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Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson

Why not an 'eleventh hour' in the life of the *mind* as well as such an one in the life of the *soul* – greyhaired sinners are saved – simple maids may be *wise*, who knoweth?

-- Emily to her brother Austin, 1851 (L44)

With every increase in the degree of consciousness, and in proportion to that increase, the intensity of despair increases: the more consciousness, the more intense the despair.

-- Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 175

In 1870, during their first meeting, Emily Dickinson told Thomas Wentworth Higginson that "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it" (L342a). A few such memorable remarks about how poetry makes one feel, along with hundreds of lyrics celebrating ecstasy, awe, and exhilaration, have naturally led readers to privilege emotional and physical responses to her poems as well. If we throw in those poems' famous opacity, we can understand why many have concluded that Dickinson's affective force does not always depend on clarity of thought or even intelligibility. Margaret Peterson has argued that Dickinson's most "impassioned poems" can "become a series of ecstatic assertions, an abandonment to excess verging on mental unbalance" (500). While I agree that emotions

and other language-defying topics are at the heart of many Dickinson poems, in what follows I will argue the opposite case and portray her not as a mystic but as a serious thinker. In my view she provides far fewer “ecstatic assertions” than careful sequences of ideas and images, not so much “abandonment to excess” as thoughtful production of, and reaction to, extreme states of being. My goal is to show both how important the category of thought was for Dickinson and how committed she was to certain projects of thinking. In so doing, I hope to provide a starting point for further exploration of how Dickinson conceived of the activity of thinking, how she imagined the relationship between thought and poetry and, ultimately, how writing poetry helped her think.

Dickinson wrote too much about thinking to catalogue exhaustively, but a few observations will help chart the territory. Thought, in her poems, is often represented as rapid, uncontrollable, and self-contesting; it is associated with power, extreme inner experience, fantasy, madness, pleasure, logic, suffering, and risk. While every poem represents thought on some level, many also thematize it and reflect precise attitudes. Some are celebratory: “Best Things dwell out of Sight / The Pearl - the Just - Our Thought” (Fr1012) and others cautionary: “If wrecked upon the Shoal of Thought / How is it with the Sea? / The only Vessel that is shunned / Is safe - Simplicity - ” (Fr1503). One group draws attention to the problems involved in expressing thought or clothing it in language: “Your thoughts dont have words every day / They come a single time / Like signal esoteric sips / Of the communion Wine” (Fr1476). An analytical cluster considers the mind’s basic powers, size, and shape: “The Brain - is wider than the Sky - ” (Fr598); “The Brain has Corridors - surpassing / Material place - ” (Fr407) and a related set describes thought’s wildness and weirdness: “The Brain, within it’s Groove / Runs evenly - and true - / But let a Splinter swerve - / ‘Twere easier for You - // To put a Current back - When Floods have slit the Hills - ” (Fr563). Others posit thought as sufficient, or almost, to provide happiness: “It’s thoughts - and just One Heart - / And Old Sunshine - about - / Make frugal - Ones - Content - ” (Fr362); “To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, / One clover, and a bee, / And revery. / The revery alone will do, / If bees are few” (Fr1779). This list could easily include more categories and be analyzed at greater length, but it is already clear that Dickinson saw thought under many lights and through many lenses.

Thought was a consistent as well as kaleidoscopic topic. According to the Rosenbaum *Concordance to the Poems*, which is based on the 1955 Johnson edition, Dickinson’s poems include the verb “feel” 39 times, “felt” 35; “feels” 16, and “feel-

ing" 8. By contrast, "thought" occurs a total of 69 times, "think" 43, and "thinking" 6. "Know" occurs a staggering 230 times, "knew" 80, and "knows" 31, putting this verb in a virtual tie with "do" (170), "did" (150) and "does" (45) for fourth most common verb after "to be," "to be able," and "to have." The form "knowing" also occurs 13 times, and "unknown" 34. If we look at the classic distinction between mind and body, we find "mind" used 79 times (usually as a noun), "minds" 9, "brain" 26, and forms of "consciousness" 40. "Body" occurs only 10 times and "bodies" 1. Partial and decontextualized as such statistics are, they nonetheless make it tempting to cut the Gordian knot and declare that Dickinson's poetry is much more about thought than feeling. At the very least, they remind us how much thought was on Dickinson's mind as she wrote.

