GARY HAWKINS

Constructing and Residing in the Paradox of Dickinson's Prismatic Space

The poems of Emily Dickinson are difficult poems, difficult in part because of their refusal to be parsed in strictly logical terms. In place of the logic of direct, binary relations, Dickinson creates a space which is more prismatic, in which elements set in equation or opposition do not exactly relate, items made to sum are not entirely replaced by any superior claim, and objects on a plane can be both isolate and adjoining. The poems may intend an accumulation of elements to "comprise a soul" — "Poets," "Sun," "Summer," "Heaven" — or attempt some other comprehensive listing of a poetic "Whole." The set of these elements defines a space where separate parts might collect, but this space is alternately of limited and infinite capacity. It is a space where perimeters do not bind the exact, where a "Whole" may be shown to have its expected interior, and, through a series of mirrors, next hold an interior within that interior.

Space in Dickinson is often validly read as actual or dramatic space: a house where separate fears like assassins hide or a stage where two lovers lament a specific gap. If in such a drama fear or loss are external forces which exist outside as ghost or absent lover and afflict a central self, this drama portrays space by means of distinction between parts. Each separate character plays upon the other. Although reading a poem as a scene in this way follows the themes of Dickinson's subject matter, the poems also present a stage filled with a syntactic uncertainty that hinders distinct separations. In this refraction of language nothing in Dickinson can be held to be intact; once a single self holds within it another self, the terms of internal space may encompass expanses. The body of a self may then be the site where the simultaneities of attraction and repulsion, traditionally witnessed between

two discrete beings, find a more complex, fractured home within one. Here, a poem's "I" — present yet incomplete, lacking not a lover but some portion of itself — is mirrored by a provisional alternative, what that "I" cannot do and yet strives to do. But Dickinson does not settle on the mere fact of multiple aspects, she constructs the paradoxical space of their relation. If it is prismatic with facets of possibility, this space is a land of desperation, where no self can settle in bonded unity. Always behind a self is another self. There is no sole comfort in this infinity.

Dickinson's poetic space fractures into facets when the poet defies exact relation even as she employs equation. A presumption of addition is plainly at work in "One and One – are One" (J769/Fr497[1]), but we also face that presumed mathematic's confusion when the poet proclaims:

> One and One – are One –
> Two – be finished using –
> Well enough for Schools –
> But for +minor Choosing –
>
> Life – just – Or Death –
> Or the Everlasting –
> +More – would be too vast
> For the Soul's Comprising –
>
> +inner +Two
> (J769/Fr497)

The tenets of arithmetic dictate that the sum be something greater than each element alone, but if that final "One" is implied to be a superior integer, it is also indistinguishable from its additives which are themselves "One." Inscribed in the poet's flourished capitals in the fair copy, each element suggests its potential beyond a single digit (one) toward an inclusive whole (One, an Individual, Self).

The next line provides the expected answer to the poem's radical equation — Two — and an immediate proclamation of obsolescence:

> Two – be finished using –
> (J769/Fr497)

Between the available solutions ("One" or "Two") the uninflected verb is both a refusal to privilege either choice with its number and an imperative

for termination of the common sum. When the exception of "But for minor Choosing – " allows "Two" only for the lesser purpose of binary choice, it reaffirms the exile of this common use to a math of sequential elements.

Still, the poem does not require any absolute dismissal of scholarly allegiance. This remains with mild acquiescence even as it is subverted with an ungrammatical use of the adverb:

> Well enough for Schools –
> (J769/Fr497)

Similarly, the variant of the last line of this stanza is sure not to completely dismiss this known mathematic's use. For if its use is justified "for Inner Choosing-" then the poem confirms that some aspect of this math is considered sufficiently holy to be employed in acts like the one at hand, the "comprising" of a "Soul's" interior.

The poem will continue with additive intent to declare a single, encompassing "Life," only to delimit it with "just," then place with coordinating conjunction a component ("Or Death"), and next extend from such a binary "the Everlasting," which supersedes the previous as it comprehends each of them. The poem is the set-making of comprising, an act of filling, a composition of elements toward some kind of whole. The work of the poem is a kind of psychic addition of a "Soul." But it is possible in this operation to go beyond the "Soul's" perimeter, to be more than "Everlasting," to be "too vast." The variant of "Two" for "More" complicates our additive sense. Even if we limit the next addend to a known quantity, "Two" still will be "too vast." Composed of totalities which may be portions of the whole and wholes inverted to be portions, the poem accounts the "Soul" as a place neither strictly cumulative nor limitless.

