject, but to refuse any meaning as such. While her material remains (poems, or "poems") make it somewhat counterintuitive to read Dickinson as exemplary of Edelman's screed against reproductive futurity, reading her work without looking for her intention for a future audience allows us to face the impossible question of what her poems "mean." The difficulty in Dickinson is not that her poems are so much more complicated than other poems are, but that there is a formal force within her poems that refuses meaning. The critical urge to describe Dickinson as "difficult" is a defense against "what remains," the uncertain feeling that inevitably lingers after reading one of her poems.

We have seen that in Dickinson's work, no futurity is required to make sense of a line, for there is no vantage point from which to look back. Dickinson's mastery lies in how she refuses resolution and writes toward an ateleological future. Vendler calls this "Dickinson's conviction of the permanent instability of truth" (176), which the poet offers us both formally and thematically in the following poem.

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -
It beckons, and it baffles -
Philosophy, don't know -
And though a Riddle, at the last -
Sagacity, must go -
To guess it, puzzles scholars -
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown -
Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -
Blushes, if any see -
Plucks at a twig of Evidence -
And asks a Vane, the way -
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -
Strong Hallelujahs roll -
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul -

(Fr373)

If full stops are infrequent in Dickinson's poems, ending the first line with a period is even more rare. Semantically, the poem could be separated into four stanzas, but instead we have a poem that continues on after its first firm pronouncement. The speaker makes the certain claim that "This World is not conclusion." There is something beyond this world, but no wisdom can nail it down. Higginson and Todd titled this poem "Immortality" in their 1896 edition, and as Vendler highlights, only printed the first twelve lines, giving the poem a more optimistic portrayal of the need for meaning. For instance, the Crucifixion is the ending to one narrative that guarantees immortality to all who believe in it. But, the poem continues, faith blushes at its own inconstancy, and in the end there is only a gnawing anxiety over one's lack of faith. Even if readers were left without the full version of the poem, something is amiss starting from the first line, the decisiveness of which obscures its strange wording. The speaker does not assert that this world does not conclude, but that "This World is not conclusion." According to the poem, conclusion, like immortality, seems to be the province of philosophers and preachers, men who scrutinize evidence and consult weathervanes. (But even madmen, we know from *Hamlet*, know which way the wind blows). Conclusion is alluring—"It beckons"—

and infuriating—"and it baffles"—and the combination of the two is enough to urge us on to solve riddles and sate our curiosity. But no question causes more anxiety than the mystery of the ultimate conclusion. As I have shown, Dickinson considered this question, yet her conclusion is not the philosopher's teleological conclusion, but the poem's "possibility":

> I dwell in Possibility -
> A fairer House than Prose -
> More numerous of Windows -
> Superior - for Doors -
>
> (Fr466)

The poet dwells in both senses of the word: she inhabits possibility (dwells *in*), with its proliferating entrances in and vistas out, and she dwells *on* it, or makes it her business to consider what may be rather than deciding what is. At times, the radical openness of her poetics seems a sanguine prospect. But, then, "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul - ." Dwelling in possibility, after all, is precisely how anxiety arrests us in suffering, and the poem ends on a note of deferred anxiety. Narcotics are ineffective because they can only dull the tooth's pain, but the tooth is not what suffers. The literal drug cannot treat the metaphoric tooth to ease metaphysical agony. Nothing can sate the urge to know, mainly because what she posits we most want to know—the mystery of death—is beyond our capacity for knowledge. Dickinson does not even grant the word "conclusion" a capital letter. Rather than attempt to draw a conclusion and fail, she refuses conclusion altogether, or in other words, her poems are not conclusions.

As Vendler writes, "If all inquiry fails, then failure—continual, consistent, and inevitable—is the ultimate Truth. And Truth slides almost insensibly—in Dickinson's ear—into the awful 'Tooth'" (176). And here we come face to face with the awful truth of her poetry, which "beckons, and it baffles" while "[t]o guess it, puzzles scholars." What makes Dickinson's poems unsettling is that even if we can interpret them as offering such wisdom, they always undo that interpretation. Her poems have a nibbling tooth of their own, one that is part of the body yet bent on its slow destruction. Anxiety of this sort cannot be stilled with "Narcotics," let alone be understood or mastered. Recall that closure is effected when one is able to piece a narrative together by binding together the troubling details of the past. Closure is a form of self-mastery marked by the ability to articulate one's own narrative instead of the body speaking out hysterically. Even if, as Cameron notes, "the same poem of pain or loss keeps writing itself over and over," mechanically

repeating pain or loss does not lead to its mastery. Mastery may be the intention that propels repetition compulsion, but true mastery would be letting go of the pain or loss rather than reenacting it again and again. Repetition compulsion proliferates pain, and, as anxiety proves, repeating a traumatic reaction to prepare for a real danger still dredges up the old feeling of loss.

To that end, let us consider one more "poem of pain or loss," a poem that, in the Franklin edition, directly precedes "This world is not conclusion."