Where did Dickinson acquire her thoughts on thought? The question is too vast to answer in full. Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls her an "artist of the age of transition," and cogently argues that her "self-imposed labor was to question God's authority and to free language from the tyranny of His definitions; thus the diction of her poetry is in the process of revising transcendent implication and pulling away from it even as the speaker addresses herself to God" (429). The Dickinson "mark of modernism," David Porter similarly says, is the mind "explosive with signifying power but disinherited from transcendent knowledge" (7). To this joint portrait of a post-transcendental Dickinson I would add that her self-imposed labors and disinheritance can be understood as postmodern. In the ways she refused either to accept or reject the powerful explanatory discourses of her time, for example, we can recognize the attitude Jean-François Lyotard finds definitive of postmodernism: incredulity toward metanarratives. And in the many ways she chose not choosing (as Sharon Cameron puts it) and became aware of herself as a site of vocal and intellectual conflict, torn or traversed by competing language games (in the Wittgensteinian and Lyotardian sense of rule-based usages), and ultimately developed a variorum poetics (as Marjorie Perloff puts it) she can legitimately be taken as a postmodern artist *avant la lettre*.¹ It would be possible to distinguish further among the various strains and strengths of Dickinson's postmodernism, but the spectrum of her attitudes on thinking emerges mainly from a specific cultural condition: the tension between the Lockean empiricist premises that saturated her schoolbooks and the Kantian themes of apprehending the supersensible that circulated throughout Transcendentalism. In the play of irreconcilable differences between these systems, one can glimpse the origin of many of Dickinson's stances on the nature and powers of the human mind.

To read Dickinson as a postmodern thinker and writer is, on the one hand, to explore the ways postmodern theory makes visible important aspects of her work, and, on the other, to see how her poetry exemplifies and illuminates central postmodern predicaments. We shed light on both problems when we see Dickinson as a Derridean *bricoleuse*, mixing and radically extending contemporary religious, literary, scientific, and other vocabularies along with their metaphysical presuppositions.² "We have a very fine school," wrote Dickinson to Abiah Root in 1845, "There are 63 scholars. I have four studies. They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany. How large they sound, don't they?" (L6). If she later chose the tropological power of poetry to pursue her tries at thinking, it is precisely because she was neither committed to nor trapped in any systematic, disciplinary patterns of thought. Of course there are differences: Dickinson played more seriously, engaged more sharply with her culture's vocabularies, and had more all-around faith in the agency of the writer than does your average postmodern. And despite occasional comic effects, Dickinson's mixing was rarely just a playful or idiosyncratic patchwork of cultural fragments. What should not get lost in a celebration of Dickinson as *bricoleuse* is the engineering depth and variety with which she employed specific language games of critical thought.

As I have suggested, one of these has clear Kantian contours. While Dickinson did not read Kant, she did share his basic attitude toward the self-contesting mind and, especially, toward the links between specific kinds and sequences of thoughts and the experiences of beauty and the sublime.³ Indeed, many Dickinson poems make use of a key scene in the *Critique of Judgment*, precisely the one Lyotard parlays into a description of the postmodern condition. It is the scene in the theater of the mind where reason conceives of something conceivable but hard to represent (e.g. infinity, death, the very large, the very small) and demands an image adequate to it, which the faculty of imagination tries but fails to provide. The mind repeatedly tries but fails to satisfy its own demand, and from this amplifying situation emerge the inner experiences that define the Kantian sublime.⁴

Many of Dickinson's poems can be read as resourceful, even desperate attempts to supply imagery for the thoughts and experiences that most defy the imagination. Trying to present the unrepresentable or, failing that, to render palpable the absence of the unrepresentable, they take up Lyotard's later neo-Kantian gauntlet: "it must be clear" he says, calling on would-be postmodern artists, "that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (*Postmodern* 81). I would suggest that Dickinson does

precisely that to a degree that other poets do not and that her lifelong commitment to difficult projects of thinking has early origins. The following extract from an 1846 letter to Abiah Root shows Dickinson relentlessly trying to think something for which no adequate image exists: her own death.

Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief to so endless a state of existence. I don't know why it is but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth – I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene – It does not seem to me that I shall ever close my eyes in death. I cannot realize that the grave will be my last home – that friends will weep over my coffin and that my name will be mentioned, as one who has ceased to be among the haunts of the living, and it will be wondered where my disembodied spirit has flown. I cannot realize that the friends I have seen pass from my sight in the prime of their days like dew before the sun will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, nor can I realize that when I again meet them it will be in another & a far different world from this. (L10)

Written less than two months after she had turned fifteen, this early letter carries *in nuce* many of Dickinson's mature traits, not least of which are tenacity and the will to force the mind beyond its human limits. As Lyotard puts it: "The obligation to which the imagination is subjected by reason does not only leave the imagination terrified, but gives it the courage to force its barriers and attempt a 'presentation of the infinite'" (*Lessons* 151). Dickinson obviously has this courage: she cannot think death or Eternity, cannot present them adequately to herself, but she cannot not think them either, and as she struggles with this predicament she reveals a mind that seems almost willing to turn to clichés – friends passing "like dew before the sun" – but is in fact relentless and uncompromising: "I cannot imagine . . . I cannot realize . . . I cannot realize . . . nor can I realize . . ." Her mind repeatedly stretches, fails, realizes it fails, regroups, rewords, and reaches its limit again. In increasingly figural language, she describes each new failure without ever arbitrarily changing the subject or leaping into the safety of a platitude or a faith.