The poem is evidence of how Dickinson unravels preconceived arenas — here the presumed logic of simple arithmetic — to create a new space of more dynamic relation. The object of her critique is allowed to remain, but this math will not have just one solution, a conception we know as Dickinson's impulse to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (J1129/Fr1263). Hers is not a solitary allegiance or the pose of the simple revolutionary attempting to overthrow one point of view with an alternate. This is not mere dilemma; it is more than a doubling. Broken free of singular conclusion, the many "slants" Dickinson offers do not compete with each other for sole significance but create an interanimating complex of perspectives, the prismatic effect of the poems.

Paul Crumbley finds that this "array of differing and often conflicting

perspectives betrays the dialogic character of Dickinson's voice, particularly its evocation of divergent discourses, none of which it totalizes or masters" (100). For Crumbley, the dialogic and other concepts from Bakhtin have found an intuitive emergence in the discussion of Dickinson and become more propitious with the "increasingly complex ideas about voice" in her poems (97). Crumbley presents Bakhtin as a way to proceed thorough "Dickinson's disruptive style" and "syntactic ruptures" which contribute to the "difficulty in categorizing Dickinson's multifaceted poetic voice" (100, 105). Such Bakhtinian language has similarly assisted my own comprehension of Dickinson's difficult multiplicities without their reduction.

Bakhtin provides a way to speak of difficulty in Dickinson without normalizing it. I use the dialogic as Crumbley suggests of an interim stage in the critical use of Bakhtin, "incidentally" while in pursuit of questions of Dickinson's rhetoric (93). I focus on "voice that emerges through a dialogue with prior discourse [and] implicitly or explicitly comments on that discourse," but ultimately I follow less its dialogue with historical reference and concentrate more on the etymological and linguistic (97). My analysis, while not specifically naming its concerns as those of voice, "overlaps with key Bakhtinian concepts," namely what happens when the "possibilities available to the speaking self are no longer bound by a demand for uniformity" (98). If the nature of the poetic voice in Dickinson is dialogic, I am concerned with the qualities of the space which it conceives. Bakhtin may see language as a social phenomenon, but we need not take the social as representational of only some external world. The tensions he describes can as well map dialogues within the poet herself, as Dickinson's poetic space which begins in the dramatic sphere quickly becomes the drama of the poet's interior.[2]

The polyvalence which Bakhtin describes as a tension of voices and forces in language suggests the tension in Dickinson's poems. Always under influence of some previous speculation whether it be the way we enter the poem expecting its contents to join or how we have been shown they might combine within the poem, all objects in Dickinson (whether concrete or conceptual) are conceived having already been once conceived. Moreover, what was once the poet's own, initial view can next become part of the complicating atmosphere of multiple conceptions as she moves from the first to her next vision. The illuminations in the poem will find no final, single solution in their sum. The poem is near endless refraction, a house of mirrors where all facets sparkle without exclusion.

A claim of accounting begins the poem "I reckon – When I count / at all" (J569/Fr533), but this action is immediately refracted. When that first

assertion — "I reckon" — is next declaimed, the first line contains the infinity of a palimpsest, a first impression of intent left residually even as it is taken away. Read as a disclaimer, "when I count / at all" is an indication that the poet has nearly "finished using" the mode of counting. But if instead we read with emphasis the unfaltering assertion that the poet will reckon whenever counting at all, it is with slant glance that she undertakes a serial act of reckoning, and we enter another accumulation.

> 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 –
> (J569/Fr533)

The "List" laid out in succession from "Poets" through "Sun" and "Summer" and then on to "Heaven" seems a simple, inclined progression from diminutive to superior. But at the point of appending another term with the conjunction "and then," the poet who entered in some suspicion of addition stops the act to proclaim completion: "the List is done – ."

Given the progressive movement and our belief that it will culminate with an encompassing element (a belief fulfilled when the arrest occurs just beyond the grandeur of the "Heaven of God"), we might easily see the Deity as comprehensive of this "List." The poet, too, seems to have expected this, her reconsideration taking place in the middle of her list-making, as if she, too, were halted by grandeur. But in the next stanza she turns on the contrasting conjunction and contemplates the elements of the catalog.

> But, looking back – the
> First so seems
> To Comprehend the Whole –
> The Others look a needless Show –
> So I write – Poets – All –
> (J569/Fr533)

The first element — "Poets," a single unity as much as a portion-is deemed the "Whole" to comprehend all the "List." However, in this accounting the sum of encompassing "Poets" does not subsume. When the "Poets" are unraveled in stanza three, they who were merely items in the "List" are constituted

by the rest of the elements (and then some): a yearlong "Summer" and an "extravagant Sun." Between "exact mathematics" and this new proposition, this set of parts within wholes (which are themselves parts) composes a refracted space.

