Emily Dickinson’s Grotesque: Ambivalent Interactions with Uncertainty

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is all my own work. This thesis neither incorporates work from another degree nor from published material. It has not been previously submitted to another university.
Emily Dickinson’s work can be understood in terms of dynamic and variable interactions with uncertainty. Sometimes uncertainty is horrifyingly meaningless, whilst on other occasions it is liberating and meaningful. Dickinson’s grotesque is predicated upon the interplay of both these perspectives.

Dickinson’s grotesque dialectic between enabling and disabling interactions with uncertainty resists monolithic critical appropriation. Theories of the grotesque enable us to unify the critical discord between conservative and radical depictions of Dickinson’s work. Using the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, I explain the dialectic between the different interactions with uncertainty and demonstrate how they are shaped contextually. Gothic context engenders fearful responses to uncertainty; female creativity engenders ambivalence; embodying contexts produce liberating uncertainty.

Dickinson’s gothic elucidates a need for meaning, and a corresponding fear of representational insufficiency. This desire for certainty is extrapolated from a Calvinist sensibility, whereby uncertainty denotes unregenerate being. The apophatic poems move towards meaning by perpetually surpassing their own conceptual limitations. However, this process becomes self-defeating as the act of negation itself turns into the kind of uncertainty it was supposed to overcome.

Female creativity is achieved through internalizing overwhelming, masculine power as the basis of poetic autonomy. Dickinson’s poetic self partially overcomes the oppressive, binary distinction between male and female positions. I compare Dickinson with Harriet Prescott Spofford, illustrating how both writers narrate their assimilation of alterity as a terrifying encounter with an omnipotent male muse.

The final chapter shows how Dickinson transforms her body into a mysterious abyss of sensation, using uncertainty to liberate herself from embodying discourses and coercive, interpersonal connections. Juxtaposing Dickinson’s gothic poems with her rejection of embodiment allows us to see how terrifying uncertainty can be rephrased as liberating when a different combination of contexts and perspectives are aligned. The thesis concludes by calling for Dickinson critics to relinquish their adherence to singular perspectives or themes and commit instead to the study of synchronic disparities between variable, co-present contexts and perspectives.
A Note on the Text

Quotations from Emily Dickinson's poetry, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the three-volume variorum edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). In all references to the poems, I cite the number assigned by Franklin prefixed with a capital F and a number sign (F#). Where appropriate, I then cite the variant chosen (A.). Since a large proportion of the secondary material cited in this thesis predates the Franklin edition, I have also provided the number assigned by the previously authoritative Johnson edition, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). These citations are prefixed by the capital J and a number sign (J#). References to Dickinson's letters are from the one-volume *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986). In each citation I provide the number that Johnson assigned to each letter prefixed with a capital L and a number sign (L#). I also cite page numbers appropriate to the one volume edition.

At the time of writing, the question of how best to present Dickinson's writing has become an increasingly vexed issue, addressed by a proliferation of full-length monographs and articles.¹ In this thesis, I have closely considered the textual variants of each poem and have made the decision to include additional information on a case

by case basis. The case for including the variant words reproduced in Franklin's textual notes is frequently compelling. However, fear of overburdening the reader means that I have only included variants on those occasions where they might complicate or assist my readings. I am far less convinced of the need to consistently reproduce word, line, and stanza division, or to refer to fascicle sequencing and manuscript details (such as handwriting). I am heartened in this decision by the recent publication of Domhnall Mitchell's excellent study *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*. Mitchell reviews the strongest available arguments in favour of detailed attention to all aspects of Dickinson's manuscripts and concludes that there is no solid evidence that she used these aspects of linguistic inscription consistently.² Of course, 'no solid evidence' is not the same as 'solid evidence of nothing', and I have included such textual details at those points where they may contribute to my argument. Instances where I have referred to photograph facsimiles reproduced in Franklin's two volume *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981) will be footnoted along with other secondary citations. Otherwise, I hope that whatever I have sacrificed in manuscript authenticity and detail I have made up through brevity and clarity.

1.1. Introduction: Dickinson’s Verse and the Theories of the Grotesque.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the uncertainty, contradiction and ambivalence displayed in and produced by Dickinson’s writing may be described as ‘grotesque’. In the first part of this introduction I want to suggest that the critical discordance over Dickinson’s evocations of uncertainty is produced by critical blind spots imposed upon the text. Dickinson criticism usually demonstrates a meaningful unity amongst differing poems or else transforms irregularity and dissonance itself into a singular, unifying principle. As a descriptive category, the grotesque disavows the need to find coherence and finality within the world or experience without ‘solving’ uncertainty by celebrating disorder as a viable end in itself.

The problematic etymology of the term grotesque recreates this profound ambivalence towards uncertainty.¹ It’s roots lie in two separate sources, the ‘grottesche’ and ‘grotto-esque’. Grottesche refers to a style of painting that emerged in Rome circa 100 BC depicting the fantastical, multiform hybridisation of animal, human and vegetable components. ² By contrast, the grotto-esque evokes the grotto, the dark cave where the paintings of Palaeolithic man were found. Grotto-esque works also displayed an imaginative disregard for the integrity of natural form, combining as they did

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¹ Where ‘ambivalence’ is taken to mean the co-presence of contradictory and highly-charged responses or interpretations to the same object, situation or occurrence.
the cyclic interaction of birth and death motifs. They contain 'images of large beasts, hybrid human-animal forms, pregnancy, and death- an inventory of the concerns of their creators'. The fusion of distinct physical objects or beings in the grotesque transforms our understanding of the objects involved. As Geoffrey Harpham observes, Christian grotesque drollery from the Middle Ages often used the hybridisation of human and animal forms as a means of caricaturing certain aspects of human behaviour: the overlap of distinct forms produces what we might understand as a transformation of meaning.

The grottesche seems to identify such breaks in the field of cognitive equilibrium as imaginative and regenerative whilst the grotto-esque regards them as fearful. Although they both present unfamiliar objects or occurrences that require a strenuous readjustment of cognitive systems, grottesche is profuse, abundant, imaginative, vibrant and colourful where grotto-esque evokes the lower strata of sensory existence, the hidden, dirty, visceral, and primitive. Grotto-esque phenomena are as likely to be excluded from the sphere of comprehension because they are base, repellent or meaningless than purely because they exceed cognitive capacity. The grotesque, premised upon the competition between grottesche vibrancy and grotto-esque repugnance, is a


4 Geoffrey Harpham, On the Grotesque, p.34.
5 For an anthropological account describing how taboo structures certain objects as clandestine and repellant, see Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (London: Routledge, 1966).
theory of reactions and judgements rather than a dispassionate description of form or content.\textsuperscript{6}

Applied to Dickinson's work, the category of the grotesque allows us to elucidate the values and investments placed upon idiosyncrasy and uncertainty by both writer and reader. The first question this chapter seeks to answer is how Dickinson's work and the inherent contradictions within the explanatory term 'grotesque' can be mutually illuminating. The second section suggests that Dickinson's grotesque can be usefully understood through certain aspects of Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theories (and those of her followers). Klein's work provides a distinctive conceptual framework for describing how splits or ruptures within the surface of experience are processed or overcome by the self and what value they represent within the individual psychic economy. Kleinian theory allows us to integrate the affirmative and negative poles of the grotesque into a unified cognitive strategy premised upon an oscillation between moments of psychic integration and disintegration. It demonstrates how disorder becomes either liberating or fearful, creative or destructive according to context.\textsuperscript{7} The third and final section will involve a brief discussion of the convergence between the terms 'grotesque' and 'sublime' within recent critical

\textsuperscript{6} Geoffrey Harpham and Dieter Meindl's account both emphasize the extent to which our modern understanding of the grotesque has become 'as much a mental event as a formal property'. Geoffrey Harpham, \textit{On the Grotesque}, p.23; Dieter Meindl, \textit{American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{7} In a recent study, James McIntosh has observed that Dickinson finds the unknown necessary and dreadful at different moments. However, McIntosh does not theorise the relationship between these two divergent responses to the unknown, thus implying that they can be said to peacefully co-exist without fear of contradiction. This thesis goes further than McIntosh's work by explaining why the unknown is fearful or desirable at different moments and seeing these
discourse. Although I do not intend to use the term sublime systematically within this thesis, I will outline the points of overlap and distinction between ‘grotesque’ and ‘sublime’ and suggest that although they often compete for our attention in Dickinson’s work they ultimately describe different responses to uncertainty.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will examine the differing manifestation of uncertainty within a pertinent range of discursive contexts including the interrelation of gothic conventions and Calvinist concerns, the narrative of Dickinson’s encounter with her poetic muse, and social discourses surrounding the management and display of the female body. I will how grotesque uncertainty produces different responses in different contexts, and how the intersection of these contexts within a single poem can entirely transform our understanding of them. Across the course of the three main chapters, I will suggest that the initially terrifying Calvinist depiction of uncertainty is resuscitated as a measure of individual interior depth when juxtaposed with secular, embodying ideologies.

1.2. ‘All men say “What” to me, but I thought it a fashion’8: The Instructive Confusion of Dickinson Criticism.

Saying "What" to Emily Dickinson is a constant rather than fashionable problem. What has changed over time is the interpretations critics use to explain the uncertainty produced by her work. Dickinson also believed that "We see—Comparatively—" (F#580A/ J#534). Although she could not anticipate the progression of literary criticism throughout the twentieth century, her sheer linguistic density guarantees the proliferation of multiple and often contradictory interpretations in each critical generation. In a discussion of the canonisation process, Timothy Morris provides this interesting overview of just over 100 years of Dickinson criticism:

The fact that so many voices and personae coexist in the dialogic swirl of Dickinson’s texts has never meant absolute defeat for the impulse to narratize her oeuvre. Reading strategies exist that can convert any amount of discrepant data into a coherent portrait of the artist; obviously, the more discrepant the data becomes (as Dickinson’s work steadily became between 1890 and 1945) the more resistant interpretative communities become to such totalizing strategies of reading. In 1894, Todd’s strategy of asserting Dickinson’s essential reverence for the spirit of Christianity bolstered by her personal acquaintance with the poet and her access to unpublished manuscripts—was certainly tendentious, but it was not unlike later reading strategies in quality. An “objective” reading like Allen Tate’s in 1932 would try to see her in “the perfect literary situation” of being “without opinions,” thereby equating her artistic diversity with her artistic objectivity (and her own objectivity with the critic’s). A reading that stresses Dickinson’s rage at a patriarchal God would deconstruct the apparently pious texts and read them as ironic [...] Readings that reduce all these poems to irony, or to playfulness, are available. So is a reading that would show how Dickinson remained immured inside her own

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patriarchal value system even in the poems that most radically oppose it—since they oppose it only on its own terms and cannot transcend it. [...] Continuities in the Dickinson oeuvre are in the eye of the theorist.  

Although the best critical studies are highly aware that taxonomies provide only a partial understanding, Morris' point is well taken. Gary Lee Stonum makes a related point when he observes that anthologies of American poetry have yet to offer any consensus on what might be Dickinson's 'most representative' poems. The enormous number of poems to consider at any given time allows the critic to tendentiously present a coherent group of poems without acknowledging contradictory examples. Early editions of Dickinson's poems, edited by Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd adopted the (retrospectively) primitive tactic of unifying her work under thematic headings such as love, God, nature etc. However more recent Dickinson scholarship has questioned this approach, choosing instead to emphasize the quirks and ambiguities present within each individual poem. In addition to different poems offering incompatible and opposing views on the same subjects, a proliferation of increasingly sophisticated critical approaches coupled with the ongoing recovery of relevant historical data and discursive contexts have increased the scope of potential interpretations. The difficulties involved in reading

Dickinson represent a convergence between diverse, often contradictory critical paradigms and intrinsically opaque poems.

As Morris notes, Dickinson criticism tends to split over whether her work depicts uncertainty as ironic and playful or fearful and culturally conservative. It is not enough to celebrate Dickinson’s multiplicity or fragmentation as a unifying principle in itself because idiosyncrasy and uncertainty are themselves subject to conflicting critical evaluations and appraisals. To describe something as ‘uncertain’ or ‘ambivalent’ is often to overlook the central question of whether we view ‘uncertainty’ as valued or feared, intriguing or boring, inspiring or debilitating. It is at this point that the grotesque emerges both as an attributed quality of Dickinson’s writing, and as an aspect of the critical debates that circulate around her text. Dickinson’s grotesque prohibits singular responses to uncertainty, either to fear its attack upon our security or celebrate its promise of subversive freedom. The grotesque always holds positive and negative responses in ambivalent tension, never allowing one perspective to utterly negate its opposite.

As such, Dickinson’s poetic speakers both value and fear meaning at different points. The absence of certain, finalized meaning is both the anxious condition and the desirable outcome of Dickinson’s writing and its transmission to the reader. The careful critic must do more than describe instances of

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opacity, (s)he must understand that these moments engender correspondingly contradictory feelings in both poetic consciousness and reader.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant-
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind-

This poem sets out two pivotal issues within Dickinson’s canon. It depicts the dynamic interrelation of truth, poet and audience. It also demonstrates that truth and meaning are only beneficial at points when the poetic consciousness or the reader is either willing or able to process them. Dickinson presents poetic expression as a dazzling force that threatens to overwhelm the reader unless it is experienced ‘gradually’. The word ‘circuit’ contains various meanings that complicate our understanding of the opening couplet. An initial interpretation might settle upon the spatial dimension of ‘circuitous’ since it complements the notion of truth as ‘slant-’. However circuit can also refer to an enclosed area or connected series of disparate points. This second interpretation stresses unity and clear delineation above the unlikely, furtive character of truth suggested by the other reading. The riddles of truth may be said to provide a common space of understanding for reader and poet. This leads a further connotation of circuit, that of enjoining poet and audience in a circular reciprocal relationship. Gary Lee Stonum has noted the subtly embedded black humour which connects
circuit and lightning along associative semantic chains: if a circuit is closed then a ‘successful’ relationship between poet and reader involves lightning electrocuting/blinding both participants. The attainment of truth is a Pyrrhic victory since it entails an end to the possibility of its comprehension. Circuits tell the truth, but they also ‘lie’; they enclose and yet they evade. The significance of truth cannot be gauged outside the variable circumstances of its reception. Dickinson evaluates truth by its intensity, it must be less than ‘superb’ or else ‘every man be blind’. The poem asks whether truth’s enabling circuit of lies is preferable to the ‘dazzle’ of its raw manifestation. Does poetry’s respect for cognitive insufficiency reveal more by disclosing less? Or are the machinations of poetic art a white lie to persuade children that lightning does not really kill? The way we choose to read the poem will ultimately decide what value we place upon the value of truth and lies for poet and reader.

Since the values of truth and certainty must be continuously addressed and renegotiated, this poem neither asserts the final supremacy of the poetic consciousness, nor does it subscribe to the random incidence of truth which would enthrone the audience as the arbiter of meaning. Dickinson’s poems frequently create a sporadic disjunction between signifier and signified so that overlapping connotative meanings displace singular denotative ones. Reading the poems is an act of establishing circuits, following the slants of words as they spill out into new possibilities. Poem F#1268A/J#1261 describes the gap between language and reception by claiming that ‘A Word dropped careless on

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a Page/ May stimulate an Eye’. Later in the same poem she compares poetic transmission to malaria, claiming that ‘Infection in the sentence breeds’. Yet this is not a manifesto for artistic insouciance. Dickinson meticulously crafts these ‘accidental’ meanings on a grammatical and semantic level to demonstrate how interpretation infects the reader’s position.

Interpreting Dickinson’s work involves asking ourselves if we are anxious or thrilled by the presence of uncertainty. Whether the poem pushes us towards one of these two poles and why we may ultimately take a certain position on the issue. The reader becomes an active component in the construction of the poem’s meaning because Dickinson’s language is heavily truncated. In addition to the widely-noted poetic techniques such as slant rhymes, heteroclite grammar, irony or tonal undercutting, and the general mood of linguistic recalcitrance, certain critics have provided extended accounts of exactly how Dickinson’s work transforms ordinary words into extraordinary meanings. Jay Leyda describes the ‘omitted centre’ of Dickinson’s poetry, ‘the deliberate skirting of the obvious [...] to increase the privacy of her communication.’ However, whilst other critics have focused upon this effect of strategic omission, they have deduced different motives than intentional obscurantism. Cristanne Miller’s work on Dickinson’s ‘poetic grammar’ outlines the pervasive tactic of ‘unrecoverable deletion’ whereby meaning is so heavily compressed or denuded of its natural semantic/grammatical context that several meanings are equally possible. By ‘[reducing] the ratio of what is stated
to what is implied’ Dickinson’s work places the reader in a situation whereby
‘Recovery of the deleted syntax [...] is inseparable from interpretation of the
poem [italic mine]’. Northrop Frye notes that Dickinson’s tendency to
introduce grammatical indeterminacy into explicitly uncomplicated statements
gives the impression that even ordinary meaning contains mysterious hidden
depths. ‘Slanted truth’ is never received as neutral. it always involves a
strenuous investigation of why one meaning is favoured above another. The
effort to fill in the gaps always involves a reflexive movement whereby the
reader is forced to confront why a particular interpretation has been favoured.
In poem F#446A/ J#448 Dickinson observes that the poet ‘Distills amazing
sense/ From Ordinary Meanings-“. The necessary process of interpretation
reverses this dictum so that ordinary meaning is made from amazing sense. The
critic’s explanation of the poem may be seen as an attempt to make ‘the truth
[...]dazzle gradually’. Her language relays her poetic self’s uncertainty so that
the disorientation is transferred into the reading experience itself. It is the critic
or reader who often slants the truth to avoid the blindness of incomprehension.

In poem F#1200A/ J#1204 Dickinson asserts that ‘When a subject is
finished-/ Words are handed away-‘. Language is synonymous with a struggle
against or celebration of uncertainty. Sharon Cameron’s work on Dickinson’s
fascicles finds a cultivated uncertainty in the variant words frequently presented

14 Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University
15 Cristanne Miller, Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar (London: Harvard University Press,
at the margins of manuscripts and drafts. Cameron suggests that Dickinson 'chooses not to choose' a unified text to underline the fact that choosing a single meaning or interpretation invariably excludes several others. Neither poetic production nor reception should be finalized out of respect for the slippery nature of truth and meaning. Dickinson’s view of language is riddled by paradox; her poetry was the ‘gift of Screws’ (poem F#772B/ J#675), the hard-earned compression of essence from roses. Yet this labour does not compress meaning into greater unity or singularity, it produces gaps and proliferating complexities. The gaps or uncertainties forces greater hermeneutic attention upon the remaining words. Poem F#930A/ J#88 further illuminates this problematic space between poet, poem and reader. Its grammatical and semantic ambiguities demonstrate how a caesura within the surface of meaning invites the reader to examine the configuration of his/her own interpretative strategies.

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

Inhere as do the Suns-
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference-

In this poem, Dickinson examines the dialogic relationship between poet and reader across space and time. Yet this dialogue is not a democratic or equivalent interchange, premised as it is upon the relative values of centre and circumference. Neither poet nor reader can entirely claim full creative authority; the poet stimulates the wick but does not strictly generate the light. The 'gift of Screws-' is the province of both poet and reader. The metaphoric association of poetry with sunlight echoes the depiction of truth as dazzling lightning found in F#1263A/ J#1129. Each metaphor initially promises illumination but tends to reveal tricks of the light, as Dickinson suggests when she notes that each age is 'a Lens/ Disseminating their/ Circumference-'. It is not clear whether dissemination simply broadens the sphere of influence, or dilutes the purity of the poetic light.

'circumference' is the keyword of this poem, and an important term across Dickinson's canon. She used it variably, at times to designate a chosen marginality and at others an enforced one. As Harold Bloom notes, circumference 'is her trope for the Sublime, as consciousness and as achievement or performance'. 19 If we examine the word across different contexts, sometimes it signifies the thrilling empowerment of the poetic consciousness and on other occasions it alludes to its depletion. In a letter to Thomas Higginson, where Dickinson claims that 'My business is Circumference-' she is using the term to designate her marginality in relation to 'custom' or common understanding (L#268. p.412). Dickinson uses
circumference as a spatial metaphor to describe her situation in terms of the relationship between centre and circumference: issues of sublime power and achievement are present, but of secondary importance. A further expansion of circumference can be found in poem F#858A/ J#802, where the relationship between circumference and centre is presented as entrapment rather than voluntary estrangement- 'I fear me this Circumference/ Engross my Finity-'. Here circumference is everywhere. it consumes the centre rather than providing an escape from it. Poem F#890B/ J#943 presents 'Circumference without Relief-/ Or Estimate- or End-'. The geometric qualities of a circle (an infinite number of sides, all of them always the same distance from the centre) are brought to the fore to provide a metaphor for an infinitely extending numbness within consciousness. My final example comes from a letter where Dickinson describes heaven as 'centre':

There is no first, or last. in Forever- It is Centre, there. all the time- To believe- is enough, and the right of supposing- (L#289, p.430)

In making the centre the site of sublime existence, Dickinson indicates that 'circumference' is an estrangement from a desirable centre, rather than an escape from a restrictive one. In each of the examples cited above the value of circumference shifts subtly between the poles of entrapment and liberation.

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20 As Albert Gelpi indicates, this idea may be derived from Emerson's essay 'Circles': 'Emerson had noted that "St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere" [...] Both [Dickinson and Emerson] were saying that a true circle is a phenomenon of time and space which has (from the individual's point of view) "God, for a frontier."' Albert Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p.122.
alienation and inclusion, power and helplessness. Like the uncertainty it describes, 'circumference' is a mobile trope, constantly challenging the presumptions of its own parameters and resituating its own horizons. As a result, its impact upon the poetic speaker also changes from instance to instance.

The interpretation of 'circumference' must be determined in the fiercely contested, dynamic site between reader and text. This serves to illuminate the value of certain meaning to reader and poetic self. 'Circumference' might be said to describe the relationship between reader and text since our interpretation will create its own centre/circumference relationship within the poem and determine how each of those positions is valued. Are we liberated or trapped by the slant truth of Dickinson's verse? Is our position at the 'circumference' of meaning a pleasurable or anxious exclusion from the centre of meaning? Does the act of interpretation, however sensitive to the vagaries of meaning, inevitably become a centre that allows the circumference to migrate to a fresh location? Circumference and grotesque never exist around a casual or lackadaisical position, a moderate or disinterested experience. As Wilson Yates observes, the grotesque is always on the margin, but ultimately concerned with the centre.21 Finding oneself at the circumference provides the best vantage point from which to discover the fundamental, foundational assumptions of meaning and being.

I now wish to consider how my interpretation of 'circumference' helps us to illuminate Dickinson's understanding of the term grotesque as something concerned with the 'central' values of consciousness or existence. She uses the word in her letters on two separate occasions, displaying a contradictory understanding of the term. On the first occasion she sees the grotesque as humorous and enlightening, on the second as horrifying and repellant. Responding to an unspecified incident, she comments:

I could hardly contain myself sufficiently to read a thing so grotesque, but it did me good indeed, and when I had finished reading it. I said with a pleasant smile "then there is something left"! (L#109, p.233)

This quotation accents a transformative, enabling aspect of grotesque experience. The use of the term grotesque in this way substantiates any of the major modern theoretical accounts where it is viewed as the simultaneous co-presence of mutually exclusive and highly charged perspectives or reactions such as horror and humour. In this instance the humorous, regenerative aspect of the grotesque triumphs since the experience generates a new sense of self. Dickinson overcomes the contradictory impulses of pleasure and revulsion to conclude with a 'pleasant smile'. The most pertinent aspect of her account is the concluding comment-'then there is something left', an ambiguous phrase which the letter fails to clarify. I would argue that the grotesque experience has produced an expanded sense both of Dickinson's capabilities and the world's possibilities. The surplus of experience (Dickinson cannot 'contain herself') proves to be pleasurable and productive.
Dickinson's second and final reference to the grotesque elucidates the more fearful aspects of shock and disorientation. In a letter to her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross, Dickinson describes an occurrence of her mother's toothache in the following way: 'Came to town next morning with slightly reduced features, but no eye on the left side. Doubtless we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" and occasionally grotesquely' (L#286, p.428). As Dickinson observes in poem F#181B/ J#165. 'Mirth is the mail of Anguish-'. The dry humour of this letter is defensive, used to render the appalling sight of her mother tolerable, thus linking the grotesque with the unadorned endurance of pain and deformity. The regenerative moment clearly present in the first letter is not to be found here. The final line's quotation stresses the ambivalent 'fear' and 'wonder' of Dickinson's reaction. Although seemingly different, fear and wonder both impose a sense of cognitive uncertainty upon the self. They leave Dickinson suspended in the grip of a formless dread or desire.

Dickinson's grotesque is ambivalent about ambivalence itself. These two letters identify disparate responses to a seeming confluence of comparable tensions between opposing tendencies within the field of experience. The reader can never anticipate or control how Dickinson's grotesque will function in each and every context. In the next section I want to argue that this ambivalence towards ambivalence can also be found between competing critical discussions of the grotesque. I shall outline the ways in which Dickinson's writing
curiously coincides with the tension within modern grotesque theory itself. I will then use Dickinson as an example of how this tension operates within the field of meaning, how it is alternately rendered productive or serves to collapse epistemological certainty.

1.3. The Theoretical Basis of the Grotesque.

The effort to define the grotesque within the lexicon of aesthetic and literary categories is as much a struggle to differentiate the term from neighbouring terms as it is the act of locating and describing its distinctive properties. How is the modern reader to distinguish the grotesque from proximate terms such as 'gothic', 'uncanny', 'fantastic', 'absurd', 'surreal', 'black humour' and 'sublime', many of which have experienced a considerable 'broadening' within contemporary critical discourse? The grotesque often finds itself marginalized and under-described within the field of precisely those discourses that purport to elucidate or celebrate blind spots or zones of exclusion. However, there are reasons why this might be so. Unlike the gothic and the fantastic, the grotesque cannot lay any recent claim to be a 'genre'. We may speak of grotesque moments or tendencies within a work, but rarely of works as grotesque in and of themselves. It has no indigenous themes or conventions within the structure of text beyond its characteristic tendency to invoke or describe hybrid forms or responses. 22 The lack of any feasible

22 As Dieter Miendl claims: 'The grotesque[...] is better described as a literary mode than as a literary genre'. See Dieter Miendl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*, p.3. Other recent critical works on the grotesque include James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, ed., *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*; Frederick Burwick, *The
precision at the core of the grotesque is both its principle virtue as a mode of expression and its limitation as a critical category. The inability to establish a hermetic orthodoxy may signify a seeming failure in critical practice, but the aspiring critic must accept that the imprecision of any prospective analysis locates the most salient features of his/her project. As I suggested in my discussion of ‘circumference’, whenever a position is taken or a response is made, a new margin is inevitably produced that becomes available as a site into which the grotesque may migrate. The grotesque may exceed any effort to anticipate its next point of means of expression, but we can fruitfully discuss some of its previous points of departure and the reasons why such a change occurred.

The grotesque occurs at those points where the practices and beliefs that structure and sustain identity are challenged. To the neo-classical imagination, the grotesque violated the encompassing faith in the sufficiency of verisimilitude, symmetry and proportion. Since the world was deemed already finalized, the grotesque was dismissed as an improper exercise of taste and

judgement.23 By contrast, the Romantics found some use for imaginatively grotesque figuration. This reversal of perspective involved a shift in the conception of artistic production from passive, objective imitation or recording to active, subjective expression (from the mirror to the lamp as M.H. Abrams suggests).24 The Romantic re-conceptualisation of the relationship between self and world argued that the world is incomplete until it has been transformed by the actions of subjectivity. This is not to say that Romantic writers do not intermittently manifest profound doubts about the actual capabilities of the individual imagination. I simply wish to demonstrate a shift in the structure of meaning from the laws of form to the figural interaction of self and natural objects. This has two consequences for the course of this study. First, that the grotesque became one potential means of reconfiguring the relationship between self and world through imaginative action. As the mind became more than a tool for the accurate duplication of objective phenomena, the grotesque aligned itself with the new centrality granted to human subjectivity. It could become evidence either of madness, or the capacity of the imagination to go beyond the merely photographic duplication of an empirically present reality.

The second consequence is that order, equilibrium and proportion are no longer purely physical attributes, restricted to the spatial, visible proportion of physical form. Thought itself becomes a place of structures, proportion and norms where grotesque aberration can occur. Grotesque gaps within reality are

23 The work of Vetruvius was a pivotal influence on the Italian Renaissance understanding of the Grotesque. See Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.20.
transferred from the register of anomalous form into the realms of subjective meaning. Mary Russo and Ewa Kuryluk’s recent work on the grotesque has suggested that both neo-classical and romantic grotesques are both merely produced by invisible discursive formations that underwrite any kind of categorical imperative. Comprehensive, discursive paradigms that structure our understandings of (for example) gender, race, sexuality are defined by the need to institute and promote order, differentiation symmetry, boundaries, regularity and proportion. In other words, certain ideas, beliefs or identities can be construed as grotesque due to their aberrant relationship within the synchronically defined norm. The meta-structures of discourse can themselves become the site of grotesque transgression. However, in spite of this seeming progression through three different types of grotesque (what we might tentatively refer to as ‘neo-classical’, ‘romantic’, and ‘discursive’ grotesque) the question about whether the grotesque is a positive or negative occurrence is played out at each stage.

The two major theoretical exponents of the grotesque disagree entirely over this fundamental question. The split between the neo-classical view of the grotesque as the destruction of a valuable sense of wholeness and order, and the Romantic grotesque as the transgression of normative tyranny are represented by Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* and Mikhail

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Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* respectively. Kayser's work, a substantial historical overview of the theories and literature of the grotesque, focuses primarily upon Romantic, nineteenth and early twentieth-century painting and prose. He focuses upon the 'grottesche' aspects of surprise and novelty, the fantastic break with reality rather than the primitivism of the grotto-esque. The grotesque, Kayser suggests, is 'THE ESTRANGED WORLD [...] Structurally it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable'. Although his avowed concern is romantic consciousness, Kayser implicitly brings the neo-classical insistence upon the value of structure, symmetry and proportion to bear his discussion. He regards consciousness as essentially reactive, largely disregarding its active participation in grotesque experience. Michael Steig has noted that Kayser 'does not attempt to analyse what actually goes on between the work and its perceiver, does not unambiguously locate the demonic within man himself'. Kayser does not see that the grotesque might record the endless depth and resourcefulness of human consciousness and therefore count against an identity formulated through strict and static norms. As a result, Kayser always emphasizes the intrusive horror of grotesque experience rather than its regenerative, celebratory capacity. He implies that self and world are already a sacrosanct whole or unity, a belief that sustains the continuity of identity as something intrinsically valuable. Change is viewed primarily as an absurd, alienating violation that produces a defensive nostalgia for a self and world under siege.

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Mikhail Bakhtin's work offers the necessary corrective to Kayser's tentative, conservative pessimism, but in doing so it duplicates his problems in reverse. Bakhtin questions Kayser's defence of identity defined through closure, regularity, symmetry and continuity. Bakhtin's critique seeks to liberate the discussion of the grotesque from the private, isolated individualism of the romantic consciousness and return it to a utopian sense of wholeness which he feels has been lost.

Unlike the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, which was directly related to folk culture and belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private "chamber" character. It became as it were, an individual carnival marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy.²⁹

Bakhtin argues that bodily orifices and processes have a capacity to overcome a premature, artificial sense of bodily finality. The abandonment of discrete, individual identity effects corresponding alteration of the social and cosmic. The world and the cosmos, life and death flow in and out of the newly liberated pores and orifices of the body's surface, continually renegotiating boundaries and norms through perpetual and systematic transgression. Bakhtin argues that regenerative transgression is more important than horror within the grotesque moment. His work challenges Michael Steig's suggestion that 'The grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic' by demonstrating that

²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p.37.
humour does more than merely maintain the sanctity of personal equilibrium. Bakhtin conjectures that a new order of being founded upon the openness of material and personal space, the overcoming of opposites and boundaries. What emerges from the blood and muck of the grotesque experience is deemed to be superior to the 'bourgeois' economy of identity that has been left behind.

Bakhtin's work has become a site for contesting the value of grotesque subversion. It is easy to see why his work has been cited with approval by those who find bourgeois individualism politically problematic. He allows the reader to posit an alternate and superior basis for identity within the scope of bodily experiences excluded to achieve a premature and spurious sense of wholeness. The political merits of Bakhtin's arguments are not strictly relevant here but, as I observed, he neglects the horrific aspect of the grotesque just as Kayser downplays the humorous. Moreover, his insistence that painful bodily dysfunction can be a source of joy requires that we relinquish our common sense understanding of pain and disease, a blind spot that displays an

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30 Steig, Michael, 'Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis', p.259. One additional problem with Steig's account is that in making the grotesque moment dependent upon an uninvited, external traumatic episode he cannot explain why the grotesque should be so inviting for both writer and reader. What, by Steig's definition, would lure the conscious mind back to such eruptions of uncanny horror unless either the self can sense (in advance) that something is to be gained from such an encounter or that the self is on some levels complicit with these moments of terror. In this thesis I have pursued the second of these arguments by suggesting that within certain contexts, the self may have something to gain from complicity with moments of destruction. I have discussed this issue through reference to the psychoanalytic concept that Steig passes over, namely the death drive.

31 Ronald Paulson argues that Bakhtin transforms carnival into an uncritical valorization of 'a time when dissent was possible and yet remained an organic part of society' which domesticates the grotesque. More importantly, Paulson disclaims the argument that carnival's multi-form transgression of categories can be situated to provide a radical critique of social structures on the grounds that it lacks the pertinence and penetrating insight of satire. The grotesque is deemed to be something that sets up an alternative, temporary social order rather
insensitivity to violence directed against women. Yet in spite of these objections, Bakhtin's work remains a powerful and often persuasive argument for transgressive practices. He reminds us that appeals to self-evident norms often conceal a clandestine political commitment. The distinction between Kayser and Bakhtin is not one of faulty reasoning or discrepant data, but of commitments to incommensurable paradigms.

With this in mind I would now like to suggest that the conflict between Kayser's emphasis upon horror and Bakhtin's insistence upon humour and joy can be understood within the terms of grotesque ambivalence that both accounts purport to examine objectively. As I stated above, Kayser and Bakhtin contradict each other because their work proceeds from dogmatic commitments to different theories of identity. Kayser values coherence and immanent continuity; Bakhtin believes that discrete individualism (associated with the bourgeoisie) has been achieved only through losing a greater sense of wholeness. These are different responses to the relative values of certainty and uncertainty or, to use Dickinson's terms, circumference and centre. This conflict within the theory of the grotesque may be reincorporated as a further example of the ambivalence that it inspires and describes. I do not intend to favour either position on the basis of a political critique since I believe that the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{32}}\text{See Thomas Laqueur, }\textit{Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud} \text{ (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.121. Bakhtin's writing tends to blur the distinction between figurative and literal instances of bodily transgression. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note, Bakhtin continually shifts between descriptive and prescriptive statements, drawing upon the self-evidence of the former to underscore the credibility of the} \]

grotesque welcomes both positions. Like Dieter Meindl, another critic who has attempted to find a way through the impasse offered by Kayser and Bakhtin, I would argue that 'The grotesque emerges as a tense combination of attractive and repulsive elements, of comic and tragic aspects, of ludicrous and horrifying features'. However, I would centre this co-presence of conflicting responses around the central ambivalence towards the value of immanent, coherent identity at the moment such coherence is challenged. The grotesque opposes singular or unified position; it constantly invokes antithetical positions at any point where stability or certainty threatens to coalesce.

1.4. Critics on Dickinson's Grotesque.

The conflict between Bakhtin and Kayser has been unwittingly played out between those critics who have attempted to describe Dickinson's grotesque. Cristanne Miller, Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Barton Levi St. Armand have tended to underestimate this inherent conflict between positive and negative responses to the grotesque that lies at the very heart of the theory. Cristanne Miller and Cynthia Griffin Wolff both articulate a 'subversive' grotesque, following Bakhtin in arguing that the violence of transgression benefits the self because it is directed outwards at a restrictive discursive fabric.


grotesque, but he ultimately sides with Kayser’s equation of the grotesque with episodes of existential terror. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that Dickinson’s grotesque oscillates problematically between these two poles of the grotesque.

Miller and Wolff argue that Dickinson’s grotesque can be understood as a strategy of subversive assertion, directed against coercive prescriptions associated with gender. Writing about the humorous aspect of the grotesque, Miller suggests that Dickinson ‘uses excess and grotesquerie to destabilize notions of the good woman, and of the “feminine body”’ in order to make herself ‘-as cultural object or cultural “Other” both the speaking and the perceived subject of her humour’. Although Miller argues that ‘the extremity of her revising and questioning leaves no stable position behind’ she goes on to describe this manifestation of the grotesque in unambiguously favourable terms through comparison with the mocking exuberance of ‘camp’.