What is not yet joined to this coiling and uncoiling mental activity is an associated and analyzed emotional experience; here she does not worry over the ways the very try of thought is affecting her as she is thinking and rethinking, and does

not explicitly reach or address Kant's point that what is sublime is "not so much the object, as our own state of mind in the estimation of it" (94).⁵ She just keeps trying to think, or rather, to realize; this recurring verb is the best one she has for expressing a complex desire to imagine fully and translate understandingly something unrepresentable into conscious life. In this case, the difference Dickinson intends between not realizing and realizing is the difference between understanding conceptually but superficially that one is going to die and understanding viscerally and profoundly that one is going to *die*. It is obviously hard for anyone at any age to realize that difference; again, the lyric may have been the richest language game she knew for such difficult projects of thought. To elucidate this idea, it will help to highlight certain elements from the only professional correspondence she ever carried out.

As literary history has recorded in italics, on April 15, 1862 Dickinson responded to Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Atlantic Monthly* essay "Letter to a Young Contributor" by writing him to ask: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L260). This question was abrupt but not as cryptic as it now sounds. She was asking what he thought of four poems: "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124); "The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized –" (Fr304B); "We play at Paste" (Fr282); and "I'll tell you how the Sun rose –" (Fr204). Each of these uses playful imagery to present cosmic or existential settings and questions. The only one not featuring children prominently is "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124), and it displays "meek" members of the resurrection "Safe[ly]" sleeping.

Beneath these poems' placid surfaces, the gears of metaphors are grinding. The whirring "ee" and "r" sounds cycling through the first line of "The nearest dream recedes – unrealized –" aurally enact the poem's superimposed narratives of frustration: a boy chasing a bee and a mind reaching for heaven. All four poems mobilize contrasting or parallel perspectives (children/adult; alive/dead; unaware/aware) and these multiple frames make the poems richly open to interpretation. Dickinson's alive-or-dead question thus draws attention to a depth of thought that might be missed when a professional critic first encounters the work of a new poet. Indeed, on second look it is not easy to intuit all the thinking that went into "gem tactics," "steadfast honey," and the poems that carry them.

Dickinson justified her question by adducing not only the poems but the reason she could not answer it: "The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask –" (L260). When the mind encounters itself, reads its own writing, or thinks about its own thinking, it is so self-obtruding that it casts

a shadow on its own light.⁶ This is the real reason Dickinson wrote to Higginson, and her next three questions in this letter, asking whether he thought the verse “breathed,” whether she had made “the mistake,” and whether he would tell her “what is true” all follow from the same epistemological predicament (L260).⁷

It is an acute problem for Dickinson because, as becomes abundantly clear in the rest of the correspondence with Higginson (72 letters extant from 1862-1886), she generally thought of writing as thought and, more specifically, as thought’s psychotherapeutic response to troubling emotion. She tells him that she writes because she had “a terror” she could “tell to none – and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid” (L261). Later she explains that when “a sudden light on Orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention – I felt a palsy, here – the Verses just relieve –” (L265). Dickinson rarely writes about writing in terms of spirit, creativity, formal or stylistic choices, historical period, influences, audience, literary movement, experimentation, appropriateness of theme, or any of the technical difficulties of shaping and sharing one’s experience in literary language. This silence is one reason critics have had difficulty pinpointing Dickinson’s ideas about her poetic composition; another is that she prized equally two things which have long been hard to reconcile in writing: mental lucidity and intense emotional experience. More than anything, she seems startled by the way Higginson answered her second letter with comments on form: her “gait spasmodic,” her style “uncontrolled” (L265).

Shouldn’t he have said what he thought of her thinking? Or at least explained why “uncontrolled” and “spasmodic” were inappropriate modes for a poet who had, she hoped, “told it clear” (L265)? He is the one who in the “Letter to a Young Contributor” had introduced the two-step compositional metaphor of thought first, language second. “Labor . . . not in thought alone,” he had exhorted potential poets, “but in utterance; clothe and reclothe your grand conception twenty times, until you find some phrase that with its grandeur shall be lucid also.” In her letters, Dickinson eschews the inflationary rhetoric of “grand conceptions,” and phrases “with grandeur,” and worries very little about whether she has managed in her poems to think something interesting, true, or otherwise worthy. On that topic she makes very few self-deprecating remarks, but she does wonder whether she has made plain the distinctions that she herself sees. “While my thought is undressed – I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown – they look alike, and numb” (L261). This response domesticates the writing process and privileges the thinking over the clothing: to put “undressed” thought “in the Gown” is much

less pretentious than to “clothe and reclothe” a “grand conception.”⁸

Sometimes poetry was something she did rather than made. Casting herself as a sailor and Higginson as one of her tools, a compass, she wrote: “If I might bring you what I do – not so frequent to trouble you – and ask you if I told it clear – ‘twould be control, to me – The Sailor cannot see the North – but knows the Needle can –” (L265). She also reported to him that “Two Editors of Journals came to my Father’s House, this winter – and asked me for my Mind – and when I asked them ‘Why,’ they said I was penurious – and they, would use it for the World – “I could not weigh myself – Myself –” (L261). Again, as these last two comments and many poems suggest, her recurring quandary is that her mind may not satisfy its own demands or understand itself or its products. The “Ignorance out of sight” she clarified later that summer of 1862, “is my Preceptor’s charge –” (L271).