Still, the "Heaven" meant to be comprehended makes its own attempts at vastness when its variants propose a "Further," "Other," and "Final Heaven":

> And if the +Further Heaven –
>
> Be Beautiful as they Disclose
> To Those who ask of Them –
>
> +Other +final
> (J569/Fr533)

Its own offer of the "Beautiful," however, is syntactically subservient. Tucked conditionally within the prism-term of "Poets ("they" who "Disclose"), this beauty comes only upon request, and "Heaven" is revealed only to those who might inquire within.[3]

Yet lest we think so vast a place as "Heaven" could be easily held within an infinite element, the apodosis quickly curtains the conditional with disbelief:

> It is too difficult a Grace –
> To justify the Dream –
> (J569/Fr533)

Here, after all has been placed subordinate to the "Poets," even the disclosure of beauty, there is something which they cannot fully claim. To reveal "Heaven's" beauty would require the comprehensive privilege of "Grace," and access to that is "too difficult" even for "Poets." They are superseded in their dream of this nested space by "Grace" itself.[4]

The space suggested by objects in inexact relation and by wholes (like the "Soul") in need of filling within their circumscription, quickly becomes dramatized space in "One need not be a chamber to be haunted" (J670/Fr407). Its sense as numeral given up to an ascribed unity of a self, the poem's opening "One" proposes the self as exterior and interior components of a gothic metaphor.

One need not be a chamber –
to be Haunted –
One need not be a House –
The Brain – has Corridors –
surpassing
+Material Place –

+Corporeal

(J670/Fr407)

If the letter of this argument is that "One" need not resemble any of these actual compartments, already the supposition is that haunting does require some kind of site. The "Brain," the "Body," and the "Self" are then, like that "chamber," extant places.

The relation of space to space in the comparison is far from exact. Is this interior space of the "Brain" more vast than these specific, erected chambers, and if so does it "surpass" in degree, amount, or quality? Is the "Brain," instead, unattachable to any single location so that even with passages (its "Corridors") it somehow exceeds the whole realm of "Material Place"? Perhaps more troubling is the final line's variant, which declares that the "Brain's" corridors surpass "Corporeal Place" itself. In this poem's unusually comprised, prismatic space, parts and wholes do not behave as they are expected. Here, the "Brain," an anatomical part, demands a space which reaches beyond its own house, its corpus. But no matter how vast, that part does not supplant the whole of which it is component, as the "Everlasting" did not forego its residence within the "Soul" in "One and one are one." We are allowed to maintain our sense that one is interior to the other, even as the former has a greater capacity.[5]

The next two stanzas, while continuing the comparison between external and internal with intent to show the greater terror of the latter, still refuse that binary and refract the space.

Far safer of a Midnight –
Meeting –
External Ghost –
Than an Interior confronting –
+That cooler – Host.

+That Whiter Host

(J670/Fr407)

The comparative that delineates one "safer," also supposes a less safe space, setting the two apart but not exactly dividing them. Despite the intensification provided to the comparative by its adverb, "far safer" is not the absolute state of *safe.* So even if the "Interior" is a more frightening place, the exterior is not without its degree of danger. The fright provided by this "Interior" phantom plumbs deeper by virtue of its own comparative descriptor, whether it be a "cooler" or a "Whiter Host." As before, the comparative form of either "cooler" or "Whiter" imports, if only for a moment, some presence less cool, less white which this one is beneath by at least a degree.

The poem that appeared to be structured by an exacting outside to inside comparison begins to misalign in the second stanza. By tucking away the adverbial "of a Midnight" with a preposition, the focus is on the action and object of "meeting – External Ghost." But if we might expect the comparison to follow object to object and this "External Ghost" to be found "safer" than "That cooler – Host" it does not correlate in that way. Instead of an equation between two fearsome objects, the "External Ghost" is "safer" than "an Interior confronting." The participant in the first "meeting" is compared to the whole of the act. If we think the resident makes the place unsafe, we find that even without an interloper, the "Interior" space is inherently dangerous.

If we provide a prepositional deletion which would also relegate "an Interior" to an adverbial, we can read the stanza with the comparison lying more directly parallel:

Far safer of a Midnight –
meeting –
External Ghost –
Than [of] an Interior confronting –
That cooler – Host.
(J670/Fr407)

This alignment of the verbals emphasizes the contact, a "meeting" compared to a "confronting." So, aided by the rhyme that serves as partial equation and an indicative "that" pointing from "Host" back to "Ghost," "That cooler – Host" seems to rename the first "Ghost." What are otherwise distinct specters are here indistinguishable. When placed in an "Interior," the phantasm that was "External" becomes more cool, more white, and more dangerous. The suggestion that in the equation of this poem there is only a single object and that the matrix of the comparison therefore overlaps allows no easy separation between the hauntings of the outer and those of an inner realm.[6]

The third stanza, a comparative equation that relies on the same rhetorical structure as the previous, initiates a gothic drama of pursuit as evidence of material haunt.