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round -
A Wooden way
Of ground, or Air, or Aught -
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a Stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -
(Fr372)

Previously, I have described the death drive working its way through Dickinson's poetry as a "formal force," but let us consider what it would mean to think of her form not as a force, but a feeling. "Formal feeling" is a tidy way of describing the effect of Dickinson's poems, where the prosody works through the feeling or affect being described. Curiously, no words are capitalized in the first line—one would expect perhaps "pain" or "feeling" to be emphasized. Again, the experience described in the first line of the poem is assured, even formulaic in how it promises that "formal feeling" is to come after "great pain" in general, not one pain in particular. The poem has a speaker, but the speaker is not the subject of the poem; that is, she is not describing an experience that is necessarily proper to her. As pain takes over, the movements of the feet becomes automatic, "mechanical," without notice where they walk. The poem regulates itself metrically as it fixes itself into an unmoving "Hour of Lead"—lead being a heavy metal toxic enough to cause a funeral in the brain. And like "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," whether the poem refers to a loss of consciousness or a loss of life becomes increasingly unclear. The

difference between remembering and recollecting offers a hint. If the "Hour of Lead" is outlived, then it will be "Remembered," or brought back to mind. To re-member is bodily, as it suggests putting broken limbs back together. Recollection, however, is a narrativizing act that pieces together past experiences and is more abstract than remembrance—unless we take it literally. "Freezing persons" do not "recollect the Snow" by thinking about a lovely winter day. The snow re-collects on their bodies as it buries them. Outliving the "Hour of Lead" is *as* difficult as fighting off freezing to death. Dickinson ends the poem with a simile, unusual for a poet who is so consistently metaphoric. The "formal feeling" she describes is like the feeling of the cold, but ultimately not the same. Again, she evades conclusion by tapering off into uncertainty, by letting go.

Letting go is a characteristically Dickinsonian way of forgoing conclusion, but it is still a formal decision. The beginning of the line staggers on with pauses in each stage of the sequence ("First - Chill - then Stupor - ") but then picks up speed and bounces along in the moment we would expect to sink into its own heaviness ("then the letting go - "). These words appear in another poem: "Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue - / The letting go / A presence - for an Expectation / Not now - " (Fr782). In Dickinson's poetry, "the letting go" is not one moment of decision, nor is it a choice made again and again. It is a mode of being that is reached involuntarily and unconsciously. Letting go, renunciation: this is how Dickinson approaches mastery. And yet, as François argues, the sort of "affirmative passivity" characteristic of a Dickinsonian subject is not a heroic ethos of asceticism but a way to "set aside the fantasy of the all-responsible subject" (267). The temporal experiences in her poems do not complete themselves, nor do her speakers report back with the knowledge of experience. Her thematic repetition was not a compulsion, but rather a part of the "formal feeling" of her prosody. Instead of writing poems that repeat the themes of pain and loss again and again to master them, instead of coming to a conclusion, she shows her mastery by refusing to hold on. In the end, a succinct articulation of Dickinson's mastery can be found on the flap of an envelope scrap, perhaps jotted down, perhaps thoughtfully composed:

In this short Life
that only lasts an hour
merely
How much - how
little - is
within our
power

(*The Gorgeous Nothings* 62).

Notes

1. Here, I wish to echo Mary Loeffelholz's remark on the merits of reading Dickinson with psychoanalytic theory from *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory*: "The risks of engaging Lacanian theory will be obvious to many readers; I hope the risks of repressing aspects of Dickinson's work become obvious, too" (7).

2. There are many critics who address Dickinson's difficulty. I have named a few I consider to be representative of their era of criticism or particularly unique in their approach.

3. Although this poem, along with others I discuss, is included in Dickinson's fascicles, I keep to the poems as published in the Franklin edition. Since my space here is limited, I leave open the question of how the proliferation of interpretations provided by the fascicles, from variant choice to the order of poems to the grouping of poems, complicates my notion of a lyric death drive, which diminishes infinitely rather than multiplies indefinitely.

4. Given the current debate about what constitutes the lyric as a genre, it may seem tendentious at best to make such claims about what poem does or does not do. Nevertheless, it is necessary for me to clarify how I understand the lyric in order to handle certain formal distinctions that have, historically, been associated with poetry.

5. For more on the theme of immortality in Dickinson's work, I refer readers to Joan Kirkby's entry "Death and Immortality" in *Emily Dickinson in Context*, where she unpacks how Dickinson's poems reflect the desacralization of death in nineteenth-century culture.

6. Poem 1773 survives as a transcript of Mabel Loomis Todd. It appears as one of the last in Franklin's edition because it cannot be accurately dated. For my part, I consider it a late poem because it is stylistically and thematically more in keeping with her later work.

7. For further reading on Dickinson's manuscripts, I suggest Alexandra Socarides's *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics*. Socarides reads Dickinson's poems as products of a material, even bodily, process of composition, and focuses on the tearing, sewing, folding, gathering, copying and recopying involved in the creation of each poem. The recent *Dickinson's Fascicles: A Spectrum of Possibilities* provides a comprehensive exploration of the fascicles with close readings and details concerning the material construction of her poems, as well as a variety of responses to Cameron's argument in *Choosing Not Choosing*.

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