Despite being anxiogenic, thought is a constant and valued theme in the correspondence. Along with Dickinson’s disdainful complaint to him about how her own “Mother does not care for thought” (L261), perhaps the most famous remark comes in a question reported by Higginson to his wife: “How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning” (L342a). For Dickinson this was a serious question. Later, she exclaims: “How luscious is the dripping of February eaves! It makes our thinking Pink –” (L450). And she repeatedly refers to Higginson’s writing as thought, too: “I had read ‘Childhood,’” she tells him, referring to his essay by that name, “with compunction that thought so fair – fall on foreign eyes –” (L449). She opens one letter with the comment that “Your thought is so serious and captivating, that it leaves one stronger and weaker too, the Fine of Delight” (L458)⁹ and comments in another: “I recently found two Papers of your’s that were unknown to me, and wondered anew at your withdrawing Thought so sought by others” (L488). She flattered him with the conceit that she had “thought that being a Poem one’s self precluded the writing Poems, but perceive the Mistake. It seemed like going Home, to see your beautiful thought once more, now so long forbade it –” (L413). She then summed up their shared faith in the primacy of thought with this rhetorical question: “Is it Intellect that the Patriot means when he speaks of his ‘Native Land?’” (L413).

Perhaps most impressively, in the spring of 1876 Dickinson wrote to Higginson after reading two anonymous essays in *Scribner’s Monthly*, “I inferred your touch in the Papers on Lowell and Emerson – It is delicate that each Mind is itself,

like a distinct Bird --" (L457).¹⁰ She had caught him out! In a twenty-four-year relationship marked by Dickinson's decorous diffidence, this confident interpretation of her friend's mental signature stands as remarkable proof of their intellectual kinship and her sensitive perspicacity. And finally, in the last month of her life, Dickinson wrote to tell him: "I have been very ill, Dear friend, since November, bereft of Book and Thought, by the doctor's reproof, but begin to roam in my Room now --" (L1042). She knew he would understand how important "Book and Thought" were to her.

It must be noted that this was not a one-way relationship. Higginson, for his part, also spoke of writing as thought and clearly understood and appreciated the way thinking and solitude were essential to Dickinson's life and work.¹¹ At one point he tells this "dear friend" that he sometimes takes out her letters and verses and when he feels their "strange power" it is hard to write to her (L330a). She enshrouds herself in such a "fiery mist," he explains, that he feels "timid lest what I *write* [he italicizes *write* to suggest that he could do better face-to-face] should be badly aimed & miss that fine edge of thought which you bear" (L330a). He continues:

It is hard [for me] to understand how you can live s[o alo]ne, with thoughts of such a [quali]ty coming up in you & even the companionship of your dog withdrawn. Yet it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you – so perhaps the place does not make much difference. (L330a)

Higginson was one of the first readers to be nicked by Dickinson's "fine edge of thought" and overwhelmed by her thinking "beyond a certain point," with "such luminous flashes." Nonetheless, it is clear that these cordial yet intimate correspondents understood each other very well, not least because so much of their conversation was about thought and literary writing understood as thought.¹² Emphasizing these elements of their dialogue not only brings into view a thinking Dickinson but also encourages us to recognize and interpret her poems as negotiated transcriptions of difficult thoughts.

One group of poems brings these negotiations especially to the fore. The express purpose of what I will call Dickinson's "try-to-think" poems is to force the mind to do something extremely difficult. The project often entails satisfying reason's unsatisfiable demand for a complete image, narrative, or understanding of a certain idea or experience. While much lyric poetry can generally be said to

think through and express thought and trauma, I nonetheless find Dickinson's try-to-think poems distinctive.

In them, the try is usually serious, the goal explicitly stated, and the emphasis squarely on the willful movements of thought. The speaker in these poems usually tests and tries to transform her own mind using a wide variety of tools, and the resourcefulness of her consciousness makes virtually every poetic element interpretable as contributing to the overriding try. The 1882 "Of Death I try to think like this" (Fr1588) is exemplary for the way its thinking is written into the poem's fabric; deputized and fused in the try's service is a wide array of signifying strata including words, moods, figural elaborations, dashes, spaces, sound patterns, narratives, memories, and allusions.¹³ "The nearest Dream recedes - unrealized -" (Fr304B) is also a try-to-think poem, one of a group trying to think immortality and eternity. With each word, mark, sound, image, and idea pressured so heavily, these open-minded poems reward close reading and can be understood as especially concentrated doses of *bricolage*.