> Far safer, through an Abbey-
> gallop –
> The Stones a'chase –
> Than moonless – One's A'self
> encounter –
> In lonesome place –
> (J670/Fr407)

The dramatized (though unidentified) subject attempts to avoid a phantom, here suggested by "stones" that exhibit volition and motive. It is an other of some repute, separate, external, albeit closing. Across the rhetorical divide of the subordinating conjunction, the drama is not equivalent. Though the gothic tropes continue and all is veiled in darkness, the subsequent space is of a different sort. What was a space through which separate beings might "gallop" or "chase" is here "lonesome" despite the "encounter" taking place, and if an "encounter" presumes one, it needs also another face. If the two are a doubling of who we take to be the same ("one" and "self"), the possessive ("one's A'self") suggests that one can supersede oneself, that "self" can be "one's" owned constituent, a pair of infinitely refracting elements.[7]

The tension of alternating perspectives in the poem's larger inside-outside structure persists on a more local level, pressing the local itself to the infinite. In this way a word which holds its conception even as it is dispersed by another perspective is like a linguistic prism, a site of dialogic double energy.[8] Central in the drama at the Abbey, *chase* includes etymologically not only the field on which such an event is played, but it also names the quarry. So while it implies the distance between participants of a pursuit, it also fixes on the catch. When *chase* means as well to set a gem or adornment into position, it suggests a tighter joint at that end. *Encounter* itself indicates many shades of the act of meeting: a falling in, a mere spatial placement of two things opposite, or the adversarial act of confrontation.[9] Dickinson's etymology provides a hologram of the way she conceives of her universe as an irreducible and unsucceedable, expansive yet cohesive space of meaning.[10]

There is further semantic dispersion in this stanza when we encounter Dickinson's neologisms. The creation *a'chase* forms a colloquial intensification of the verb (perhaps as contraction of the present perfect's "have") meaning "in the act or process" of chasing. This creates an interiority, a potential for

being within what we would have taken as a unified act on its own. That is, we are placed in the process of a process.

This same construction will refract the substantive unity of a self in *one's A'self*. Read as a preposition, the "a" of "a'self" hints at being in or upon something, in super- or juxtaposition (this is seen in common use only as a contraction, such as *abed* or *afoot*). If "a" in this position suggests a prefix, then it allows the creation of addition or increase (such as *abu*t or *avail*) as well as the formation of negation or opposition (as in *achromatic*). Here we see again the subtle creation of a semiotic interior, of being placed semantically within something which on its own is complete of sense.

As article, "a" signals a coming noun, the act of indication a kind of individualizing of a self even as it fails to definitely distinguish it. The indefinite article holds etymologically this doubling: what began in Old English use as the definite numeral one, eroded in pronunciation to a "weakened" form ("a"). "A'self" is both unparticularized (a self) and complete (one self), and between each state of self the diacritic is a tiny mirror across which, like a dash, meaning breaks.

The initial stanzaic structure of exterior drama followed by a comparison to the "Interior" of the "self" is next inverted.

> Ourself – behind Ourself,
> Concealed –
> Should startle – most –
> Assassin – hid in Our Apart –
> ment
> Be Horror's least –
> (J670/Fr407)

As a result of this inversion, those who participated in the internal "self-encounter" in the previous stanza are here "Ourself" in the position where external dramas have been cast. Even if we propose a perfect reversal and decide the first part of the stanza will pertain to the "Interior," each scene will no longer be so confined. Within what would then read as "Interior" space, the concealing of self behind self is shocking enough to "startle most." The startling extends to an audience outside the "self." Through the course of the stanza the distinction of what is inside and what is without has broken apart.

Given this erosion, the character of an "Assassin" is immediately feared not as "External Ghost" so much as an ominous "One" or alternate "self" about to confront the central "self." This occurs, in part, due to some

allegiance to the established terms which places him in the lower, "Interior" portion of the stanza. The line division (in the fair copy) only heightens this reading. The wily "Assassin" who hides "in Our Apart – " finds a place to hide inside a space which is already fractured ("apart").

Free of the scaffold of comparison, the drama of selves' engagement is truly at the front. As the poem's mode has been to shoot wholes through with holes, any unity of "self" can be divided, this time by preposition: "Ourself" hidden *behind* the other but neither excluded. On the line there is mirrored symmetry:

> Ourself – behind Ourself –
> (J670/Fr407)

There is no way to determine which is behind which or who behind whom in this reflected infinity. Even the act of reflexivity in a pronoun like "Ourself" involves moving outside the single identity of "Our" in order to see it as a whole, recognize a "self," and reflect this back with comprehension. Always in this space there is another depth, a bending into what we took to be intact.[11]

With "Assassin" still present, the final stanza portrays the oppositional quality of these selves within a "self."