Like camp, Dickinson’s poems of humorous grotesquerie are simultaneously epistemological and cultural in their mocking rejection of standard ways of seeing, speaking, and being; they attempt not just to violate norms (or taste) but to open up possibilities for new ways of perceiving and being both gendered and sexual beings in a social and natural world.

Miller correctly notes that the grotesque involves a productive convergence between tangible cultural/epistemological paradigms and a posited moment of negativity that illuminates and transforms the conceptual horizons of identity. Cynthia Griffin Wolff is slightly more acute in her analysis of co-presence of

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carnivalesque and horrific within Dickinson's grotesque. She correctly sees the grotesque as emerging from the intersection of different demographic commitments (race, class, gender, political status), the conventions of literary form and other linguistic expression, and the encompassing discursive assumptions that sustain the coherence of the self. She also describes the grotesque as a favourable, consciously desired re-negotiation of the synchronic relations between Dickinson's poetic self and the restrictive paradigms within which she works. However, in situating the radical alterity of the grotesque as a site for a new consciousness, Wolff also tends to under-theorize the appearance of the horrific. Both Miller and Wolff assume that a new identity arises from the grotesque's assertive differentiation from imposed, inauthentic meanings and practices that constitute the foundations of the self. Labelling equilibrium and certainty as politically suspect, Miller and Wolff rule out identities founded upon coherence, stability and continuity. They ignore those aspects of grotesque experience that inspire the valuable adherence to established, secure identities as well as the liberating flight into new ones.

Miller and Wolff bring us to a prevalent assumption within Dickinson studies that manifest poetic or linguistic ingenuity constitutes evidence for the poetic self's triumph over adversity. Dickinson's status as a great, startlingly original poet is always correlated within her poetic celebration of 'transport', the search for transcendent identity or the assumption of power. These interpretative paradigms require that each quirk, gap or aberration within the

36 Cristanne Miller, 'The Humour of Excess', p.106.
field of meaning provides a consistent demonstration of the poetic self’s capacity to question, subvert, overcome or transcend available discourses or identities.37

The other way of looking at her poems is to view them as highly articulate expressions of powerlessness in the face of intolerable circumstances. The danger involved in moments of ‘transport’ leads Dickinson to assert the virtues of stability and constancy more frequently than is generally recognized. In order to understand the possibility of loss that gives rise to horror we must take these more reticent tendencies seriously as competing strands within her grotesque aesthetic. Dickinson’s poetic consciousness frequently encounters the offer of a new ‘reordering’ with trepidation. Although Dickinson’s poems frequently describe being as a condition of painful depravation, abstinence and suffering, she expresses a reluctant commitment to the term of her existence for fear that radical change could not be tolerated. Poem F#535A/ J#405 reports the fear of being overloaded with success and delight:

It might be easier
To fail- with Land in Sight-
Than gain- my Blue Peninsula-
To perish- of Delight-

Dickinson’s grotesque pivots on the fact that each individual manifestation of
the self transforms the relative importance of fear and desire within the psychic
economy. At certain points the prospect of a transcendent moment of self-
transformation may be desired without qualification. As with poem F#1263A/
J#1129, ‘truth’ in whatever manifestation it takes can simply overwhelm the
fragile self, driving it to annihilation. In spite of her frequently voiced longings
for episodes of transcendent consciousness, Dickinson often recoils from such
moments in fear. Her valorisation of finite identity occurs most often in her
ongoing struggle with unknowable divinity, as the final stanza of poem
F#307A/ J#271 attests:

And then- the size of this "small" life-
The Sages- call it small-
Swelled- like Horizons- in my breast-
And I sneered- softly- "small"!

At each instance where the constitutive borders of identity are disclosed to
consciousness the possibility of a conservative re-assertion of continuity may
be more desirable than liberating discontinuity. Dickinson’s grotesque must be
understood to contain and mediate between these two poles and as such cannot
be effectively recuperated to a single mode of being or knowing.

If one pole of Dickinson’s grotesque asserts the continued imaginative
resourcefulness of the self in resisting discursive compulsions, then Barton Levi
St. Armand’s account reads Dickinson’s work as contingent and symbiotic with
these same discursive paradigms. He presents an American grotesque premised
upon a 'mixture of folk and popular motifs crystallized in a distinct personal
vision of Calvinism's monster-god'. His account provides a timely reminder
that the grotesque uncertainty and ambivalence are not sceptical infections from
a posited alterity. Uncertainty can already exist as a legitimate aspect of some
discourses and it is surely no coincidence that St. Armand's study focuses upon
Calvinism, a belief system fundamentally premised upon the uncertainty or
cognitive insufficiency of its adherents. Yet the consequence of this exclusive,
historical empiricism is that the grotesque becomes too continuous with its
historical climate. If we think of Dickinson's grotesque as readily compatible
with the surface practices of American culture then it no longer describes a
space where the aberrant individualism, change and radical possibility
described by Miller and Wolff can be produced. St. Armand's Emily Dickinson
reflects the complex fabric of social, religious, literary and scientific discourses
of her day, but rarely emerges as more than the documentary sum of these parts.

Working between Bakhtin and Kayser, Miller/Wolff and St. Armand,
this thesis will argue that Dickinson's grotesque pivots upon the oscillation
between uncertainty as a desirable product of autonomy and uncertainty as a
fearful condition that threatens the basic coherence of the poetic self. This in
turn produces two fundamentally different relations to identity, culture and
discursive formations. Dickinson's verse can be seen as poised between
conservative and radical positions: the representation of a disruptive, subversive
autonomy that flouts discursive restraints, and the simultaneous presentation of

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38 Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge:
an identity fully inscribed within the surface of cultural history. These two incompatible pictures of Dickinson's autonomy create a tension throughout many critical appraisals. David Porter, for example, does not doubt that Dickinson is 'a highly conscious, technically adept, sophisticated craftsman' and much of his book is spent arguing on behalf of Dickinson's achievements. However, he also comments on Dickinson's fragmented aesthetic that 'The lack of design, of duration, then, is the manifest sign of the lack of authority with which to stand against reality if not to enter fully into it'. Porter echoes Karl Keller's statement that Dickinson's ambiguity 'is less a matter of clarity about complexity than of confusion about the clearly complex' and yet also anticipates Sharon Cameron's suggestion that Dickinson (to paraphrase the title of Cameron's book) 'chooses not to choose' finality in her verse as a mark of her poetic strength. Dickinson's grotesque circulates within each of these accounts, complicating any effort to proclaim the poetic consciousness as simply the victor or victim of circumstance. Attempts to impose 'closure' upon the process of the grotesque or recuperate it to one specific function denies its fundamental ambivalence.

The twin possibilities that her poetic consciousness is powerful or powerless exist simultaneously within a select number of poems. This oscillating, paradoxical relationship between uncertainty and autonomy is

frequently registered by the poetic self as it struggles to locate and evaluate the impact of idiosyncratic experience. The instability of grotesque experience is presented most succinctly at the start of poem F#341A/ J#281.

'Tis so appalling- it exhilarates-  
So over Horror, it half captivates-

Dickinson’s poetry reproduces the experience she felt in reading Hawthorne, she ‘appals, entices-’ (L#622, p. 649). Experiencing an extreme, singular emotion brings its polar opposite into play. A response delineated by revulsion melts into one of exhilaration, horror topples over into a state of mind that seduces and imprisons (the two possible meanings of ‘captivates’). Since extremes of experience always challenge the self’s equilibrium, they are fundamentally ambivalent. They elucidate the simultaneous fear and desire for uncertainty that exists at the heart of Dickinson’s poetry. Since we are never told what precipitates the action of this poem, incomplete comprehension leaves the reader’s understanding transient and incomplete, bewildered by the varying, extreme responses that uncertainty seems to inspire. Dickinson’s poems chart this fluid, interchanging set of positions, a passage of experience characterized by unending tension.

Poem F#285B/ J#673 is a rare example of the tension between positive and negative responses to uncertainty being maintained in perfect tension. I will conduct a detailed reading of the poem because it will provide a template for

41 Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty* (London: The Johns Hopkins University)
many of the subsequent discussions. I will examine how the poem presents a state of mind in flux and reproduces this uncertainty through tonal variation, lexical and syntactical obliqueness which, in turn, unsettles the relationship between text and reader. However, I will also suggest that discursive contexts must be considered in order to evaluate precisely how uncertainty structures or undermines the relationship between experience and consciousness.

The Love a Life can show Below Is but a filament, I know, Of that diviner thing That faints opon the face of Noon- And smites the Tinder in the Sun- And hinders Gabriel’s Wing-

‘Tis this- in Music- hints and sways- And far abroad on Summer days- Distils uncertain pain- 
‘Tis this enamors in the East- And tints the Transit in the West With harrowing Iodine-

‘Tis this- invites- appalls- endows- Flits- glimmers- proves- dissolves- Returns- suggests- convicts- enchants- Then- flings in Paradise-

This particular poem is situated on the threshold between life and death, immanence and transcendence, and heaven and earth, all of which proves fertile grounds for ambivalent speculation throughout Dickinson’s work. One reading of the poem might conclude that the act of reaching paradise optimistically looks past the ‘uncertain pain’ that accompanies it. A more hesitant, pessimistic reading might emphasize the abrupt shifts in tone and image as something that

undermines the speaker’s initially unequivocal faith in the superiority of the afterlife. The poem clearly entertains both possibilities without allowing one to dominate. The approach of ‘that diviner thing’ is variously deemed to ‘appall’, ‘harrow’, ‘convict’ ‘dissolve’ and, with a more positive inflection, to ‘invite’, ‘glimmer’ and ‘enchant’. Walt Whitman’s poetic ego could incorporate confusion within the unassailable, incorporative flow of his verse: ‘Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large. I contain multitudes.)’.42 Dickinson’s verse invites us to consider whether she contains multitudes or fragments and divisions. Her ‘reply’ to Whitman might have been ‘Except Thyself may be/ Thine Enemy-/ Captivity is Consciousness-/ So’s Liberty-’ (F#649A/ J#384).

The final stanza with its overlapping, cacophonous sequence of verbs dissolves any unified sense of the poetic consciousness into a sequence of disparate responses. As Suzanne Juhasz comments, Dickinson’s poems ‘are not concerned with what- nor with who, where or when’. these are merely the occasions whereby the texture of experience can be interrogated.43 The poetic consciousness is caught between bringing the experience into singularity, coherence and order, or attempting to find an esoteric pleasure in ceaseless proliferation. The grotesque paradox is the possibility that increased meaning may be increased meaninglessness. As Geoffrey Harpham notes, the binocular vision of the grotesque offers us two ways of looking at the same thing, one ‘in

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which, forms are compressed into meaningful ambivalence; and those in which [...] forms are proliferated into meaningless ambivalence'. The reader is invited to participate in this unresolved ambivalence to experience uncertainty and cognitive transformation through the motion of reading the poem.

It is important to remember that grotesque ambivalence need not be predicated upon conflicting responses or interpretations of equivalent weight. The majority of poems discussed in this thesis do not always sustain an entirely balanced position between two wildly opposing readings. The grotesque produces instances of doubt against monolithic certainty, but may conclude by preferring one perspective. To highlight ambivalence in Emily Dickinson is to recognize the possibility of an alternative reading, not necessarily to endorse it.

I would suggest that the subject matter and context of individual poems may guide the reader gradually towards a preferred (though not ultimately stable) interpretation. In this particular poem I would argue that the uncertainty does not strictly constitute a radical inversion of the speaker’s world view since it is clearly embedded in a common, discursively ingrained trepidation of the afterlife. This is not a poem of wholesale theological scepticism, but it does dissolve its contextual moorings so thoroughly within the intense scrutiny of subjective processes that the pervasive faith in ‘that diviner thing’ may intermittently become anxiously invisible.

With this in mind let us reconsider how we might read the final stanza of this poem. It begins with a concise and certain statement of her faith in the afterlife. However, as the poem progresses, certainty partially recedes under the advance of ambivalence. With the exception of the final stanza that is composed in Long Meter (8,6,8,6), the poem is written in common particular meter (8,8,6,8,8,6), although the excessive use of the dash in the final stanza does tend to break any particular sense of rhythm. Although Dickinson uses full rhyme for much of the first two stanzas (except for Sun/Noon and East/West which are consonantal rhymes) the rhyme scheme of the third stanza tends to be overwhelmed by the repetitious third person verb conjugation 's'. As such, each verb blurs into its contrasting neighbour. They are sufficiently broad in their meaning to allow the reader a basis for uniting the words into a potentially cohesive viewpoint and yet the combination of generality and contradiction insists that one true, unifying perspective can never emerge. The dashes syntactically join and separate the words. They imitate the breathless pace of the approach to heaven through the cumulative overlapping of words and they break apart the flow of the poem into disembodied, shapeless words that hold no promise of yielding a stable picture. This is the essence of the grotesque, to introduce ambivalence into every possible vertex of understanding so that singular judgements may be confronted with their opposites.

The theological context of the poem sways the balance of positions involved in grotesque ambivalence. A basic first reading is likely to view the uncertainty as a thrilling passage into a desired afterlife. However, this
particular poem undercuts singular meanings through subtle variations of metaphor and tone. It piles several metaphors one after the other, accentuating the common ground of meaning whilst playfully diversifying the variant expressions. It operates by (to quote the opening line of the second stanza) ‘- hints- and sways-’. It presents staccato flashes of meaning that are vividly echoed within the poem’s diverse imagery. The constitution of the next life proves akin to a delicate woman who ‘faints upon the face of noon’, a resourceful Yankee frontiersman who lights up the sun by smiting the tinder, and the shadowy, mischievous child who ‘hinders Gabriel’s Wing’. The tense playfulness stressing the interconnection of divine freedom with robust, physical imagery makes the speaker sound both assertive and clumsy. The poem echoes the more frequently cited ‘I taste a liquor never brewed,’ (F#207A/ J#214) where Dickinson, ‘the little tippler/ Come staggering toward the sun’ is beholden by incredulous ‘Saints’. The jarring contrast with the austerity, restraint and reverence demanded by Dickinson’s native Calvinism could not be more pronounced, creating a site where pleasurable uncertainty overlaps more tormenting doubts. In her strenuous compression of meanings and peculiar selection of images from ordinary aspects of daily life to represent grand conceptual abstractions, Dickinson partially aligns herself with the tradition of metaphysical poets. However, she combines these techniques with a.

45 Constance Rourke and Ronald Wallace both discuss the Yankee posturing within Dickinson’s verse. Rourke sees the Yankee as self-consciously quirky, active and independent. Wallace stresses the irony of Yankee posturing, full of laconic modesty, understatement and affected ignorance. Both writers illuminate how the Yankee pose employs quirky self-effacement and simplicity as a circumspect way of achieving higher goals. See Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of National Character (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931).
more Romantic sense of troubled personal investment within the images she uses. The poetic self always experiences risk as a necessary component of inquiry.

Where the first stanza is profuse and liberating, the second one is more dry and melancholy, its metaphors correspondingly more familiar and less outlandish. Image of ‘uncertain pain’ and ‘harrowing Iodine’ centralize the metaphors transforming the multiple metaphors of the first stanza into ambivalent responses in the second. The grotesque moves from an externally recognisable multiplicity, to subjective divisions and fragmentation. We are now in the shadowy realm of ‘hints’ and uncertainty where doubt has partially displaced joy as the appropriate response. Dickinson pares down the theological context to a matter of traces or points so that we cannot go outside the poem to unravel its ambiguity. Context and subject are inseparable from the poet’s transformative ‘unnaming’ of them and the reader must thus submit to the flow of abrupt changes, hesitations and ambiguities.

Ultimately Dickinson’s grotesque draws sharp attention to the ways in which certain critical strategies use theory or evidence to defend themselves against the anxiety and mess of uncertainty or to take pleasure in the promise of liberation. Neither positing a subversive theoretical negativity, nor carefully

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46 I have borrowed this excellent term from Harold Bloom who uses it to describe how Dickinson’s linguistic ingenuity transforms words so that they become estranged from any
unpacking the nuances of social, discursive, literary, and personal contexts are sufficient in themselves to describe how the grotesque functions in each instance. As Bernard McElroy comments, we must avoid a simple equation between the grotesque and confusion but must try to understand how confusion operates within the broader context of meaning within which it emerges. The relationship between the gap in comprehension and the context in which it appears is reciprocal or mutually transforming. The circuit of meaning between poetic consciousness, reader and the poem’s occasion requires that all perspectives, commitments, prejudices and certainties must be perpetually re-evaluated or relinquished. Since Dickinson’s grotesque asserts the spontaneous idiosyncrasy of experience, we cannot expect to produce a comprehensive vocabulary of grotesque instances that will retain their validity across time and occasion. The relative positions of current, present meaning and a moment of intrusive negativity will determine how each is to be understood.

The conclusion that Dickinson’s grotesque represents a variable tension between uncertainty and autonomy will not provide a vocabulary of thematic markers or reference points, but it may provide a grammar through which intelligible patterns may emerge. Dickinson’s grotesque appears at the circumference of understanding when the limits of identity and cognitive capacity are tested. Sometimes these moments of crisis are horrifying. They

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happen to the poetic consciousness robbing it of autonomy, vitality and certainty. Where certainty appears restrictive, where meaning is endowed with a premature sense of closure, then uncertainty may become an ally, breaking open the horizon of experience into new possibilities. I would argue that this oscillation between disabling uncertainty and enabling uncertainty requires further investigation to gauge exactly how these responses interrelate and under what circumstances one perspective may be suddenly favoured over another. In the next section I would like to introduce the reader to certain aspects of Kleinian psychoanalytic theory which may help us to answer these questions.

1.5. The Grotesque, Dickinson and Kleinian Theory.

I have introduced Kleinian theory into this thesis to answer clarify three pertinent aspects of Dickinson’s grotesque. First, Klein enables the reader to explain the fear of absence or idiosyncratic meaning imbedded in Kayser’s formulation of the grotesque. Her work suggests that negativity impacts upon consciousness in a way that instigates the unbinding of the ego and ensures its

48 My theoretical stance in this thesis is more indebted to Bion than Klein. However, Bion’s work cannot be understood independently of Klein’s theories, and, in spite of his own hugely original contributions, he is usually referred to as a Kleinian. In the process of outlining Klein’s major theoretical contributions, I have occasionally found it more elegant to cite later writers. Since Klein often formulated and revised ideas over the course of several papers, later writers are often in a better position to clarify retrospective patterns over the uneven course of theoretical development. The following overviews have been immensely helpful: Hanna Segal, Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein (London: Karnac, 1988); Jean-Michael Petot, Melanie Klein, vol. 1: First Discoveries and First Systems 1919-1932, trans. by Christine Trollope (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1990); Jean-Michel Petot, Melanie Klein, vol. 2: The Ego and the Good Object 1932-1960 (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1991); R. D. Hinshelwood, A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought, 2nd edn (London: Free Association Books, 1991).
consequent decentralisation within the sphere of its own experience. She outlines a phenomenology of helplessness, horror and despair under the fragmentation of meaning. Secondly, and most importantly, Klein and Bion enable us to explain how the horror of Kayser’s grotesque can be effectively transformed into the exuberant liberation of the Bakhtinian grotesque and to determine why and under what conditions such a transformation would occur. Bion’s formulations move Kleinian theory away from the strictly clinical and enable us to see uncertainty as a product of an asymmetrical relationship between the self and language/culture. Finally, Klein and Bion enable us to elucidate the problematic circuit between experience, poet and poem outlined in the previous sections. They allow the reader to view Dickinson’s linguistic strategies as an ambivalent negotiation between certainty and uncertainty.

Critical studies of the grotesque have forged a productive confluence with a huge number of diverse theoretical approaches. The grotesque’s abstractness ensures that nearly every contemporary critical theory approach currently sanctioned within literary studies will be at least partially illuminating.49 However Klein’s theories provide a unique perspective on how intangible absences within the field of meaning impact upon the emotional.

linguistic and cognitive integrity of the self. Gaps within meaning instigate the consciousness' terrifying dethronement. The competing, contradictory perspectives that arise to fill such gaps represent a cognitive effort to integrate meaning and non-meaning, changing our understanding of both. My account follows in the wake of critics such as Sharon Cameron, David Porter, Joanne Feit Diehl and Agnieszka Salska, all of whom have suggested that Dickinson’s work presents an interaction with negativity.\(^5\) Klein serves to remind us that the absence of meaning is not to be taken lightly. Her association of mental splits with a state of cognitive trauma provides a timely reminder that circumferences and centre are not merely abstract structures devoid of any experiential content or value.

Since Klein's innovations within the field of psychoanalysis have rarely been applied within the field of literary study, a brief summary of her ideas may be useful. The Kleinian theories applied in this thesis can be pared down to two simple questions. What is the nature of destructive anxiety and how can such moments of uncertainty contribute to the integrated functioning of the self? Kleinian thought believes that a coherent self is achieved through the toleration of anxiety and the integration of split, polarized objects and experiences. As readers of Dickinson’s text we may equate these splits with instances where the speaker produces multiple, ambivalent perspectives towards the same occasion.

Bion linked these moments of developmental crisis with linguistic and personal creativity, approvingly citing Keats' description of 'negative capability'. Keats defined negative as the capacity 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. A Kleinian exposition of 'negative capability' will allow us to assess how the absences, slants, multiple perspectives and ambiguities in Dickinson's are related to the anxiety surrounding her 'omitted centre' of experience.

In this section I shall outline the two aspects of Kleinian theory which are most pertinent for the present task. Firstly, I will discuss Klein's description of innate destructive urges, a negativity within the mind that Bion referred to as 'nameless dread'. Secondly, I will propose that Klein's 'paranoid-schizoid position' and 'depressive position' allow us to describe how uncertain, fragmented states of mind can be unified. These positions are not based purely on the schema of 'defence' or 'repression' but should be placed alongside such mechanisms as 'sublimation' as a means of progressive acceptance and transformation of previously intolerable states. The management of nameless dread and uncertainty provides a succinct theoretical basis for the description of the grotesque that I outlined in the prior sections.

51 For an excellent account of language acquisition and manipulation based upon Bion's work, see Gemma Corradi Fiumara, The Symbolic Function: Psychoanalysis and the Philosophy of Language (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Following Bion and Wittgenstein, Fiumara sees language as a differentiated field marked out by overlapping paradigms of meaning. The individual consciousness is perpetually engaged in the process of renegotiating the boundaries of his or her paradigm, attempting to metabolize anomalous meanings.

Klein’s description of conflicting divisions within the mind comes from her commitment to the Freudian death drive. However, she almost entirely revises our understanding of its function within the mind. She is not concerned with the relationship between conscious and unconscious, indeed her work progressively obscures this distinction. Instead, all levels of consciousness are subject to an oscillation between separation and integration of ego and objects. Life and death instincts produce a stable, coherent self through their interaction and dissolution. Freud’s formulation of the death drive was a speculative move, introduced to explain previously unintelligible phenomena such as the compulsion to repeat unpleasurable or traumatic experience, certain kinds of masochism and a more general need to account for the enduring human propensity for violence. Klein initially linked the death instinct to the postulation of a severe, punitive pre-Oedipal superego. However, her later work broadens its influence so that it becomes the amorphous and envious antithesis of the life drives, annihilating internal objects and the perceptual self.

Freud’s prose reveals a sublime respect for the death drive, for its ‘desire to be at peace and (prompted by the pleasure principle) to put Eros, the mischief-maker, to rest’. The tone of Melanie Klein’s is entirely different. Emphasising the death drive’s gruesome sadism and hostility, concrete absence rather than enticing mystery. André Green astutely observes that there is an unresolved tension between the Freudian notion of an unconscious characterized by holistic, inclusive, symmetrical mechanisms such as condensation, displacement, timelessness and the absence of contradiction, and the negativity of the death drive that breaks unities and continuities apart. Although Klein portrays an infant mind very much full of phantasy content, the import of her writing strays towards the negativity described by Green. Phantasies produced in conjunction with the death drive may initially have a tangible ‘content’ or reference, but later Kleinian thinkers such as Bion have demonstrated that negativity should not be considered in terms of content, but as a process, unbinding the coherence necessary for mental or linguistic representation.

Klein argued that the impact of both life and death instincts are manifested through the relationship with the mother’s breast. Although the basic form of the phantasy remains inviolate, its effect upon the ego is almost entirely shaped by its alignment with either the life or death drive. If the death drive, manifested as sadism against the mother’s body, predominates in the

mind then the combination of overpowering phantasy and primitive defence mechanisms (splitting of the object, followed by a combination of projective-identification, projection, and introjection) will produce a hostile 'bad breast' that threatens the infant. If the phantasy is produced under the auspices of the life drives then the 'good object' provides a nourishing cornucopia of endless goodness. Klein's descriptions show the fragile nascent mind to be rent asunder by competing perspectives of the same object, each charged with a polarized ultimate significance.

Klein's work increasingly recognised that the splitting of the object into good and bad components also splits the ego into correspondingly polarized, asymmetrical aspects. This is initially successful as a defence against internal negativity, but in the long term it impoverishes any prospective coherence, integrity and strength within the ego. Hostile impulses are projected into the mother's breast as a means of ridding the self of toxic, harmful elements but the actual consequence is that the breast is rendered hostile. It takes on the destructive characteristics of the drive and is transformed into a hostile object which is thought to seek the self's annihilation. Upon splitting the object into good and bad components, the ego introjects (incorporates) the good object as support for its fragile unity whilst the bad object is correspondingly expelled. The process of managing these competing impulses is one of continual


59 The key works, bridging Klein's earlier emphasis on the split of the object with the later interest in the parallel split in the ego are Melanie Klein, 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States', in Love Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945, pp.
splitting, projection and introjection, the ultimate goal being to render anxiety tolerable.

Klein portrays the assaults of psychic negativity through the most repellent, visceral imagery. Edward Glover wittily and accurately summarizes Klein's prose evocations as 'a combination of a butcher's shop, a public lavatory under shell-fire, and a post-mortem room'.\(^{60}\) Klein's death-riddled unconscious is 'full', abundantly overloaded with visceral content. The child attacks, bites, splinters, poisons the breast with sadistically charged urine and faeces and when the bad object has been sufficiently tainted by these attacks it is felt to threaten the infant itself. Like Kayser's grotesque, a vital sense of wholeness is splintered or subdivided into increasingly meaningless fragments. The possibility of a unified conception is broken apart into competing units, just as grotesque uncertainty causes the fraught proliferation of competing perspectives or interpretations. Klein's work enables us to couple these vivid descriptions of instinctual assault with a detailed map of exactly how these episodes assist or hinder the search for a singular coherence within the self and within the field of meaning. Comprehension and unity must spring from the integration of objects or experiences that threaten their very existence.

Perhaps the clearest way to differentiate Klein from Freud is to suggest that the latter can find the death drive cognitively invigorating whilst the former


sees it as the root cause of a stultifying and terrifying mental paralysis. Their
differences recall Anne Radcliffe’s distinction between terror and horror.
Radcliffe suggests that these two similar responses are ‘so far opposite, that the
first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the
other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them’. These twin possibilities
circulate uneasily within Kleinian theory, acknowledging that a triumphant
expansion of the ego through terror is always staged against the near possibility
of horrific disintegration. Freud’s elegant prose style tends to produce a sense-
expanding terror in contemplating the death instinct; a mood of mystery, awe
and sublime contemplation permeates his work. Klein’s work locates that
horrifying moment when the subject position risks an ignoble collapse into non-
existence, the horror proving so overwhelming that subject position and
autonomy are felt to vanish. As William Ian Miller observes. ‘Horror is horror
because it is perceived as denying all strategy, all option’. When applied to
the experience of reading Dickinson’s text the poetic speaker or reader may be
confronted with so many variable readings (or too few) and hence feel
cognitively paralysed, unable to choose between them. Several key phrases
within Dickinson’s work indicate that she recognised this paradoxical strain
between the terrifying stimulation and the horrific, meaningless paralysis
induced by uncertainty. Consider phrases such as ‘Vague Calamity’ (F#838A/
J#971) and ‘Taints of Majesty’ (F#319A/ J#290). In each quotation an absent

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(p.149).
62 For one account of the Freudian sublime, see Harold Bloom, Agon: Towards a Theory of
Revisionism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
event produces a sense both of magnitude and bathos, cognitive expansion and contraction. This negative dimension strongly implies that the sublime engorgement of the poetic consciousness involves its simultaneous choking. Her reactions have been traumatically split into good and bad components, gaps in comprehension promoting an unstable polarisation that entices and threatens.

Wilfred Bion's work centralizes the link between the successful processing of formless dread and cognitive coherence and achievement that was only implicit in Klein's writing. He translated the Kleinian notion of splitting into a divide between unassimilated alien experience, and experience that is available for cognitive action. Throughout his work, Bion used digestion as a metaphor to explain cognitive competence, the integration of formless alien experience into the field of meaning. The mind sifts through the formless, uncertain experience differentiating the meaningful from the non-meaningful aspects. The boundary between meaning and non-meaning is thus a constant site of negotiation. Bion relates formless dread to what he terms beta-elements, described as 'undigested [i.e. meaningless] facts.' Beta elements represent a blank, traumatic impasse in the field of experience, a point where the absence of language and meaning threatens to collapse the cognitive self. 'Negative capability' is achieved through the successful transformation of beta-elements into alpha elements, units of meaning that allow a coherent thinker to come into

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64 The earliest formulations of this idea are Wilfred R. Bion 'Attacks on Linking' in *Second Thoughts*, pp. 93-110; Wilfred R. Bion, 'A Theory of Thinking', pp.110-120.
being. If these gaps in meaning are not converted then Bion suggests that the very foundations of the perceptual self are under threat. A split self, assaulted by meaningless, undigested experience is frozen, immobile. listless. scarcely sentient and poised on the brink of annihilation.

Psychic negativity within Klein and Bion does not bear the characteristic features of the drives (source, pressure, aim, object). Its purpose 'is to fulfil as far as is possible a disobjectalising function by means of unbinding'. Klein's idea of splitting and Bion's beta elements designate the unbinding, the de-cathecting of ego, object and reality. When gaps in the psychic economy appear, the alignment of drives, self and world in a reciprocal scenario is destroyed. The death drive (formless dread) and the grotesque are linked since both see the horrifying consequences of absence upon the meaningful integration of the self. The splitting of the ego corresponds to a proliferation of meaningless, conflicting perspectives, the thinker's autonomy overwhelmed by his/her thoughts. The 'formless dread' of the grotesque reduces autonomy to a zero-point so that thoughts seem to produce the self as a helpless by-product, an impotent onlooker in the field of its own experience. In Dickinson's work the grotesque may appear as something that happens her poetic consciousness, a shock that annihilates precisely because it cannot be digested or understood. The proliferation of ambivalent perspectives around the

68 Bion regarded thinking as an apparatus for dealing with thoughts. Where this management was not possible, thoughts overwhelm the thinker. See Wilfred R. Bion, *Learning from Experience*, p.83.
grotesque moment cannot be experienced as liberating unless the poetic consciousness either instigates the variety or is empowered to choose amongst them. In her encounter with the 'narrow Fellow in the Grass' (F#1096B/ J#986) Dickinson expresses a parallel effect when she experiences 'a tighter breathing/ And Zero at the Bone-'. The zero point of existence constricts the self, freezing the mind's activity rather than promoting its active centrality.

The challenge presented to the cognitive framework produces a polarity between the possibilities of increased or decreased meaning. A more expansive sense of self and understanding may emerge, yet it is equally possible that the self will find its cognitive capacity choked on meaninglessness. Dickinson's poems frequently reproduce this dichotomy in borderline positions, on the threshold of life and death, immanence and transcendence, mystery and discovery. As I suggested in my introduction, a great many critical accounts demonstrate Dickinson's enlarging victory over such moments. However, we must not overlook those poems where futility and meaninglessness dominate in the places we would expect to find triumph.

Power is a familiar growth-
Not distant- not to be-
Beside us like a bland Abyss
In every company-
Escape it- there is but a chance-
When consciousness and clay
Lean forward for a final glance
Disprove that, and you may-

F#1287A/ J#1238
This poem reminds us that power, change and transcendence are not intrinsically beneficial. 'Bland Abyss' is a grotesque oxymoron, implying the co-presence of ultimate meaning and futility. Unlike other poems within Dickinson's canon, the abyss here is not a threshold to transcendent significance, but something common, ever-present and uninteresting. Where a terrified reaction would invoke frenzied cognitive activity, the horrified reaction numbs the poetic consciousness into inertia. She is virtually killed by meaningless boredom. The poem enacts startling revision of the word 'power', reversing its usual associations with control, autonomy, authority and transcendence. Whether power is produced by the self or employed against it by an external authority, the word usually denotes a profound significance entirely absent here. Power's familiarity creates a yawning (both literally and metaphorically) chasm within the self, it reappears in every company, across every available context transforming the spectrum of opportunity into a flat plateau of sameness. Although proximate, power is tellingly deemed '-not to be-'. Like Bion's nameless dread, it is a stillborn experience, indigestible and opposed to any form of autonomous identity. Death is posited as perhaps (but not necessarily) the only possibility of change. Actual death becomes a release from a more profound living death. The self is propelled towards the 'final glance' before non-existence, each point of hope consumed by the blandness of power. This enforced abdication of cognitive capacity coupled with the pervasive breakdown of investment in self or situation characterizes the horror of Kleinian negativity. It is this paralysis within the mind, the slow purposeless
disintegration of option and interest that corresponds with the Kayser pole of the grotesque.

Klein eventually produced two, interlocking mental 'positions' to describe how uncertainty and negativity are processed by the mind. She termed these the 'paranoid-schizoid position' and the 'depressive position'. The paranoid-schizoid position denotes a split, persecuted mental organisation dominated by polarized conceptions of good and bad objects. As the competing life and death drives focus upon the phantasy representation of the breast, the negative drive manifestations constantly threaten to annihilate the nourishing goodness necessary for ontological stability (as outlined above). The effort of splitting the object produces a fundamental instability within the ego, the good object is felt to be insufficiently strong to guarantee an independent, sufficient autonomy. As Thomas Ogden writes:

There is not yet a person interpreting his experience. There is not yet an "I." The paranoid-schizoid position is the realm of "the it," even though it is not exclusively the realm of the id (i.e. instinctual pressure). In other words, the early ego (the adaptive organising component of personality) is also impersonal in that it is practically devoid of subjectivity, a sense of "I-ness".

Dickinson once described the frantic process of writing a letter as omitting vital details: she 'only said- the Syntax/- And left the Verb and Pronoun-out!'

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69 The Paranoid-Schizoid position was first named in Melanie Klein, 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms'. Significant precursors to the concept can be found in many, earlier key papers, but most obviously in Melanie Klein, 'Mourning and its Relations to Manic-Depressive States', in Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1943, pp. 344-369; See also R. D. Hinselwood, A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought, pp.156-166.

The paranoid-schizoid position leaves the skeleton of experience intact though subject position and meaning have dissolved. The paranoid-schizoid position may be compared with a diffuse, split range of available meanings, but without the autonomous capacity to order them or choose between them. Paranoid-schizoid states of mind find uncertainty horrifying, the ego depleted under a range of overpowering, persecuting choices.

Dickinson's grotesque poetics frequently reports such overwhelming depletions in the face of uncertainty. Her poetic consciousness is often depicted as an incidental by-product of an experience rather than its necessary centre. Above all else, she fears cognitive impotence, the sense that each meaning, word, and syllable may designate meaning's disintegration rather than its increased coherence. Poem F#362B/ J#495 requests 'Flowers- to keep the eyes— from going awkward-/ When it snows-' and 'A Landscape- not so great/ To suffocate the eye-'. Flowers here may be understood as what Bion calls a 'selected fact'. The flower breaks up undifferentiated whiteness, allowing experience to cohere and be rendered meaningful. Selected facts represent the ego's attempt to integrate its cognitive capacity in the face of paranoid-schizoid chaos. Without it, perception is 'awkward'. The suffocating eye equates cognition with fundamental bodily integrity in a fashion familiar to Kleinian

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71 Dieter Miendl has anticipated my conclusions about the grotesque through different means. Following Heidegger, Miendl suggests that the grotesque assigns priority to Being, at the expense of a decentered consciousness. Dieter Miendl, American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque, p.10.
72 Wilfred R. Bion, Learning From Experience, p.73.
thought. The dynamic between extraordinary experience and receptive subject takes place against the fearful possibility of the self’s disappearance. The ‘dazzle of truth’ infinitely multiplies meanings leaving consciousness teetering between the desire for illumination and the fear of blindness. These predicaments of Dickinson’s poetic consciousness are relayed to the hapless reader who must endure similar anxieties about the text’s uncertainty, its impenetrable opacity, its compression, deletion and emotional intensity.