In the way they stage the mind attempting to satisfy or improve itself, try-to-think poems sometimes also have a try-to-*believe* quality. In the 1863 "I think To Live - may be a Bliss," the word "may" should be emphasized in the first line; then the whole first stanza sets the terms for another thought-defying thinking:

I think To Live - may be a Bliss
To those who dare to try -
Beyond my limit - to conceive -
My lip - to testify -

(Fr757)

In the rest of the poem, the speaker tries to become, through the power of self-persuasive and self-transforming thought, one of the hypothesized "those" who live blissfully because they "dare to try" to conceive beyond her limit. Lastly, as these brief examples suggest, try-to-think poems are precisely sequenced, if difficult, thought experiments. They invite readers to (try to) repeat their steps and monitor the results.

The 1863 "I tried to think a lonelier Thing" (Fr570) exhibits all of these features. It is not the only poem in which Dickinson tried to understand that unique exposure of the self to infinity and emptiness that she often called loneliness, but it is certainly a difficult one.¹⁴ "Wherever Emily Dickinson's mental processes may have led," Albert Gelpi has written, "they began with an intolerable sense of emp-

teness which drove her to project as concrete evidence of her incompleteness the loss of childhood, father, mother, lover" (69). But this poem treats a case so extreme that it cannot be pinned on any specific loss:

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
Than any I had seen -
Some Polar Expiation - An Omen in the Bone
Of Death's tremendous nearness -

I probed Retrieveless things
My Duplicate - to borrow -
A Haggard comfort springs

From the belief that Somewhere -
Within the Clutch of Thought -
There dwells one other Creature
Of Heavenly Love - forgot -

I plucked at our Partition -
As One should pry the Walls -
Between Himself - and Horror's Twin -
Within Opposing Cells -

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,
Such Luxury - it grew -
That as Myself - could pity Him -
Perhaps he - pitied me -

(Fr570)

One understands why the 1890s editions of her poetry all passed this poem over, as did every edition until *Bolts of Melody* in 1945.¹⁵ Despite its advertised attentiveness to the movements of thinking, it is hard to know how to interpret even its most basic mental gesture of trying to think. Is it, as the bold opening line suggests, a proactive, virtuoso attempt to conceptualize an extreme human possibility? Or is it, as I have come to think, a more reactive attempt to use language, argument, and other mental tools to deal with the painful conditions into which the poet has been thrown? I think the main purpose of this poem and many others is not to invent or define an extreme experience but to deal with once it arrives, to knead it, battle it, alter it, realize it, or just survive it through thought.¹⁶

"I tried to think a lonelier Thing" poses a second problem: it does not give what it seems to promise—namely a full story of how and what "I tried to think." Although it begins in the reassuring past tense and makes us anticipate resolution and critical distance, we are finally deprived of those things. As usual, there is no synthetic dialectical finish to this uncompromising and uncomfortable poem, no final stanza beginning, say, "Then loneliness despaired of me / and vanished into noon." This poem that begins so actively with a try ends in a stop-motion picture, a paralytic image of almost striving in which action is arrested.

What is still moving, of course, is thinking, which is represented not as patient, observant, analytical, meditative, or argumentative but as creative, tenacious, and desperately involved. The poem begins with a rapid series of thoughts (lines 1-6), then slows with a tangential, almost conversational remark (lines 7-11), then ends with two evenly-paced, narrative stanzas (lines 12-19). Yet while the fast-slow-medium pacing rhythmically suggests a resolution, the intellectual and emotional atmosphere is volatile throughout. Among other things, the speaker, trying to think, reaches for a lexical toolbox brimming with nervous vocabulary: "tried to think," "probed," "borrow," "Haggard comfort," "Clutch," "plucked," "pry," "almost strove," "clasp," "Perhaps." That is not a family of overconfident words.

What exactly does thought do as it tries to think? The first line represents an attempt to will or define loneliness into the category of thing, a hypostasizing gesture Dickinson uses to enable linguistic access to otherwise unspeakable loneliness, roughly on the model of the assertive but mysterious "'Hope' is the thing with feathers -" (Fr314). The speaker then tries to find a clearer name for the "Thing" being thought, and we see right away both how important indexing can be in a serious try of thought and how defiant this particular lonely feeling is to nominative language. The question is not only how to communicate this unprecedented loneliness, but what to call it. Constrained by reason to present it in an image, the mind generates two quiddities (lines 3-4), two tries, that is, at something more precise than the vague "Thing." The first is "Some Polar Expiation" and the second, "An Omen in the Bone / of Death's tremendous nearness."¹⁷ These two molecules of intellection, so different yet suggestive – "drained" or "strangely abstracted" as David Porter would say – initially suspend the try of thought in doubtful parataxis.