> The +Prudent – carries a
> Revolver –
> He bolts the Door –
> O'erlooking a Superior Spectre –
> More near –
>
> +Body
> (J670/Fr407)

The "Prudent," who in a variant is the "Body," bolts her own door to defend against what has come to be an endless erosion of perimeters.[12] As in the "encounter" of "One" and "self" before, "He" who might be laterally adjacent to another in this sole compartment is over-reached by a "Superior Spectre." However, the dynamic of their interaction does not succumb to that superiority. The "Prudent" (the "Body") who overlooks a presence it fails to see as separate dissolves the entire encounter; or else, the "Prudent" makes this supposedly "Superior Spectre" instead an inferior by looking *over* it.

The drama of "Ghosts" and "Assassins" in metaphoric play and the

poem's semantic irrelation will not allow mere adjacencies or any nesting of "self" gently within "self" like so many perfectly-fitting matrioushkas. But these confusions are not intent on chaos or an utter dismantling of sense. These poems are interanimate, revolving through alignment and repulsion and insistent that meaning have many facets.[13]

Certainly this is the same refracting space of "I cannot live with you" (J640/Fr706).[14] While the poem is regularly read in dramatic context as the harmony and discord of romantic union or as an account of impossibilities in reaching that union, its prismatic depths portray an inner dynamic.[15] Once we are shown the Self as a space, a space which is both whole and holds multiple conceptions of Self in dialogic accord — no one reigning but still striving for unity — we might, in the poem, reach this more interior conclusion. Although the pose of the poem is ostensibly one of argument, one which begins and ends in the emphatic present, it does not take on the task of exact proof. Instead, it is more the bulwark of an argument, a series of parallel propositions, each postulation found in turn to preclude connection between the two "souls" of the poem despite an exhaustive attempt to outwit impossibility. This simultaneous attraction and refused solution exists within the poem's thesis:

> I cannot live with you
> So we must meet apart
> (J640/Fr706)

If the posture of the first clause is one of negation, its impact is one of intended connection, of living *with* you; and if the imperative of the second seems to affirm, its impact is negative: *we* in compulsive separation.

Whereas the initial declaration "I cannot live with you" seems immobile and inarguable, it is presented as a modal. It holds possibility even as it expresses prohibition. In fact the whole poem uses modal construction to build its arc suggestively rather than causally. The modal as auxiliary inflects the verb but does not eclipse it. A distance arises between the present state and things as they might be otherwise, but as it amplifies possibility, each phrase contains, in the root of the verb, fulfillment. In providing the hypothetical, a modal proposes another possible place, where — in living or dying or rising — a pair of persons or of selves might reside together. When it shows another potential world, it cannot suggest to stop at one alternative or be exclusive: meeting and parting are both suggested in the infinity.

The modals *could* and *would*, in desiring something more, do so either with transport into an alternate past or a proposed future. When the poem

changes near its end to a use of the subjunctive ("And were You Lost, I would be – ") it may sacrifice the modal's anticipatory propulsion, but it gains a substantive timelessness. The subjunctive resides – not grasping forward or back – in the moment of its speculation. The subjunctive in a conditional sentence indicates to Fowler a "utopia, the realm of the non-fact or the imaginary" (576). Within a poem that confronts and confronts again impossibility, this is a space where inequations might coexist.

The beginning declaration is that these two – "I" and "You" – cannot reside in a single place. That place "would be Life" as figured in a cup, though the cup is pushed for size and cracked.[17]

> I cannot live with You –
> It would be Life –
> And Life is over there –
> Behind the Shelf
>
> The Sexton keeps the key to –
> Putting up
> Our Life – His Porcelain –
> Like a Cup –
>
> Discarded of the Housewife –
> Quaint – or Broke –
> A newer Sevres pleases –
> Old Ones crack –
>
> (J640/Fr706)

Even in the midst of the "Life" held "over there – / Behind the Shelf" in this first refusal, there is an inescapable containment as the two are kept within the union of a possessive ("our Life"). Although "I" and "You" do not meet, they are next contained within a greater possession, that of the "Sexton" over "His Porcelain" where they are again together beneath a single subordination.[18]

While these two demand separation, in a rhetorical strategy of "I could not"s that structures the poem, within the arguments themselves the two defy exact distinction. In the first of these proclamations, "I could not die – with You-," the justification for refusal is that "One must wait / To shut the Other's Gaze down." Given the shift to a more omniscient tone ("You" replaced here by "One"), there is no sure way to ascertain which of the two is the "One"

who will wait, which the "Other." The relationship is reciprocal, mirrored, and nearly identical.[19] The truncated further response to the argument ("You – could not –") might alternately be completed as "you could not shut [the Other's gaze down]," "you could not wait," or "you could not die." Each adds to the confusion of which role each "One" fills. When we read that line as complete and categorical in its refusal, the two are syntactically identified in their impossibility at the two ends of the argument: "I could not . . . You – could not."