Klein’s ‘depressive position’ provides a model for the triumphant emergence of an integrated consciousness through a passage of debilitating fragmentation or uncertainty. Consciousness overcomes the need to split off parts of itself and its objects as a means of saving the good object from the effects of the bad one. Klein’s depiction of the depressive position is phrased in rather moralistic terms that have been compared to the Augustinian account of original sin. The self becomes aware that the bad object’s hostility is merely the mis-attribution of its own destructive tendencies to the other. When this fact is accepted, the mother as a separate whole person progressively replaces the primitive part-object, good and bad breast. Having accepted responsibility for injuries done to the mother, the child begins to mourn the damage done and attempt to repair the shattered internal object. Once again, Thomas Ogden’s formulations are useful as he notes that the depressive position produces an enhanced capacity for self-object differentiation, the development of the capacity for symbol formation, increased capacities for affective modulation.
reality testing and memory'. The disjunctive field of paranoid-schizoid experience, gives way to continuity and a contingent sense of increased autonomy. When using the depressive position to describe the relationship between reader and text it denotes either the formulation of a unifying interpretation or the toleration of fragmented meaning as within the poetic work. Ultimately the depressive position makes peace between the self's demands for stability and uncertainty's demands for recognition. It conserves the equilibrium of being.

1.6. Klein, Bion and Variable Responses to Uncertainty.

At this point the reader may feel that I have betrayed my initial scepticism towards identifying the grotesque as biased towards a particular response to uncertainty. How can Klein's writings, which emphatically describe the death instinct as mordantly negative, be sufficiently pliable to accommodate the intermittent pleasures of uncertainty that can be found in Dickinson's and Bakhtin's work? Klein's writings tend to promote the depressive position as the apex of psychological acuity, with the paranoid-schizoid position portrayed as detrimental to any sense of psychological coherence or linguistic stability. However, later Kleinian thinking (particularly Bion's) stresses that the

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74 Thomas Ogden, The Matrix of the Mind, p.72.
75 Recent philosophical expositions of Klein have tended to perpetuate this view of the depressive position as the overcoming of destructive, solipsistic and unethical tendencies. See C. Fred Alford, Melanie Klein and Critical Social Theory: An Account of Politics, Art, and Reason Based on Her Psychoanalytic Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Emilia Steuerman, The Bounds of Reason: Habermas, Lyotard and Melanie Klein on
attainment of the depressive position is not a permanent state, nor is its value static and immutable. Coherence and fragmentation, certainty and uncertainty are both vital to the ongoing project of identity. They are felt to balance each other out. Depressive coherence emerges to save the self from total disintegration whilst paranoid-schizoid uncertainty may intervene to change a static, atrophied existence.

Later Kleinian writings emphasize that paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions are in a continued process of re-negotiation and that a moderate caesura within the unbroken surface of comprehension is vital to ensure the strength and vitality of cognition and self. The oscillation between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, the variation between risk and certainty, provides the basis for the Kleinian conception of creativity. Klein observes that “though the rejected aspects of the self and of internalized objects contribute to instability, they are also at the source of inspiration in artistic production and in various intellectual activities”.

Bion was sceptical about the prospect of ever referring to being as complete and thus placed cognitive transformation, a self open and every vigilant to novel, unknowable experience, at the heart of his work. He uses the formulation PS\leftrightarrow D to describe this necessary interchange between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. These formulations allow us to demonstrate the interrelation of Bakhtin and


Kayser's different versions of the grotesque. Meaning requires the goal of depressive stability, the temporary coagulation of meaning, but this coherence must only be temporary to avoid stagnant or restrictive states of being. As Dickinson wistfully comments 'Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it- that is Life, is it not, Dear?' (L#1024, p.893). Life renews itself through continued immersion in its horrifying antithesis.

Dickinson's grotesque values both coherence and the sense of the world in flux; nothing can be final, static or complete, but equally nothing can be too fragmented. Dickinson and Bion both contended that the mind could not gain ultimate, final knowledge of the world, that cognition must aspire to process rather than conclusion. Bion supports this contention by citing Kant's description of the unknowable 'thing-in-itself' which could only be intuited through 'primary and secondary qualities'. The thing-in-itself can be considered equivalent to Leyda's description of Dickinson's 'omitted centre'. It posits a basic level of uncertainty between the self and the world. As Bion comments:

If there is a thing-in-itself, a thing which Kant would call the noumenon, all that we can know is about phenomena. When the noumena, the things in themselves, push forward so far that they meet an object which we can call a human mind, there then comes into being the domain of phenomena. We can guess, therefore, that corresponding to these phenomena, which are something that we know about because they are us, is the thing itself, the noumenon.

77 Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, vol. 1, p. xxi.
Bion argues that language and thought can periphrastically hint at unknowable noumena, but never quite fully capture its essence or 'presence'. This is not intrinsically a beneficent or detrimental situation for the self. It simply states that meaning is comprised of a chain of finite, interconnected statements. The relationship between language and thought, phenomena and noumena is never static, but oscillating and unsteady. Bion argues that whilst a certain short-term 'depressive' continuity is essential, phenomenal representations of uncertainty, noumenal realities should not prematurely harden into hermetic units that stifle further receptivity.

Bion also recognised that we need a theoretical model to conceptualize how these moves towards coherence or fragmentation are prompted by the self's interactions with specific discursive or linguistic formations. He supplements his Kantian formulations with a second model of 'container' and 'contained'. The mother's breast is thought to be the first, archetypal container since it is deemed to contain formless dreads in such a way that they are rendered tolerable and suitable for thought.79 Containing transforms persecutory splits within the field of experience into coherent, meaningful representation. As Bion's interest began to extend beyond the realms of the specifically clinical, the terms 'container' and 'contained' were broadened to encompass any point at which meaning and cognitive structures are congruent rather than antagonistic. However the relationship between container and contained is not

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79 Bion calls this process of detoxifying transformation 'reverie'. See Wilfred R. Bion, Learning from Experience, p.36. The mother's breast-as-container may be said to convert beta elements into alpha elements.
always conducive to the productive transformation of new meanings. Bion observes that sometimes the container's relationship to the contained is 'parasitic', which expresses 'the overwhelming of the content by the container'. He felt that the coherence and singularity of meaning associated with the depressive position could sometimes be detrimentally stifling. Bion's variable container and contained relationship can be related back to Dickinson's inclusive trope of 'Circumference' which is sometimes entrapping and sometimes liberating.

Bion's work allows us to see Kayser's fear of the grotesque and Bakhtin's celebration of it as interdependent within an economy of meaning that oscillates between the need for coherence and the need for liberating fragmentation. Dickinson gravitates towards one pole or the other on the basis of context. In order for paranoid-schizoid fragmentation to generate new understanding, two conditions must be met. Firstly, the degree of catastrophe must be sufficiently manageable not to destroy meaning entirely. Secondly, and most importantly for this study, it must be introduced into a 'container' or context that is felt to be claustrophobic and restrictive. The second and fourth chapters of this thesis are based around distinctive types of discursive or linguistic 'containers', gothic literature and embodying discourses respectively. In gothic scenarios, Dickinson's poetic self struggles to find a container of meaning that might save her from the terrors of uncertainty, whilst embodying

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80 Wilfred R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, p.95.
discourses are felt to be such restrictive, prescriptive containers that uncertainty is sought to shatter their stifling influence.

Bion's work also enables us to see how this PS→D oscillation is recreated in the interaction between text and reader. We may also use it to create a convergence between those who see Dickinson as liberating, subversive and ironic and those who find her a model of cultural pessimism. Daneen Wardrop presents one possible reading of Dickinson's poetic strategies when she argues that:

Dickinson leaves the reader waiting, anticipatory, unsatisfied, and, finally, anxious. Readers find themselves the victims of her work and, in the suspension of suspension of dis/belief, become the suspended factors themselves. Yet we must also accept that the reader does not necessarily come to Dickinson's text seeking certainty. Although the possible interpretations of a text are not infinitely diverse, our individual commitments to critical paradigms may lead us to describe these moments of suspension as pleasurably subversive. Text and reader enter a space of mutual engagement and transformation that brings into play the systaltic PS→D oscillation between uncertainty as welcome fragmentation of an opaque, semantic blockage and uncertainty as something to be 'depressively' tolerated and integrated into a singular, purposive motion. We can never entirely claim that Dickinson's speakers are destroyed by uncertainty, nor that they are enabled by it.
The following poem may be seen both as a comment upon the kaleidoscopic workings of the poetic consciousness and the experience of coming to grips with Dickinson’s text. It provides a model for the oscillations described above.

We see- Comparatively-
The Thing so towering high
We could not grasp it’s segment
Unaided- Yesterday-

This Morning’s finer Verdict-
Makes scarcely worth the toil-
A furrow- Our Cordillera-
Our Apennine- a knoll-

Perhaps ’tis kindly- done us-
The Anguish- and the loss-
The wrenching- for his Firmament
The Thing belonged to us-

To spare these striding spirits
Some Mornings of Chagrin-
The waking in a Gnat’s- embrace-
Our Giants- further on-

F#580A/ J#534

Seeing comparatively involves the simultaneous recognition of similarity and contradiction, harmony and discord that characterizes Dickinson’s grotesque. This poem is both a digression upon and a performance of these unprecedented transformations in the texture of experience. It maps out the fluidity of experience through playfully protean and dramatic shifts between different

81 Daneen Wardrop, Emily Dickinson’s Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge (Iowa City: University of
tones and vocabularies. Lines three and four do not merely register a change in perception, but a change in language types: The shift from ‘furrow’ to ‘Cordillera’ and then from ‘Apennine’ to ‘Knoll’ involves an oscillation between vernacular, Anglo-Saxon terms and extravagant, polysyllabic equivalents. The physical ascendance involved in changing position from trough to peak is matched by the aggrandizement of language. This rising and falling will continue indefinitely since the poet can only grasp a ‘segment’, never the whole (thing-in-itself in Kant and Bion’s terminology). Since no perspective can finalize meaning, the interchange of comparative perspective is designated an endless process of which the actual text itself may only be considered a ‘segment’, a portion of an infinite whole.

Once again, this poem situates this creative prevarication upon the threshold between mortal immanent existence and the unknown, transcendent ‘Firmament’ of God. ‘The Thing so towering high’ fuses the oscillation of perspective with an anxious emotional portent; the transformation will change or destroy the speaker’s identity. It involves the projected transformation of earthly loss into spiritual gain. However, the suggestion that ‘anguish’ is ‘kindly done’ remains only a ‘perhaps’, a possibility. The theological framework itself is only a segment, something that encourages the endless proliferation of conjecture. Since there is no single phrase or image that might allow us to narrow the scope of comparative seeing, the poem is given over to an episodic shifting around temporary points of coherence and stability.

Consequently, the act of reading does not involve the simple recitation of degrees and differences, it also demands that the values we attach to high and low, anguish and kindness should be interrogated. In the PS±→D transition, what is loss one moment may be gain from another perspective. The poem concludes with a relative pairing between ‘Gnat’ and ‘Giant’ that thwarts any simple attempt to label either one a superior or inferior option. A common understanding of these terms would lead us to valorize the giant above the gnat on the basis of stature and power. Here, however, the former is horrifying large and grand, the other detestably small and insignificant. The unbridgeable extremity of the contrast overwhelms the value that each term gains from their differentiation. Dickinson uses this contrast again in poem F#848A/ J#796 to affect a similar transformation of perspective: Giants are thought ‘ill at ease/ In minor Company’ whilst the Gnat is ‘Unconscious that his single Fleet/ Do not comprise the skies’. Our common understandings are challenged and dissolved. Whether this enable the poetic consciousness to see ‘Anguish’ and ‘loss’ as something ‘kindly- done’, or paralyses the understanding in a choice between progressively splintering options is unclear.

In this section I attempted to outline a theory that enables us to discuss how Dickinson’s poetry emanates from a precarious ambivalence. Her verse alternates between profusion and compression, luminosity and opacity, the poetic consciousness alternately desires and dreads the gaps in meaning that constitute a vital part of the poetic expression. The kaleidoscopic perspectives
available to the reader are matched by a fundamental indeterminacy within the poetic consciousness itself. We must ask how and why the act of registering a gap in meaning will produce beneficent changes in the horizon of understanding. In order to help us answer that question I wish to briefly discuss the sublime, a theoretical term that shares much common ground with the grotesque. The discussion will demonstrate that although both terms describe an initially troubling encounter with an overwhelming force or incomprehensible object, the sublime is broadly optimistic, triumphantly incorporating the unknowable power into the self. The grotesque is premised upon a more fundamental ambivalence, unsettling any secure conclusions.

1.7. Dickinson, the Sublime and the Grotesque.

Grotesque and sublime describe unusual subjective responses through the dynamic interplay of postulated mental faculties. They locate those moments of experience where cognition encounters an object that it simply cannot process and describe the effect this has upon the equilibrium of the self. Although there is a dearth of secondary literature comparing the grotesque and the sublime, I want to argue that the principle difference between them is that the latter tends to recuperate these moments of challenge to a renewed sense of coherence and cognitive capacity. Although there is a relatively substantial literature on ‘the Dickinson sublime’, these works tend to conclude that each moment of crisis contributes towards the enlargement of Dickinson’s poetic
conception and autonomy. The fearful possibility of cognitive collapse described by the grotesque is not strictly ignored, but it is underplayed. I will also suggest that the sublime tends to fill gaps in meaning with a posited authority, power or transcendent reality and rarely entertains the possibility of true, horrifying meaninglessness that is often present in grotesque experience.

These are small, but significant divergences that I will discuss in this section.

Defining the sublime with any accuracy is a tremendous task and it is quite impossible to do justice to the question within the scope of this thesis. Although this thesis will not use the term sublime in a systematic fashion, our understanding of the grotesque will benefit from a comparison with those theories of the sublime influenced by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. As Geoffrey Harpham observes, 'what is commonly conceived of as an opposition between the sublime and the grotesque is often a mere difference in point of view'. If we focus our attention on the Kantian sublime, then the scope of the inquiry narrows to the impact of an unmanageable excess/absence

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of meaning upon finite cognitive faculties. Kant enables us to describe the sublime encounter as an abstract structural interplay between knowing subject and unknowable experience/object. He enables us to separate the pure structural grid of the sublime from its varied, local manifestations.

Kant achieves this degree of abstraction by making his account of the sublime largely intra-psychic. It describes the interplay of two mental faculties that he referred to as ‘understanding’ and ‘reason’. Understanding is a hypothetical mental principle comprising pure (i.e. content-free) categories that organize sensuous intuitions into discrete objects and events that can be interrelated according to the laws of space, time and causation. The function of reason, as Paul Crowther states, is ‘to formulate ‘principles, that is concepts which seek to systematize and unify other sets of concept’. For Kant there are two main types of sublime, the mathematical and the dynamic. In the moment of the mathematical sublime, the faculty of understanding struggles to present an object that exceeds its synthesising capacity. If the mathematical sublime is presented in a vocabulary of dispassionate calculation and spatial quantification, then the dynamic sublime describes an encounter with force or power from which the self emerges less dependent upon its immanent, earthly

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needs. In both types of sublime, reason intercedes at the point of understanding's failure and converts the cognitive occlusion into an opportunity to remind the subject of his or her own supersensible free will. The supersensible is associated with the noumenal against the phenomenal. The supersensible guarantees free will because it is not bound by mere cause and effect relations. The challenges presented by this uncertainty are ultimately surmounted by supersensible freedom and the conceptual safety net of reason, which re-confirms the self's cognitive enthronement even at those points when they have manifestly been defeated.

Although the sublime is initially fearful, Kant confidently recuperates the moment of challenge into something that asserts the individual contains a noumenous, moral freedom above the sum of his or her phenomenological parts. I would argue that it is this faith in the supersensible, numinous dimension of the mind that provides a point to differentiate grotesque and sublime within Dickinson's work. She described the sublime in terms that stress its reassuring link with faith in a numinous reality. In a letter discussing the death of her friend Benjamin Newton, Dickinson claimed that he taught her 'what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublimier lesson, a faith in things unseen'[italics mine]' (L#153, p.282). She regards the sublime as a panacea, a soothing belief that an uncertain, mortal existence is ultimately governed by a higher purpose. The gaps or absences in language and consciousness that permeate Dickinson's work can (from one perspective) be

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89 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, pp.260-266.
seen as moments of sublime faith. an anticipation of meaning to come. In poem F#1013A/ J#999 Dickinson describes 'That syllable whose Faith/ Just saves it from Despair'. Sublime language produces hope from instances of traumatic discontinuity, it transforms absence into anticipation. The central question for the Dickinson scholar becomes how to distinguish those instances of crisis that are saved from despair by sublime ‘faith’ and those where the belief in ‘things unseen’ fails to materialize. This latter position may be fruitfully associated with what I have termed the grotesque.

Grotesque experience may be seen as sceptical about the existence of noumenal/ transcendant meaning. It is also ambivalent about whether noumenal/ transcendent meaning interacts benevolently with the cognitive subject (as we saw in my reading of F#1263A/ J#1129). Dickinson’s poetic consciousness is ambivalent about the unknown on both these counts. The recuperative faith in the sublime rarely excludes the horrifying possibility that the subject may experience a total collapse of hope, cognitive capacity and affective intensity (as conceptualized in Kleinian psychoanalysis). The grotesque emerges as a consuming scepticism within the sublime moment, although a grotesque entirely purged of sublime ‘faith’ would be unthinkable since unredeemed horror would deny the ambivalence essential to its functioning.

Scholars such as Gary Lee Stonum, Shawn Alfrey and Joanne Feit Diehl, have all stated that the Dickinson sublime is marked by a hesitation at
the point when sublime power and authority are imbibed by the poetic ego. If we agree with these critics then it would seem that my stipulated equivalence between ambivalence and the grotesque could have been reached just as easily through the judicious engagement with modern, theoretical appropriations of the sublime. The difference between this thesis and these other accounts arises over whether Dickinson can be said to choose hesitation and ambivalence in every instance. Since these critics seem to be arguing in favour of ambivalence as an achievement rather than a predicament, each instance of uncertainty is recuperated back to a sense of autonomous control. It is precisely this supremacy that the grotesque calls into question.

My second area of disagreement with these critics occurs over their implied certainty that sublime power and meaning exist and it is merely a question of whether this power can be incorporated by Dickinson’s poetic ego. The concluding pages of Gary Lee Stonum’s book usefully outline the distinctive features of what he regards as Dickinson’s sublime:

First, she imagines the world according to a phenomenological divide between self and other, or to be more precise, between subjectivity and alterity. Second, she experiences her own selfhood as inwardness and as

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will [...]Such inwardness can be threatened, but for Dickinson it always remains finally inviolate. It is not the creature of some other agency, in other words, and it never quite loses its phenomenological priority. Third, the otherness standing against or confronting inwardness is usually met with as an alien subjectivity, not a neutral object[...]. The fourth constant is accordingly that for Dickinson epistemological issues take second place to ones having to do with authority or sovereignty[...]. Fifth and last, Dickinson sees the relatedness of subjectivity and alterity as principally antagonistic. 92

If I have understood the argument of Stonum's book correctly, the poetic consciousness can experience force, authority, or power even at those points where it does not identify with or incorporate it. Power may be aggressively counterpoised against Dickinson's subjectivity, but it is always present. As Barbara Claire Freeman argues (following Jean-François Lyotard), the sublime does not present the unrepresentable, it presents the fact that the unrepresentable exists. 93 If the sublime guarantees the existence of the unrepresentable (in the very refusal of representation), then I would argue that the grotesque hesitates between cognitive occlusion as 'no evidence' and as 'evidence of nothing'. The grotesque, understood through the writings of Klein and Bion, enables us to entertain the possibility of sheer absence, meaninglessness and the unredeemed disintegration of the ego. Stonum's notion of an inviolate consciousness with a phenomenological priority begins to look less certain and more like one response to ambiguous instances of perception. The absence at the heart of grotesque experience is not necessarily the failure to recognise sublime authority but the doubt in the very possibility of

93 Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, p.11.
its existence. This important distinction is demonstrated by poem F=388.A J#430.

It would never be Common - more - I said -
Difference - had begun -
Many a bitterness - had been -
But that old sort - was done -

Or - if it sometime - showed - as 'twill -
Upon the Downiest - morn -
Such bliss - had I - for all the years -
'Twould give an easier - pain -

I'd so much joy - I told it - Red -
Opon my simple Check -
I felt it publish - in my eye -
'Twas needless - any speak -

I walked - as wings - my body bore -
The feet - I former used -
Unnessesary - now to me -
As boots - would be - to Birds -

I put my pleasure all abroad -
I dealt a word of Gold -
To every Creature - that I met -
And Dowered - all the World -

When - suddenly - my Riches shrank -
A Goblin - drank my dew -
My palaces - dropped tenantless -
Myself - was beggared - too -

I clutched at sounds -
I groped at shapes -
I touched the tops of Films -
I felt the Wilderness roll back -
Along my Golden lines -

The Sackcloth - hangs opon the nail -
The Frock I used to wear -
But where my moment of Brocade -
My - drop- of India -?
The poem charts a progressive disillusionment in sublime authority. The poem’s narrative moves from a ‘Common’ life to spiritual destitution through a passage of pleasurable elation. The events are related in the past tense with dashes frequently breaking up the lines into subject/noun phrase and object phrase. The last three lines of the first stanza are significantly heavy, monosyllabic and sound rather final, presenting the events as something that happens to the speaker as opposed to something she initiates. It is only in stanzas three and four, where the sublime endowment is most pronounced, that pronoun and verb are proximate and congruent. The poem’s ambiguous occasion is retrospectively patterned by the poetic consciousness in an attempt to prevent sublime elevation from being continually shadowed by a horrifying, traumatic void within existence.

Increasingly subtle tonal complexities unfold in the second and third stanzas. The projected relief of future pain by bliss unfolds time into a sublime vista- ‘all the years-’. Joy emerges as involuntary bodily sensation, ‘publishing’ through her cheek and eyes in a way that rendered ‘needless- any speak-’. The equation of necessity and language implies that writing is an attempt to fill an unspeakable gap within memory. Language attempts to impose on top of broken understanding. Equating unrepresentable truths with sublime transport is a key theme within Dickinson’s work. Poem F#1266B/ J#1207 argues that ‘The Truth never flaunted a Sign-’ and a letter to Higginson stipulates that Hills and the sundown ‘are better than Beings- because they know- but do not tell-’
Dickinson’s sublime reveals that a poem is always less than the silence it seeks to capture. Sublime elevation often carries the crippling uncertainties of the grotesque that work against the grain of optimistic expectation.

Stanzas four through seven describe the erosion of sublime enrichment under grotesque negativity. No explanation is given for this sudden change in fortune, nor any agent identified. The implication is that grotesque disappointment occurs spontaneously on the circumferences of experience. As we see in Bion’s formulation PS→D, change spontaneously occurs to prevent experience becoming totalizing and monolithic. Being simply begins to haemorrhage, images of generosity, opulence and pleasure suddenly dissipate. Where pleasure was once spread ‘all abroad’, it suddenly ‘shrinks’. Where once the speaker was able to dower the world, she now finds that ‘A Goblin-drank my Dew’. Affective resonance is depleted as meaning is sucked out by a repellent, vampiric entity. Stripped of wealth and then cognitive power, the poem produces its darkest evocation yet of sublime experience. The opening of stanza 7 is an example of what Cristanne Miller calls Dickinson’s parataxis:

Successive short sentences or sentence units allow a particularly quick movement from metaphor to metaphor, or from abstract pronouncement to particular example back to pronouncement[...]Consequently the opportunities for understated connection are multiple.94

The action of the poem blurs into undifferentiated sequence of actions and abstractions, clutching at sounds and shapes. The infinity of space is
disorientating rather than inspiring. Although the first person pronoun begins
the first four lines in an assertive fashion, the concluding impression is of
cognitive impotence. The poem illustrates the instability produced by
uncertainty upon consciousness. There is no point at which the sublime rapture
can gain a definitive purchase over the crippling ambivalence associated with
the grotesque. Dickinson’s speaker finally yearns for a ‘moment’ of Brocade
and a ‘drop’ of India; abundance has clearly been abandoned as impossible.
Any account of Dickinson’s sublime must take into account poems such as this
where the ‘omitted centre’ is a source of nihilistic absence rather than a
transcendent faith in things unseen.

Dickinson’s grotesque does not strictly negate sublime ‘faith’: it simply
renders it a possible outcome rather than a guaranteed one. The sublime is one
possible position in Dickinson’s sceptical engagements with the evidence for
transcendent meaning. The other position, as we will see in my chapter on the
gothic, is that the brain is immured in delusion, cannibalising its own thoughts,
tricking itself into unwarranted securities. The sublime validation of human
autonomy is intimately bound up with the notions of certainty and proof
emerging from situations of doubt. Poem F#1356A/ J#1333 is her most
dispassionate meditation on this perennial problem of proof. It is particularly
fascinating because the extensive annotations, variant words and revisions
gradually move the poem away from its initial faith in the sublime towards a
progressively more disillusioned viewpoint. Unlike Emerson and Whitman, the

two most boisterous, native exponents of the sublime, Dickinson could not sweep all possible contradictions and doubts up in the encompassing flow of her poetic consciousness. Grotesque scepticism nibbled continuously at her efforts.

A little madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown-
Who ponders this Tremendous scene-
This sudden legacy of Green
As if it were his own-

5 sudden] bright • whole • swift- 5 sudden legacy of Green] fair Apocalypse of Green-

Revision (1) 5 sudden] gay • fleet • sweet • quick (perhaps cancelling the alternative whole)
  alt 5 Apocalypse] underscored (forming quick Apocalypse); whole interlined below (forming whole Apocalypse)

Revision (2) 5 This whole Apocalypse of Green- rev (2) 5 Apocalypse] Experience- • Astonishment- • Periphery- • Experiment rev (2) whole Apocalypse] wild Experiment

Dickinson registers the sublime impact of spring upon ‘the King’ and ‘the Clown’, two figures of contrasting status and importance. The King finds spring’s sublimity relatively unproblematic since hierarchy and supremacy are ingrained and habitual. His sublime is ‘A little Madness’, because his status is largely guaranteed and immutable, the change of the seasons a brisk, invigorating tipple, but nothing more. Gary Lee Stonum suggests that the disparity of reaction between king and clown may proclaim the latter’s response
the more accurate register of the sublime’s truth. Indeed the poem’s light, understated tone suggests that Dickinson is ‘clowning’ around with the meaning of the poem, playing with sublimity rather than being in awe of it. However, I would argue that the poem is highly ambivalent towards the clown’s benign perplexity, celebrating his bliss whilst underlining the horrifying truth underneath his comforting assumption.

The final four lines of this poem elucidate the duplicity within sublime experience. The word ‘clown’ is complex since it could refer to a carefree being whose seemingly illogical pronouncements contain a kernel of greater wisdom and truth. In seeing the ‘sudden legacy of Green/ As if it were his own’ the clown is a quasi-Transcendentalist seer, enlarged through communion with nature. Alternatively, ‘clown’ could indicate a foolish believe that the ‘legacy of green’ belongs to him. The clown’s misattribution of power to himself might be said to reveal the bleak truth under the king’s haughty assumption. When Dickinson writes ‘But God be with the Clown’, she could be describing the clown’s imaginative appropriation of divine authority, or alternatively she could be imploring God to save him from the grips of an unfortunate delusion. In each of these double meanings, the uncritical encomium of sublime experience is troubled.

The extensive variants for ‘sudden legacy of Green-’ (line 5) give some indication of Dickinson’s prevarication on the exact value of the clown’s

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experience. This first draft concludes with 'sudden legacy of Green'. Each recension from 'sudden legacy' to 'whole Experiment' significantly alters our understanding of sublimity. The first version — 'sudden legacy of Green' — elucidates the shock of the sublime and the reward to be gained from its endurance. Spring brings a 'legacy', a measure of inherited wealth or status that may be said to equalize clown and king. The substitution of 'sudden legacy' for 'fair Apocalypse of Green' presents the sublime as a paradoxical alignment of benevolence and destruction. Each other appropriate variant, 'fair', 'gay', and 'bright' produces a similarly positive contrast to the apocalypse. Although these phrases capture the thrill and risk of sublime experience, unlike 'sudden legacy' they delete the issue of inherited power. The textual variants guide the reader away from a phrase where the 'gain' of the sublime is pronounced, to one where confusion and extremity are present without tangible endowment for the clown.

Subsequent revisions move the poem even further away from the question of sublime gain. Whilst the other considered adjectives contrast starkly with apocalypse, the combination of 'whole' and 'Apocalypse' cannot be said to constitute such a paradox. Wholeness may be equated with infinite or final meaning and therefore recalls Kant's mathematical sublime where the object exceeds understanding's capacity (though it lacks the dimension of force necessary for the 'dynamic' sublime). The substitution of 'Apocalypse' for 'Experiment' further increases the sense of conceptual abstraction and emotional disinterestedness. There is no sense of how the 'whole Experiment of
Green’ (the chosen form in the two other non-worksheet copies) impacts upon the clown’s subjective register. In poems F#191A/ J#300 and F=666A/ J#550 Dickinson uses the term ‘experiment’ to undercut the comforts of faith. It represents a momentary uncertainty, a surrender to conjecture that seeks but cannot verify numinous or sublime presence. To be overwhelmed by a ‘whole Experiment’ of Green is not to be excluded or overwhelmed by a verifiable force; it is to entertain the possibility that the ‘little madness of spring’ may amount to nothing more than faulty conjecture. As these alterations unravel over Dickinson’s worksheet, faith in sublime occasion vanishes under scepticism and bathos.

Dickinson’s treatments of sublime encounter leave room for the grotesque to emerge as an ambivalent uncertainty about whether absences in perception provide definitive evidence of a superior, transcendent dimension of meaning. The ‘legacy’ which is an integral part of the sublime guarantees the centrality of the perceiving subject. Where uncertainty is not encountered by faith or optimistic aspiration, the receptive consciousness threatens to collapse in nihilistic horror. The grotesque consciousness is always suspended between several competing explanations and positions, never able to enjoy the security of just one.

Wonder- is not precisely knowing
And not precisely knowing not-
A beautiful but bleak condition
He has not lived who has not felt-

Suspense- is his maturer Sister-
Wonder and suspense represent the two possible types of response to uncertainty, the one encouraging the ego’s expansion, the other reducing the self to mangled viscera. Wonder equates to my description of the sublime, whilst the deeper scepticism of suspense is closer to the grotesque. Wonder’s ‘beautiful but bleak condition’ clearly emphasizes sublime recuperation of suffering because its tone is oneiric and ennobling. It is close enough to not-knowing to keep ‘Conjecture flourishing-’ (F#1150A/ J#1128), yet sufficiently near to knowing so that a collapse into existential terror does not ensue. Dickinson’s claim that suspense is the ‘maturer Sister’ insinuates that wonder is marked by a naive idealism. Consequently, suspense is described as ‘the Gnat that mangles men’, the bathos of linking a profound ontological crisis with an insignificant insect recalls the ego’s collapse in the extremes of the paranoid-schizoid position. Suspense cannot even be securely identified as ‘adult pain’ since it may be ‘of itself a new misgiving-’, its province of uncertainty can extend infinitely.

As my discussion of Klein and Bion indicated, each challenge of uncertainty can enlarge the sphere of comprehension, but only at considerable risk. Dickinson certainly required the challenge of the sublime, but she understood that ‘The Risks of Immortality are perhaps its’ charm- A secure
Delight suffers in enchantment-’ (L#353. p.480). She also knew that ‘These sudden intimacies with Immortality, are expanse- not Peace-’ (L#641. p.661). The grotesque is the enemy of peace, a crack in certainty that breeds new misgivings. Risks and challenges are Janus-faced, promising a breach of transcendent thresholds, yet denying Dickinson’s poetic consciousness the opportunity to claim such moments as victory.

The previous writings on Dickinson’s sublime all detect hesitancy within her verse at that moment when the force of mystery of the sublime occasion supposedly reinstates the cognitive supremacy of the self in an enlarged form. Both Stonum and Helen Regueiro Elam stipulate that Dickinson never reaches that point at which supersensible reason produces elation from the terrifying defeat of imaginative terror.96 I would agree with this conclusion, although unless we allow the sublime a conceptual elasticity then critics such as Stonum, Elam, Alfrey, Feit Diehl et al are actually arguing against Dickinson’s inclusion in such a category. Does the sublime not ultimately require a conceptual allegiance to the elevation of the self, to magnificence, grandeur and power in order to guarantee its renewable validity as source of personal and political? Mary Russo has put forward such an argument, suggesting that the finitude of ‘noise, dissonance, or monstrosity’ contrasts with ‘that limitless, incommensurable, and transcendent space associated with the Kantian

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embracing openness, uncertainty and the loss of ego boundaries as a legitimate personal or political goal creates a vision of the sublime where any circumstance or experience can be recuperated as valuable and meaningful.

As I stated earlier, what differentiates each of these critics from my argument is that they describe the rejection of transcendent identification as a choice, rather than a horrifying inevitability. Dickinson criticism that uncovers radical poetic triumph in all circumstances negates the hints of horror, despair, bathos, nihilism and genuine meaninglessness that I attempted to outline in my discussion of Klein and Bion. Dickinson's undoubted greatness as a poet does not mean that we should expect to find a sense of greatness, achievement, strength and triumph continually permeating her poetic consciousness. Her work repeatedly stress the enormous cost of autonomous assertion in such a way that the reader may find himself/herself asking 'Was it worth it?' It introduces us to repellent, ludicrous images such as mangling gnats that simply cannot be used as the basis of a new, heteronomous consciousness. This thesis seeks to respect Dickinson's uncertainty by avoiding premature closure, acknowledging fragmentation of meaning and consciousness without turning this into a unifying principle in itself.

In the subsequent chapters of this thesis I want to discuss these issues about the nature and significance of uncertainty as historically contingent. Just as the grotesque alters its significance according to context, so much recent

97 Mary Russo, The Female Grotesque, p.11.
work on the sublime has focused upon the historical and discursive factors that transform its value in each context. Thomas Weiskel argues that the twentieth century has seen the sublime become a "moribund aesthetic" because we find enslavement to a jargon of ultimacy narcissistically offensive- "the sublime must now be abridged, reduced and parodied as the grotesque, somehow hedged with irony to assure us that we are not imaginative adolescents." If Dickinson critics celebrate scepticism, irony and fragmentation as a valuable end in itself, it may be because these strategies occupy the space vacated by a redundant sublimity. Of course, Weiskel's account has not gone unchallenged: Patricia Yaeger's influential work on the female sublime suggests that his negation merely increases the yearning for those same sublime impossibilities.

The politics of identity, autonomy and individualism divide Weiskel and Yaeger over the continued validity of the sublime just as they divide Kayser and Bakhtin over the grotesque. Weiskel wishes to defend the dignity of the individual, whilst Yaeger sees it as an impediment to new and superior forms of sublimity that "expand[s] toward others, spreads itself out into multiplicity.'

In the broadest terms, the late twentieth century has seen a renewed interest and respect in the sublime and the Bakhtinian grotesque as the project

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98 Suzanne Guerlac denies that a distinction between grotesque and sublime can be made without "implying that there is always some way securely to interpret one's way out of the grotesque (or catachesis), to pass from 'grotesque' to 'sublime' through a hermeneutic 'shift in point of view' which enables the 'new insight' (and, by implication, full meaning)." See Suzanne Guerlac, 'Delights of Grotesque and Sublime', p.53.


101 Patricia Yaeger, 'Toward a Female Sublime', p.191.
of discrete, coherent identity has become politically and theoretically suspect. In the following chapters of this thesis I will argue that Dickinson's work oscillates between Kayser's fear of the grotesque and Bakhtin's celebration of it precisely because she can only be intermittently committed to the supremacy and centrality of consciousness and the secure contours of individuality. Sometimes gaps in being or consciousness are terrifying inspiring a defensive retrenchment of being's existing foundations. Sometimes this uncertainty is liberating because identity and consciousness are felt to be restrictive. Radical challenges to the equilibrium of self and world are rarely encountered without some measure of ambivalence, but in many cases it may be said that Dickinson takes a relatively clear position. Using Bion's theory of container and contained as a theoretical scaffold for the interaction of self and culture, we can determine how and why uncertainty is received in one particular way.