How are they related, and how do they help the speaker think? First, "Some Polar Expiation" shows her mind leaping to a traditional kind of lonely undertak-

ing, a cleansing process of soul-searching in which one divides, objectifies, despises, and ultimately rejects some part of one's self.¹⁸ This is not only more precise than thinking of a lonely thing, it is more purposeful, religious, moral, conventional, and self-directed, all of which suggests that specific cultural forces are pressuring the try of thought. Were it not for the frigid adjective "Polar," the idea of performing an expiation or atonement might actually seem consolatory, a painful but useful work. But by punning on polar expedition and exploration, the speaker emphasizes the unforgiving, epic, arctic, limits-of-the-civilized-and-natural-world connotations of the enterprise.¹⁹ "Polar Expiation" thus expresses something like the feeling of being radically and painfully removed from one's natural surroundings, culture, and self.

The second vision of the loneliest thing, complementing, improving upon or replacing the first, is no longer retrospective and inward-looking but anticipatory: an "Omen in the Bone / Of Death's tremendous nearness -." This portent is felt rather than witnessed or imagined; suddenly death seems tremendously near in time (the speaker's own death feels nigh) as well as space (another dead soul or spirit is there, nearby). These feelings are self-alienating, too, but no longer illustrating. One does not willfully create omens for oneself in the way one examines, analyzes, and repents one's past acts; the omen of death "in the Bone" is received unexpectedly, from without, and remains to be interpreted.

The unlike options of expiation and omen might suggest that the poem is essentially playful, a game of how much loneliness would a lonely woman think if a lonely woman could think loneliness. Yet the care with which those two metaphorical clauses were chosen makes me think instead that the try of thought they represent is dead serious. Even the reaching motion of the mind is made evident by non-specific articles: "*Some* Polar Expiation, "*An* Omen in the Bone" (italics mine). The calculating, self-repudiating transformations of expiation mutate, and yet equate – emotionally if not conceptually – to the imminent, incalculable, dispersive loneliness of the self facing death. Shifts and equations like these make paraphrasing difficult, but one might speculate that thought is attracted to the way these two brief phrases amount to a basic binary set of loneliness-generating possibilities: the idea-glimpses of being coldly removed from one's past self (through expiation) or from one's present and future self (in death.) So while on the one hand these phrases are semantic placeholders, self-consciously inadequate waystations pointing to the unreachable summit of a nascent thought, a thought one can only try to think, on the other hand they hypostasize the most self-annihilating

thoughts and feelings.

However brilliantly or succinctly one manages to bring a painful emotion into language, one does not, for all that, palliate it, and that is what the speaker tries to do with the next gesture of thought. Having put forth unstable but generative concepts and imagery, the speaker then proceeds, quite unexpectedly, to reach into the world of the dead for a kindred spirit: "I probed Retrieveless things / My Duplicate - to borrow -." Since her duplicate qualifies only on the basis of also being "Of Heavenly Love - forgot -," the core idea is that somebody already dead has been, like her, rejected by God. This makes it clear for the first time that the "lonelier" idea/feeling she is trying to think is derived not just from an acute awareness of her death but also, and especially, from her catastrophically alienated ontological status. The idea that a rare and special loneliness was reserved for God's forgotten was a recurring thought for Dickinson. It is clearly expressed, for example, in this commiserating 1850 letter to Abiah Root:

You have stood by the grave before; I have walked there sweet summer evenings and read the names on the stones, and wondered who would come and give me the same memorial; but I never have laid my friends there, and forgot that they too must die; this is my first affliction, and indeed 'tis hard to bear it. To those bereaved so often that home is no more here, and whose communion with friends is had only in prayers, there must be much to hope for, but when the unreconciled spirit has nothing left but God, that spirit is lone indeed. I don't think there will be any sunshine, or any singing-birds in the spring that's coming. (L39)²⁰

In "I tried to think a lonelier Thing," the technique of borrowing one's "duplicate," or imagining a fellow "unreconciled spirit," is meant to mitigate the unique loneliness of the non-believer. The chief interest of this mental replication seems to be that it creates *ex nihilo* the smallest possible unit of imagined community. A self thinking of another absent and possibly imaginary self, a copy-self or twin ontological orphan, has at least that chance of relationality with another, of existence outside the self.

Such a mental leap is not a full statement of method, but it is constructive. It serves as the founding premise for the rest of the try at thinking, and from it, somehow, a "Haggard comfort springs." This announcement interrupts the past-tense narration of what the speaker has felt and announces instead a general law, one that moves the poem into the thinking present and perhaps universalizes it.