A later line provides more correspondence:

> And were You lost, I would be –
> (J640/Fr706)

This might read with a recovered deletion "were You lost, I would be [lost, too]" to illustrate the two acting in parallel. We should not, however, elide the fact that there is opposition here as well. Leaving the phrase intact, the categorical — "I would *be*"— is exclusive from the "You," isolate in its own being.

The "I" and "You" are each other's harmonic and each other's rejoinder.[20] If these states seem irresolvable in their opposition, the speculations of the conditional and subjunctive tenses of the poem propose a space within which they might both reside. "One need not be a chamber to be haunted" describes the interior of Self as a space able to contain inequities, doublings, and single elements which themselves exceed the Self's realm. "I cannot live with you" finds those same qualities in a space it calls "our Life." In this context where "I" and "You" are at once separate aspects and indiscriminate, the edicts

> I cannot live with you
> So we must meet apart –
> (J640/Fr706)

that first seem to apply to two individual beings, could also refer to contradicting intentions or the interior refractions that exists within us, between ourself and our assassin, between myself condemned and mine who seeks salvation.[21]

The penultimate stanza's myriad syntactic combinations present the increasingly familiar but never easy relation of the "I" opposed to and also in equation with the "You."

> And were You – saved-

And I – condemned to be
Where You were not
That self – were Hell to me –
(J640/Fr706)

A "You" who is saved is both identified with and dissimilar to an "I" who is variously "condemned to be" by possible completions to the truncated construction. The "I" might be "condemned to be saved" (in which the posture of the sentence seems a positive one, but its proposed salvation is left pending in the infinitive) or condemned to *be*, exclusive and isolate in such being (as before, in response to the "You" lost, the "I" would *be*).

The apparent truncation might be fulfilled by the line that follows, such that the "I" is "condemned to be / Where You were not," a more directed form of exile. When that direction combines with the appositive of the stanza's final line, the poem proposes an isolation within the circumscribed space of "self." In other words, "Where You were not / That self – were Hell to me" unravels to read: "that self wherein you are not would be Hell to me." The lament of the poem is still one of absence, but the site which is both lacking and potential fulfilling is the site of "self." This is a space where mutual residence is tight as "Ourself" tucking "behind Ourself." But if this interior has previously been sufficient in capacity for selves upon selves, here the multiple inhabitation is not just possible but necessary. For the "I," the thought of inhabiting a "self" (herself) where her other is not is tantamount to damnation.[22]

The isolation of "I" from "You" which seems an error and the horror of Hell also proposes, in the poem's subjunctive non-factual utopia, a place where both can exist and reach fulfillment.[23] This tenor of possibility offered in the intimacy of "self" helps propel the poem to its concluding thesis of paradoxical union. The final declaration is more reiterative of the whole poem's own enactment than a true conclusion. Any separation, even within a single "self," is unthinkable as it is inevitable:

So we must meet apart –
You there – I – here –
(J640/Fr706)

We must meet to be one Self. We must be in opposition to be all our selves. "Apart" as adverb reveals the action of partition; but it also suggests the articled noun ("a part"), and the indefinition and distinction of the article that informed "a'self" makes "a part" here both an indefinite one-of-many

and a distinct whole of its own. "Apart" and "a part" cleave between beings but also suggest the refracted depths within a self contained, an interior that might hold both one's assassin and one's necessary relation.

In this space from which we might leave Dickinson, there are both: union and its opposition. Though I'd stop short of calling the poem's end a cause for celebration, the door that indicates separation is also a threshold and has been left just a little bit open. The interstice it invites us into is vast as "Oceans are," a space of distances without distinction. If the last word, "Despair," is a giving up in hopelessness, it always carries its root of hope. Dickinson conceives the devastation of "Despair" as a"White privilege," a state in which some special advantage is to be found.[25] She effects this state as a place of essential nourishment, a "White Sustenance." Here "Despair" – this loss of hope – contains the pair and their split, in word ("dis-pair") and within the whole of the poem. The two who are within are at once "One" and "apart."[26]

Notes

1. The texts of the poems I take from R. W. Franklin's variorum edition although I choose to replicate the line divisions on the page and provide variants as they are germane to my argument. Johnson poem numbers are provided for ease of reference.

2. These facets of multiple connections and mirrors of dynamic interaction are suggestive of Mikail Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic as presented in *The Dialogic Imagination.* Bakhtin's is a linguistic argument that gives credence and method to the dictum that "form and content in discourse are one" (259). He conceives of heteroglossia as a space of "living, tension-filled interaction" (279), an "elastic environment" (276). Here, any "language that presumes to be the only language" comes under challenge from other viewpoints (both historic and immediate) and cannot seem single (68). In this same manner the sum of "One and One" can no longer be presumed in the poem. Dickinson's "slant" is suggestive of Bakhtin's "sideways glance" at the existing word (61). Further, if any statement can fall from its claimed hegemony, then the perspective which challenges it, as well as the many, simultaneous conceptions that may next be proposed, cannot them selves "presume to be completely unified" (68). Once the space is opened to heteroglossic possibility, each word will refract between each in infinities.