The following chapters demonstrate the varied workings of the grotesque in a series of different cultural context contexts. Each of these cultural contexts encourages the poetic self to view uncertainty differently. My first chapter compares some of Dickinson's poems with the gothic, perhaps the genre with the most affinity with grotesque moments. Dickinson's gothic-tinged poems all display the poetic consciousness attempting to cope with a horrifying absence within the field of meaning. Gothic works centre on what we might call the fear and desire of uncertainty. The reader and the protagonists are both involved in a process of disclosure and concealment, progress and

102 See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p.32.
regression in an attempt to uncover a terrifying mystery. The gothic and the grotesque align in the conflicting experiences of fear and desire that cluster around the gaps in comprehension, demanding a meaningful resolution. The grotesque emerges as the moment when the themes and conventions of gothic form disclose their own representational insufficiency, blocking the anxious effort to bring the mystery conclusively into language. Dickinson’s gothic-grotesque tends to see uncertainty as more horrifying than thrilling or liberating. This is because her gothic is premised upon an allegiance with certain strains of Calvinism. Gothic teleology, which describes the problematic quest for knowledge, elucidates the compulsive search for grace, the ‘meaning’ of God. Just as the gothic mansion promises to disclose the dark secret, bringing unity to the events of the tale and demanding that the protagonist and reader engage in the activity of searching, so the Calvinist conception of God continually stresses the unbearable gulf between sinful man and omnipotent deity as something to be overcome through the active search for grace. In both cases the failure to heal the breach in the fabric of understanding is already designated as a situation of dreaded consequences by the discursive casement in which the consciousness finds itself. As such, I will conclude that Dickinson’s gothic leads her to view uncertainty as fearful.

My final two chapters offer different contextual situations for the grotesque and a correspondingly different balance between the fear and desire inspired by uncertainty. We move closer to the Bakhtinian spectrum of grotesque experience where the poetic consciousness manages to transform
uncertainty into something enabling, liberating and thrilling. In my discussion of Dickinson's relationship to her 'Master', the terrifying non-meaning is figured as a sexual molestation of the self, something which threatens to annihilate the poetic consciousness. Through tropes like the volcano, Dickinson demonstrates how the hostile alterity can be transformed and incorporated to provide the basis for a poetic autonomy. Dickinson's poetic self-conception involves something akin to a 'subversion' of the moments of horror through a complex renegotiation of male and female points of identification. It is this complex flux of poetic and personal interrelations which accounts for the diversity of responses necessary for grotesque ambivalence and, in providing such a complex site of possibilities, it simultaneously provides the means of escape from a set of identifications marked by their rigidity.

If my chapter on The Master demonstrates the emergence of the more constructive side of the grotesque, then my concluding chapter situates Dickinson amidst a number of complementary discourses that seek to stabilize and regulate the female body. This completes the move away from the grotesque in its gothic manifestation by its most beneficial, carnivalesque aspect. Dickinson holds these beliefs or conventions in extremely low regard and uses the disruption of the grotesque as a means of breaking open the surface of the spurious orthodoxy which reduced autonomy to mere complicity with all-encompassing codes of behaviour. Uncertainty is transformed from a horrifying threat to her cognitive integrity into the principle that elevates and liberates her identity.
2.1. Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Superstition and Internal Hauntings

In this chapter I want to suggest that gothic form entraps Dickinson's poetic consciousness in a state of terrifying uncertainty. I will argue that the gothic's salient features within Dickinson's work are its commitment to uncovering hidden meaning, even when the prospects of revelation recede at each instance. Meaning is felt to be a cure for the terrors of uncertainty. The gothic division of space into forbidden chambers and dark interiors structures a process of discovery that is duplicated at the level of language itself. Poems flow along a disjunctive chain of signifiers, ferociously interrogating language and experience as the poetic self seeks to escape uncertainty. However, I will argue that the process of escape from linguistic immurement becomes a further form of entrapment. Dickinson's poetic consciousness is caught in repeated, self-cannibalizing instances of rumination, the drive for certainty paradoxically producing ever greater uncertainty.

This intensive scrutiny manifests itself in a profound ambivalence towards the conventions of gothic representation. In the first half of this chapter I want to contextualize Dickinson's work by suggesting that she participates in a collective struggle by American writers to rid gothic work of its reliance upon 'superstitious' figurations and outmoded beliefs that prohibit the accurate registration of genuine personal and cultural concerns. I have equated superstition with an outmoded interest in the traditional trappings of gothic
work such as ghosts, haunted spaces, witchcraft etc. In the second half of the
chapter I will argue that Dickinson’s interest in gothic representational
insufficiency is supported by her inability to escape the spiritual terrors of
Calvinism. Gothic hesitation or rupture in the field of meaning maps onto the
failure to attain grace or election. Dickinson’s gothic provides a key site where
grotesque ambivalence is played out in relation to divine meaning.

I would suggest that there are two different ways to define the formal
characteristics of the gothic, a distinction which may help us understand the
problematic relationship between American gothic works and their
‘superstitious’ precursors. The more specific definition rests upon a group of
instantly recognisable and highly generic themes, symbols, narrative tricks and
strategies. The classic English gothic novels such as Horace Walpole’s Castle
of Otranto and Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho plus works from
Charles Maturin and Matthew Lewis (all of which were available to the
American readership) fall into this category. The second kind of gothic may
borrow an occasional prop from its unwieldy predecessor, but usually shares
only the mood of the gothic, the hyperbole and affective intensity generated by
terror, mystery and the violation of taboo. At this point, gothic can often be re-
described as ‘ghost stories, as horror stories, as tales of terror, of the macabre.

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick regards these gothic novels as so intensely generic that ‘it would be
possible to write a Gothic novel by the formula that would only be useful for describing a mid-
Victorian, or eighteenth-century picaresque, or modern one.’ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, The
of the supernatural, of the uncanny'.

Dickinson composed her verse in a literary climate hospitable to the latter kind of gothic and pointedly uncomfortable with the former. Indigenous fiction by Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and poetry by Alice and Phoebe Cary, Rose Terry Cooke, Elizabeth Stoddard, Sarah Piatt and Louise Chandler Moulton may all be considered gothic in this secondary sense. Each of these writers continue the traditional gothic interest in terror, mystery and desire, but formal gothic conventions are rejected as insufficient to articulate contemporary secular and religious anxieties. I will demonstrate that there is a palpable tension within many nineteenth-century American writings between a gothic dependent on generic themes and the need to find less stylized means of expressing social or spiritual predicaments.

The term 'gothic' risks diffuseness because it has been applied in such a broad range of contexts. Correspondingly, there are several 'gothic Dickinsons'. Some Dickinson scholars have followed Leslie Fiedler in defining the gothic as a

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3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides a near definitive list of such clichés: 'the priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; possibilities of incest; unnatural echoes or silences, unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable; garrulous retainers; the poisonous effects of guilt and shame; nocturnal landscapes and dreams; apparitions from the past; Faust- and Wandering Jew-like figures; civil insurrections an fires; the charnel house and the madhouse. The chief incidents of a Gothic novel never go far beyond illustrating these few themes, and even the most unified novel includes most of them.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, pp. 8-9.
confluence of psycho-sexual drama and terrified cosmic speculation. Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Barton Levi St. Armand see the gothic as a natural by product of the Calvinist temperament and world view. The unfettered horror and fear of Dickinson’s writing dramatizes the huge gulf between the inscrutability of God’s will and the omnipresent need for a secure human agency. Daneen Wardrop, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer a gender-based analysis whereby the previously invisible conditions of female oppression by an overwhelming, malevolent masculine archetype is disclosed and counteracted through Dickinson’s linguistic dexterity. Helen McNeil and Daneen Wardrop have suggested that Dickinson’s gothic becomes synonymous with linguistic and syntactic uncertainty. These critics share the premise that ‘Her [Dickinson’s] fear is gothic- the fear of a secret hidden at the core of something’. I propose to strip Dickinson’s gothic down to its core structures which are the penetration of secrecy and heightened emotional investment; discovery in Dickinson’s gothic is all-important. Her poetic consciousness is propelled towards its goal by the terrors of uncertainty.

This thesis follows these critics in suggesting that Dickinson’s gothic articulates a transgressions of social or discursive norms. Opinions differ as to whether gothic transgression is feared or desired by Dickinson’s poetic self. If we are to describe Dickinson’s gothic as a mode of transgression then it must be understood not as a gleeful loosening of conceptual chains but as a frantic attempt to escape from a situation already marked by debilitating uncertainty. Dickinson’s gothic transgression operates through inter-textual engagement with and revision of predecessor texts. The manifest, textual dependence upon subterranean spaces, ghosts, hidden manuscripts, sadistic masters and terrified heroines must be disavowed so that a more resonant, subjective ‘haunting’ can take place. Her poems reproduce gothic fear in the process of attempting to escape the formulaic restraints of gothic form itself. This struggle was collectively experienced by a wide range of American authors who were forced

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to construct imaginatively engaging works without resorting to an inherited
gothic form that was inappropriate for the task at hand and disavowed for
inappropriate ‘superstition’.

This phenomenon of intertextual engagement is not distinctively
American, nor a purely aesthetic question. It demonstrates an enduring, gothic
concern with escaping the past, a concern that stretches across different
contexts. G.R. Thompson and Richard Davenport-Hines have noted that gothic
fear (whether English or American) is ‘nothing if not hostile to progressive
hopes’. Thompson argues that English gothic locates the schism between an
optimistic, secular philosophy of ‘evolving goodness’ and an ‘abiding obsession
with the medieval conception of guilt-laden, sin ridden man’. Dickinson’s
gothic evokes a failed cultural repression, an entrapment within an inherited
language she seeks to supercede. The possibility that she cannot escape from
‘superstition’, from outmoded and spurious representations of numinous
meaning, points to a genuine, terrifying skepticism that the sanctuary of true
meaning will always remain beyond her grasp.

Dickinson’s verse invites the reader to view the creative engagement
with gothic tropes as a process of haunting. In a frequently cited letter to

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10 Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*
Thomas Higginson, Dickinson commented that 'Nature is a Haunted House- but Art- a House that tries to be haunted' (L#459A. p.554). Haunting may refer to the legitimate apprehension of ghostly, numinous meaning, but it may also indicate that consciousness is haunted by a false consciousness of inherited ghosts, a superstitious shadow cast across a mind seeking enlightenment. Although Dickinson suggests that haunting is poetry's self-conscious aspiration, autonomy and choice cannot be guaranteed by such a slippery metaphor. Haunting is potentially enabling and paralyzing, underscoring poetic achievement but only as a residue of a fearful encounter. One of Dickinson's terms for the tension between voluntary, enlightened gothic haunting, and being haunted by gothic limitation is 'possibility', which she outlines in poem I#466A J#657.

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

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

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

This poem examines the prospect of cognitive expansion through tropes concerned with spatial transgression. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Manuel Aguirre have both argued, gothic fiction is structured around the dynamic
organization of space, structuring knowledge into different zones. The subterranean chamber, the haunted house, the secret passage, the maze, and the sublime landscape are all used to elucidate the process of transgression and discovery, the division of space into prohibited or inaccessible zones provides a site for the realisation of gothic disclosure. As Gaston Bachelard indicates, there is always more in a closed box than an open one; mystery promotes the significance and desirability of meaning just as it suspends it beyond the reach of the inquiring self. Dickinson defines her house through its ability to close off or provide access to other areas of space. If the ‘Impregnable’ cedar chambers and the roof of the sky provide differentiation and opacity, the distinction between internal and external, then the windows and doors present access to experience beyond the walls of comprehension. It is this greater number of orifices or gaps within the house’s boundaries that provides the poetic consciousness with ‘Possibility-’. ‘Dwelling’ in ‘Possibility-’ does presuppose a stable or securely delineated location, but an open-ended commitment to re-situation, mobility and spatial transgression as a guiding principle of existence. The aim of this strategy is made clear in the closing lines: ‘narrow’ hands must be spread wide ‘To gather Paradise’. The mind must be open to continually shifting conceptual horizons. ‘Possibility-’ links us back to the trope of

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‘circumference’ where the poetic self must continually renegotiate the center of its understanding amidst shifting margins.

The poem provides the central trope of ‘Possibility-’ with an intriguing antithesis, ‘Prose’. The equation of prose with a stifling atmosphere is sustained at other moments in her poems and letters, not least in F445A/ J613 where Dickinson finds herself ‘shut[...]up in Prose.’14 If ‘Possibility-’ is an oblique trope for ‘poetry’, then the poem cited above maps out the difference between poetry and prose through the metaphor of spatial restriction. Poetry is preferable to the rigidity of prose because it offers a more permeable membrane between the inside and outside of the house. And yet, as we read and re-read the poem, attending to the lexical subtleties, certain counter-points emerge to complicate the poem’s surface optimism about ‘Possibility-’. The ‘Chambers’ that are ‘impregnable of eye’, present obstruction and secrecy where doors and windows proffer freedom. The image hints at gothic, subterranean passages where ‘Possibility-’ collapses into incoherence and maze-like confusion. However the clearest hesitation within the poem is produced by the word ‘Gambrels’, which can refer either to a distinctive, gabled roofing structure or to meat-hooks,

14One quotation from Dickinson’s letters support the contention that she used the term ‘prose’ to designate an enforced restriction and poetry to denote a kind of freedom. In a letter to (then) Susan Gilbert written in 1851, she comments, ‘but for our sakes dear Susie, who please ourselves with the fancy that we are the only poets and everyone else is prose’(L56, p.144). In a letter to her brother from the same year Dickinson equates poetry with a kind of freedom - ‘and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that its pretty much all real life’ (L65, p.161). Poem F590A/ J669 decries the novel as something that ‘dilute[s] to Plausibility’. She concludes the poem by claiming ‘Our Novel- When ‘tis small enough/ To Credit- ‘Tis’n’t true!’ Clearly Dickinson conceived of poetry in line with the trope of possibility that I am outlining here.
supporting animal carcasses from the ceiling of a slaughter house. Although the poem's general tenor favours the former reading, the horrifying alternative cannot be discounted. The discovery of this secondary, shadowy meaning against is itself an instance of gothic revelation. It recalls the shock disclosure of forgotten corpses behind secret panels. The space that allows a pleasurable reciprocation between internal and external worlds may also become an opaque and foreboding torture chamber, ready to spike the brave soul who ventures beyond its fiercely guarded thresholds.

In my introduction I suggested that the trope of 'circumference' was malleable and context dependent, sometimes a trope for sublime release, sometimes for painful entrapment. Individual poems can emphasize one particular aspect of 'circumference' or oscillate between the two. I would argue that 'Possibility-' entertains a similar mobility. Its expansive permutations combine and separate the fear and desire of transgression just as the structures of the house both release and contain. The gothic is a genre of possibility only inasmuch as it sustains our fear of or desire for the undisclosed. Since contradictory perspectives around uncertainty are the basic condition of the grotesque, then Dickinson locates one permutation of her grotesque aesthetic within the gothic staging of restriction and transgression. She gestures towards the necessity of constantly exceeding linguistic figuration, resituating textual boundaries, demonstrating a reluctance to remaining within the walls of the gothic haunted house. The 'possibility' of gothic tropes is released through a
reflexive, intertextual skepticism that challenges the surpassing rigidity of their forms. I now want to describe the cultural context of this dynamic that reconfirms the power of the gothic at the point where it disavows its dependence upon 'superstitious' ideas.

2.2. Dickinson, American Gothic and Superstition

Wallace Stevens once wrote that 'The death of Satan was a tragedy/ For the imagination'.¹⁵ For a whole host of nineteenth-century American writers, the opposite sentiment was true. The renunciation of superstitious preoccupations, of devils, witches, ghosts, and all other gothic paraphernalia was an essential part of confronting authentic, spiritual, secular and existential fears. Many American gothic texts are palimpsests, new expressions of fear articulated through the apophatic erasure of discredited ones. There are clearly distinguishable reasons why issues of authenticity and originality plagued American writers. Teresa Goddu's recent study has suggested that gothic is fundamentally antithetical to American culture because it betrays the self-conscious attempt to mythologize the new land as a site of purity and innocence.¹⁶ My argument describes the ways in which Dickinson seeks a kind

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¹⁶ Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Goddu's work focuses upon large-scale social tensions such as the ruin of the Indians and the horror of commerce (in Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*). Her argument implies that gothic constitutes a violation of the American Eden against the grain of its theological aspirations. My own approach is more in line with Edward J. Ingebretsen, S.J., *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell: Religious Terror as Memory From the Puritans to Stephen King* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1996). Ingebretsen's work (which will be discussed in detail at a
of linguistic or figurative ‘innocence’, an authentic expression or meaning unhindered by inherited superstitions and linguistic insufficiency.

Dickinson’s general skepticism towards figuration may also spring from an engrained, early Puritan hostility to sensuous or symbolic representations of the divine that continued to exert an insidious but pervasive influence upon the American consciousness. This is not to say that Puritan culture did not provide any imaginative conceptual scaffolding with which to grapple with divine questions. As Robert Daly argues, American Puritans did have a strong (and highly gothic) visual tradition exemplified through tombstones featuring skeletons, hourglasses, coffins, scythes, candles etc. Writers such as Edward Taylor remained caught between the existential necessity of rendering God intelligible through such figuration and the accompanying fear that sensual realization might actually obscure spiritual resonance.  

Although transcendentalism and more progressive liberal theology promoted matter and language as a conduit for spiritual essence, the prejudices of this earlier age almost certainly circulated around the conservative Amherst.  

later stage) argues that gothic experience is structurally inseparable from the effort to purify self and community.


against imaginative literature had been translated into a more secular vocabulary by the mid-nineteenth century. As Nina Baym convincingly argues, although resistance to fiction in general had softened, reviewers in popular journals continued to differentiate between ‘unnatural’ and ‘natural’ excitement. The concept of natural excitement demanded that literature should be concise, functional and didactic in content. Gothic fiction almost always fell under the rubric of ‘unnatural excitement’, the illicit over-stimulation of the nervous system at the expense of reason and moral growth. When Dickinson revealed that her father ‘buys me many Books- but begs me not to read them- because he fears they joggle the Mind’ (L#261, p.404), she was experiencing the general suspicion of imaginative excess. Moral and aesthetic discourses combined to castigate gothic form as an obstruction to the authentic depiction of self and world.

The pivotal issue of superstition, the adherence to retrospectively ludicrous beliefs, emerged as a critical stumbling block to the progressive, theocratic aspirations of American culture. To insist upon the continued relevance of medieval tropes from English gothic novels was to condemn the imagination to a contemptible gullibility and unregenerate pessimism. One text that articulates such cultural anxieties is Washington Irving’s ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’. Irving’s tale centers on the unfortunate figure of Ichabod

Crane, a lonely and pitiable schoolmaster who entertains romantic designs towards Katrina, the highly prized daughter of a local wealthy farmer. The actual events of the story are brief and comprise less than a third of the text. Ichabod, who "had a soft and foolish heart toward the [female] sex" seeks the affections of Katrina, much to the annoyance of her more eligible suitor Brom Bones. After a failed attempt to woo Katrina at a party, the dejected Ichabod is seemingly attacked by the headless horseman, a figure of local superstition: he is never seen again. However, the explanations of Ichabod’s disappearance are framed within the highly detailed presentation of his life, interests and character. This biographical picture directs our understanding of the tale’s purported supernatural events. It is Ichabod’s weak-minded commitment to folklore, fireside tales and superstition that unsettles the reader’s response to the story and also uproots any sympathy a contemporary audience might have felt for his untimely disappearance.

'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' exemplifies what Tzvetan Todorov has termed a ‘fantastic’ narrative. The fantastic occurs when a text wavers between ‘uncanny’ (initially strange, but ultimately amenable to rational, natural explanation) and ‘marvelous’ (truly supernatural and, therefore, purely fictitious) explication. Todorov argued that fantastic texts map out a process of discovery, whereby each narrative detail constitutes evidence towards either a final

supernatural or natural conclusion. Although Todorov’s framework is useful, it ultimately presumes that the implied reader can securely differentiate the fictitious/supernatural from the natural. ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ is concerned with the cultural necessity of separating fact from fiction, natural from supernatural, but its denunciation of Ichabod reveals a considerable anxiety about where the line between natural and supernatural is to be drawn. Indeed, the text contains a postscript where the attentive audience attempts to assess the moral of the tale and any question of its veracity is firmly rejected. His continued willingness to believe in whispered superstitions and discredited beliefs renders him a foolish and pitiable figure. Irving relates Ichabod’s whimsy to character flaws that would have been instantly recognisable to his readership. Through a steady accumulation of biographical data, Ichabod Crane is presented as effete, gossipy, gullible and laughably deluded in his ineffectual pursuit of Katrina. He is a bachelor school-teacher, ‘an odd mixture of small shrewdness and simple credulity’, admired by the womenfolk in his principality with whom he shares his passion for superstitious tales.

Irving’s greatest indictment of Ichabod’s character is the disclosure that he ‘was a perfect master of Cotton Mather’s History of New England Witchcraft, in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently believed’. Mather’s accounts of the Salem witch trials continued to provoke anxiety well into the nineteenth-century since it represented the enduring problem of

distinguishing true perception of the divine from false or deluded perception, where supposed devils are eventually revealed to be a hoax. In 1832 The North American Review published a review article that confirms the ongoing problem of separating truth from superstitious fiction.24

The mass of mankind are not philosophers, and they regard their own hereditary prejudices as too venerable to be surrendered without an age or two of deliberation[...]. Faith in witchcraft has been banished from the high places of the earth; but it is no more found in the pulpit or the judgement-seat; but it is still entwined around the hearts of many, and adheres to them as closely, as the consciousness of their existence[...]. Much of what passes under the name of superstition, when divested of its absurdities, is natural to the mind.25

Dickinson, Irving and a host of other American writers engage in the complex task of sifting absurd superstitions from the legitimate hauntings of consciousness: in order to become Captain Ahab or Hester Prynne, one must negate any connection with the hoax experiences of Ichabod Crane. Since English and German gothic texts were 'conspicuously literary', relying upon static, derivative textual codes, they provided a means for writers to reject a whole slew of extra-literary practices and beliefs as 'fictional', unworthy of

24 Perhaps the single greatest indication that superstition prevailed in Dickinson's culture is the immense popularity of mediums and spirit-rappers. Daniel Lombardo observes that there were over 2,000,000 registered members of the spiritualist movement in 1853, though some were highly earnest about the importance of their beliefs whilst others saw it as merely a recreational activity. See Daniel Lombardo, A Hedge Away: The Other Side of Emily Dickinson's Amherst (Northampton, Massachusetts: Daily Hampshire Gazette, 1997), p. 176. Ann Douglas and Howard Kerr both note that spiritualism (the belief that spirits could be channeled) was so popular until around 1850 that it was considered spiritually dangerous. See Howard Kerr, Mediums and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature 1850-1900 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 108; Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (London: Papermac, 1996).
serious and authentic imaginative interest. A number of direct quotes from different writers show how the manifest rejection of gothic form resuscitates the genre’s latent intensity. Charles Brockden Brown begins *Edgar Huntly* with such a claim in the name of cultural verisimilitude:

One merit the writer may at least claim; that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader, by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable. 26

Brown regarded his work as an opportunity ‘to exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country’. *Edgar Huntly*’s tonal hyperbole and its wholesale borrowing from gothic narrative techniques can be justified on the basis that experiences represented are grounded, however loosely, in an authentic representation of American cultural predicaments. In describing frontier events through a narrative structured around gothic techniques of horrifying revelation, Brown recuperates the gothic as an ‘amusement to the

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26Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1984), p.3. Nathaniel Hawthorne performs an almost identical rhetorical strategy in the opening chapter of *The House of the Seven Gables*. In order to maximise the gothic power of Colonel Pyncheon’s oppressive, patriarchal influence, Hawthorne writes, ‘There is a tradition, only worth alluding to as lending a tinge of superstitious awe to a scene perhaps gloomy enough without it’. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (London: Dent, 1907), p.12. Hawthorne wants to use a hint of gothic to cultivate awe, but does not want to sully his tale through tampering with superstition. Referring back to Brown, Donald Ringe sees his gothic work as a navigating the divide between reason and imagination. Ringe argues that Brown shares in the communal American rejection of absurd mythology and superstition, but rejects the uncritical valorisation of reason irrespective of character or context. As Ringe notes, Brown’s work is concerned with the entirely natural problem of perceptual limitation and the fallibility of the human mind. Although I will suggest that Dickinson’s work is also concerned with the malfunction of apperception, her interest in the mental is partially based in her concern with the numinous (something that is absent in
fancy and instruction to the heart'. Edgar Allan Poe was also preoccupied with prevented the gothic inflection of his work from being castigated for unwarranted 'Germanisms'. Although he acknowledged a gothic influence upon his works, he protested that:

If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul- I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results.²⁷

It is the need to legitimate their gothic work as an authentic depiction of an existential or cultural predicament that drives Poe, Brown and Dickinson to their aesthetics of suspicion. Bringing hidden fears and existential traumas within the field of representation always draws the self back towards debased, superstitious form and the possibility of false consciousness. Dickinson’s house of ‘possibility’ demonstrates that the only way to elucidate the mind’s true hauntings was to submit to the process of continual transgression. Representation must constantly exceed itself, question itself, haunt but never disclose itself. Her clearest statement on this subject comes in poem F#212A/ J#184:

A transport one cannot contain
May yet, a transport be-
Though God forbid it lift the lid,
Unto it’s Extasy!

A Diagram- of Rapture!
A sixpence at a show-
With Holy Ghosts in Cages!
The Universe would go!

In this poem Dickinson insists that consciousness must resist the temptation to present the excess of transport since presentation inevitably cheapens and distorts the experience. As the second line indicates, our experience of transport must only be one of anticipation: we must never yield to the urge to represent. The necessity of a temporal delay or breach is subtly enforced by the misspelling of ‘Exstacy’, which can be read as ‘Ex-tasy’. Transport disclosed through the lifting of the lid is always ex-stacy, something already past that migrates or disappears upon the moment of revelation. As we saw with Dickinson’s house of possibility, transport is produced through the apophatic negation of experience rather than through direct report. This poem helps us to understand that whilst linguistic transgression is a vital component of ‘transcendence’ (the attainment of Immortality or election via transport), they are not synonymous. Transgression is a commitment to displacement, whilst transcendence is transgression’s projected destination where the process comes to some form of conclusion. Since the state of transcendence can only be conjectured, apophatic transgression remains the only window through which a partial glimpse can be gained. In a letter to Otis Lord, Dickinson asks ‘don’t you know that “No” is the wildest word we consign to Language?’ (L#562, p.617). The word ‘consign’ suggests that the initial wildness of defiance or negation never retains its full
power once it has been committed to language. Dickinson insists that negation is an ongoing process, never a conclusion.

Lifting the lid transforms precious transport into debased vaudeville, available for a mere six pence. 'Holy Ghosts in Cages' make transport available to the self and the universe, but in the process experience becomes 'ex-perience'. By connecting the presentation of rapture with the dregs of public taste, Dickinson stresses that certain forms of representation are suitable only for common, enfeebled imaginations. She is perpetually wary of containing experience within language, even if the result is that the 'universe' or her audience remains troubled by fearful anticipation. Dickinson makes clear in the final two stanzas of poem F#1433A/ J#1400 that to 'know' a ghost revises the accepted understanding of knowledge as a progressive and cumulative endeavor.

But nature is a stranger yet:
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house.
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

The more directly one talks about nature the further it recedes on the conceptual horizon. The more Dickinson knows the more she is aware that there are untapped reservoirs of experience left to plumb the further away from them she gets. She demands that we resist the sirens call to premature 'simplified'
figuration. ‘Holy Ghosts in Cages’ are symptomatic of a superstitious, feeble imagination, craving cheap thrills and easy understanding. True haunting discloses how little one knows.

I have considered how certain texts comment upon the disavowal of degraded or superstitious motifs. Now I would like to discuss how certain American gothic texts enact these denunciations as a way of demonstrating the predicament of Dickinson’s poetic self. Harriet Prescott Spofford, a writer whom Dickinson admired, uses this strategy of rhetorical negation in her novel Sir Rohan’s Ghost. By turns parodic and serious, Spofford’s work produces two different perspectives on her gothic scenarios through the interaction of two very different characters. These are Sir Rohan himself, a dejected aristocrat of degenerate family lineage who is haunted by the ghost of his wife, and Miriam, a spirited, intelligent and highly irreverent young woman who is subsequently (and somewhat unsurprisingly) revealed to be his daughter. The unusual narrative tension of the story is generated by the fact that whilst Sir Rohan regards his predicament with unblemished seriousness, Miriam finds them utterly ludicrous. Unlike ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’, the existence of supernatural phenomena are not in question. However this does not stop the ghostly visitations from producing quite opposite reactions in the two central protagonists. Sir Rohan is trapped within the supernatural events, unable to avoid their consequences, whereas Miriam treats the scenarios as nothing more
than a story. She appreciates gothic excess for the sheer fiction that it actually is. Miriam is a savvy, inquisitive reader of the events as much as a contributor; she represents a position within the text where Spofford can engage with the reader's presumed skepticism towards the conventions of gothic story telling.

*Sir Rohan’s Ghost* never quite reconciles Miriam’s irreverent perspective with the need to conclude the narrative in a coherent fashion. Miriam never anticipates the revelation of her father’s identity and is powerless to prevent his sudden death. Her feisty guile and Spofford’s story telling both recapitulate the gothic conventions they seek to escape. This elucidates the central predicament of some American gothic texts: they must acknowledge and use discredited narrative conventions in order to move away from them. Dickinson’s poetic consciousness may be seen as oscillating between the disparate perspectives represented by Sir Rohan and Miriam. She aspires towards a critical detachment from supernatural figuration, but can never quite finalize her escape.

Dickinson’s poems may begin with superstitious figuration, but they progressively attempt to disavow them through strenuous introspection and apperception. Her poetry maps out the transference of gothic fear from the ludicrous belief in external ghosts to the authentic haunting of thought itself that Poem F#1211A/ J#1225 refers to as ‘The Subterranean Freight/ The Cellars of the Soul.’ Many of the strategies that I have observed in American gothic texts

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are described by Terry Castle in her reading of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Centering on Radcliffe’s use of the explained supernatural, Castle’s reading suggests that:

The supernatural is not so much explained in Udolpho as it is displaced. It is diverted-rerouted, so to speak, into the realms of the everyday. Even as the old-time spirit world is demystified, the supposedly ordinary secular world is metaphorically suffused with a new spiritual aura.\(^{29}\)

Castle’s work traces the transformation of external supernatural ghosts into the metaphorical haunting of the Freudian unconscious. Dickinson’s work might be seen as caught on the cusp of this paradigmatic shift, almost certain that external ghosts are fiction and just suspecting that true haunting takes place in the barely illuminated, labyrinthine passages of thought. Whilst I accept Castle’s argument, I would add an important qualification. Internalisation does not merely incorporate the genuine spectral presence, but also the possibility of superstitious, hoax or false moments of consciousness. The problem of differentiating real ghosts from false ones is repositioned, not dissolved. Dickinson employs what Paul Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of ‘suspicion’ in her poetry, whereby the relationship between consciousness and meaning is not endogenous.\(^{30}\) Instead, thinking goes into a free-fall, entangled in the perpetual process of unmasking, transgressing, questioning and surpassing. Ricoeur and Castle both make clear that describing experience as subjective or internal in no

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way confirms the centrality or autonomy of consciousness. Apophatic gestures ultimately create a new, curious entrapment within the process of perpetual negation.

So far in this discussion I have outlined two core strategies within Dickinson’s gothic: the staging of discovery or change through the movement across metaphorical spaces or boundaries, and the negation or disavowal of superstition. These motifs elucidate the desire to be liberated from entrapping beliefs, spaces, and words and move towards superior zones of meaning. However, they also express grave misgivings about permanent progress. Just as the house of ‘Possibility’ both releases through its openings and impales on its gambrels, so the release from superstition can be liberating or merely generate new forms of entrapment. Dickinson’s most direct consideration of this problem within the gothic and superstition is poem F#407B/ J#670:

One need not be a Chamber-to be Haunted-
One need not be a House-
The Brain has Corridors-surpassing
Material Place-

Far safer, of a midnight meeting
External Ghost
Than it’s interior confronting-
That cooler Host-

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop.
The Stones a’chase-
Than unarmed, one’s a’self encounter-
In lonesome Place

Ourself behind ourself, concealed-
Should startle most-
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least-

The Body-borrows a Revolver-
He bolts the Door-
O'erlooking a superior spectre-
Or More-

Dickinson maps out the transformation of external ghosts into internal ones, but she also suggests that the end result is an increase in terror and confusion. She appreciates that affirmative figuration can only be produced through negative equations. The poetic consciousness tracks a peculiar ambivalence, a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the gothic conventions it invokes, the endless corridors of the haunted house, the 'External Ghost', the crumbling abbey, the assassin and the spectre. Freud's influential essay on the uncanny regarded the 'compulsion to repeat', the periphrastic re-visitation of traumatic, undisclosed material, as the fundamental basis of uncanny experience. Dickison's gothic is premised upon the mind's continual proclivity to return to obsolete superstitions in the act of surpassing them. The poem could not proceed without these points of reference. Gothic superstitions and conventions are something that Dickinson must go through rather than around. Hauntings continually reposition themselves as an affront to the mind's aspirations. Daneen Wardrop suggests that Dickinson's gothic draws attention to 'the literary threshold inherent in the setting, plot, character, image, or language that causes

hesitation in the reader'. For the gothic hesitation to be sustained, the poem must disclose the insufficiency of each figurative equation whilst not discounting the possibility of affirmative, sufficient representation in general. Linguistic entrapment and transgression are seemingly incompatible and inseparable since only the former can provide the basis for the latter.

The relocation of haunting to interior chambers splits the self rather than producing an endogenous, self-identical relationship between subjectivity and representation. Dickinson knows that gothic subjectivity involves the shock of finding 'Ourself behind ourself, concealed'. Far from registering a metaphorical expansion of space as the centrality of the self is disclosed, the internalisation is represented by a spatial contraction of the world with a bolting of the interior chamber's door and, finally, 'The Body'. The poetic consciousness strips away the figurative external casing in an attempt to produce a pure, self-identical subjective predicament, but the attempt is subtly thwarted by the complex implications of the final stanza. The assertion that the body borrows a revolver to defend itself against the 'spectre' involves the separation of being into matter and spirit, phenomenal and noumenal components. The body takes defensive action because the spiritual autonomy has been lost to a haunting possession. Borrowing a revolver is technically ridiculous since bullets cannot harm internal ghosts. Even at this critical stage, the poetic consciousness misidentifies the nature of the threat in a manner that I have identified as 'superstitious', whereby

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tricks of the mind are treated as real. This continual threat of misidentification explains why the gothic endures in Dickinson's writing: it is a permanent warning of cognitive fallibility, it remains a language she is compelled to speak.

The ambiguous final line leaves the reader caught between contradictory interpretations. We are poised between admiring and horrifying responses to the recognition that there is something even 'More-' than the superior spectre of consciousness. On the one hand, the disclosure of further encounters provides an encouraging marker of psychological depth and versatility. Dickinson suggests that there will be no circumstances where the pattern of negative analogy should not be feasibly renewed. On the other hand, the poetic consciousness must engage in a ceaseless struggle for a conjectured meaning that it cannot reach. What emerges from the poem is an ambivalent tension within the field of consciousness. Meaning appears in the process of perpetual repositioning, recreating the positions of fear and desire in each successive moment.

The metaphoric shrinking of experience towards the somatic outline of the body produces the illusion that consciousness could experience itself as authentic, hermetic and unmediated if the invasive alterity of gothic language were obliterated. Yet Dickinson implies that the conventions of gothic representation (unspeakable fear, prohibition and enticement, entrapment and liberation) continually impose themselves upon consciousness. Poem F#877A/ J#777 addresses the isolation of pure loneliness and concludes that 'The Maker
of the soul/ It’s Caverns and it’s Corridors/ Illuminate- or seal-’. Even conceptually abstract conditions such as loneliness find themselves figuratively entrapped in gothic metaphors. Caverns and Corridors are both illuminating and sealing at any given juncture, but the liberating dimensions of the former can only be appreciated through immurement in language.

Dickinson’s poetic consciousness is split between what it can know and what it desires to know. This gap is both terrifying and illuminating. Her poetic self seeks out ‘internal difference-/ Where the Meanings, are-’ (F#320A/ J#258). The simultaneous exploitation and undercutting of gothic form creates gaps within consciousness and language. These gaps enable her to escape from superstitious entrapment within a false consciousness whilst continually projecting the apex of meaning somewhere beyond the horizon of each individual linguistic formation.\(^{33}\) The recognition of difference frees the speaker from one instance of horror only to recreate it anew in the principle of uncertainty itself. Helen McNeil observes that ‘To be’ and ‘to know’ are the most frequently occurring verbs in Dickinson’s canon notching up 719 and 230 references respectively.\(^{34}\) In order to be authentically one must know with certainty and yet certainty can only be approached by continually testifying to

\(^{33}\) Helen McNeil compares Dickinson’s linguistic practice to Jacques Derrida’s notion of difference which she summarises as ‘a not-quite-definable disjunction, a sort of non-principled principle of discontinuity’. Dickinson seems to be caught between an unflinching devotion to the attainment of meaning or ‘presence’, and the celebration of difference, of perpetual skepticism as an end in itself. See Helen McNeil, Emily Dickinson (London: Virago, 1986), p.6.