(Of course, in order to feel included and therefore relieved by the “Haggard comfort,” a reader must also be “of Heavenly Love - forgot -.”) Yet the precise claim given lawlike properties is not easy to see:

A Haggard comfort springs

From the belief that Somewhere -
Within the Clutch of Thought -
There dwells one other Creature
Of Heavenly Love - forgot -

The difficulty is that the phrase “Within the Clutch of Thought” is precariously ambiguous. It means reachable by thought, just within the power of thought, or else composed solely of thought, purely imaginary. The undecidability is important and one can easily make the poem pivot upon it: since one cannot know that one’s duplicate “dwells” somewhere, one must (try to) take it on faith. This is the difference between a recognizably Romantic misery-loves-company logic and a more desperately lonely awareness that one is completely fabricating one’s source of comfort.²¹

Negotiating those two possibilities, the last two stanzas of the poem are an uneasy endgame. They relate the speaker’s two attempts to do something on the basis of the preceding sequence of thoughts, beginning with “I plucked at our Partition.” To understand this plucking, we must see that this “Partition” is the invisible, enigmatic, and absolute line separating the speaker from the imagined duplicate: the line between life and death.²² And, crucially, it is “our” rather than ‘the’ “Partition.” The collective pronoun reveals the inventive force of the speaker’s thought, for it signals that her mind is not turning back from the infinitesimal sense of community it has captured or created. A we has been formed, a communion of souls however imaginary or weak, and the “Partition” they share is thus both bridge and barrier between a live, thinking, trying consciousness and a hypothesized dead twin.

The poem is clearly trying to realize, in the Dickinsonian sense discussed above, a terrifyingly solipsistic condition. We are made aware of the impossibility of reaching across the partition by the physical and visual activity of “pluck[ing]” at it. Like other Dickinson images of awkward, unnatural responses to intolerable conditions, it is extremely disconcerting. One thinks of the desperate bird in “Of course I prayed” (Fr581) stamping her foot “on the Air” in protest to God’s indif-

ference. To feel something of the futility registered by the simile "As One should pry the Walls - / Between Himself - and Horror's Twin -," one need merely picture oneself thinking of one's own dead "duplicate" and plucking in the air (as opposed to more hopeful possible gestures like extending a hand). It is no less unnerving if plucking at the partition is taken as a metaphor for movements of the mind; on the contrary, it would then join the series of probing retrieveless things and borrowing one's duplicate to form a trio of mental procedures desperate enough to be a symptomatology of unfathomable, sickening loneliness. Indeed, the basic communicability of the poem's try hinges on the reader's willingness to identify with and follow a process of despairing thought well beyond where thinking usually wants to go. While many readers may refuse, not recognizing or believing in this extreme loneliness, those who have come to trust Dickinson may go deeply into the experiment.

The result is a chilling scene reminiscent of Beckett's *Godot*: two God-forsaken souls in opposing cells, one alive and one imaginary and/or dead. The last stanza narrates the way the live one, the speaker, comes to accept being part of a carceral community stripped to its atomic minimum:

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,
Such Luxury - it grew -
That as Myself - could pity Him -
Perhaps he - pitied me -

The mirroring twins are connected only by a fantasy of mutual pity, but somehow this self-consciously pathetic vision results in a feeling of "Such Luxury -." It turns out that it was the purpose of the original try of thought to produce this mental drama of a virtual community and make it credibly intelligible as a consolatory grace earned by thought alone. The feeling of luxury, the awe on this human trinket, would thus grow out of the confidence produced by the experimental force of thought itself; in fact, rereading the poem I hear the implied but elided phrase "to think" in the middle of this last stanza: "Such Luxury - it grew [- to think] / That as Myself - could pity Him -." That is what I think the poem is saying and the poet is thinking. Or rather, trying to think, for despite the past tense this is surely a fragile state and a momentary victory: how long can meditating on one's dead duplicate continue to console? Will it not ultimately reinforce one's intolerable loneliness and return it to the intolerable and ineffable status it had before the valiant attempt at thought?

In this as in every other try-to-think poem, we do not know if Dickinson succeeded or even thought she succeeded in thinking what she tried to think. We know only that these were poems in which she tried to help or save herself by representing her own efforts to help or save herself. Such trying poetry invites us to join and repeat her thinking about and beyond thinking, but in the case of "I tried to think a lonelier Thing," we join, paradoxically, only at the risk of experiencing a loneliness we cannot sound.

Notes

1. See Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*; Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*; Perloff, "Emily Dickinson and the Theory Canon."
2. For Derrida's analysis of Lévi-Strauss's *bricolage*, see "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."
3. Critics have not explored the links between Kant and Dickinson in great depth. See Gelpi (124-5) and the articles by Frederick Morey and myself.
4. The beautiful occurs when a satisfying image *is* found and harmony reigns throughout the mind's faculties. For the fullest discussion to date of the ways Dickinson's poetry responds to and reinvigorates the Romantic sublime, see Gary Lee Stonum's *The Dickinson Sublime*.
5. Many theoretical approaches and vocabularies can be used to describe Dickinson's mental activity. Because I wish to emphasize the movements and processes of thought, I prefer in this essay to draw upon the language developed by Stonum in *The Dickinson Sublime* on the basis of the philosophical, literary, and aesthetic traditions of the sublime. In *The Undiscovered Continent*, Suzanne Juhasz has also written compellingly of "dimensional" and "conceptual" terminologies in Dickinson.
6. The mind's self-elusiveness was a common issue in Dickinson's many textbooks of mental philosophy. The difficulty often described is that the mind cannot treat itself as an object of science. In the Thomas Brown volume in her library, for example, we read that analyzing "is not less [necessary] in mind, than in matter; nor, when nature exhibits all her wonders to us, in one case, in objects that are separate from us, and foreign; and, in the other, in the intimate phenomena of our own consciousness, can we justly think, that it is of *ourselves* we know the most. On the contrary, strange as it may seem, it is of her *distant* operations, that our knowledge is least imperfect; and we have far less acquaintance with the sway which she exercises in our own mind, than with that by which she guides the course of the most remote planet, in spaces beyond us, which we rather *calculate* than *conceive*" (Brown's Italics; 108). For Upham, similarly, the problem is that we cannot "see the mind, nor is it an object . . . of sense. Nor, on the other hand, is the notion of mind a direct object of the memory, or of reasoning, or of imagination" (125). Lawrence Buell has recently brought new attention to Emerson's perhaps more famous epistemological wrestling with the problem of "double consciousness" (204ff.).
7. "Should you think it breathed" means: is my thought now living on its own, apart from me? Does it make sense to others? "If I make the mistake" means: have I included or omitted sounds, words, rhymes, ideas, or something else that is keeping my thought from living on its own and becoming fully intelligible? And when Dickinson asks Higginson for "what is true" she wants him to give his unadorned opinion.