   Paul Crumbley has extensively traced the application of dialogic theory to readings of Dickinson in his essay "Dickinson's Dialogic Voice." Following the critical attention to voice in the poems, Crumbley presents three stages of dialogic criticism from a period where critics were "innocent of the specialized vocabulary of Bakhtinian theory" to a recent period in which the dialogic mode is "the primary starting point for inquiry into other aspects of Dickinson's poetics" (93). What I call the interim is Crumbley's second stage in which "instead of being a focus for critical inquiry, dialogism . . . becomes a way of answering questions raised by such approaches as historical influence studies, genre study, gender analysis, and the investigation of manuscript material" (93).

   Bakhtin distances his own argument on "artistic prose" (269) from that which is "'poetic' in the narrow sense" (260) because poetic discourse is to him one that assumes "a unity of language (in the sense of a system of general normative forms) and on the other hand the unity of an individual person realizing himself in this language" (264). Beyond his encouragement to "radically reconsider that conception of poetic discourse" (267), his contentious argument remains germane to Dickinson precisely because Dickinson also contends with such unitary language and, like him, with "the concept of poetic discourse as it now exists . . . [with] certain underlying presuppositions that limit it" (269).

   Much of what I take from Bakhtin is metaphoric. Specifically, I find his conception of the dialogic, at once proposing and opposing, to be suggestive of the endless refraction I see in the poems:

   > The way in which the word conceptualizes its object is a complex act

— all objects, open to dispute and overlain as they are with qualifications, are from one side highlighted while from the other dimmed . . . by an alien word about them. And into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters — it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours . . . . If we imagine the intention of such a word, that is, its directionality toward the object, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word . . . in an atmosphere filled with alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle (277).

3. When Gary Lee Stonum in *The Dickinson Sublime* moves from a version of the listed elements as "categorically distinct" to a more complex revision of them, his terms are those of traditional comparison in which the poem proposes only a simple inversion of importance between the "Poets" and "Heaven" (12). He notes the key dynamic, but stops at equity when "earlier the heaven of God had come in a poor fourth in the reckoning, but now the speaker considers that God's further heavenmight indeed be as beautiful as the poet's representa tion" (12). He accurately marks this as provisional "within the conditional grammar of the poem's ending" (12).

4. In *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Gramma*r, Cristanne Miller first reads a simple supremacy in the poem where Dickinson "chooses 'Poets' over 'Heaven'," but in a comparison of this poem to "A Word Made Flesh" (J1651/Fr1715) she also sees a choice of "'Philology' over God's 'Word'" (173).

5. When Cynthia Griffin Wolff reads this poem she does so as extension from a previous discussion of "The Brain is Wider than the Sky" (J632/Fr598) in which the brain is a vast interior that can contain and subsume sky, sea, or God. "One need not be a chamber to be haunted" is then the extension of such an "inward movement" until the whole poem is contained in an "isolated inner world" (463). Beyond this she is one of several, including Daneen Wardrop in *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*, to chart the thematic import of a poem as an "excellent example of both frightening self and split self" (Wardrop 128) in which the "latent peril is entirely within" (Wolff 464).

6. Sharon Cameron uses this poem as part of her far-reaching argument of "what interior is" in the context of the variants and structure of Fascicle 20 in Choosing Not Choosing. In this, "since the ghost is discovered to be inside, the boundary between inside and outside ceases to be significant" (57).

7. Cameron's reading takes cues from the fascicle as a whole to combine any

psychological reading with the religious but nevertheless finds the "imported entity" that enters the poem is "never fully identical nor fully differentiated from the speaker" (126).

8. *Centripeta*l and *centrifugal* are Bakhtin's terms for this dialogic play of language. Centripetal are the posited crystallizing forces that create a real, though relative "unitary language;" while the many, interplaying unitary languages act as disunifying, centrifugal forces. According to Bakhtin, "every utterance exists in both." In etymology the prevailing sense of a word may be an example of a single language's claim for unity even as the object which it hopes to hold on its own is alternately conceived. While always presenting the oppositions that are central to the dialogic, Bakhtin does not wish to dismiss this centripetal, unifying energy that "makes its real presence felt as a force" and is an essential part of language that "insures its dynamics." Any word holds tight to a unity of meaning even as an inquiry into its etymology unravels all its strains (270-72).