\(^{34}\) Helen McNeil, Emily Dickinson, p.10.
how little one knows. The experience of reading her poetry replicates gothic narrative strategies of incomplete manuscripts and unreliable narrators. Gothic themes such as the haunted house, the bleeding statue, the ghost et al occupy a metonymical relationship to undisclosed meaning; they stand in for meanings but do not fully disclose them. Reading is oblique, both leading and misleading, but non-participation is not an option. Terror and mystery are synonymous within the gothic oeuvre. Eve Sedgwick notes that adjectives such as 'unspeakable' and 'unutterable' denote both incapacity and prohibitive fear. The presence of superstitious figuration and emotional hyperbole within Dickinson's gothic propels her towards a point of realisation whilst denying that she will reach it.

In order to progress beyond superstitious, figurative entrapment, Dickinson dissolves the specific contours, neat conclusions and moments of revelation synonymous with gothic conventions into more amorphous predicaments. As Leslie Fiedler writes, gothic novels have a tendency to 'dissolve into its components, abstract morality and shoddy theatre' at their conclusion.35 Didactic resolutions appear abruptly, supernatural occurrences are explained (The Mysteries of Udolpho), family ties are discovered, mysteries are disclosed, the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished to fulfil the overarching moral scheme of the text. However the internal haunttings of Dickinson's lyric consciousness blur the distinction between inside and outside, entrapment and freedom, supernatural and natural, right and wrong. The closure

35 Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p.28.
of meaning must be resisted since it risks immuring the self in a moment of superstitious mis-recognition.

My next set of readings will consider Dickinson’s repudiation of ‘superstition’ as a broad strategy within her work. It is found where coherent or fixed linguistic figurations are avoided because they risk deforming meaning through premature closure. We will see an increasing emphasis on the duplicity of language as it is revealed to be both teasingly partial and horrifyingly incomplete. As I argued in detail in my introduction, this project is premised on the tendency of gaps in comprehension to produce multiple and often contradictory meanings. In Dickinson’s gothic poems move between the authentic examinations of internal haunting and the futile, bathetic possibility that the mind may be grasping at shadows of its own making. The haunting that promises revelation may be no more than a trick of the light, confronting consciousness with its gullibility rather than its centrality. Sharon Cameron has argued that dialectical experience is a key structure within Dickinson’s verse. In her analysis of the following poem, F#355A/ J#510, Cameron indicates that ‘‘It was not Death’’ insists on the problematic features of the double-ness of names and insists, also, that it is this doubleness that has the power to liberate us’. The poem charts the interrelation of vividly realized antithetical positions before internalising the dialectic process in a singular, paralysing moment. As with

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down-
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos- crawl-
Nor Fire- for just my marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool-

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine-

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And `twas like Midnight, some-

When everything that ticked- has stopped-
And space stares- all around-
Or Grisly frosts- first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground-

But, most, like Chaos- Stopless- cool-
Without a Chance, or spar-
Or even a Report of Land-
To justify- Despair.

The poem may be said to take place around three distinct acts of doubling or division. The first two stanzas operate through apophatic equations, producing a dialectic between description and its unspeakable antithesis. The third and fourth stanzas introduce a split at the level of consciousness, whereby the speaker becomes a passive spectator in her own drama. The fifth and sixth stanzas
dissolve the coherence and authority of consciousness into the transient, self-differentiating texture of experience itself. We might understand this in Mutlu Blasing's terms as a progression from metonymical to ironic poetic strategies. The poem initially uses relatively concrete relations between words and meanings, but ultimately the trajectory towards meaning becomes mired in self-reflexivity, opening up gaps where haunting can take place.

Helen McNeil suggests that gothic language proceeds through metonym and synecdoche, irregular, incomplete and unprecedented patterns of meaning. The opening two stanzas proceed through analogies that are, on the surface, concise and reasonable but are ultimately trite and unsophisticated. The first two lines compare death with the physical position of a corpse. The assertion that 'all the Dead, lie down-' renders a potentially terrifying mystery indistinguishable from other forms of inertia, such as the simple position of the body asleep. In the third and fourth lines, the speaker verifies that she cannot be talking about night because she can hear noon chimes. The seriousness of the thinking process is undercut by comparing church bells with naughty children that 'Put out their tongues, for Noon'. The horrifying element of the poem is highlighted by the

37 Blasing follows Kenneth Burke in locating four 'master tropes' within American poetry: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Metonymy is 'a strategy for reducing the intangible to the tangible, the immaterial to material proofs, manifestations, signs' whilst irony 'expresses two meanings simultaneously: at once affirming and denying the proposed relationship[...]Irony is thus polyphonic and consciously comments on the nature of linguistic substitution and questions the generation of meaning through such deviant means'. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp.4-5.
39 The representational contexts governing the female corpse will be discussed fully in my chapter on the body.
possibility that 'put out' might actually mean cut out. If the bells lose their tongues, then what is actually 'put out' is silence and the inability to speak becomes permanent. Dickinson invites us to consider the operation of consciousness upon silence or absence, something superior to the transparently inadequate equations of the first two stanzas. We are seduced by the vivid, humorous quality of these descriptions even as we recognize their limitations. The second stanza makes the question of seduction more apparent as the contrasts of heat and cold play out in a contradictory erotic melange of sensation. At this point, the effort to distinguish a singular, asymmetrical experience is abandoned as the consciousness transforms paradox into an instance of singular cognitive inclusiveness—the experience 'tasted, like them all'. If this moment of synthesis is necessary for the poetic consciousness to overcome the reliance upon negative equation then the respite from confusion is only temporary. As Sharon Cameron notes:

The power of these negations is revealed in how firmly they stake out the territory of the known until all that is left is the vague and terrifying inference that this state is worse than physical death because, having most of its attributes, it is denied any of its reliefs: outside of time, it does not end.

Although the poem continually alludes to the external manifestations of death (the chancel at the altar, the figures waiting for burial), its essential significance remains beyond comprehension. The effect of reading the poem is markedly

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40 Dickinson uses 'put out' in this sense in poem F#336A/ J#327 'Before I got my eye put out'.
similar to the conclusion of F#407B/ J#670: death is always ‘More-‘ than the sum of the representations used to describe it.

In the third and fourth stanzas the poem relocates the lacuna to the level of perception, whereby the self is both subject position and a corpse to be observed. In addition to complicating the vital distinction between subject and object, the poem collapses the contingent distinction between creator and the created, poem and poet. The ‘Figures I have seen/ Set orderly, for Burial,’ could refer either to physical bodies or to linguistic ‘figuration’, the capacity to understand and represent experience. Body and language are ‘Set orderly, for Burial’, but Dickinson’s gothic poems make clear that ‘orderly’ language merely hardens into spurious orthodoxy and deadening opacity. When language and subjectivity dwell upon the corpse, they risk an enforced assimilation of its static numbness, a notion more clearly expressed in poem F#341A/ J#281 where Dickinson observes that ‘Looking at Death, is Dying-.’ Figuration traps the poetic consciousness, immuring it in the objects of perception. To have one’s life ‘shaven,/ And fitted to a frame’ refers to both a coffin and a picture frame. The linguistic key that might open the coffin and resuscitate the corpse is nowhere to be found. Perception and figuration becomes reversed into helplessness as the self is written into entombment.

Since there are no pronouns in the final two stanzas, it seems to demonstrate the subject’s dissolution at precisely that point where the
experience's subjective qualities are most pronounced. In my introduction I suggested that these moments within Dickinson's work corresponded to Klein's paranoid-schizoid position where experience splinters to the point where there is no 'I' at its center. The subjective self becomes an otiose satellite position, aimlessly haunting its own disjunctive consciousness. The ticking of time that initially enabled experience to be ordered around the poles of night and day has ceased: the space that previously constricted the self has become a vast sentence that 'stares all around-' without any seeming seeing anything. 'Chaos' is paradoxically both 'Stopless-' and 'cool-'; it is ceaseless in its proliferation of fragments, but simultaneously as cool, rigid and static as the corpse. The poem has moved decisively from simple, negative analogies to nebulous metaphors and yet has come no closer to naming its subject. In an earlier poem, Dickinson describes how different types of language fail to represent death in different ways:

There's something quieter that sleep  
Within this inner room!  
It wears a sprig upon it's breast-  
And will not tell it's name.  

Some touch it, and some kiss it-  
Some chafe it's idle hand-  
It has a simple gravity  
I do not understand!  

I would not weep, if I were they-  
How rude in one to sob!  
Might scare the quiet fairy  
Back to her native wood!  

While simple-hearted neighbors
Chat of the "Early dead"-
We-prone to periphrasis.
Remark that Birds have fled!

F#62A/ J#45

The simple neighbors perceive merely the absence of life in the "idle hand" and "simple gravity" of the corpse. The poet avoids gross corporeality through "periphrasis". Dickinson seems to be implying that one confronts the facts too directly, the other not directly enough whilst the truth slips through the middle. "Death's immediately-" (F#1450A/ J#1420) is both more than the metonymic equation with the dead body and the figurative perception of the departing soul. Although periphrasis seems closely related to Dickinson's tropes of "circumference", "Possibility-" (F#466A/ J#657), and "More-" (F#407B/ J#670), it is rather more circumspect in its endorsement of oblique poetic strategies as a means of escaping linguistic entombment. What poem F#355A/ J#510 makes clear is that the obliqueness of poetry resituates the problems posed by the objective condition of the corpse within the subjective plane. The exchange of gothic, claustrophobic entrapment for dissipating, agoraphobic expanse within subjectivity merely turns the problem upon its head. The final two lines leave the poetic self in a state of pause, neither able to confirm nor deny any option. "Despair", the poem's final word, may be seen either as a moment of definition, or the acceptance that definition will never be possible. In poems F#466A/ J#657 and F#407B/ J#670, I argued that a slippage in meaning enabled the self to escape from an enclosing meaning, but here the situation is quite different. In
this poem, 'Despair' transforms the pause in meaning and being into something depressingly permanent. It reconfirms entrapment at precisely the moment when liberation from static figuration seems most accessible.

I have tried to suggest that the gothic tropes of entrapment, liberation, and haunting are inseparable from the basic conditions of figuration. There is no hermetic, complete and self-identical logos in Dickinson’s work. Each act of language is only ever partial; they open certain doors and close off others. The blanks of consciousness and representation resituate themselves as an essential precondition of meaning. Gothic language is not fully under the poet’s control, it pre-structures the unfurling of experience within the poetic consciousness into speakable and unspeakable components. I have equated this cyclical sequence with the repeated disavowal of superstitions as they threaten to trap consciousness in a prematurely finalized meaning. The possibility of a new language and consciousness is premised upon this moment of skeptical surpassing. Not-knowing propels these poems towards the distant possibility of certainty. In poem F#466A/ J#657 the organizing trope of 'Possibility-' indicates that the poetic autonomy initiates the endless transgression of positions. I would now like to consider a poem where the reverse is true. Since gothic tropes are felt to structure linguistic expression, Dickinson reverses the relationship between tropes and consciousness, so that the latter is felt to be determined by the former. Haunting by superstitious, gothic language overwhelms the poetic
self. She is immured in the coffin of linguistic restriction from the moment she attempts to articulate her predicament.

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

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

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

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

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

F#340A/ J#280

This poem defeats the teleological prospect of discovery by making time circular. As Sharon Cameron notes, the funeral causes the speaker’s death which is the very event it was supposed commemorate. The initial definition proves to be the poet’s epitaph. David Porter argues that many of Dickinson’s poems

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42 Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time*, p.98.
are preoccupied ‘with afterknowledge, with living in the aftermath’. Memory is not merely an ‘organising force’, but something already organized, structured and haunted prior to any recollection. Experience and its commemoration occupy an impossible overlap of time. Gothic figuration commemorates the death of consciousness in advance of its actual occurrence, shaping the experience according to a predetermined teleology. Although the final line suggests that the speaker ‘Finished knowing- then-’ this seems a disingenuous claim. What exactly can be known or recalled here, except the structuring tendency towards recollection? The poetic consciousness, like the mourners, goes ‘to and fro’, repetitiously crossing the same ground without seeming purpose.

The first stanza makes clear that the images binding the poem into a relatively coherent tale of mental breakdown are a false consciousness that make it seem as though ‘Sense was breaking through’. Statements are all carefully qualified (she thought that her mind was going numb, it was as if the Heaven’s were a bell etc.), although this capacity for doubt does not stop the speaker accepting the general tenor of her figuration as true. The word ‘sense’ is rich in lexical layers; it can refer to sanity, the data provided by the five bodily senses, or the general question of intelligibility. As we read and re-read the poem what becomes apparent is that ‘sense’, in whatever ‘sense’ one takes it, never emerges. It is the experiential crescendo of numbing absence that breaks through

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and instigates what might be described as the repetitious pulsation of blankness. The poem may be compared to Poe’s tale ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ where the pulse of existence is obsessively expanded by the narrator’s obsessive attempts to render experience intelligible. Poe’s narrator is haunted by the pale blue eye of another man, although he claims it is ‘impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain’. How the idea got there swiftly takes second place to its impact. In the act of murdering the old man, he is overwhelmed by the sound of a heart, a sound that returns to haunt him and force him to confess. The most obvious interpretation of Poe’s story stipulates that the narrator foolishly (or superstitiously) attributes his own rapid palpitations to the old man. As with poem F#340A/ J#280, the teleology is premised upon a false consciousness that precipitates its own downfall through a self-fulfilling prophecy. A ‘tell-tale’ heart may be both a heart that tells its owner’s secrets and a heart that literally makes stories out of nothing.

Dickinson’s poetic consciousness attempts to render experience intelligible by transforming absence (or ‘ab-sense’) into something concrete, the overwhelming presence of nothingness. Being is like an ear, a receptacle but not an autonomous agent. The infinite (or perhaps simply indivisible and monotone) tolling of heaven finds itself wrecked with silence, being is filled with a void. In my introduction, I argued that conscious states where meaning and affective


intensity simply drained away into absence constitute the negative side of
grotesque experience (as described through the Kleinian framework). This poem
demonstrates that identity and memory are nothing more than a tale erected
upon unsustainable foundations. Although the pronoun ‘I’ is used liberally
throughout the poem, the assertive centrality of consciousness is undermined by
the littering of mental faculties across the stanzas. ‘Brain’, ‘mind’, ‘Soul’,
‘Being’ and ‘Reason’ are not used with a discernable specificity and merely
reinforce the impression of an endless and unproductive traversal of
consciousness. I have argued that gothic conventions often engender possibility
through the ongoing transgression or disavowal of linguistic boundaries. I have
also suggested that we may profitably understand instances of linguistic closure
as (by definition) premature and thus comparable to superstition, which imposes
a spurious order upon discontinuous experience. Against the background of
these conclusions, I would argue that this poem represents the collapse of
consciousness due to the inability to disavow or escape the ‘superstitious’
figuration of its own funeral.

2.3. The Gothic and the Grotesque.

In this section I want to relate Dickinson’s gothic back to Wolfgang
Kayser’s negative view of the grotesque, which I equated with a desire to
preserve the coherence of being and a corresponding fear of uncertainty. I also
want to use Klein and Bion to describe the phenomenology of Dickinson’s
imagery, specifically where it relates to cognitive disintegration. Superstition,
which I described as a point of premature closure in the field of comprehension, is intimately bound up with the coherence of the poetic ego. In knocking away the possibility of linguistic stability and certainty, the unity of consciousness is revealed to be a superstitious delusion. When this happens, the mind becomes occluded, devoid of option and drained of affective resonance and intensity: belief in ultimate meaning is fatally eroded because it cannot be distinguished from a mere misapprehension of the banal, fragmented and common place. In the following two poems I will demonstrate that a catastrophic split occurs at the moment of superstitious figuration. The aspiration towards a transcendent moment is shadowed by the bathos of a finite consciousness.

I heard a Fly buzz- when I died-
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air-
Between the Heaves of Storm-

The Eyes around- had wrung them dry-
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset-when the King
Be witnessed- in the Room-

I willed away my Keepsakes- Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable- and then it was
There interposed a Fly-

With Blue- uncertain- stumbling Buzz-
Between the light-and me-
And then the Windows failed- and then
I could not see to see-

F#591A J#465
Dickinson works from the cultural tension between the social and ritual aspects of dying, and the anticipated moment of transition within consciousness when the afterlife is sensed. The second stanza of the poem describes an excess of crying and the mental anticipation of the 'King's' arrival. Nineteenth-century mourning culture, extensively described by Ann Douglas, James Farrell and others, produced ornate rituals to commemorate and preserve the social identity of the deceased even as actual death took place. The culture of mourning was intended to be a panacea for collective spiritual anxieties, but was perceived by some to have toppled over into sentimental kitsch, an overindulgence cultivated for the relief of the effete and feeble-minded. Presenting an un tarnished picture of the deceased to placate the living occupies the same position of cultural disdain as superstition: both were deemed a mix of unlearned theological digression, outmoded belief and cheap, sensationalist presentation. Although it would be inaccurate to claim that Dickinson's work entirely circumnavigates these concerns, she tends to portray immortality as discontinuous with (and thus promising an end to) earthly concerns rather than their fulfillment. The appearance of 'the King [...] in the Room-' may be the promise of transcendence, of the 'Immortality' that Dickinson strives after in other poems. However, it is important to note that the poem does not make it clear whether it is the mourners or the deceased that actually anticipate the king's arrival. Given that

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the poem's final stanza works quite emphatically against the possibility of anything being 'witnessed', the more likely interpretation makes the King a product of the mourner's expectations than the deceased's aspirations.

The fly is the grotesque double of the King, a harbinger of mere physical death rather than spiritual accession. Its intercession complicates both the rites of mourning and the passage into death. As a symbol of decay, it denies the sentimental gloss over the corporeal facts of physical decay.  

The cunning double meaning of 'interposed' suggests that the fly both interrupts the speaker's experience and begins to consume flesh. The 'portion' that is 'assignable' refers both to keepsakes and reinforces the notion of the body as food for the insect intruder. The black humour subverts the cherished, social sanctity of the occasion. However, this self-same focus upon repressed corporeality simultaneously binds the poetic consciousness into a mortal, finite position from which transcendence cannot occur. The gothic focus upon death as a transitional moment across a figurative threshold is denied.

Dickinson uses the image of insects sparingly but consistently throughout her poems and letters as a marker of terrifying uncertainty.  

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46 These ideas will be outlined in much greater detail in my chapter on embodiment.  
48 This does not include the bee, which enjoys an entirely different and far more positive treatment in Dickinson's verse. Richard Rabinowitz documents the significance of the bee in the American cultural consciousness. He suggests that the bee links industrious activity with sociability and pleasure. Evangelicals castigated the bee as the spirit of uninhibited
are inconsequentially small entities that take on particularly unsavory connotations in relation to dirt and death. The fly is also associated with buzzing, the irritating persistence of an undifferentiated, flat monotone sound, a petty, earthly torment. The fly seems markedly different from the other natural minutia that recur across Dickinson’s verse. It does not represent a treasured, clandestine pocket of meaning outside mortal life, but exists only as a principle of disruption, a perpetual torment that erodes by inches and degrees. It is perhaps Dickinson’s ultimate symbol of grotesque horror since it lacks the necessary drama or power that might endow it with sublime recompense. ‘Crumbling’ as she observes in poem F#1010A/ J#997 ‘is not an instant’s Act’.

‘Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul  
A Cuticle of Dust  
A Borer in the Axis  
An Elemental Rust-

Ruin is formal- Devil’s work


Andrew Delbanco offers some interesting insights into the links between evil and insidiously slight phenomena within American literature (particularly the literature of the south). Delbanco argues that cultural impetus towards the validation of enterprise and commerce as divinely sanctioned meant that evil became heavily associated with sloth, mediocrity and the conspicuous lack of magnificence. I would argue that the Dickinson’s fly is a potentially demonic presence which substitutes sublime terror for the horrifyingly bathetic. See Andrew Delbanco, The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995), pp. 43-45.

These minutia range from individual flowers and jewels, to lowly fauna such as cats, spiders, worms, snakes, butterflies, bees etc. Paula Bennett has suggested that nineteenth-century women poets tend to focus upon details at the expense of a more panoramic subject matter (associated with a masculine perspective). Paula Bennett, Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), p.103.

The relationship between the detail and the over-arching order in art has been explored in detail by Naomi Schor, Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen, 1987).
Consecutive and slow-

For Dickinson, the fly and the Devil worked through steady, monotonous and inconspicuous means. The buzz of the fly may be compared to the meaningless pulse of existence that overwhelms consciousness in poem F#340A/ J#280. In a similar statement, Dickinson commented to Samuel Bowles that the ‘Bareheaded life-under the grass-worries one like a Wasp’ (L#220, p.364). The worry of the wasp is not the fear of death as a moment of passage, but of a ‘bareheaded life’, which I take to mean fear of becoming carrion without spiritual recompense. Ultimately, Dickinson links the appearance of these insects to a gradual degeneration of faith. Her comment (in a letter to Mrs. Bowles) that ‘The Dust like the Mosquito, buzzes round my faith’ (L#235, p.377) suggests that the ‘dust’ of human corporeality must be cleared away before faith can grasp its target. The fly eats away at spiritual faith by transmogrifying it into base flesh and somatic numbness.

The Truth, is Bald- and Cold-
But that will hold-
If any are not sure-
We show them- prayer-
But we, who know,  
Stop hoping, now-

F#341A/ J#281

Death, presumed to be the gateway to the numinous, is revealed to be nothing more than consciousness aware of its rotting, fleshy container. Both sentimental
mourners and the dying, individual consciousness seek a meaning within the moment of death that the fly denies.

The incessant buzzing of the fly transforms the narrow threshold of death into ‘A fundamental pause’ (F#101A/ J#997). Memory and anticipation are swallowed up by the experience of the present. The fly may be productively understood in Wilfred Bion’s terms as a ‘no-object’, which I equate with the grotesque at its most threatening. The ‘no-object’ occurs when the splitting that is used to separate good and bad objects is so severe that the objects disintegrate leaving a terrifying hole in the field of meaning.

Tolerance of frustration involves awareness of the presence or absence of objects, and of what a developing personality later comes to know as “time” and [...] “space”. The factors that reduce the breast [object] to a point, reduce time to “now”. Time is denuded of past and future. The “now” is subjected to attacks similar to those delivered against space [...] It is both exhausted and split.52

The horror produced by the gap in comprehension traps the self in an empty ‘now’, robbing the event of meaning or possibility. The poem describes ‘between-ness’ on all levels: the air is still as if between storms, the witnesses have finished crying and are waiting for ‘the king’, and the speaker has given away her keepsakes. Uncertainty has become a static condition between past and future with the fly representing the meaningless present. It blocks the course of events, obstructing the light with ‘Blue-uncertain stumbling Buzz.’ The reader is unable to tell whether waiting for the king is a hope in vain.
The precise meaning of the last line must be unpacked very carefully since it provides an invaluable example of how the grotesque undermines the centrality of consciousness. There is a subtle yet all-important difference between not being able to see and being able to see that there is nothing there. The former describes darkness as a crippling failure of consciousness; meaning may well exist beyond the threshold of death, but the speaker will never know. The latter would at least confirm the veracity and potency of consciousness in this final moment. As the protagonist of Poe’s ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ observes ‘it was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see’. 53

So far in this chapter, we have seen that hesitation in meaning, variously described by Dickinson as ‘Possibility-’, ‘More-’ and ‘between’, can be a means of escaping a premature rigidity in figuration. As she observes in poem F#1334A/ J#1329:

Miseries of conjecture
Are a softer wo
Than a Fact of Iron
Hardened with I know -

The paradox within Dickinson’s verse is that the opposite view is expressed just as frequently, that conjecture is actually revealed to be nothing more than

entrapment within uncertainty. Paul Fry refers to experience of listening to the buzzing fly as 'the zero-degree somatic actuality of being alive' though his use of the word actuality is problematic since it suggests that some indication of presence can be gained from such an encounter. 54 As my reading of poems F#212A/ J#184 and F#466A/J#657 indicates, Dickinson endorses a strategy of ceaseless linguistic transgression, but she also stipulates that this principle entails great risk. If hesitation or transgression become entrenched as unifying principles in themselves, then identity can be swallowed up by the futile anticipation of reaching an ever-receding horizon. As she comments to Higginson, 'I was always told that conjecture surpassed Discovery, but it must have been spoken in caricature, for it is not true.' (L#459, p.554). Vijay Mishra attributes the perpetual self-renewal of gothic terror to a refused sublime moment of identification. Mishra suggests that gothic works do not allow reason to silence the failure of imagination and thus encourages the self to confront failed transcendence without sublime recompense. 55 Dickinson's writing oscillates between the virtues of ending the speculative process and committing to the ceaseless project of negating figuration. Yet her grotesque sensibility goes further than the refusal of the sublime that Mishra describes. Confronting herself with cognitive insufficiency can erode any sense of tragedy or worth in the slow

disintegration of meaning. Hints of black humour and bathetic despair deny her speakers the option of sublime tragedy.

I would now like to offer one final example of the relationship between superstitious figuration and consciousness. The following poem both proposes and undercuts a trajectory towards a point of superior, transcendent meaning located beyond the threshold of death. We see the enchantment with misleading fantasies produces a dénouement that leaves the poetic consciousness trapped in naive expectancy. The projected horizon of meaning is nothing more than a deluded projection of an imagination steeped in gothic clichés.

Because I could not stop for Death-
He kindly stopped for me-
The Carriage held but just Ourselves-
And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his Civility-

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess - in the Ring -
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain-
We passed the Setting Sun -

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

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -
Since then- 'tis Centuries- and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity-

F#479A/ J#712

Different critics have related the figure of death to entirely disparate cultural reference points. Daneen Wardrop and Cynthia Griffin Wolff both consider him to be a gothic seducer who takes the speaker away against her will. For these critics, the indication that Death stops out of 'kindness' is a moment of ghoulish humour on Dickinson's part, a poetic denial of powerlessness.\(^5^6\) Although I agree that the poem ultimately erodes the speaker's faith in Death's 'civility', I would argue that he is not exclusively a seducer. Maria Farland situates the poem within the more likely context of consolation literature where the presentation of death is portrayed as 'the sweetly smiling face of a cultivated angel of death, wooing the believer with gallant and refined attentions, danced attendance on the dying with a warmth and affection that testified divine generosity'.\(^5^7\) As Farland notes, portraying death as a bridegroom was popular in contemporary writings and I would argue that Dickinson critiques this notion, demonstrating the disillusionment of her speaker with an idea that is enticing, but false.

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The narrative sequence of the stanzas promotes death as a cordial companion on the passage towards 'Eternity', but as the poem progresses it becomes clear that the carriage is going nowhere. Death, we are told, 'knew no haste'. Our first reading of this line would see the leisurely pace as a mark of consideration, a further confirmation of his gentility. Once we reach the fourth stanza and realize that the journey has been fraudulent, it assumes more sinister connotations and precipitates a re-evaluation of the speaker's judgement and autonomy. The anaphora of 'We passed' becomes the passive 'Or rather- He passed Us-'. It is the world that moves whilst the speaker and her escort stand still. This shock announcement precipitates a dramatic change in imagery. The warm, elegant life of pastoral innocence symbolized through playing children and 'Gazing Grain' has been replaced with the chill of night. The transformation of the tippet (a warm, fur wrap) into silk and the gown into 'gossamer' both indicate that the speaker is being insidiously laid out in burial garments. Her story is unmasked, its comforting aspirations displaced in favour of the somewhat more blunt facts of burial. The fifth stanza clearly refers to the grave, but the fact that it is not called so implies that the speaker still retains an attachment to fanciful stories, her gullible superstitions about her deathly bridegroom. Where the reader sees a grave, the speaker sees her new domicile where her home comforts will continue undisturbed. As Wolff notes, the opening of stanza five leaves the poem ambiguous about whether the speaker is still travelling or has settled into the grave without realising it. Although the final stanza is written in the present tense, the speaker offers no statement about her
current situation nor a conclusion to the narrative. She merely restates the original summation of travel towards eternity, concluding the narrative in an obviously unsatisfactory fashion. Dickinson castigates the teleological restrictions involved in gothic story telling. Superstitions such as the spectral bridegroom impose a fatuous belief in progress that warps and distorts our perception of death. The poem invites us to consider whether we are better to be perpetually committed to progression or accept that death does not bring the wealth of meaning so yearned for by the speaker. The world moves past and the body decays whilst the speaker anticipates a destination that may never be reached.

By way of concluding this analysis I would like to comment upon how Dickinson structures the difference between 'Immortality' in the first stanza and 'Eternity' in the last. When we encounter these words in other Dickinson poems they often seem interchangeable. They both gesture towards a point of ultimacy, a transcendent state beyond finite, mortal existence. Yet the question remains why should the speaker travel towards 'Eternity' when 'Immortality' is riding with her in the carriage? I would argue that immortality designates ultimacy as a transcendent state of being, whilst eternity is a site where the immortal might be found. In poem F#1683A/ J#1646 Dickinson offers what might be seen as a rebuke to the position offered in this poem, that immortality is found at the end of a journey:
Why should we hurry- Why indeed
When every way we fly
We are molested equally
by immortality
no respite from the inference
that this which is begun
though where it's labors lie
A bland uncertainty
Besets the sight
This mighty night

When the speaker in poem F#479A/ J#712 claims that ‘The Carriage held but just Ourselves-/ And Immortality’, she acknowledges the presence of Immortality as an after-thought. She is travelling to reach a state that is already with her. Dickinson seems to be claiming that we lose our way when we seek ultimacy as an external destination rather than an internal depth to be plumbed. Once again, it is figuration that misleads consciousness. The poem indirectly returns us to the superiority of internal haunting, the division within the self that constantly exceeds each effort at comprehension.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter so far is to suggest that gothic teleology, the fearful progression towards a projected point of revelation, allows Dickinson to map the erosion of identity through uncertainty. In attacking coherent figuration as a superstitious simulacra of genuine meaning she argues that language must constantly exceed itself to overcome its conceptual limitations. The uncertain mystery at the heart of gothic experience can never manifest itself in a self-identical, immanent form, but must be approached obliquely. However, as Terry Castle’s work suggests, the internalisation of
gothic haunting simply diffuses superstition so that it permeates every aspect of consciousness. Internal haunting is more pervasive because it can recreate the sense of untapped depth at every instance. Dickinson's poetry resists the temptation to bring unspeakable mystery into a decisive, singular denotation because meaning can only ever be partial or segmented. As poem F#340A/ J#280 makes clear, to 'finish knowing' is not the same as arriving at full meaning. It is the premature abandonment of the gothic quest.

The gothic mystery of existence must be ongoing and any sense that depth has been plumbed extinguishes meaning. Dickinson regards experience as a kind of gothic novel that she cannot finish because she is afraid to ask 'Go we anywhere/ Creation after this?'. The moment of death or the point at which an immanent existence gives way to a transcendent one is the threshold of meaning towards which Dickinson's poetic consciousness aspires. The question is how
can Dickinson sustain her faith in revelation when her use of gothic tropes already marks out meaning as unreachable? Her gothic poetry proceeds from the unbearable tension between an insatiable need for meaning and the knowledge that it can never be reached. The closer this uncertainty seems to bring her to awe, the more it erodes her life into a monotonous numbness because transgression itself becomes flat and repetitious. The haunted house of the gothic is entered only so that its figurative contours can be surpassed. However, as Dickinson's verse indicates, the haunting comes to occupy and taint this very process of surpassing itself.

2.4. 'Deformed Men-ponder Grace': Dickinson and Calvinism.

In the previous sections I argued that gothic entrapment became a metaphor for a more general immurement within restricted cognition and language. Sometimes Dickinson portrays the gesture of transgression, of surpassing or liberation (exemplified by the tropes of 'More-' (F#407B/ J#670) and 'Possibility-' (F#466A/ J#657)) as an end in itself. On other occasions, liberation is clearly only meaningful as a strategy by which the projected goals of 'immortality' and 'eternity' can be reached. If this goal is not attained, then the process of transgression can become futile. Dickinson's work depends upon the repetition of apophatic negations because she cannot represent immortality directly. Her gothic stages a repudiation of superstitious 'absence' without
knowing exactly what would constitute ‘presence’. In essence, I argued that
transgression itself becomes a form of entrapment. Dickinson’s gothic represents
uncertainty as horrifying, debilitating and potentially meaningless.

In this section I intend to relate the link between horror and uncertainty
to the predicament of the Calvinist consciousness. The perpetual surpassing of
linguistic limitation is modeled upon the strenuous, skeptical, introspective
dwelling upon one’s own sinfulness that characterizes the Calvinist search for
grace. Although Dickinson’s neologist tendencies often obscure the Calvinist
nature of her concerns, her gothic work is clearly predicated upon this religious
sensibility. As the title quotation of this section suggests, Calvinist theology
often used the fear of hell to propel its adherents towards introspective
discovery. The peculiar consequence of this conceptual interdependence is that
heaven is approached through repudiating hell, just as gothic ‘truth’ is
approached through repudiating superstition. Since God is fundamentally
unknowable, he must be sought through apophatic figuration. I would argue that
Dickinson’s common trope ‘Immortality’ is her equivalent for grace, whereby
the self is named one of God’s elect. By extension, those spaces of cognitive
entrapment mapped out by the gothic directly report the speaker’s persistent,

54 For the sake of simplicity and brevity, I have followed Ronald Lanyi’s division of Calvinist
doctrine into five salient and distinctive features: 1. Innate depravity following the fall. 2.
Unconditional election, whereby God selects some amongst the damned to be saved according
to the dictates of his own omniscient will rather than the struggles and efforts of the individual
human consciousness to redeem itself. 3. Limited Atonement: The redemption of some
through the earthly sufferings of Christ. 4. Irresistible Grace: The inability of mortal souls to
refuse election. 5. The Perseverance of the Saints: the inability of man to refuse divine favour
horrifying suspicion that she is not attained the full meaning and certainty of election and has little prospect of doing so. Cognitive uncertainty produces the horrifying impression of unregenerate being at every turn.

Dickinson's work is generally not concerned with solving doctrinal paradoxes, but with how these confusions can be transformed into a vocabulary that elucidates the workings of her poetic mind. Her religious sensibility is not related to any specific texts or strands of orthodoxy. Richard Rabinowitz correctly notes that women of Dickinson's generation often possessed a religious sensibility without a pronounced dedication to church doctrines or intense scriptural hermeneutics. There is almost complete agreement amongst Dickinson scholars about the importance of theological contexts within her work, and little agreement about which considerations are discussed and how they are resolved. This problem is somewhat compounded by the enormous

after it has been offered and accepted. See Ronald Lanyi, "My Faith That Dark Adores": Calvinist Theology in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Arizona Quarterly, 32 (1976), 264-278.

Barton Levi St. Armand observes that Dickinson's perpetual uncertainty would have been a more acceptable spiritual syndrome before the work of Jonathan Edwards. After Edwards, grace was viewed as an intransigent point of spiritual enlightenment. Barton Levi St. Armand, Emily Dickinson and Her Culture, p. 88.


George Frisbee Whicher argues that Dickinson casually picked and chose those aspects of Calvinism that suited her. See George Frisbee Whicher, This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938); William Sherwood attempts to present (unsuccessfully, to my mind) all poems written after 1862 as imbued with Calvinist piety. See William Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Albert Gelpi argues convincingly that Dickinson's work is on the borderline between the noble, self-effacing piety of Edwards and the engorged self-assertion of Emerson. See Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965); Karl Keller and Cynthia Griffin Wolff are the critics most concerned with the gothic flavour of Dickinson's theological speculation. See Karl Keller, The Only Kangaroo among
range of perspectives within her verse. Poems of simple homage and piety sit side by side with ironic, embittered deconstructions of God’s empty promises. What I want to argue in this section is that Calvinism contributed to this sense of God as amorphous, contradictory and inescapable because it made the deity both omnipotent and unknowable. His terrifying accusations of human unworthiness became a form of gothic entrapment precisely because they were accusations that could never be entirely refuted.

Dickinson’s work transforms our understanding of sin and grace in two different ways. Roger Lundin argues that, like the Romantics, ‘Dickinson considered the central human dilemma to be a problem of knowledge rather than a matter of the will’.62 This produces a radical shift in the conception of consciousness since sin is representable whereas absence or uncertainty is not. We have already observed the palpable effects of not-knowing in the previous section: the mind becomes stripped of affective intensity and immured in a suffocating sense of its own helpless inertia. Dickinson also revises the common understanding of grace by making it synonymous with transcendence or the afterlife rather than a condition of earthly existence.63 She regards election as beyond all that can be said and known in this immanent sphere. For Dickinson, redemption takes place where conscious knowing cannot follow.