8. When she says “*they* look alike and numb,” Dickinson switches naturally but oddly from the singular to the plural form: “while *my thought* is undressed, I can make the distinction, but when I put *them* in the gown” (My Italics). Thought thus exhibits a kind of cell division, moving from single (when abstract and unwritten) to plural (when materialized in writing).
9. Here “Fine” means the price or penalty of delight.
10. Johnson explains that Dickinson “correctly guessed that Higginson wrote the unsigned review of Lowell’s *Among My Books: Second Series* for the March 1876 issue of *Scribner’s Monthly*. . . . The review of Emerson’s *Letters and Social Aims* in the April issue, likewise unsigned, may be Higginson’s but has not been so identified” (L457, Note). The Emerson review reads very much like Higginson to me.
11. Dickinson’s family also understood how much she valued thought. Lavinia undoubtedly expressed the general sentiment when she wrote: “As for Emily, she was not withdrawn or exclusive really. She was always watching for the rewarding person to come but she was a very busy person herself. She had to think – she was the only one of us who had that to do. Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I had the family to keep track of” (Bingham 413-4).
12. She asked him during his visit: “Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?” and then, in the next letter, asked him “to forgive me for all the ignorance I had” (L342b, L352).
13. For a close reading of this poem, see my “Dickinson, Death, and the Sublime.”
14. In another poem, pure thought has the power to produce a vastly enriching kind of loneliness: “There is another Loneliness / That many die without - / Not want of friend occasions it / Or circumstance of Lot // But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought / And whoso it befell / Is richer than could be revealed / By mortal numeral -” (Fr1138).
15. “I tried to think a lonelier Thing” (Fr570) appears in fascicle 25 between the poems “A precious - mouldering pleasure - ’tis - ” (Fr569) and “Two Butterflies went out at Noon - ” (Fr571). These last two were first published in 1890 and 1891 respectively.
16. Dickinson’s letters are also peppered with comments and études on loneliness. In a December 1854 letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, she wrestled with the difficulty of expressing extreme loneliness in words, ultimately nominating visual art as the superior medium: “Susie - it is a little thing to say how lone it is – anyone can do it, but to wear the loneness next your heart for weeks, when you sleep, and when you wake, ever missing something, *this*, all cannot say, and it baffles me. I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be - *solitude*, and the figures - solitude - and the lights and shades, each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there; then haste grateful home, for a loved one left” (L176).
17. “Expiation” is one of the loneliest words in Dickinson’s lexicon. This poem has the only recorded use in any poem or letter.
18. I disagree with Paul Muldoon’s argument that this poem involves a commentary on the Civil War, that there is “no doubt that a strand” of this poem “refers to that ‘Horror’ involving ‘Polar’ opposites, North and South, between whom there falls a ‘Partition’” (24).
19. The series of expeditions to the Arctic funded by Lady Franklin in search of her husband Sir John Franklin were much in the news in the 1850s; Dickinson read an April 1851 *Harper’s* article on the subject. (See Muldoon 13-18) She never forgot these events; in an 1885 letter she joked to her nephew Ned: “How favorable that something is missing besides Sir John Franklin!” (L1000).
20. The letter refers to the death of Leonard Humphrey on 13 November 1850.
21. Goethe’s Werther is a good example of a Romantic who is lonely but consolable by others: “Sometimes I say to myself: ‘Your destiny is unique; call the others fortunate

-- no one has been so tormented as you.' Then I read an ancient poet, and it seems to me as though I look into my own heart. I have so much to endure! Oh, were there other men before me as miserable as I!" (119).

22. Dickinson uses the singular form of the word "partition" only twice in poems, never in letters. In both cases it unambiguously means this barrier/bridge between the living and the dead. See "In falling Timbers buried -" (Fr447).

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