9. All definitions from *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

10. Suzanne Juhasz points out in her lexical study, *The Undiscovered Continent*, that "the rhetoric of the poem is dramatic as well as concrete" (17). She offers a detailed reading of the poem's diction and follows this mode to further explore issues of space and distance throughout Dickinson.

11. Daneen Wardrop notes in *Emily Dickinson's Gothic* that as "the most memorable phrase out of many memorable phrases" "Ourself – behind Ourself" is an odd conflation of plural and singular, although the rest of the study is less linguistic and more psychologically diagnostic (115).

12. Of this condition Joan Burbick says "Dickinson's language of the self as it is represented in its pronomial form does not permit such impenetrable individual ism" (93).

13. The action is similar to that of the Bakhtinian word, "breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others...able, in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone" (277).

14. "If Dickinson characteristically does not choose syntactically, she also characteris tically does not choose between the story ostensibly being told and the story actually being told," says Cameron with the example of when "choosing not to be with a lover rather means choosing the grounds on which to meet him." The voice that is thus "at odds with itself" behaves in a dialogic manner such that "the proper term for the disagreement is in fact heteroglossia in another

form" (*Choosing* 27).

15. Of those who use a dramatic basis to reach their various, detailed readings of this as a love poem — among them Kher, Farr, Cameron, Stonum, and Denise Kohn — Cynthia Griffin Wolff does so in a manner aligned with my own approach as that of a "struggle . . . internalized in a potent form of linguistic wrestle" between a loss and hypothetical proposal where the final site of possible union is the poem itself (417).

16, Michael Perkins, arguing in *Modal Expression in English*, proposes a wider understanding of the modal beyond auxiliaries and even phrases. In its ability to suggest a hypothetical he suggests the subjunctive is itself a modal expression.

17. In *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, Judith Farr points to the spacelessness of the poem in the fact that "there is no landscape at all and no real place" (306), but as she casts the poem on dramatic grounds between the speaker and "the one she loves," a human other ("Master or the beloved woman"), she presupposes some field of distance on which the interaction of characters might occur (308).

18. In hearing the demonstrative adjectives as colloquial speech, Wolff locates this proposed, greater "Life" just "over there," a sense of nearness and relative ease of access that will extend to "You there – I – here" at the poem's close (421).

19. Cameron finds this kind of identity in the ninth stanza's "Because You saturated sight – / And I had no more eyes." First she notes, in *Lyric Time*, that the use of the past tense in reference to a time in which the "I" was subsumed indicates that this union is not merely hypothetical, but has occurred before (80). In *Choosing Not Choosing*, while continuing to see the characters as separate, she points to the causality of the lines: because of the "You's" saturating sight the "I" has no more eyes — as if they shared a common pair. This is "partializing the body to arrive at wholeness" and a case of "his self as that part of her body which, once absorbed, in effect continues to occupy her" (176).

20. The two are then simultaneous participants in a dialogic field of conversation which they begin within even as there is some distance between them. As Bakhtin puts it, "utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it — it does not approach the object from the sidelines" (276).

21. To "meet apart," according to Stonum, is a relationship defined "on her terms" and one which further "almost wholly internalizes the relation" (160).

22. Cristanne Miller acknowledges the impossibility faced in this poem as an example of "hypotaxis [that] allows Dickinson to specify the relations that analogical juxtaposition or use of metaphor may imply." It is a grammar of "multiple possibilities for further action" in which "although Dickinson's speaker may be

caught in narrative stasis at the end of a poem...her syntax seems to allow for even further transformations and complexities" (98).

23. To Cameron the subjunctive in this stanza is only capable of imagining "a condition of (more) distance," although she does find that the end of the poem proposes "a condition which enables the renegotiation of distance and effectively does away with it" (*Choosing* 171).

24. After suggesting that this exemplifies those poems which are "intellectual confrontations with the void without suggesting means of transcending it," Agnieszka Salska proposes Dickinson's poems in context of the elegy as "hardly 'lamenting' or 'grieving,' for they treat loss as the experiential given and strive" beyond. If that given is a despair that provides nourishment, it is, however, only one which "must suffice," lacking any alternative (98). Carolyn Kemp calls "meeting apart" the solution to the dilemma in which the poet is able to "maintain relationships under her control" (246).

25. Dickinson provides "privilege" as a variant to "Sustenance" in the poem's final stanza.

26. "Despair" to Stonum is a sustaining sustenance that is a kind of common point between the two; "in contrast to a consuming and apocalyptic presence, it can be prolonged without requiring the parties to be consumed" (161). What is to Stonum a "negative ratio" (134) of pain to a glory-to-come is what Wolff also sees as an choiceless inversion where "paradoxically, then, the word of ultimate desolation — 'Despair' — becomes the only way to give utterance to ultimate ardor" (420).

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Unless otherwise indicated the following abbreviations are used for reference to the writings of Emily Dickinson.

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