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This transformation of grace into a panacea of meaning leads Dickinson to imaginatively define the gap between 'elect' and 'non-elect' states of consciousness in terms of a stark, black and white division. Since she could only ever experience the not-knowing, her verse contains shockingly gruesome depictions of spiritual or existential torment. Dickinson was seemingly immune to the more liberal theological strains within her culture that threatened to silence any talk of hell. Amherst's theological climate tolerated such beliefs, but the area was considered highly conservative. 64 Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Dickinson sees God as an unrepentant sadist, who withdrew his presence from the world and then blamed his mortal subjects for his omniscient decision. The mystery of God is not a benign tabula rasa, a neutral absence of meaning, it is an accusing void waiting to be filled. However, whilst God proved highly foreboding, the gulf he presented between man and god provides an impetus for thought and, by extension, poetic explorations. As Karl Keller argues:

It is not so much that she thought[...] it existed [the pit of hell] as that she needed that pit to symbolize the dark side of herself and to use as launching pad for her own poetic/spiritual soarings. 65

The damnation and torment within consciousness create a gulf between self and ultimate meaning that her poetry seeks to cross. Dickinson considered this division to be an internal predicament produced by an unsolicited, external

cause. In poem F#320A/ J#258 Dickinson explains the inseparability of suffering and meaning.

Heavenly Hurt- it gives us-
We can find no scar,
But internal difference-
Where the Meanings, are-

Dickinson’s poems locate the heavenly hurt of ‘internal difference’ within the introspective process itself. It is unregenerate thought that scars and wounds. As I suggested in the prior section, the attempt to repudiate or surpass certain instances of perception does not heal the internal division, but merely causes it to migrate. The act of rooting out ‘sin’ within the self actually renews its claims upon the speaker’s perception.

Philip Greven argues that at its most evangelical, Calvinism places such strong emphasis upon the stringent, perpetual discovery of sinful thought that the impossibly high standards of certainty could effectively brand any proof of election as insufficient. Sin may be compared to what Karl Popper describes (in another context) as an ‘unfalsifiable’ proposition, whereby an explanatory hypothesis is so broadly, vaguely and pervasively outlined that there are no

65 Karl Keller, The Only Kangaroo amongst the Beauty, p.80.
conceivable circumstances where it might not apply.\(^{67}\) We can clearly see this endlessly probing, skeptical inquiry in those gothic poems where uncertainty can never be entirely banished. The frantic effort to overcome any premature pretensions to certainty strives to produce transcendent meaning through ‘internal difference’ but the process becomes circular since internal difference guarantees one’s estrangement from the very truth one seeks. Gothic figuration, with its language of undisclosed, dreadful secrets, spatial entrapments, and heightened emotional states haunted and structured Dickinson’s religious concerns.

If the incommunicable mysteries of God entrapped Dickinson’s poetic consciousness within its sphere of influence then part of the reason must be that a universe without an ultimate source of meaning was even more intolerable to Dickinson’s poetic consciousness. Her work is theologically constrained because there is no equivalent, atheistic language that could sustain the dignity and mystery of consciousness. James Turner notes that it is one thing to undermine an existing theological order, but quite another to provide a systematic vocabulary to support the spiritual, psychological or existential angst of former believers.\(^{68}\) Although Dickinson’s quest for ‘immortality’ did not fit smoothly into the Calvinist tendency towards lacerating self-denigration, she could not quite replace God with the self-identical centrality of her own consciousness or


with a rational, mechanistic explanation of the universe. As Lawrence Buell observes, Dickinson’s poetry takes place on the cusp of a paradigmatic shift, whereby the doctrinal sustenance of faith is simultaneously all important and bankrupt.69

Those- dying then,
Knew where they went-
They went to God’s Right Hand-
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found-

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small-
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all-

F#1581A/ J#1551

As this poem indicates, theological skepticism does not strictly kill god, it means he cannot be located. A brief survey of pertinent poems and letters indicates that Dickinson’s attraction towards the brutal, unassailable mystery of Calvinism increased as theology became more concerned with corroborating scientific concepts and alleviating secular anxiety at the expense of understating God’s awesome mystery. Given that Henry Ward Beecher declared Jonathan Edward’s vision of hell dead in 1877, Dickinson’s vivid depiction of bottomless pits and crumbling bridges a mere 15 years earlier seems all the more anachronistic, but she believed that human terror is the appropriate response to omnipotence.70

Dickinson wrote in a letter ‘You speak of “disillusion.”’ That is one of the few

subjects on which I am an infidel' (L#860, p. 794). The amputation of 'God's right hand' has a certain Darwinian brutality about it (Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published in 1859) and Dickinson was certainly aware of these startling developments in contemporary thought. 'Science,' she wrote, 'will not trust us with another World. Guess I and the Bible will move to some old fashioned spot where we'll feel at Home' (L#395, p. 511). In poem F#1420A' J#1380 she rages against the foolishness of 'The Fop- the Carp- the Atheist-' who 'Stake an entire store/ Upon a Moment's shallow Rim.' What she objected to in the increasingly influential scientific naturalism of her era was the reduction of religious experience to immanent understanding. Dickinson's recurring immersion in pain and fear demanded expression that could not be adequately explained by natural means. The gothic language of clandestine meaning and the promise of an absolute revelation of universal truth suited her mind much more.

2.5. ‘Heaven hath a Hell- Itself to signalize’: The Paradoxes of Dickinson’s Calvinist Gothic.

Dickinson’s Calvinist gothic draws attention to ways in which the process of election is achieved through immersion in cognitive insufficiency. Calvinism promoted the view that the self was closest to God when it recognized its distance from the divine through self-abnegating terror. As such, a

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70 As noted in James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1926*, p. 82.
71 See L#359, p. 485: 'Why the Thief ingredient accompanies all Sweetness Darwin does not tell us'.
fraught pessimism about one’s standing amongst the elect was the very route to attaining that status. The torments of consciousness are often intolerable and seemingly illogical, leading to a conceptual hemorrhaging between God’s will and its impact upon man’s consciousness.

Dickinson presents spiritual crisis as evidence of divine mystery. It was also, by extension, a defense against the contemporary acquiescence of religion to secular needs and knowledge. Dickinson’s broadly conservative attitude towards Calvinism highlights a fundamental division within American gothic itself. Donald Ringe, Teresa Goddu and Cathy Davidson all argue that gothic work undermines the essential optimism and theocratic aspirations of American culture. However Sacvan Bercovitch and Edward Ingebretsen have argued that the American theocratic project depended upon the ritual acknowledgement of unregenerate perceptual insufficiency. Bercovitch’s examination of the American jeremiad concludes that the continued, graphically-apparent threat of damnation and divine retribution spurred puritan communities to greater spiritual efforts.

Ingebretsen ties these conclusions to the distinctive qualities of gothic work:

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72 Donald A. Ringe, American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth Century Fiction (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982); Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Teresa A. Goddu, Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation. However, I should stress that their arguments are quite different. Ringe regards the gothic as an expression of doubt about the potentialities of reason. Goddu believes that the gothic violates America’s national myth of new-world innocence. Davidson focuses specifically upon the question of enterprise and cultural transition, centered around the politically ambivalent figure of the self-made man. 73 Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p.8.
A society authorized by divine revelation is [...] a society of secrets and scrutiny, its social order one of undressing and exposure. Such a theology, then, offers in effect an erotic grammar of transgression and expiation, of covering and uncovering, and this secret the Divine's twin faces of fear and ecstasy - is the secret hidden away in repudiated pulp horror. 74

Gothic texts and religious tenets both depend upon the simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards precisely those elements they were supposed to disavow. As Ingebritsen observes, internal difference stimulates both fear and desire. Of course, both these critical perspectives on the gothic are correct in the sense that spiritual doubt is both a means to superior consciousness and a legitimate diagnosis of personal or cultural failure. 75 Dickinson is aware that spiritual and cultural optimism can only be attained by working through unregenerate material, but she is not always certain that the desired result will be produced.

Dickinson's gothic operates on the Socratic premise that the self knows most when it acknowledges the limits of cognition. This is because Calvinism pivots upon a strange paradox, requiring the strenuous dedication to the internal search for grace whilst simultaneously asserting that becoming elect was a function of God's will alone. Calvin argued that grace could not be earned through 'works' (good deeds). The human quest for salvation did not unfold at each temporal moment according to the individual believer's balance of good

75 As Raymond Tripp, Jr. comments: 'Even well intended attempts to speak of God are mistakenly negative. There is a tendency to use apophatic statements which seek knowledge of God by saying what He is not. Since He is above all particulars, it is wrongly assumed that He is also not in and of them as well. He is endlessly exiled as 'not this,' 'not that,' etc.' See
and bad deeds. Since God was infinitely powerful he must, by definition, have pre-ordained who would be saved and who would be damned. In its most reductive presentation, Calvin's theology denied that human actions could change God's pre-ordained plan. The experience of realizing one's elect status was spiritually painful and permeated with doubt, but the successful conclusion of the process utterly transformed the individual's world view. To be elect was to watch the whole world come sharply into focus as the presence of divine order became apparent in all of creation. Such a massive change in perception articulated through the dramatic leap between natural and supernatural realms doubtless appealed to Dickinson as a conceptual model for imagining a move towards a source of infinite truth.

Since the assignment of grace took place outside of experience, Dickinson was encouraged to blanch her verse of any sensuous immediacy or conceptual consistency. The paradox articulated within her verse is that acknowledging one's ignorance is a very threadbare sustenance for one who


Obviously this made responsible and communal action a somewhat problematic thing to enforce. The link between election and behaviour had become far less pronounced by the middle of the nineteenth century. As Patricia Caldwell and Kai Erikson both note, although good behaviour could not guarantee grace, one would expect a member of the elect to act properly as a direct consequence of God's grace. See Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Macmillan, 1966). Roger Lundin argues that had Dickinson wished to demonstrate her faith, the stipulated requirement was merely the briefest assurance of belief in Christ. See Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, p.50. What almost all writers on the course of Calvinism and Puritan culture generally agree is that once the secular pressure of organising a community under extreme duress had relaxed, the question of faith became a more internal, private matter.
hungers after an enlarged consciousness. Dickinson was highly ambivalent about the price of salvation - the surrender of consciousness as a central force in favour of awe at God's omnipotence. As Joseph Haroutunian succinctly comments 'Piety is the love of God because of God's own glory, and not because the laws of God are useful for the attainment of happiness'. Evangelical strains of Calvinism promote God as a source of ultimate meaning, but deny Dickinson's quest for 'Immortality'. She often struggled to reconcile the benefits of salvation with their tremendous, personal cost. Perhaps Dickinson's gothic cannot quite supercede its apophatic commitment because her speakers cannot bring themselves to relinquish consciousness.

As such, Dickinson's gothic owes as much to Jonathan Edwards as it does to Ann Radcliffe. More than anyone, it was Jonathan Edwards who taught New England culture the conceptual interdependence of man's infinite sinfulness and God's infinite glory. For Edwards, the absolute certainty of the former was the means by which a sense of the latter could be gained. Dickinson's description of this predicament comes in poem F#791A/ J#751:

My Worthiness is all my Doubt-
His Merit- all my fear-
Contrasting which, my quality
Do lowlier- appear-

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The Calvinist subject comes to know God solely and exclusively through a thorough and traumatic acknowledgment of the depths of his/her own sinful depravity. The problem for the Calvinist subject is that although a profound sense of sinfulness and suffering always accompanied the conversion passage to grace, this doctrine cannot be used inductively to prove the reverse, that suffering is always and everywhere a sign of immanent grace. When Dickinson alludes to the agony endured at the threshold of existence she could by no means be sure that her suffering would necessarily lead to immortality. She was constantly caught between two entirely different responses to suffering: one that would open up the path to grace and one that merely confirmed the rank torment of earthly existence. Just as moments of gothic transgression produce the competing possibilities of entrapment and liberation, so Dickinson’s religious sensibility remains poised hesitantly between transcendent grace and entrapping damnation.

We may conclude from this discussion that Dickinson’s poetry is attracted to the theological sophistication of orthodox Calvinism and appalled by the fact that it proved emotionally intolerable as the basis for a mortal existence. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s account demonstrates, Dickinson did not subsume intellectual questions to emotional necessity. In certain poems, she angrily rebukes God for the unfairness and seeming inconsistency of his design. In poem F#1500A/ J#1461 she notes the injustice that ‘We [must] apologize to thee/ For thine own Duplicity’. Dickinson’s solitary reference to Edwards (in a letter to
her nephew Gilbert) attributes the bibles most sadistic and vengeful passages to his hand (L.712, p.701). However, I propose to discuss those poems where theological inquiry is expressed through the internal conflicts of the poetic consciousness, rather than the poems where dispassionate, abstract considerations dominate the proceedings. Dickinson's introspective process is both an act of judging herself by God's standards and a wider attempt to discern whether those standards are still viable. It is not always clear whether her desire for 'immortality' confirms the ultimate authority of the divine, or the central importance of her own consciousness.

'Immortality' is always approached through faith and conjecture within Dickinson's verse since she cannot directly comprehend or represent what it would mean to possess it. She is split between a pessimistic view of figurative capacity and an overwhelming, implied need for meaning. As I suggested in earlier sections of this chapter, this leads her to a view of poetic language as perpetual self-negation. Calvinism denied that anything could be done to fully bridge the gap between man and God, either in language or thought. A true state of grace did not necessarily illuminate the divine workings of the universe any more clearly, it encouraged even more submissive self-abnegating reverence for God's infinite majesty. God's absence contrasted sharply with the omnipresent sense of human sinfulness that haunted those uncertain of their status amongst the elect. Walter Hughes notes that seventeenth-century poets

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78 The citation "All Liars shall have their part" is from Revelation 21:8.
were caught between two different conceptions of sin, the 'privative' and the 'positive'. In the positive definition, sin is an active, tangible presence within the manifest surface of the psyche, whilst privative sin is the absence or deprivation of something essential to salvation. Dickinson's equation of sin with problems of knowledge means she tends towards the privative definition. However, as my discussion of her gothic poems demonstrates, she also understood that a privative expression of sin was created through the disavowal of its positive, sensual aspect. Dickinson's poems gravitate towards the sensual threshold of consciousness, producing an urgent, starkly monochromatic division between transcendence and limitation, between absolute presence and absence. Only a complete negation of finite experience, language and meaning could propel Dickinson's poetic consciousness towards either God or the realisation of her 'immortal self'.

Consequently, the fallen realm of experience is both the antithesis of God's glory and yet (through knowing it and rejecting it) the only means by which the divine can be made apparent. The infusion of Calvinism into Dickinson's gothic instigates a direct equation between the absence of God and a dependence upon material, sensual figuration. Evil is conceptualized as the simple absence of good: the evocation of a specific, intentional, malevolent, and numinous power is superseded by a description of sin that potentially

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encompasses every aspect of phenomenal existence. There is always a possibility that immortality cannot be gained because there is no possibility of writing or perceiving without alluding to sensual experience. God's painful absence is the foundation for human experience, his absolute presence an unattainable fantasy.

A Tooth upon Our Peace
The Peace cannot deface-
Then Wherefore be the Tooth?
To vitalize the Grace-

The Heaven hath a Hell-
Itself to signalize
And every sign before the Place-
Is Gilt with Sacrifice-

F#694A/ J#459

The conceptualization of 'peace' is inseparable from the trials and torments that must be endured to reach it. In fact, as the concluding two lines indicate, the poem has no means of representing heaven or peace, it can merely allude to the 'signs' that come before the apprehension of its existence. The choice of 'vitalized' as the verb to signify the action of the tooth seems carefully nuanced to provide two possible interpretations. One interpretation would simply indicate that the tooth impresses the necessity of attaining heaven upon the speaker. The second meaning implies that heaven can only be understood through being

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80 Herbert Schneider describes this as a pillar of Jonathan Edwards's thought. Edwards, Schneider writes, considered evil to be merely the absence of noticeable beauty, order, proportion or function in the human sphere. See Herbert Wallace Schneider, *The Puritan Mind* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), p.143.
fleshed out with the 'vital' substance of earthly life. In other words, heaven only makes itself apparent through the very things it is supposed to disavow. I suggest that the tooth is a symbol of nihilistic doubt akin to the fly in poem F#591A/ J#465. In poem F#373A/ J#501 Dickinson refers to 'the Tooth' That nibbles at the soul-', comparing doubt to a gradual consumption by a small, base animal: the association of doubt with the sensuous activity of eating is perhaps not incidental. The effort at figuration involves the fusion of privative and positive conceptions of sin, the ceaseless oscillation between what is known and unknown. Each spiritual unknown is matched with a tangible secular equivalent. The final line makes this duplicity quite clear: through claiming that the path to heaven is 'Gilt with Sacrifice-' Dickinson sees the pain of sinful recognition as a pleasing adornment: 'Guilt' and 'gilt' are conceptually and semantically inseparable.

The poem demonstrates the paradox that heaven is perceived through the profound immanence of its opposite, hell. This points has been partially anticipated by Edward Ingebretsen and broadened into a general theory of American gothic culture:

Those who inherited the Puritan’s imaginative world never lost the habit of terror...The irony, of course, is clear: the telling of perversity’s pleasures for communal uplift was built into the confessional act. Indeed spectacular sin was a prerequisite for converting grace. [italics mine]

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He goes on to argue:

To realize, as Edwards did, that while the language of the Holy provided a boundary site at which one could invoke the ineffable God, language could not do more than that. Indeed at that paradoxical intersection of speaking and unspeaking the Divine also suffered a kind of sympathetic declension, transgressing the boundary of sense, and slipping into its demonic opposite. Edward’s preaching would be a case in point: the more fervent the attempts to articulate and express the Holy, the more thoroughly the Divine converted into the unspeakable demonic.  

In his most rhetorically powerful work on the subject of man’s wretchedness—‘Sinners in the hands of an Angry God’—Edwards clearly sets the template for Dickinson’s notion that ‘The Heaven hath a Hell-/Itself to Signify’ in the horrific image of man as a spider suspended over the flames by a single thread. ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ is not necessarily a representative text in Edward’s writings, but it does accurately capture a vision of extreme Calvinism that Dickinson seems to engage with. Since Edwards was arguing that the divine was beyond any conceptual register he was required, by definition, to leave God’s will under-described. Any effort to make God fully comprehensible could only tarnish and compromise his omniscience. However, whilst Edwards accepted the inevitable distance from God and exposed his own sinfulness through pious self-abnegation, Dickinson’s seeks grace for personal recompense. The figurative prostration at God’s feet was sufficient for Edwards because he never sought to have his identity sanctified. Since Dickinson actively seeks to attain immortality for her own aggrandizement, the introspective

acknowledgement of absence proved considerably more troubling. Dickinson once commented in a letter 'They say that God is everywhere and yet we always think of him as something of a recluse' (L#551, p.609). She appreciated that God was could only be seen through the inverted, gothic mirror of a fallen language. The effort to apprehend him directly results in his vanishing from sight. Gothic images of entrapment, suffering and alienation are not merely a depiction of a painful spiritual predicament; as evidence of linguistic insufficiency, they are also its source. Gothic figuration is itself a symptom of that tendency towards 'positive' sin that needed to be discarded. If 'Parting is all we know of heaven/ and all we need of hell' (F#1773A/ J#1732), language must strive towards the points of absence within its own operation. Dickinson's dilemma remained how to enact permanent deletions within consciousness and language without becoming stuck in a pattern of ceaseless conjecture.

The path towards immortality takes Dickinson towards a painful confrontation with her mortal sufferings. In the previous section, I argued that each instance of gothic figuration presents entrapment and liberation as inseparable. In order to supercede the limits of comprehension those limitations must be pursue and invoked. The process of attaining grace or election through creative endeavor risked trapping the poetic consciousness in a fruitless state of perpetual oscillation. Although Dickinson realized that 'Tis Opposites-Entice'

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Deformed Men- ponder Grace-' (F#612A/ J#355). the presence of deformity always threatens to overwhelm the grace it is supposed to illuminate. Edwards focused upon human sinfulness as a comparative tool to celebrate God's majesty, but it is not difficult to see how the emphasis could be shifted to form a picture of unthinking cruelty:

Far from Love the Heavenly Father
Leads the Chosen Child,
Oftener through Realm of Briar
Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
Than the Hand of Friend
Guides the Little One predestined
To the Native Land-

F#1032A/ J#1021

Although this poem is concise and elegant in its formulation, Dickinson's other work testifies that she did not consider God a fit subject for children. He only revealed himself in anger at human weakness, which was the only lens through which he became visible. The fairy tale quality of the images transforms God into a terrifying dragon. However this depiction contains more than a hint of the 'Holy Ghosts in Cages!' (F#212A/ J#184) that Dickinson resisted. Her imagination was steeped in stock images, equal parts sermon and gothic novel, that continued to reassert themselves as a signification of her insufficiency. However, as the following poem will attest, what was equally troubling for Dickinson was the prospect that purging her mind of figuration and sensuous immediacy might leave her entrapped in a more profound hell. Absence itself can
harden into a rigid and impermeable barrier that leaves the self trapped in horror. anticipating presence or election yet unable to confirm it.

That after Horror- that 'twas us-
That passed the mouldering Pier-
Just as the Granite crumb let go-
Our Savior, by a Hair-

A second more, had dropped too deep
For Fisherman to plumb-
The very profile of the Thought
Puts Recollection numb-

The possibility- to pass
Without a moment’s Bell-
Into Conjecture’s presence
Is like a Face of Steel-
That suddenly looks into our’s
With a metallic grin-
The Cordiality of Death-
Who drills his Welcome in-

16 drills] nails

F#243A/ J#286

This poem elucidates the consequences of living in the aftermath of an event and a language that are imposed upon the self. It is a poem situated in between life and death, salvation and damnation, the language that attempts to order the experience just receding from the point of revelation. The archetypal myth of the fall exhibits an uncanny repetition across Dickinson’s work. In poem F#340A/ J#280 the speaker was condemned to dropping ‘down, and down-‘ and hitting ‘a World, at every plunge’. As an image that emerges from a posited pre-history,
the pit both precedes and surpasses its recognition within the individual consciousness. It may be productively related to poem F#372A/ J=341. 'After Great pain, a formal feeling comes', since both poems define consciousness as the result of sin's unrecoverable mark. The crisis recalls Edwards' pronouncement during 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' that 'unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen'. However, Dickinson rephrases the evocative, lurid horror of Edward's pronouncements into a more fundamental disintegration of spatial and temporal coordinates. Each component of the poem contributes to the profound and inescapable sense of disorientation. The opening line proclaims the speaker to be 'after Horror-' whilst the final line discloses the welcome of death, yet there is no point before horror and it is not clear what exactly death is welcoming the self into. The speaker has passed into 'conjecture's presence', though since this has been achieved without 'a Moment's Bell-', the possibility remains that nothing has changed. Each hesitant and conditional phrase distances the speaker ever further from the elucidation of a genuine happening.

In the first stanza, salvation tantalizes with its proximity, it is always just out of reach and therefore keeps 'Believing nimble' (L#750, p.728). The pier of faith may be 'mouldering' but the drop is precipitated by the collapse of a

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solitary 'Granite crumb'. In my reading of poem F#591A/ J#465 I noted that Dickinson often sees doubt as a progressive erosion by tiny, base and inconsequential objects (such as the fly). There is perhaps a hint of hyperbolic incredulity that a single crumb can plunge one into the abyss. Although the poem's syntax is extremely truncated, it seems that the poetic self just misses being saved 'by a hair' as the bridge crumbles from under her feet. Salvation tempts through perpetual proximity, yet there is no prospect that the distance will be closed.

Yet the self clearly also avoids dropping 'too deep/ For Fisherman to plumb-'. Since Christ refers to himself in Luke 5.10 as a 'fisher of men', he has apparently been gracious enough to save the self from the extinction of memory, only to condemn it to living death. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes:

Contrary to the reassurances of Scriptural promises, Christ's death in the distant past has not disarmed present death; the decomposing elements of that ancient era offer a lesson of decay and corruption, not of victory and resurrection.85

Death surreptitiously shadows each step upon the pier of faith since the granite essence referred to in line 3 implies that the speaker is also treading upon her gravestone. It is death, not Christ that beckons the speaker by drilling 'his Welcome in-'. The speaker does not view death as a destination or state, but a prelude to the emergence of something more legitimate. The more profound horror of plunging into the inexpressible deep has been avoided. Her depiction

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85 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Emily Dickinson, p.265.
of death in the final stanza is too sensationalist, too concrete and available to
match the numbing horror alluded to in the second stanza. His seducer’s
cordiality and metallic grin are chilling, but in the final analysis are lesser than a
horror that cannot be expressed at all. Where death fully reveals his grinning
‘Face of Steel’ the mere profile (a side view) of the other thought is enough to
numb her. Dickinson included a telling variant for the final line of the poem,
offering ‘nails’ as a substitute for ‘drills’. Although elliptical, the poem implies
that death crucifies the speaker, once again binding her to the image of the
savior that has just failed her. The poem neither promises complete annihilation
nor salvation, but the stasis of death, where conjecture can flourish without the
relief of hope or certainty. Although this poem is one of Dickinson’s most
linguistically dense and elliptical, there is a suggestion that consciousness
summons the absence that might guarantee its transcendence or annihilation.
‘Conjecture’s presence’ is a paradox, since conjecture denotes the anticipation
or search for meaning. Once the bridge of faith has been lost, consciousness falls
into horrifying guesswork. In claiming that ‘Consciousness is the only home of
which we now know’ (L#591, p.634) Dickinson realized that conjecture could
not, by definition, perform the complete self-annihilation required to free her: I
think therefore I fall, but I never reach the bottom.

Dickinson tends to focus on the paradoxical fact that consciousness can
be both the cause of damnation and the only possible way to gain salvation. It
seemed that the more strenuously she tried to find God, the further he slipped
away. Although Edwards had seen this as the natural consequence of God's incomprehensible glory, it can equally be seen as intolerably to his human subjects. In the following poems, the use of hell to 'signalize' heaven results in a confusing and horrifying conceptual interchangeability of the two sites.

He scanned it-
Staggered-
Dropped the Loop
To Past or Period-
Caught helpless at
a sense as if
His Mind were
going blind-

Groped up, to see
if God were there-
Groped backward
at Himself
Caressed a Trigger
absently
And wandered out
of Life-

F#994A/J#1062

This poem sees a frantic search for meaning conclude with a futile, seemingly accidental suicide. There is a huge discrepancy between the earnest, strenuous effort to make sense of experience and the largely senseless demise at the poem's conclusion. The combination of ten verbs and the manuscript's tendency to use line breaks to separate them from their corresponding nouns produces a division between intention and action, desire and realization. When the trigger is

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caressed 'absently' we may deduce that in spite of frantic searching, the mind is absent in the truest sense of the term. It was 'as if/ His Mind were' going blind'. but the phrasing makes it clear that the experience is so disorientating that even cognitive blockage cannot be verified. Perhaps this is because the action of consciousness is always antithetical to the attainment of grace and meaning. The claustrophobic, hurried tone of the poem means that conceptually-vast words such as 'Past', 'Period', 'God' and 'Himself' fly past in an unembellished condition, never yielding their full meanings to either the reader or the poetic speaker. The poem strains towards profundity, but any potential meaning is drowned out by the clatter of the asphyxiated mind. The subject leaves life behind without any specific purpose, the final four lines transforming a serious question into a black and absurd comedy. Neither God nor identity can anchor the experience.

The ceaseless motion of Dickinson's poetic consciousness indicates that salvation has not yet been reached. As Richard Rabinowitz argues, Puritan culture believed that a body's placid composure signified that the soul was blessed with grace. 87 Frantic activity could only denote uncertainty, and uncertainty was a sign of damnation. The notion that the mind is 'Caught helpless at a sense' conflates two potential different meanings: it can either suggest that the mind has been overpowered by a sense (meaning) that it cannot escape or get around. Alternatively, it could imply that the self is restricted to

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unregenerate, sensory experience and cannot transmute this data into something more spiritually profound. Too much sensory experience, too much introspection eventually becomes a fruitless oscillation, divorced from prospect. Heaven might need a Hell ‘itself to signalize’ but Dickinson’s gothic is always poised at the point where the attainment of grace or election never quite frees itself from the means it took to get there. Poetic figuration is both the means of comprehension at the condition of the speaker’s downfall. Perhaps the requirements of Dickinson’s poetry and the requirements of her soul were ultimately at odds. The ceaseless resourcefulness of her poetic cognition, whilst initially redemptive in allowing her to transcend hellish figuration, eventually became ever closer to uncertainty.

In my introduction I stipulated that the grotesque arose from simultaneous and conflicting responses to the same occasion. Calvinism induced ambivalence through incredulous paradoxes and illogicalities. Pain could eventually transform into eternal bliss, punishment could precede any demonstrable, unregenerate behaviour, and heaven was ‘signalized’ by hell. As we have seen, consciousness is both the only means of disclosing imperfection and simultaneously its source. As such it was hardly surprising that Dickinson occasionally felt that the distinction between heaven and hell had become irretrievably blurred.

A Pit—but Heaven over it—
And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad;
And yet a Pit—
With Heaven over it.

To stir would be to slip-
To look would be to drop-
To dream- to sap the Prop
That holds my chances up.
Ah! Pit! With Heaven over it!

The depth is all my thought-
I dare not ask my feet-
'Twould start us where we sit
So straight you'd scarce suspect
It was a Pit- with fathoms under it
It's Circuit just the same
Whose Doom to whom
'Twould start them-
We-could tremble-
But since we got a Bomb-
And held it in our Bosom-
Nay-Hold it- it is calm-

F#508A/ J#1712.

This poem perfectly exemplifies the core issues of this chapter by showing that the spur of the pit does not make the speaker more willing or able to strive for heaven, but obstructs progress by instigating a perpetual, unquenchable anxiety.

The crumbling pier of doubt has become a pure predicament of opposites. heaven and the pit, which are distinct yet inseparable. At three points in the first two stanzas Dickinson repeats the Phrase 'A pit with Heaven over it' with minor variations. Consciousness returns in a motion of uncanny repetition to this simple fact that must be acknowledged without being accepted. Although heaven is 'over it-/ And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad' the abundance of salvation does nothing to prevent the poetic consciousness from dwelling on the dread that lies beneath. Heaven is everywhere except beneath the speaker, and
that is the only place that concerns her. The precariousness of her position precipitates a hyper-consciousness about balance, and a consequent inability to act. The anaphoric structure to the first three lines in stanza two elucidates the repetitive confrontation with impotence. In refuting the significance of action ('stir'), perception ('look'), and aspiration ('dream'), the speaker encounters a paralysis of being on all levels. The fear of falling is the sum total of the experience and permits of no further conception. As with poem F#591A/ J#465, hell is signified as 'in between' anticipation and realization.

It should be noted that Dickinson tellingly avoids using the word 'hell' to refer to the pit. The motive behind this becomes clear when she claims that 'The depth is all my thought-'. Through the double meaning of this line, she reveals that the all-consuming preoccupation with the pit reveals depth to be an internally experienced and generated occurrence: hell and consciousness become synonymous. Once this realisation has permeated the poetic consciousness it becomes 'a pit- with fathoms under it'. The internalization of the pit produces a terrifying internal depth which, following my earlier reading of poem F#407B/ J#670, we might claim is always 'More-' than the actual figuration of the pit itself. The internal pit becomes a model of Dickinson's gothic figuration, its continuous ability to exceed itself confirming the expanse of consciousness whilst simultaneously questioning its control.
The speaker can only fall even deeper into her internal pit unless the internalization can be transformed into a mark of strength and achievement. The final seven lines of the poem are dense and ambiguous but they do seem to gesture towards a beneficent reconfiguration of the internal difference that divides the self into ever-receding heaven and all too proximate pit. Hence, although the ‘Circuit’ [of the pit is] ‘just the same [as that of a hell that is not solely within the circumference of thought]’. the speaker can begin to interrogate how doom presents itself. Line 16, ‘Whose Doom to whom’ asks to whom it is assigned and by whom. If the pit is generated by a division within consciousness then the cessation of consciousness can end the suffering. Although the reader inevitably maps the pit onto the image of hell, provided by a God who employed ‘Moral[s]- with a Mastiff’ (F#1332A/ J#1317), this assumption gives the image of hell a power and precedence it does not strictly deserve. The bomb is within the ‘Bosom’ and the final line asserts with some authority ‘Nay-hold it- it is calm’. Quelling the bomb within is not a matter of stirring, dreaming, trembling or looking: it comes from a realisation that a tranquil and resigned consciousness is the most effective way to stop the endless depths of the pit consuming thought and being. This cessation of consciousness may be considered the closest that Dickinson’s speakers can come to a sense of personal election, yet the one thing they are rarely able to attain.

Once she had transformed the quest for grace into a thirst for knowledge. Dickinson’s gothic diverges from the lacerating humility demanded
before the glory of God. The relocation of haunting to the internal landscape allows the fluid tides of thought to perform a continuous enacting of boundaries, divisions and skepticisms as a means of separating the self from thoughts that threaten to immure and reify the self. I would argue that Calvinism warns against that point where consciousness threatened to become its own end and reward, producing hesitation about the consequences of the ego’s expansion. Dickinson focuses upon words such as ‘Possibility-‘ (F#466A/ J#657) and ‘More-‘ (F#407B/ J#670) because they marked the mechanisms of excess as a kind of victory for the self. These words capture the tension between a desire to liberate the self from self-consciousness, only to find that very aspect of the self she wishes to transcend repositioned at each point of the process, celebrating its achievement. Caught between the Calvinist insistence upon the use of consciousness to dismantle its own pretensions, consciousness shifts between a means of uncovering grace and an impediment to its attainment.

This duplicitous presentation of consciousness as inevitable yet insufficient, succeeding only in the instances of its failure is echoed by the problems that Dickinson found in the notion of redemption through suffering. As she once wrote, "'Whom he loveth, he punisheth," is doubtful solace finding tart response in the lower Mind’(L#369, p.492).88 Pain can clearly be seen as a marker of one’s immanent, sinful existence and yet, at its extremes, it achieves the obliteration of consciousness required by true evangelical piety. Pain allowed

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88The quotation is from Hebrews 12.6.
the self to emulate the torments of Christ whilst also reminding the sufferer of the disparity between their respective standings in the eyes of God. Just as consciousness must always prove insufficient for the task of reaching transcendent truth, so the quantity of pain required for redemption always stretches beyond what the self has actually endured. ‘Transport’. Dickinson knew, was ‘Brewed from decades of Agony!’ (F#199A/ J#207) thus stretching the requirements of suffering into the realms of the unobtainable. Hence ‘One Crucifixion is recorded- only-/ How many be/ Is not affirmed of Mathematics-’ Or History-’ (F#670A/ J#553) because God does not grant the same recognition or recompense to human sufferers as he did to Christ. Calvinism stipulated that the burden of gratitude imposed by the crucifixion on mankind could not possibly be fulfilled. For Dickinson, the alliance of faith and gothic pain was useful for ascertaining whether ‘There’s newer- nearer Crucifixion/ Than That-’.

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

The Feet, mechanical. go round-
A Wooden way
Of Ground. or Air. or Ought-
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment. like
a stone-

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

F#372A/ J#341

Pain atrophies existence but, through parallel with the crucifixion, it also liberates it to 'let go'. Although this poem bears many of the impressions, images and motifs that we find in poem F#340A/ J#280. I find it more positive since the poetic consciousness is not condemned into the endless plummeting of memory. The tombstones of the mind both commemorate through ceremonial resplendence and produce a numbing 'Quartz contentment'. The phenomenology of pain does not strand the self in a perpetual state of overcoming, nor does it condemn it to a living death. Instead, the mind’s stupor enables the speaker to blur the issue of Christ’s sacrifice, raised tacitly at the conclusion of the first stanza.

The uncertainty as to whether and when Christ suffered can be interpreted either as a mark of doubt or as a slippage that allows the consciousness to render her own pain synonymous with this first, redemptive sacrifice. Since the poem cannot record whether the pain occurred 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'. the poetic consciousness bypasses the ingrained Calvinist fear that no amount of earthly suffering can match God's sacrifice of his son. The poem proceeds towards the threshold of death commemorating earthly
memory and identity as it slips away. The final analogy for memory ("As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow-") actually works against the prospect of recollection. Outliving the experience in a corporeal sense is not necessarily desirable if immense pain is to be repetitiously re-invoked. The act of letting go is perhaps a more complete conclusion than 'More-' (F#407A/ J#670), ‘Possibility’ (F#466A/ J#657) and ‘Finished Knowing’ (F#340/ J#280), since it relinquishes all the functions of consciousness under the redemptive banner of crucifixion.

Where pain annihilates consciousness and memory it provides the self with a liberation, however horrifying. The following poem shows the speaker unable to use pain to free herself from the coils of consciousness. The castigation of God’s sadism is premised upon the incomprehensibility of pain, why it is applied, and how much is required to attain meaningful, transcendent release.

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer. every Day,
Kept narrowing it’s boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyped coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem-
And you dropt. lost.
When something broke-
And let you from a Dream-

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As if a Goblin with a Gauge-
Kept measuring the Hours-
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws-

And not a Sinew- stirred- could help,
And Sense was setting numb-
When God- remembered- and the Fiend
Let go, then, Overcome-

As if your sentence stood- pronounced-
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt
To Gibbets, and the Dead-

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped "Reprieve"!
Which Anguish was the utterest- then-
To perish, or to live?

F#425A/ J#414

The speaker's pain is inflicted in a methodical, cumulative and investigative motion, although no conclusions are reached. We are invited to ask what is being measured and why. Although the poem clearly makes sense when described as a narrative of attempted redemption through suffering, this religious paradigm is not explicitly invoked and must be imported by the reader. Dickinson toys with the idea of redemption just as the agony toys with the 'delirious Hem', she cannot quite bring herself to take the idea seriously. Each episode within the poem teases with a release or revelation that never quite appears. Both speaker and reader find the experience terrifyingly (or teasingly) incomplete.
As Daneen Wardrop observes, the poem invites the reader to step in and offer the blessing of sense that God clearly chooses not to bestow. On the other hand, the reader may come to feel like a helpless voyeur, powerless to answer the question posed by the final line. The sequence of events towards the concluding point imposes a format of revelation without disclosure upon the poem. Dickinson presents a number of different metaphors for breaking through for the approach of a final revelatory moment, she is ‘dropt, lost’ ‘let from a Dream’ and finally ‘led/ From Dungeon’s luxury of Doubt/ To Gibbets, and the Dead-’. We have returned to the key structure of Dickinson’s gothic whereby the perpetual surpassing of cognitive and linguistic limitation becomes progressively more empty and stagnant. However, the vivid evocation of agony as senseless does not free the reader or the reader from the pressing need to produce meaning. The ‘Second’ that the Goblin weighs between his Paws could be a unit of time or, alternatively, might refer to the ‘second life’ of heaven that hangs in the balance. Whichever meaning is chosen, the goblin’s decision remains clandestine, a ‘pause’ in the sequence of understanding.

Although God’s will and the process of election was supposed to be unavailable to mortal cognition, Dickinson blasphemously represents the decision making as a rather confused and haphazard affair. Her own desire to have experience rendered comprehensible is cast back as an accusation at her tormenters. God becomes a somewhat absent-minded guardian who intercedes

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just in time to prevent her death: an anonymous creature provides a similar
interjection just before the eyes are finally stitched. It seems as though God and
his demonic acolytes are also uncertain about the question posed in the final line
and are using the poetic consciousness as an experiment. Since Calvinism denied
any significance whatsoever to the status of ‘good works’ it excluded attempts
to know the journey to god in secular, rational terms of degrees, logic or
proportion. By invoking the enormity of sin and suffering. Dickinson invites the
reader to collude with her and ask how a soul in such strife could not strive to
use whatever means possible to assess the value of life? As she notes in poem
F#396A/ J#1725, the high price of election can only degenerate into a reductive
anticipation of ‘the market price’:

They weighed me. Dust by Dust-
They balanced Film with Film,
Then handed me my Being’s worth-
A single Dram of Heaven!

The problem for Dickinson’s poetic speakers is that election and meaning are
not quantifiable, finite or comprehensible. They constantly exceed any attempt to
name them, categorize them or render them intelligible. She sneers at the notion
of God as a crude merchant, trading in salvation, but these sneers are defensive
rather than redemptive. The thirst for certainty remains constant.

The interconnection of gothic and Calvinist aesthetics within
Dickinson’s work are balanced upon the interaction between cognitive/
figurative certainty and uncertainty. The latter is useful for defending the self against a fatal complacency, for introducing mystery into thoughts blighted by a spurious sense of finality (which I described as superstitious). The attainment of grace or immortality was predicated upon the location and renunciation of these attempts to present meaning. As poem F#616A/ J#358 makes clear, salvation grows ‘by the Fact, and not the Understanding’. Since gothic texts work towards overcoming their own figurative and generic boundaries and structures, they provide an ideal model for Dickinson to stage her own passage of cognitive progress. Meaning and consciousness unfold in a sequence of disavowed reference points, gesturing away from a figured entrapment but not necessarily towards a superior prospect. The structures of gothic negation and transgression account only for part of what is essential to attain election or immortality. They successfully disavow immanent, ‘positive’ experience, but cannot, by definition renounce the consequent sense of internal depth and significance. The hyperconsciousness that comes from gothic form ultimately blocks access to the divine because the ascent to grace demands the cessation of cognitive activity as a mark of piety. The marked tendency within Dickinson’s work to elevate the term ‘immortality’ (where the self and consciousness are the center of their own concerns) over ‘grace’ (which stresses the inviolability of God’s will) underlines her unwillingness to allow the demands of piety to rob her mind and writing of any vitality. Gothic uncertainty frees her from one problem only to threaten to trap her in another. Dickinson once commented “We thank thee Oh Father” for these strange Minds, that enamor us against thee’ (L#472. p.561). Thought
could and did become seduced by its own luminous operations. Each chamber of the mind tempts with the prospect of the chamber ahead, yet eventually the infinite expansion of thought itself becomes a form of gothic entrapment. It is at this point that the desire for certainty, for the mind to rest at a tangible point reasserts itself.

Dickinson's gothic ultimately fears the unknown because it aims for certainty rather than faith (where uncertainty, and the impotence of ego are accepted). Faith is the optimistic view of linguistic and cognitive equilibrium. consciousness blinding itself to internal division and thereby avoiding the suggestion that knowledge or certainty are required to complete the self. 'To be alive, is power-/ Existence- in itself-/ Without a further function' (F#876A/J#677) is Dickinson's most complete evocation of an existence lived through grace rather than consciousness. Gothic work always forecloses on the question of self-identical, sufficient experience because it is, by definition, positioned on the point of a division. Even the frequently cited poem F#409A/J#303 'The Soul selects her own Society-' shows that relocating the divine into the self does not bridge the split between self and ultimate meaning, rather it serves to radically estrange portions of the self.

Calvinism presented the condition of grace as an acceptance that limitation signifies obedience to an incomprehensible, divine power. In my introduction I suggested that the grotesque is constituted from a profound
ambivalence clustered around a gulf in meaning, and it would seem that gothic work, with its twin polarities of attraction and repulsion, fear and desire, enclosure and liberation, is a prime example of this. However, I also carefully stipulated that ambivalence does not mean that competing perspectives and responses must be given equal weight and consideration at any given time. Calvinism channels ambivalence in the direction of mortal terror and fear because it has already marked hesitancy and doubt as symptoms of unregenerate being. Its discursive sway encourages the grotesque to gravitate towards the fearful, negative side of its ambivalence, though it does not entirely eradicate the positive side (denoted by the luminous fascination with thought and the tantalizing hope that meaning may be just round the next corner). Calvinism is sufficiently encompassing to make the operations of even the most original and resourceful minds confirm its central tenets. In a letter to Otis Lord, Dickinson observed ‘we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble’ (L#750, p. 728). Yet Dickinson knew that believing in election was not the same as being elect and that nimbleness of thought could eventually prove counterproductive. Spiritual elation is the inverse of haunting since it does not engage the mind, but rests at the undisclosed point of each and every moment where the mind cannot reach.

One problem this chapter has not sought to engage with is the influence of gender upon Dickinson’s interaction with Calvinism and gothic conventions. The painful alienation from meaning was significantly worse for women who
may have found their social and political inequalities inscribed as divine law. As Barbara Epstein notes:

Women were drawn to Calvinism in part because the choice that it posed between total subjugation and total damnation made sense in the context of their experience. Calvinism helped women understand their lives by providing a justification for the submission to male authority that was in any case virtually unavoidable.91

In support of this contention, Epstein notes that men were more likely to speak of conversion in the active, practical terms of gaining a path to heaven rather than verifying their own worthiness. Women, deprived of a field of action or expression outside the home, could not correlate the experience of conversion with any sense of agency or action and were thus forced to frame the conversion experience in more abstract, dramatic and emotive terms. For women, the experience was more than a solution to the problem of the next world, but also an address to the problems they felt in this one. These suggestions explain why Dickinson expresses herself through the extremes of Calvinism, and why her cognitive action does quite congeal into a coherent or affirmative conclusion. However, Dickinson’s involvement with Calvinism is not merely the gloomy reflections of a powerless ego. Dickinson’s work requires this alienation from meaning and certainty for her poetic impetus. In the next chapter I want to examine this intersection of gender and grotesque uncertainty through a discussion of Dickinson’s narrative of poetic inspiration. In much the same way

that the over-burdening sense of hell propels her to seek God, so the need for presence and truth draws her poetry beyond its limits to what it cannot and should not represent. We must turn our attention to the move away from uncertainty as horrifying by demonstrating how Dickinson’s poetic voice navigates the grotesque passage between certainty and uncertainty.
3.1. ‘A Tomb of One’s Own’: Dickinson’s Grotesque and Female Poetic Identity.

This third chapter groups together a series of thematically similar poems to elucidate the strategies used by Dickinson’s poetic self to tolerate anxiety or uncertainty and transform them into something enriching. It shifts the grotesque from its negative ‘Kayseresque’ pole towards the more celebratory, Bakhtinian end of the spectrum. Dickinson never produced a single, comprehensive theory that might define her poetic project. She did, however, produce a substantial number of poems and letters discussing what constitutes poetic inspiration, what a poet is, and how poetry navigates the unstable relationship between self and experience. Taken as a whole, these poems produce a narrative of Dickinson’s relation to a masculine muse who inspires tremendous ambivalence within her poetic consciousness. I will demonstrate that poetic inspiration is problematic for Dickinson since it oscillates between empowering her speakers and terrorizing them, reducing them to the ‘other’ within their own creative enterprise. As such, Dickinson’s narrative of poetic inspiration produces a grotesque that oscillates evenly between Kayser’s rejection of uncertainty and Bakhtin’s embracing of it.

The first section of the argument discusses Dickinson’s interrelation of two positions, that of being both a writer of poetry and also its reader. Since reading is viewed as receptive and writing perceived to be active. I will show

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1My thanks to Kristen Matthews for providing the first part of this title
how Dickinson complicates these distinctions as an active, female poet. In the second section I will briefly discuss Dickinson’s treatment of homosocial encounter as enticing, yet uninspiring, when compared to interaction with the male muse. Dickinson’s silent female muse stabilizes and strengthens the receptivity of her poetic identity, but the alterity of the masculine figure seems to provide the impetus towards the assumption of poetic power. The third section, and central concern of the chapter, is the relationship between the poetic act and the nature of the inspiration provided by a masculine figure who, following Dickinson herself (and many subsequent critics), I have termed ‘the Master’. Dickinson’s Master is a site of profound ambivalence. On any given occasion he may appear as father, lover, God, Christ, rapist, goblin, snake and muse. He is perceived to be the source of Dickinson’s poetic power, even though he may also prohibit its transfer to the poetic consciousness. The encounter of the Master and female poet provides a narrative structure that brings the problems of uncertainty sharply into focus.

The Master poems allow us to bring together two aspects of Dickinson’s poetry that have not previously been compared. The first aspect is the ‘external’ threat of the Master as he seeks to subjugate the poetic consciousness through mysterious, violent seductions and terrifying displays of power. The second

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2 I have used homosocial as an inclusive term to encompass all relationships premised upon gender similarity. Homosexual, pre-oedipal or narcissistic relations would all be included within this term.
aspect is the internal explosive power of the 'volcano'. whereby Dickinson's poetic consciousness is overwhelmed by a raw, untutored force. Since both sets of poems view the process of creation as the emergence of alterity, I would argue that the volcano represents the partially successful internalization of the Master's power. In poem F#1691A/ J#1705 Dickinson wrote of 'Vesuvius at Home' though her writing makes it clear that the encounter with her internal volcano was anything but a 'homely' experience. This volcanic otherness within the self is enticing and foreboding, empowering and horrifying. It discloses the depth and intensity of Dickinson's poetic power, whilst questioning the extent to which it can ever be entirely integrated into the structure of an autonomous poetic self.

The relationship between the poetic consciousness and the Master that Dickinson refers to as 'Burglar! Banker- Father!' (F#39A/J#49) oscillates between benevolent and malevolent aspects. If the burglar violently robs the self, rendering it 'poor once more', then the banker invests her creative capital in a productive manner. Of course, the banker's constructive prudence is always undermined by his disspiriting reduction of thrilling and dramatic encounter to arid, cynical accountancy. I would suggest that Dickinson prefers the invasive.

1 Barton Levi St. Armand has suggested the term master may come from Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. See Barton Levi St. Armand. Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.83.

4 The appearance of the banker may be seen as prefiguring Dickinson's frequent usage of legal terminology to describe spiritual predicaments. Dickinson's use of legal terminology is not an entirely cynical posture and has many serious precedents in Calvinist writings. See Robert G. Lambert Jr., Emily Dickinson's Use of Anglo-American Legal Concepts and Vocabulary in her Poetry: Muse at the Bar (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).
burglar aspect of her Master, since his violence inspires her own poetic explosions. Her poetic speakers seek to transform the violence done to her into violence done by her. This is not achieved without some ambivalence. However, whereas I argued that Dickinson's gothic elucidates the gradual transformation of cognitive activity into futile paralysis, the encounter with the Master's alterity is far more productive. Its oscillations and enigmas never fully deplete cognitive potential and affective intensity to the same degree that the buzzing fly (F#591 A/ J#465) or the funeral (F#340 A/J#280) do. There is a continued vitality about the Master's presence that persists even in his most terrifying manifestations.

3.2. Dickinson as Reader, Dickinson as Writer.

In this section, I hope to demonstrate that, even in instances of creative expression, Dickinson's poetic ego does not always feel like the source or commander of her own language. Creativity can be seen as an estranging process that makes her the reactive reader of her words rather than their autonomous producer. In Dickinson's narrative of poetic inspiration, language is marked by an alterity that resists total integration into a coherent poetic autonomy. I will suggest that this tension between the poetic self as writer and the poetic self as written by the other supports my broader contention that Dickinson's verse is concerned with the variable interactions between alterity/uncertainty and autonomy.
The poetic self’s troubled relationship with language is a result of the Master’s prohibitions, whether explicitly or implicitly presented within individual poems. Calvinism’s severe, unknowable deity is the principal template for Dickinson’s Master. His omnipotence means that any attempt to represent him directly is blasphemous. Dickinson symbolizes her sense of subjective uncertainty, suffering and helplessness before God in a muse who is perceived to be mysterious, malevolent and powerful; in other words, she equates her feelings with God’s intentionality. His mystery may be an unendurable absence or ‘The Truth [that] must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind’ (F#1263A/ J#1129).

The single umbrella term that best designates the Master’s power and hostility is alterity or otherness. He is a point within the field of consciousness that demands attention and eludes comprehension. Portraying alterity as the Master gives narrative shape and definition to the intractable problem of inspiration. The friction between a personified otherness and autonomy becomes dramatized as a series of sexual encounters, marriages, betrothals and rapes.

I now wish to suggest that estranging, erotic encounter produces the distinction between reading and writing poetry. In a meeting with Thomas Higginson, Dickinson commented ‘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’ (L#342A, p.473). Aside from the tremendous tonal ambiguity and brutally sensual imagery, what is most intriguing about this account of reading poetry is that it echoes Dickinson’s
earlier account of how she writes- 'when I try to organize- my little Force explodes- and leaves me bare and charred-' (L#271, p.414). Gary Lee Stonum has argued that Dickinson 'wholeheartedly and even one-sidedly defines poetry by its affective consequences[...]Even the poems that explicitly take poets as their subject understand the subject from the audience's point of view'. For Dickinson, the experience of producing poetry involves a continued process of encountering the strangeness of what is written. As Nicolas Abraham claims 'it is always legitimate to consider the poet as the reader of his [or her] own works'. Several aspects of Dickinson's manuscripts bear witness to the dialogic encounter between her status as reader and writer, such as her proclivity for producing different drafts over time without specifying a preferred version, her deletions and variant word choices within the same manuscript. Sharon Cameron has productively suggested that Dickinson 'chooses not to choose', but I would suggest that the element of control or authority, implied by the term choice, must be continuously asserted by Dickinson's poetic speaker on each occasion that she returns to the otherness of her text. For all the recent detailed attention paid to Dickinson's manuscripts, as scholars we are never in a position to infer that any given version represents the poet's final effort. Had Dickinson lived another few decades, it is entirely possible that she would have performed

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further extensive revisions on many of the fascicles and manuscripts we now possess. What concerns me most here is how the presentation of consciousness within the poems broadens our understanding of Dickinson's creative process. As Helen McNeil indicates, 'Dickinson assumes a continuously changing relation between herself as poetic subject and the object of her discourse'. Her speaker's encounter with the Master elucidates the extent to which situating an 'I' at the heart of her poem involves the navigation of experience that always seeks to render her 'other' (or 'reader') within her own work.

In keeping with the theoretical framework outlined in my introduction, I would like to compare this perpetual rediscovery of poetry's essential strangeness to Wilfred Bion's description of the productive oscillation between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (PS↔D). Each moment of poetry is encountered by the mind as shockingly new and temporarily disorientating. As Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris Williams (following Bion) claim: 'It is the 'new idea' which impinges on the mind as a catastrophe for, in order to be assimilated, this sets in flux the entire cognitive structure'. Poetry's impact breaks depressive stability and reintroduces the fragmented trauma of the paranoid-

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9 Morag Harris has anticipated my comparison of Bion and Dickinson (albeit briefly). She suggests that Dickinson's work exemplifies Bion's description of the 'containment, understanding and transformation of catastrophic experience' where catastrophe is understood as the vital, shock impingement of the new upon the cognitive structure. Morag Harris, *Emily Dickinson in Time: Experience and Its Analysis in Progressive Verbal Form* (London: Karnac, 1999), p.126.
schizoid position where internal objects assume primacy over the ego and where the writer becomes the reader of his or her own works. The analyst Eric Rhode provides a clear summary of this process, describing the PS→D transition:

An infant can look into its mother's face and intuit that the radiance in her expression is true of an inward radiance, an integrity of outward and inward that is *iconic*. The discovery of the depressive position reveals that thought is similarly iconic: that thought exists in its own right and is true to itself and carries within itself a dynamic for transformation. Under the impress of the depressive position, the ingredients of the paranoid-schizoid position intensify, and in their intensification they can either increase the dissolution of meaning or bring about a transfiguration that is prototypic of transfiguration in art. Sensations that are persecutory in themselves are reformed into a meaningful constellation.\(^1\)

Whilst Bion notes that a venture into paranoid-schizoid division is essential for the continued progress of thought, each moment of catastrophe brings with it the twin possibilities noted by Rhodes, the 'dissolution of meaning' or the transfiguration into creativity. In the paranoid schizoid position, poetic meaning is attributed to a posited otherness and it is the attempt to incorporate this otherness that characterizes poetic inspiration. In Dickinson's work, the iconic otherness is either the external master or the internal force (volcano). The simultaneous co-presence of destructive and creative possibilities within the same instance is the essence of Dickinson's creative grotesque.

Bion argued that thoughts always precede the thinker.\textsuperscript{12} He suggested that we consider thinking as the management or modification of experience that integrates it into a coherent ‘I’. If this is not achieved then thoughts are felt to overpower the self and inhibit autonomy. Following Bion’s model, I suggest that Dickinson believed that the force of poetry preceded her self-realization as a poet and that her principal task was to assimilate this force so that it was felt to emanate from a relatively coherent poetic self. She must be a reader of poetry felt to be ‘other’ before she can absorb it and become a writer herself.

Four key poems within Dickinson’s canon map out this position through a set of consistent motifs and concerns surrounding the interrelation of reading and writing poetry. These poems are F#446A/ J#448 ‘This was a Poet- It is That’, F#348A/ J#505 ‘I would not paint- a picture-’, F#772B/ J#675 ‘Essential Oils- are wrung-’, and F#1353B/ J#1247 ‘To pile like Thunder to its close’. Each bears out David Porter’s contention that, for Dickinson, poetry is ‘a source, not a record, of experience’.\textsuperscript{13} Reading and writing poetry are both highly active, engaging experiences for Dickinson. Both are presented in terms of an unassimilated impossibility, a necessary pain or loss at the heart of poetic experience. Both regard pain as an inseparable component of joy. Both stress that the core of the poetic consciousness must risk a disorientating renunciation

\textsuperscript{12} Wilfred R. Bion, \textit{Learning From Experience} (London: Karnac, 1984), p.83. Thinking is defined as the capacity to manage and process experience, rather than to generate it.

of its own centrality in the unfolding of creativity. However, although the process of disorientation is palpably threatening for the poetic consciousness, the ambivalence it produces dissolves the rigid boundaries between reader and writer, male and female positions under the Master’s law.

I would not paint- a picture-
I’d rather be the One
It’s bright impossibility
To dwell- delicious- on-
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare- celestial- stir-
Evokes so sweet a torment-
Such sumptuous- Despair-

I would not talk, like Cornets-
I’d rather be the One
Raised softly to the Ceilings-
And out, and easy on-
Through Villages of Ether-
Myself endued Balloon
By but a lip of Metal-
The pier to my Pontoon-

Nor would I be a Poet-
It’s finer- Own the Ear-
Enamored- impotent- content-
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts- of Melody!

F#348A/ J#505

Each stanza describes the interaction with creativity through a set of images related to seduction, conquest and law. The implications of the word ‘dwell’ are deceptive, since the speaker is clearly not ‘at home’ in the instance of
contemplation. For the female poet, dwellings are problematic because they must be gained through the awful 'privilege' of 'Dower' and therefore licensed marriage. Interspersing the manifest digression upon the pleasures of creative endeavor, a second set of images can be found relating to licenses, dowers, privileges. These are the domains of the Master who haunts this poem through subtle inference. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, the 'Comets' referred to in stanza two have multiple layers of meaning. They refer not only to musical instruments, but also to 'an officer of cavalry', a cornucopia or 'horn of plenty' and finally may be said to refer to the male sexual organ. The Master comes to claim his bride through force and law, the 'bright impossibility' of seduction gives way to subjugation. The speaker simply avoids the encounter by floating to the ceiling like an endued (i.e. furnished with clothes or status) balloon. The comic implication is that Dickinson's speaker has not succumbed to the seductive fingers. She does not remove her clothes, but puts them on along with airs and graces to float away in glorious self-regard, taking the 'bright impossibility' and turning into an occasion of narcissistic self-regard. The sexual pleasure and celestial wonder of the first stanza are brought face to face with the rule of law in the third, where the speaker must declare herself 'Enamoured- impotent- content-'. However, 'content' refers not merely to contentment, but to capacity, thus indicating the speaker's discovery of her own inner space of potential. This space is portrayed as 'own[ing] the Ear-': she can never quite own the power to stun herself or paint pictures, but the capacity for

receptive experience is sufficiently hers. What she is permitted is the 'License to revere' not the 'Art to stun myself/ With Bolts- of Melody!'. The hints of eroticism in the final line imply a kind of spiritual and poetic masturbation, though it is modeled on penetrative, masculine sexuality. The poetic consciousness is not permitted to assume both male and female roles in the eroticism of poetic experience, she is forbidden to both create and enjoy. However, the preceding lines of the poem have shown that this seemingly enforced passivity can be a site of great, active experience. Her refusal to become a poet is bound up with her refusal to become a wife.

Ultimately, the poem becomes a comedic evocation of a very real predicament. Although Dickinson mocks the censorious implication that she cannot be allowed to 'stun herself', the oxymoron of 'sumptuous- Despair-' in the first stanza remains intact. She rejects the notion that poetry can be licensed or a privilege, restricted to certain types of place and people, but she does not underestimate the danger of poetic experience. This creates a confusion between (as Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it) 'verbs of being' and 'verbs of doing'. Simply basking in the glow of a poetic act propels the self into the active experience of contemplation. The poem may explicitly renounce the activity of doing poetry but, as Adrienne Rich observes, the poem undermines that claim through the irony of its very existence.\(^{15}\) Doing poetry and experiencing poetry

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are inseparable, just as sumptuousness and despair are intertwined. In fact, the satirical bent of the final four lines seems to emphasize that the risks and illicit pleasures of torment and despair are just as present in the instance of experiencing poetry as they are in the act of writing it. The speaker does not strictly need to dower herself with penetrating bolts. It seems that she would rather occupy the hesitant, uncertain space between activity and reverie, between being a poet and experiencing poetry. The distinction between activity and reverie reflects the powerlessness that Dickinson often feels when confronted by the Master. Since becoming his wife would be too awful a privilege to contemplate, she chooses seduction, the process over the conclusion.

Poem F#1353B/ J#1247 invokes God as the prototype for the shadowy master. Just as the creativity of poetry is curiously described as its opposite (destruction), so God’s love is curiously experienced through the consuming, destructive obsession with sin. In both cases the speaker must find a position whereby the exclusion from creativity can be tolerated.

To pile like Thunder to it’s close
Then crumble grand away
While everything created hid
This- would be Poetry-

Or Love- the two coeval come-
We both and neither prove-
Experience either and consume-
For None see God and live-
Poetry and love both 'would be' envisioned as an apocalypse, a shedding of life because 'none see God and live'. In delaying the introduction of love until the beginning of the second stanza, Dickinson reminds us both how common and yet how counter-intuitive the interconnection between love, destruction and poetry is. The themes of this poem will be familiar to us from my arguments in the previous chapter. God's supposed love for man is matched by his castigation of man's sinful nature. His existence is beyond 'proof' and can only be gauged at the point when the mortal spirit leaves the body. The terrifying poetic apocalypse, from which 'everything created hid' is part of God's gothic rule of prohibition. Poetry is surrounded by taboo, quite emphatically not of the speaker's own creation. It is a 'bright impossibility' (F#348A/ J#505), a happening within the self and world that abolishes the subject position.

Poetic power is the destructive introduction of transcendent power into a vulnerable sentience. The speaker gives no indication that she is amongst the accused since she views the poetic apocalypse voyeuristically, appreciating the grandeur of the prospective occasion. Poetry 'would be' like god since it can only be conjectured or anticipated, never proved. As such, poetry becomes akin to grace that is conferred, but cannot be sought. Yet there is a key ambiguity over the word 'consume'. Do the purifying flames of poetry consume the self, or is she a poetic 'consumer', eating the spectacle with a presumptive, blasphemous relish? The more subversive meaning would substitute pious submission to God's will for the pleasures of apocalyptic spectacle. Poetic grace takes place in
that moment when the speaker watches her world destroyed rather than in disinterested focus upon glory.

Dickinson’s poetry navigates between reading and writing poetry, between consuming poetry without being consumed by it. This involved an internalization of power that entails, as she claims in poem F#772B/ J#675, ‘the gift of Screws-’. Dickinson’s poetic screws perform violent operations upon words and meanings, compressing their ‘Essential Oils’ into service. Essential may refer to extracting the core essence of subject matter, but it might also refer to that which is requisite or necessary for poetic existence. Applying the vice of screws to her own mind was an ‘essential’ activity for Dickinson to produce poetry. As the remainder of poem F#772B/ J#675 suggests, it is ‘not expressed by Suns- alone-/ It is the gift of Screws-’. Light requires the activity of reception, the screws of consciousness to produce the essential oils. As Wendy Barker observes, ‘suns’ and ‘sons’ are interrelated within Dickinson’s work and her speakers find it difficult to become self-‘expressive’.16 The sun’s expression requires active reception to compress and distill its meaning but, as poem F#1263A/ J#1129 indicates, the female poet must use her internal screws as much for defense against the sun’s dazzle as for producing greater illumination. As the following poem indicates, the Master yields control of his poetic power begrudgingly.

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Dickinson demonstrates how the male poet's achievements both endow and diminish his audience. Poetic meaning is unquestionably presented as more amazing than ordinary meaning, though it is not clear whether this is in anybody's interest but the poet's. Although the syntax of the second stanza is highly convoluted, it seems that ordinary consciousness (i.e. non-poetic) 'arrests' amazing meaning at the door so that it perishes without disclosing its vital attar. The double meaning of 'arrest' indicates that the familiar species is prohibited from revealing its immensity under a rule of law, thus linking the 'gift of Screws' to an instance of transgression. The poet reveals that the door of the mind has been prematurely closed to amazing senses locked away in ordinary and familiar meanings that have become dead to our understanding.
The poet himself (who may be one manifestation of the Master) is shown to be far from beneficent. The final two stanzas suggest he brings negative legal implications, 'entitling' the self to 'ceaseless Poverty-'. The poet himself cannot be harmed by robbing, but he becomes another 'Burglar! Banker-Father!' (F#39A/ J#49), leaving the speaker impoverished. He may be understood as an icon of paranoid-schizoid status, radiating a solipsistic aura of meaning that fails to confer the richness of amazing meaning upon the speaker's consciousness. The poem's explicit use of the past tense to refer to the poet and the closing observation that he is 'Exterior- to Time-' all imply that the poet is being mourned, that he has died at precisely that moment when amazing meaning becomes apparent.

As I suggested in my introduction, the presence of amazing meaning is less important to Dickinson than whether this truth can be tolerated, whether meaning can be successfully assimilated or understood by the speaker. As my reading of F#1263A/ J#1129 suggests, Dickinson's grotesque aesthetic implies that sometimes poetry must actually distill ordinary (in the sense of tolerable and comprehensible) meanings from a sense that is so 'amazing' that consciousness is blinded. Tellingly, in the poem cited above, 'amazing sense' is not capitalized whereas 'Ordinary Meanings-' is. This is Dickinson's equivalent of Keats's (and later Bion's) 'negative capability', the understanding that 'The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind-' (F#1263A/ J#1129). The ambivalence
between creating poetry and experiencing it extends to the relationship between the self and the ‘gift of screws’. Sometimes they are employed to extract more light, sometimes to dull the overwhelming impact. Since Dickinson’s poetic consciousness often appears as crushed, assaulted, over-powered and impoverished by blinding inspiration, I would suggest that the screws are a duplicitous symbol, sometimes signifying a resilient absorption of the Master’s power, sometimes his indomitable otherness within the self.

Poem F#446A/ J#448 demonstrates that the greater the male poet’s authority, the greater the internal poverty experienced by Dickinson’s speakers. The incorporation of the Master’s otherness has the effect of diminishing Dickinson’s poetic consciousness, rendering it ‘other’ within the field of experience. She is as much an awe-struck audience of her volcanic, poetic explosions as she is their conscious instigator. The Master presents poetry as his own, exclusive province, anathema to the aspiring female poet. Dickinson’s poetic self must attempt to claim some measure of poetic authority by reshaping her designated, static position as spectator or reader of a poetic occurrence produced beyond her control. In the following poem, the active/passive binary surrounding creativity is clearly interrelated with concrete prohibition.

They shut me up in Prose-
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet-
Because they liked me “still”-

Still! Could themselves have peeped-
And seen my Brain -go round-
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason- in the Pound-

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down opon Captivity-
And laugh- No more have I-

11. Look down opon] Abolish his-

Being shut up in prose is a powerful trope for the notion that identity is written into being by a powerful ‘other’. In a letter to Thomas Higginson, Dickinson commented ‘I thought that being a Poem one’s self precluded the writing Poems, but perceive the Mistake’ (L#413. p.525). Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes that ‘whether to create beauty or to be beautiful, seems to have hounded almost every significant woman writer; and Dickinson was no exception’. However, Dickinson makes us aware that these options are not equally accessible to the prospective woman poet and that being beautiful was more keenly encouraged. Daneen Wardrop emphasizes the compulsion towards passivity when she writes that ‘According to the dictates of society, women are to be objects of beauty, to be killed into art by patriarchal artists, and not to be creators themselves’. Dickinson equates becoming a poetic artifact with a sense of gothic entrapment. The Master’s law creates static binary divisions

17 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Emily Dickinson, p. 170.
between creator and created. The prospective female poet sees the Master’s house as a stifling prison or tomb, trapped in the creative will of the other. The use of the pronoun ‘they’ links the Master’s authority with a sense of collective approval or consensus. Creative autonomy and social dictates are intertwined and inseparable.

The use of quotation marks around ‘still’ draws our attention to multiple meanings. It indicates that the Master requires the self to be quiet, inconspicuous, and powerless. It also hints that ‘they’ want her to remain ‘still-as-she-is’, unchanged and unchanging, never able to mature or progress, a powerless little girl locked in a ‘depressive’ closet rather than a powerful, autonomous woman. The final, gothic reading of the stanza suggests that they want her still as a corpse, forging a powerful connection between the submissive wife and the cadaver. Once again, Dickinson’s poetic consciousness finds its ‘life [...] shaven,/ And fitted to a frame.’ (F#355A/ J#510). She is written into prose against her will and interest, an object on display but not a creator in her own right. The question remains how to take up the pen herself and write her way to autonomy and freedom.

The two final stanzas provide a subtle, qualified subversion of the speaker’s initial powerlessness. Within the inert, female body the brain continues

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19 At this point I would remind the reader of my discussion of ‘I dwell in possibility’ where Dickinson also associates ‘Prose’ with a sense of entrapment. The current argument extends the implied contrast between the respective benefits of prose and poetry that I have put forward in the previous chapter. See chapter 2, footnote 14.
to turn unobserved. The dark humour of the line depends upon our appreciation of its viscera. As Camille Paglia notes, brain is ‘one of her earthy Anglo-Saxon tropes’. Only an autopsy can uncover the extent of the subject’s depth and ingenuity. Dickinson suggests that the imprisonment is as futile as lodging ‘a Bird/ For Treason- in the Pound-’, yet the subsequent pronoun denoting the bird as masculine gives us pause. Dickinson plays with the common equation of female poets with songbird in nineteenth-century America used by male critics and female poets alike (discussed in the subsequent chapter). In addition, tombstones often showed souls figured as doves or transported to heaven in the bellies of birds. The escape from the Master’s text thus requires the acquisition of masculine authority and the presumption of a kind of grace to ensure that escape is creatively beneficial. The trope of the caged bird expresses this compromise between the ambitious assumption of masculine power underpinning poetic escape, and the inescapable fact that her gender works against such an appropriation. These compressed connotative knots cannot be unpacked to complete satisfaction, but the muddying of semantic waters with its accompanying linguistic hermaphroditism, the oscillation between masculine and feminine positions and identifications is, itself, the strategy that Dickinson’s speaker employs to escape from the rigid demarcation of ‘prose’.

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21 As the title of Cheryl Walker’s study *The Nightingale’s Burden* testifies. Dickinson alludes to this tradition in a letter to her cousin Louise Norcross when she comments- ‘It is lonely without the birds today, for it rains badly, and the little poets have no umbrellas’ (L.340. p.471).

The ambiguity surrounding the speaker’s gender demarcation is repeated in the ambiguous final line, ‘No more have I-’. Marked by unrecoverable syntactical deletion, this line could mean ‘No more have I to do than will myself out of captivity’. Dickinson’s speaker would assume the bird’s masculine strength enabling her to escape from her prison of prose. Alternatively, the line could stress the unbridgeable gulf between her abilities and those of the bird. Once he has flown from captivity she does not ‘have’ him and his strength any more. With his escape goes all hope and sense of power. This reading provides striking parallels with the male poet of F#446A/ J#448 who induces ‘ceaseless Poverty’ by rendering himself ‘Exterior- to Time-’. This paradox within the poem’s interpretation neatly encapsulates Dickinson view of poetic power; she can only escape from the suffocating prose of the Master’s discourse through a heroic, appropriated exertion of masculine authority whose assumption would be ‘treason’. Dickinson subtly undercuts the jaunty and certain tone of the poem to illustrate the risks and uncertainties accompanying the assumption of liberating poetic authority.

The second textual detail of interest is the variant reading of line 11 where ‘Abolish his’ is offered as a substitute for ‘Look down on’. Based upon my earlier readings within this chapter, I would suggest that gender is the key to choosing between these two readings. Following my readings of poems F#1353B/ J#1247 and F#772A/ J#675, I would argue that the variant recalls the
link between poetry and the destruction of a discursive prison (or in Bion’s terms, a parasitic container). There is a substantial difference between ‘Looking down upon’ captivity and ‘abolishing’ it, and the latter, rejected variant which seems more akin to Dickinson’s vision of poetry as a volcanic outpouring, a ‘gift of screws’ that creates meaning out of crushing or destroying obstructions. The preferred variant implies that the male bird may transcend captivity without destroying it. However, the variant renders transcendence and violence against the prison synonymous. It equates poetic freedom with an opposition to discursive restraints, rather than a capacity to simply ignore them. The female poet is closeted in the variants of her own poetic text and her only option is to break into the text of the poem, assimilate the violence perpetrated against her and to redirect it against her entrapment. As such, the circular, self-referential act of a poetic voice reflecting upon its creativity through its creative act is premised upon a transformation of this sense of enforced estrangement.

These poems give us a broadly coherent set of images based around law, violence, transgression and gender, all of which are related to the process of female poetic inspiration. I now wish to briefly examine the trope of the volcano as an organizing term within Dickinson’s work. The volcano represents a site of tension between successful and damaging internalizations of the Master’s power, between autonomy and entrapment, male and female gender demarcations and passive reader/ active writer dichotomies. Some sense of internal difference.

resistant alterity within the self is an essential component of poetic inspiration. In an influential essay, Adrienne Rich argues that cultural restraints made the male muse an inevitable component of Dickinson’s poetic self-conceptualization:

In writing at all—particularly an unorthodox and original poetry like Dickinson’s—women have often felt in danger of losing their status as women[...] Since the most powerful figures in patriarchal culture have been men, it seems natural that Dickinson would assign a masculine gender to that in herself which did not fit in with the conventional ideology of womanliness. 24

Rich was amongst the first to posit the volcano as the most elucidating symbol of Dickinson’s creativity. 25 I would argue that the volcano represents the tension between otherness as something successfully internalized or internally produced, and otherness as an impermeable fact of the cultural landscape that draws attention to the limitations imposed upon creative autonomy. It underscores the fact that the prohibitions surrounding female creativity are no less genuine for being internalized.

The volcano is an overdetermined metaphor. The expressed indeterminacy about the status of otherness refracts and is refracted by accompanying references to gender and creativity. The volcano is pregnant with an unspoken power, both creative and destructive. 26 From an archetypal

25 Represented in poems F#517A/ J#601, F#1743A/ J#1677, F#1776A/ J#1748, and F#1691A/ J#1705.
26 Lawrence Buell has confirmed the prevalence of the volcano trope within the period as a means of expressing Neoclassical anxiety about losing mastery over personal and social passion. See Lawrence Buell, New England Literary Culture from Revolution Through
perspective, it may be seen as the interior of the womb/vagina, the hidden. maternal strata of the earth saturated with unexpressed creative potential. As the following poem indicates, the female poetic principle asserts itself through oblique intrusions and aberrations, it exploits the tension of binaries, but does not overcome them.

A still- Volcano- Life-
That flickered in the night-
When it was dark enough to do
Without erasing sight-

A quiet- Earthquake style-
Too subtle to suspect
By natures this side Naples-
The North cannot detect

The solemn- Torrid- Symbol-
The lips that never lie-
Whose hissing Corals part- and shut-
And Cities- ooze away-

The volcano, like the female poet, is simultaneously still and flickering, solemn and torrid, awesomely powerful and yet ‘Too subtle to suspect’. Rigid categories of understanding are dissolved. Female poetic power is insidious and periphrastic because creativity must circumnavigate the Master’s dominance.

Although possessed of ‘lips that never lie’, the volcano is a seething mass of

_Renaissance_ (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.119. However, Dickinson’s work recognizes that the passions of poetry are not entirely ‘hers’. Her volcanic poetry cannot strictly be repressed or controlled because it is not strictly a part of the self, it can only be survived or transformed into something more beneficial.
paradoxes and contradictions. Like the female poet, the volcano’s power is an unexpected apocalypse lurking under the ‘still life’ of a compliant exterior. It is surely no coincidence that Dickinson’s volcano poems describe that expectant moment just before the point of eruption where silent female power is transformed into a visible ejaculation of lava/power. The image of the volcano designates a unifying and transmogrifying membrane between masculine and feminine elements, between creation and destruction, and between subject and object. This thrilling, indeterminate identity flux is perhaps best illustrated by poem F#367A/ J#339 where Dickinson describes ‘My Cactus- [who] splits her Beard/ To show her throat’. The phallic spikes of the cactus beard seductively rupture to reveal an exciting expanse of delicate throat. Although the word ‘throat’ indicates a sexual objectification of the female body, it is also the zone where voice and song are produced. This incompatible tension between meanings within the same word once again confirms the volcano’s central position as a trope of indeterminacy and ambivalence.

3.3. ‘So bashful when I spied her!’: Dickinson’s Silent Homosocial Identifications.

In this section I want to contrast Dickinson’s treatment of oppressive patriarchal assumptions with her depiction of homosocial encounter. Although

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28 An association confirmed in poems F#1126A/ J#1102, F#1444A/ J#1426, F#1663A J#1600, F#397A/ J#1761.
Dickinson presents woman-to-woman relationships as nourishing and often erotically enticing, these relations do not, in themselves, provide the charge of otherness necessary for poetic inspiration. As I argued above, Dickinson’s volcano represents an intersection of contrasting images and identifications, a bisexual fusion of masculine inspiration and female appropriation. The current task is to elucidate those strategies of female deployment and assess their influence upon Dickinson’s poetic identity.

Although I have argued for the centrality of the Master and his alterity in the drama of poetic inspiration, no account could succeed without at least some mention of Dickinson’s inconspicuous female muse. Feminist Dickinson scholarship has largely avoided positing a matrilineal poetic tradition that could be considered an alternative to the patriarchal inspiration of the Master. However, critics such as Rebecca Patterson, Lillian Faderman, Margaret Homans, Paula Bennett, and Martha Nell Smith have argued persuasively that Dickinson’s textual treatment of women offers distinctive features that require attention. I intend to explore these examples of homosocial encounter to

29 Dickinson’s admiration for Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot does not constitute a matrilineal, diachronic chain of poetic inspiration. It is clear that these women enthralled her through their capacity to renegotiate the same struggle with a masculine literary tradition that she herself faced, a task which is never complete but must be attempted at each given instance.

elucidate the strategies of identification distinctive to the identity of Dickinson's female poetic speakers. These are strategies premised upon the principles of sameness, reciprocation and conceptual fluidity.

Mary Loeffelholz comes closest amongst Dickinson critics to balancing recognition of male and female poetic identifications. Examining Dickinson's mourning of a male lover, Loeffelholz suggests that she effects a strategic reversal of the violent, oppressive objectification of the female body by the male artist (a common concern amongst other nineteenth-century female poets). However this reversal irrevocably links the female poet to the violence that inspires her.

[The] female self and male other partially or completely change places, reverse roles of activity and passivity, turn aggression directed toward a female object around upon the male other[...]The female speakers remain themselves to some degree victims of, or imprisoned by, the fates that redound upon the male other. Violence in some way bodily links self to the male other rather than decisively severing their connection [italics mine].

My own account recognizes the conceptual interdependence of masculine violence and female creativity, and the integrity of violent differentiation to Dickinson's formulation of gender identity. Following Lacan, Loeffelholz argues that one simply cannot posit access to the pre-Oedipal mother as a reservoir of identity for the female poet. Maternal and patriarchal influences constantly


inflect each other within Dickinson's verse, with the former providing the means by which the power of the latter is processed. Marianne Noble has recently furthered the argument by discussing the complex intertwining of male and female identifications as a form of masochistic compromise. In a detailed reconstruction of the background to sentimental nineteenth-century American women writers, Noble observes that adopting a masochistic posture towards an omnipotent god produced a sense of transcendence that is simultaneously 'maternal, sexual, and sacred'. Masochism underscores the essential similarity of humble prostration in front of God's glory to the posited bliss of mother-infant non-differentiation. To supplement Loeffelholz's account I would like to follow Noble in suggesting that Dickinson's subversion of the male/female binary proceeds from the volcanic fusion of masculine encounters and homosocial identification. Although Dickinson's speakers are forcibly estranged from the Master's power, masochism translates this estrangement into a form of feminine intimacy. The achieved bi-sexual space of the volcano crosses prohibited borders through the fluid encounters between prohibitions and enticements, subject and object, male and female elements. As those critics influenced by both French and American feminism have been quick to point out, this structure of openness, transgression and fluidity is not merely employed by the female poet, but constitutes the basic conditions of her existence. The

33 See, for example, Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (London: University of California Press, 1995). Freeman argues that the
introduction of female poetic elements does not so much subvert the Master’s power as render it hospitable and poetically productive. It softens the shock of the Master’s otherness without negating the creative charge to be imbibed from the encounter.

Dickinson’s relationship with the Master is often presented as gothic encounter and the sharply differentiated male and female positions within Dickinson’s poems are to be found in some gothic writings. Many critical studies of the ‘female gothic’ have noted that gothic narrative strategy often endorses the stark divisions of power and status along the axis of gender (even when the novel as whole may be said to undercut these ideologies). William Patrick Day observes that gothic selves are fatally split, fractured and mutilated into pure, monolithic gender positions. The male or female other of the text returns as an overwhelming, omnipotent ‘bad’ internal object (in Kleinian terminology), a testimony to the failure of isolated, reified individualism. The deeper the split, the more omnipotent this figure will be perceived to be. Day hypothesizes that if androgyny could be accepted then sexual relations could be seen as enriching.14 Although Day is elucidating the predicament of masculine protagonists, his conclusions can be transferred to the study of a female perspective. Dickinson’s poetic consciousness expresses its female dimension by rephrasing the radical

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feminine sublime overturns the traditional, masculine investment in power, mastery and individualism.

alterity of the Master that leaves her imprisoned in prose without autonomy or power.

Dickinson's work follows gothic novels such as Jane Eyre or the Mysteries of Udolpho which tend to leave their female protagonists bereft of powerful and sympathetic mother figures. Typically orphaned, the gothic heroine is forced to accept marriage to the Master as the only course for her life. Dickinson alluded to the striking absence of a maternal principle within her poetic self-conception when she wrote to Thomas Higginson 'I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled' (L#342B, p.475). She was clearly not engaged in biographical revelation, but was attempting to articulate the unavoidable centrality of a specific adversity. As a gothic heroine seeking to be a poet, she was prohibited from the nourishing homosocial matrix of mother-daughter identifications. Yet, as Noble's account makes clear the clandestine maternal principle may be unearthed through careful reflection upon the ways in which the female poet receives and incorporates patriarchal power even as the mother figure is absent from the manifest surface of the text.

As such, Day's conclusion about gothic novels dovetails neatly with Homans and Bennett's suggestion that critical attention should be refocused on the modes of relating between individual selves rather than following patriarchal insistence upon identity as always hermetic and discrete. Paula Bennett describes
the difference between male and female aesthetics as a contrast between identification based upon either sameness or difference:

As both Homans and Morris observe, Dickinson’s woman-centered poetry is based on sameness rather that difference. As a result, it lacks the potential for the kind of fervor and angst characterizing her poetry to The Master- both the drama of the speaker’s ‘elevation’ (her ‘Queenship’) and the pathos and anguish of her ‘fall’.  

We must be clear about what Bennett means by these terms ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ (associated with female and male relations respectively). Sameness stresses reciprocity, mutuality and nurturing symbiosis. Bennett argues that Dickinson’s vocabulary of sameness focuses upon little things such as ‘birds, bees, flowers, dew, crusts and crumbs’, the small intimate fascinations that occupy the communal female attention contrasting vividly with the grandiose preoccupations of the masculine sublime. The Master structures relationships through hierarchy or oppressive otherness. He threatens the subject rather than enabling it. The trope of the volcano may said to represent the female poet’s effort to process the Master’s oppressive otherness through distinctively female strategies that stress incorporation, reciprocity and familiarity.

35 Paula Bennett, Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet, p.162.
36 As Lillian Faderman and Caroll Smith-Rosenberg have both shown, intense and unselfconscious passion for other women was accommodated and even sanctioned as an reflection of their pure and feeling natures. The stark division of male and female spheres meant that women often found homosocial company more supportive and encouraging. See Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow, 1981); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
Although the concept of sameness outlined above involves comparison or interchange between similar though distinct persons, Dickinson's homosocial poems often gesture towards a deeper, foundational sense of sameness at the very heart of being, a sense of non-differentiation that overwhelms identity. As such, poems that stress reciprocation and commonality occasionally incorporate more fundamental manifestations of sameness premised upon narcissism and non-differentiation. In a series of influential articles the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has described the pre-oedipal/oedipal distinction in terms of sameness and difference and used these latter terms to provide an important framework for the discussion of gender construction. Following Nancy Chodorow, Benjamin attributes the masculine overvaluation of difference over commonality to their decisive struggle to free themselves from collapsing back into the pre-oedipal mother. Masculine identification with the father is achieved through stringent repudiation of the mother. The Oedipal father who insists upon a damagingly thorough split within the gender economy, intercedes

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37 Nancy J. Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Nancy J. Chodorow, 'Freud on Women', in The Cambridge Companion to Freud, ed. by Jerome Neu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.224-248. Nancy J. Chodorow, 'Individuality and Difference in How Women and Men Love', in Psychoanalysis in Contexts: Paths between Theory and Modern Culture, ed. by Anthony Elliot and Stephen Frosh (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.89-105. Benjamin's conclusions provide a vital conceptual supplement to the work of Foucauldian feminists, such as Judith Butler. Although Benjamin agrees that differentiation is a vital component of identity, she also laments the failure of Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian feminist theorizing to posit 'inclusion' as the theoretically necessary counterpart. Benjamin states that 'Butler seems to posit an exclusion that has no opposing term, no inclusion, no formation of the subject through recognition. But if this were so, how could the “contesting and rifling” she calls for occur, how could the demand to respect difference be posed? On what basis other than an ideal of inclusion, or recognition of the other's right to participate in the polity, on what grounds—besides the sheer self-interest or power of the excluded—is exclusion to be opposed?' See Jessica Benjamin, Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis
in the developmental process to promote the predication of masculine autonomy upon the wholesale rejection of the maternal, utopian bliss. Benjamin argues that a balance of individuation and inclusiveness is required in the formation of identity, but that patriarchal norms promote individuation to such an extent that inclusiveness is feared. The initial symbiosis with the mother is retrospectively (or post-Oedipally) figured as an ontological black hole that threatens to dissolve the structures and contours of identity. Benjamin has argued that reintroducing female modes of identification allows the self to 'give up the notion of identity, reified as thing, without throwing out the notion of identification, as internal psychic process'.

Dickinson's homosocial encounters conflate neatly with Benjamin's theoretical framework. They provide resources for appropriating the Master's power (premised upon reified, binary identity) by giving the self over to a shifting process of identifications.

However, as Paula Bennett concedes, the aesthetic of sameness or inclusiveness may receive favorable treatment in Dickinson's work, but it does not confer the same drama or significance upon the poetic process. Poetic inspiration is, almost without exception, portrayed as an invasive alterity that both thrills and impoverishes the self. Ultimately Dickinson is forced to commit

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39 Joanne Fiet Diehl's Harold Bloom-inspired reading argues that a female muse could not have offered the same degree of inspiration to Dickinson since a poetic mother would not
herself to a partially phallic conception of poetry that alienates her within a rigid position whereby experiencing herself as a creative force is problematic. Benjamin suggests that women experience a conflict between what she terms 'identificatory love' and 'object love':

In the original Freudian account, the girl's paternal identification and her sense of agency were not positive contributions to her attainment of womanhood, but obstacles to be removed. Her active longing to be like the father was, when it remained influential, a neurotic masculinity complex. It had to be superseded by the passive longing for the father—for his phallus, and his baby. The fragility of this passive sexual identity, which is without its own sense of agency and sovereignty, is all too clear to us. Furthermore, the conflict between the identificatory love that enhances agency and object love that encourages passivity is replayed over and over in women's efforts to reconcile autonomous activity and heterosexual love. 40

Dickinson's Master is presented as an unattainable object of worship and erotic longing, manifesting a self-glorifying autonomy she is prohibited from possessing. I would argue that the image of the volcano does not represent the abandonment of the mother's 'sameness' in favour of the father's alterity. Instead, it shows Dickinson attempting to treat the Master's forbidding power as if it were simultaneously part of her, synonymous with her silent mother. At the conclusion of poem F#1771A/ J#1756 Dickinson acknowledges that she must 'With winter to abide' and she invites the Master to 'manacle your icicle' Against your Tropic Bride'. For Dickinson, the intertwining of poetry and gender represented the meeting of fire and ice, the rigid petrifying stare of the

Master against the fluid heat of the mother. Ice threatens to cool fire, just as fire threatens to melt ice. The outcome is never certain, but the conflict must be approached.

I would now like to analyze three poems which, when taken together, may be said to outline a relatively coherent position on the simultaneous virtues and dangers of homosocial encounter. In this first poem the homosocial relation is not enabling or inclusive, but merely narcissistic and sterile. An encounter devoid of masculine ‘otherness’ offers neither the friction of inspiration nor a confrontation with power.

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes-
Incredulous of Ought
But Blank- and steady Wilderness-
Diversified by Night-

Just Infinites of Nought-
As far as it could see-
So looked the face I looked opon-
So looked itself- on Me-

I offered it no Help-
Because the Cause was Mine-
The Misery a Compact
As hopeless- as divine-

Neither- would be absolved-
Neither would be Queen
Without the Other- Therefore-
We perish- tho’ We reign-

The poem echoes Jacques Lacan’s postulations about ‘the Mirror Stage’, the fictitious unification of the ego through an external image or representation. The sterility of the encounter is premised upon the speaker’s inability to recognize herself in the image she confronts. She becomes her own other, but this alterity is false since it offers none of the power, drama or invigoration of the encounter with the Master. The solipsistic consciousness is incapable of crowning itself ‘queen’. Personal and spiritual election can only be attained as a queen, a status founded on hierarchy and difference. Susan Kavaler-Adler’s object-relations analysis of Dickinson sees the situation from a slightly different angle, arguing that such personal decimation bespeaks a fear of individuation so severe that the self becomes ‘overwhelmed with a craving to incorporate others as symbiotic self-extensions (as opposed to differentiated internalizations)’. In a letter to Susan Dickinson she observes ‘for the Woman whom I prefer, Here is Festival- Where my Hands are cut, Her fingers will be found inside-’ (L#288, p.430). The need to possess Sue is so great that she is felt to be under the skin, guaranteeing the sanctity of the immediate sanctity of the self, whilst ultimately proving sterile. Dickinson’s exclusively homosocial encounters often have a manic quality, as though the self was trying in vain to fill a hole in identity through narcissistic retreat when only genuine otherness can actually perform this function.

This absence of genuine otherness is related to the speaker's inability to distinguish 'hopeless' misery from its 'divine' counterpart. They are compacted together in an inseparable paradox whereby the poetic self is simultaneously elevated and crushed. In a parallel move, the final line reveals that the self will have to accept living death as the condition of reigning. The inseparability of divinity and despair, personal death and election both demonstrate the consequences of narcissism. It both seduces and appalls the self, tempts with divinity, yet never allows the self to be queen. Dickinson makes it clear that there is no prospect of progress or transformation of the speaker's being. The wilderness of existence is 'Blank- and steady', non-differentiation stretches out to infinity, a black, contorted reflection of election's perfect solipsism.

Dickinson's treatment of marriage within her letters and poems provides evidence for my suggestion that she draws her poetic strength from the flux between coherent, finalized identities. She rarely describes wedded life; it is either something she anticipates or something she remembers, something in the future or the past but never the present. The desire to be a bride, or the memory of having been one, presents identity in a state of movement, of becoming, rather than a concrete, present event. She moves symbolically towards a prospective union with the Master, but never reaches the point where her identity is surrendered. Fixed identities premised either upon inclusiveness or difference are
avoided. Dickinson summarizes the attractions and repulsions of marriage in a letter to (the then) Susan Gilbert:

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening; but to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten. our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning. satisfied with the dew. and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun, think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho’ it scorches them. seathes them: they have got through with peace- they know that the man of noon is mightier than the morning and their life is henceforth to him. Oh, Susie it is dangerous, and it is all too clear, these simple trusting spirits, and the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist! (L#93, p.210)

Marriage to the Master is thrillingly anticipated, but the mode of relating is one of masochistic worship (object-love) rather than complimentary symbiosis. The burning sun (son) demands adoration and the abject surrender of peaceful identity and autonomy. The wife so completely contorts her thinking into compliance that she can no longer remember a time when ‘dew’ was sufficient. Vivian Pollock suggests that marriage was Dickinson’s only metaphor for an effective union with the world, that it might save her from the narcissistic sterility portrayed in poem F#693A/ J#458. 43 However, to become a wife involves a parallel dissipation of self in the consuming regard for her Master. By presenting her poetic consciousness as an expectant bride, Dickinson located her poetic enterprise in the space between narcissistic paralysis and a subsequent masochistic immolation as the Master’s wife. Poem F#225A/ J#199 examines

the consequences of becoming the Master's wife and the strategies by which its
totalising consumption of identity can be resisted.

I'm "wife"- I've finished that-
That other state-
I'm Czar- I'm "Woman" now-
It's safer so-

How odd the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse-
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven- now-

This being comfort- then
That other kind- was pain-
But Why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop There!

The speaker compares the virtues of wifehood against her former life as a 'girl'.

The poem is curiously balanced between self-confident assertions of identity and
a hesitant mourning for a former life. Dickinson compares married life with
transcendence to heavenly existence. However, the poem makes it clear that the
heaven of marriage merely translates suffering rather than ending it. This poem
joins others such as F#725A/ J#696 and F#307A/ J#271 in its skepticism
towards the idea that 'marriage' to heaven will make the previously earthly life
seem insignificant. As such, the final line of the poem permits two contradictory
readings. Cynthia Griffin Wolff finds the speaker's decision to desist from
comparison as empowering. The speaker would no longer be defined against the
girlhood she left behind or through becoming the Master's wife. The final
assertion of wife is thus 'self-defined and self-conferred, and it designates a
poetic Voice of experience and authority.* However, I am not convinced that ‘I’m “Wife!” Stop there!’ represents a triumphant crescendo. A variety of details within the poem partially erode our confidence in such a reading. Becoming a ‘wife’. ‘woman’ and ‘czar’ because it is ‘safer’ seems, at best, faint praise. The continued assertion of different identities undermines the confident singularity to which the speaker aspires. The extensive use of quotation marks suggests that the self-definition is unsatisfactory or ironic, the speaker assuming identities that never quite fit. The hesitancy of this first stanza inevitably affects the comparison between wifehood and girlhood within the second. The oddly wistful, reflective tone contrasts sharply with the assertiveness of stanzas one and three and destabilizes the attempt to separate past and former lives into comfort and pain. The effort to stop the endless becoming of identity may be seen either as a moment of assertion or a denial of the unsettling continuities between current and past identities.

Dickinson clearly presents the assumption of wifely identity as premised upon the total rejection of girlhood. The speaker’s self-presentation as a ‘Czar’ (a masculine denomination tellingly used without quotation marks) implies that the Master’s rigid individuation has been internalized by the poetic consciousness as the foundation of her wifely identity. She remembers her former life only as an estranged otherness, lost in an abstract, unrecoverable prehistory of ‘that-ness’, ‘I’ve finished that-’, ‘That other state-’. ‘That other

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* Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, p. 203. Wolff argues that the more assertive
kind'. The speaker implicitly acknowledges that wife is founded on a site of loss. Where masculine identities thrive upon the repudiation of a prehistory founded on continuity, reciprocity and sameness, the female consciousness finds these things harder to relinquish.

The startling phrase ‘soft eclipse’ introduces the indeterminacy that undercuts the move towards a finalized identity under the Master’s law. Neither light nor dark, forgotten or recalled, a ‘soft eclipse’ is a permeable membrane between usually irreconcilable differences and binaries. Rather like the volcano, it represents the site where clear distinctions and discrete identities become dangerously unstable, but also malleable and receptive to change. I would argue that the speaker’s capacity (however reluctant or painful) to experience her identity as a fluid, reciprocal continuum between past and current selves exemplifies the aesthetic of sameness outlined by Bennett, Benjamin et al. The status of wife, is premised upon the rejection of such a continuum. It demands the capitulation to the law of the Master, leaving the core of female identity to haunt the self as a painful memory.

I do not wholly reject Wolff’s suggestion that this poem may be taken as a model of poetic self-assertion. I merely wish to argue that the poem’s subtle ambivalence, accompanying the process of self-definition through the Master’s law, incurs costs even as it registers benefits. The Master’s all-pervasive position is indicated through the use of capitals and exclamation marks.
influence renders homosocial or narcissistic encounter prohibited and problematic. He prefers a self securely shut up in the authoritative prose of his authority, rather than roaming amongst different identities. The homosocial other, be she lover, mother, sibling or past self becomes a mercurial, seductive ghost, partially visible through the soft eclipse of memory. Although poem F#693A/ J#458 clearly delineates the risks of narcissistic collapse inherent in exclusive homosocial identifications, the influence of prohibition or loss accentuates their desirable aspects. Poem F#611A/ J#518 describes this ghostly encounter in greater detail. Here the speaker finds a bittersweet pleasure in less certain and distinct identities. The speaker herself becomes a kind of ghost, roaming imperceptibly between male and female positions.

Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night
Had scarcely deigned to lie-
When, stirring, for Belief's delight,
My Bride had slipped away-

Jan Montefiore has described this poem as an ‘erotic ghost-story’ and suggests that it may be a homoerotic encounter because Dickinson ‘doesn’t sound at all like a lawful bridegroom’. For Dickinson, homoeroticism is not so much a love that cannot speak its name as a love that can see the positive aspects of invisibility. The absence of a personal pronoun to identify the speaker within

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46The cultural background to Dickinson’s writing makes it very difficult to distinguish genuine instances of what we would now identify as lesbian sexuality from instances of emotional closeness. As Lillian Faderman notes, the suppression of lesbian sexuality within the mid-nineteenth century is less a simple question of manifest prohibition than the want of a
the poem signifies freedom as much as anonymity. The poem's focus upon the wedding night enables Dickinson to draw a critical distinction between bride and wife. The union is broken as soon as it is consummated, meaning that the identity of wife is never fully realized. The relations between the bride and the speaker are temporally confused, she is both past and future, desired and mourned at the same time. However, this poem clearly provides us with a basis to distinguish homoerotic identifications from the masochistic yearnings for the Master. The final two stanzas draw explicit comparisons between belief in the vanished, ghostly bride and faith in a mysterious, absent masculine figure.

If 'twas a Dream- made solid- just
The Heaven to confirm-
Or if Myself were dreamed of Her-
The power to presume-

With Him remain- who unto Me- 
Gave- even as to All-
A Fiction superseding Faith- 
By so much- as 'twas real-

Dickinson invites the reader to consider this distinction between fiction and faith in gendered terms. The dream-like bride is so enticing that she outshines God. His characteristically taciturn response guarantees that the 'Fiction' of the bride will supercede the 'Faith' in him. If, as I argue in my chapter on the gothic, Dickinson uses the term 'prose' in a negative, restrictive sense throughout her conceptual language to recognize female sexual desire. The endorsement of emotionally intense female friendships as an indicator of women's greater moral fiber effectively explained away any and all instances of lesbian encounter in non-sexual terms. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p.152.
work, then 'fiction' is viewed with more generosity. In a letter to Thomas Higginson, Dickinson says of Amherst 'It is difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place, but test's severe repairs are permitted all' (L#330, p.460). Fiction is an illicit pleasure that thrives in those spaces where the God's gruelling tests of faith are temporarily forgotten. 'Belief's delight' is associated with a masculine consciousness that needs to have faith and certainty in his bride. However, once the speaker allows the masculine aspect of her bi-sexual persona to slip away, the homosocial pleasures of fiction, that stress the delicious sanctity of uncertain desires, can come to the fore. The speaker cannot be sure who exactly is doing the dreaming ('if Myself were dreamed of Her-'), indicating a pleasurable reciprocation between subject and object, which echoes the oscillation between reader and writer positions in the poems discussed earlier. In Kleinian terms, the threshold between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions entails a two-way transfer of autonomy between the core ego and its constellation of internal objects. Rather than thinking or dreaming, the self finds itself being thought or dreamed by an impinging consciousness. Such temporary losses of central autonomy and coherent selfhood can be enabling if they engineer a creative break from rigid, reified thinking. In this poem, the pleasure to be taken in the fluid interchange between dreamer and dreamed contrasts sharply with the sober, stringent Calvinist demands for certainty through faith. The vanished bride may be seen as another 'soft eclipse' that enables the speaker to escape from the realm of the Master's rigid distinctions between self and other, male and female. Unlike God, the bride is not entirely beyond consciousness, she
exists between presence and absence, never to be possessed again though never entirely lost. If the Master shuts her up in his prose, then the bride endows her with the delirious, bittersweet freedom of fiction which allows her the freedom to haunt identities, but denies her a sense of coherent, final identity. Once again, Dickinson is ambivalent about uncertainty and the effects it may have on the self.

When contrasted with poem F#225A/ J#199, we understand the cost of becoming a 'wife'. As I stipulated earlier, aspirations towards marriage and becoming the Master’s bride are not synonymous. The anticipation of marriage introduces a sufficient alterity to break from the sterility of narcissism, but the homoerotic tone allows Dickinson to circumnavigate the corresponding peril of consuming acquiescence to the Master’s law. If the 'wife' is a fixed destination of identity, then the bride is, as Dickinson writes in poem F#815A/ J#830 'Dwelt hesitating, half of Dust-/ And half of Day'. Dickinson’s poetic consciousness does not aspire to a singular or complete relationship with her muse (be they male or female). Poetry and poetic identity are both premised upon the perpetual negotiation between the demands of masculine and feminine positions, between identity as a fluid, reciprocal continuum between feminine sameness, and the alterity of the Master that provides the impetus towards personal change, individuation and progress.

In the final example of this section I wish to discuss Poem F#627A/ J#593, penned in praise of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. This piece describes how
a powerful female identification can productively intercede in the instance of poetic inspiration. Although the female muse is as mysterious and entrancing as the Master, their power is fundamentally different. The 'Foreign Lady' does not demand the slavish subjugation of the poetic self, but merges seamlessly with it, filling the self with her creative power.

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl-
I read that Foreign Lady-
The Dark- felt beautiful-

And whether it was noon at night-
Or only Heaven- at noon-
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell-

The Bees- became as Butterflies-
The Butterflies- as Swans-
Approached- and spurned the narrow Grass-
And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer-
I took for Giants- practising
Titanic Opera-

The Days – to Mighty Metres stept-
The Homeliest- adorned
As if unto a Jubilee
'Twere suddenly confirmed-

I could not have defined the change-
Conversion of the Mind
Like Sanctifying in the Soul
Is witnessed- not explained-

'Twas a Divine Insanity-
The Danger to be sane
Should I again experience-
'Tis Antidote to turn-
To Tomes of Solid Witchcraft-
Magicians be asleep-
But Magic- hath an element
Like Deity- to keep-

In order to make sense of the opening images of light and darkness, I refer once again to Wendy Barker’s work, which suggests that light is always correlated with the Master’s power and influence. The female poet is drawn towards the sun’s (son’s) power whilst prohibited from owning it. However, the foreign lady seems able to transform feminine darkness into something illuminating and beautiful. It no longer seems like a consolation prize for being locked out of the Master’s circle of power. Although foreign, her ‘otherness’ does not oppress or imprison the poetic ego. The relationship between the speaker and the foreign lady is premised upon, as Jessica Benjamin puts it, ‘the paradoxical balance between recognition of the other and assertion of the self’. The Master’s power commands an all-consuming attention that forces the speaker into a posture of self-abnegating worship, but the dark lady swiftly vanishes as a distinct presence within the poem and integrates herself seamlessly into the speaker’s experience of the world.

The representation of the foreign lady in this poem confirms the assertions of Bennett, Homans et al that a female muse promotes sameness.

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fluidity and reciprocity against the rigid, differentiating strategies of the Master. Once again, Dickinson illustrates this strategy through the creative dissolution of oppositions and binaries. The 'Lunacy of Light' which confuses the distinction between the day and night simultaneously confuses the masculine and feminine (respectively) gender positions associated with each. The 'Homeliest', referring to a woman's domestic space and responsibilities, becomes a place of 'Jubilee'. Delicate, feminine butterflies are transformed into phallic-necked swans. As poems F#171A/ J#173, F#610A/ J#354, F#836A/ J#970, and F#1107A/ J#1099 all attest, the butterfly is one of Dickinson's favoured tropes for personal transmogrification; the lowly caterpillar eventually emerging as the beautiful feminine butterfly. The dark lady's influence seemingly enables these jubilant, promiscuous interchanges of identities and positions. The poetic consciousness shifts between day and night, butterfly and swan, sanity and insanity, pleasurably questioning the values attached to each. The Master makes the dark a source of awe, but my reading of Dickinson's work suggests that only the restraining influence of homosocial contact and inspiration can make enforced darkness feel beautiful and inviting.

In this section I have argued that the 'female muse' does not so much inspire Dickinson's speakers as weave herself seamlessly and productively into the speaker's modes of relating to otherness, notably the ways in which the poetic consciousness transcends boundaries, incorporates alterity, and tolerates oppressive power. The final three stanzas of this poem compare the experience
of reading the foreign lady with witchcraft and conversion. The former is an illicit power primarily associated with dangerous heathen women, the latter is the cornerstone of the Puritan consciousness. As the final stanza makes clear, magicians are asleep to the dark ladies’ witchcraft, its alternative conversions passing them by. Like conversion, the speaker regards the experience as something private, ‘witnessed-not explained’. The singing of the female muse is unobservable, yet deeply affecting. This female capacity to tolerate and assimilate otherness is one aspect of Dickinson’s poetic volcano. I will now discuss how this otherness is presented.

3.4. The ‘Circumstance’ of the Master: Dickinson and Harriet Prescott Spofford.

This section discusses those poems where issues of power, gender, alterity and inspiration are raised through interaction with the Master. Each encounter is profoundly ambivalent, a desire to incorporate the Master’s power matched by a fear of being overwhelmed. Dickinson was aware that poetic inspiration could not rely entirely upon the homosocial enticements discussed above, although the poems do not always suggest that her speakers solicit the Master’s attention. He is felt to be something that happens to the poet, a presence to be accommodated rather than one actively sought. In order to provide a coherent thematic framework for the following section, I would like to discuss poem F#1130C/ J#1136. Although the gulf between the malevolent serpent and the inert, morally pure flower is so tremendous that no reconciliation
seems possible, the poem raises questions about whether the poetic self can afford to reject the terrifying, accusing alterity of the male muse without leaving her poetic identity sterile.

The Frost of Death was on the Pane-
"Secure your Flower" said he.
Like Sailors fighting with a Leak
We fought Mortality-

Our passive Flower we held to Sea-
To mountain- to the Sun-
Yet even on his Scarlet shelf
To crawl the Frost begun-

We pried him back
Ourselves we wedged
Himself and her between-
Yet easy as the narrow Snake
He forked his way along

Till all her helpless beauty bent
And then our wrath begun-
We hunted him to his Ravine
We chased him to his Den-

We hated Death and hated Life
And nowhere was to go-
Than Sea and continent there is
A larger- it is Woe

Dickinson integrates two separate narrative sources: the biblical parable of Genesis and a domestic, sentimental horror story, within a simple tale of seasonal cruelty. These source materials express diametrically opposed views on why the flower ‘falls’. Dickinson rewrites Eve’s encounter with the serpent from a fatalistic perspective, so heavily emphasizing the flower’s fragility and ‘helpless
beauty' that it is portrayed as the victim of an overpowering seduction rather than a weak sinner. The poem clearly draws nineteenth-century ideologies of ideal womanhood as passive, delicate and morally unimpeachable 'flowers'.\textsuperscript{49} Assertions of intrinsic female purity had displaced the earlier Christian emphasis upon women as inheritors of Eve’s sinful weakness. The righteous vengeance described in stanza four seeks retribution against the cruel deity who blames his fragile creations for failing to survive in such inhospitable circumstances. The poem clearly underlines the poverty of sustaining natural resources: sea, sun and mountain can offer no help against the omnipotent frost. The fall becomes a reflection of God’s sadism rather than the flower’s recalcitrance.

However, the fifth stanza undermines the poem’s moral outrage by drawing attention to the problems accompanying repeated protestations of innocence. Mourning the flower’s violation becomes an all-consuming activity, draining existence of hope and vitality. The poem gravitates almost unwillingly towards the acceptance of sin, the unspeakable horror at the core of being, as a starting point for spiritual regeneration. Rather than pining for an unrecoverable lost innocence, rather than recoiling in horror from masculinity as though it were destructive rather than unavoidable and potentially productive, the poem pulls us back towards the volcano trope, where conflicting male and female elements can be partially reconciled. Once the Master’s power (in its varying manifestations of death, sin, sexuality and power) has been acknowledge, incorporated and

\textsuperscript{49} These cultural contexts will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.
transformed, then poetic identity can commence. As I suggested in the previous section, the rigid split between the inert, beautiful female flower and the active, powerful masculine death ultimately impoverish identity. The poetic selves metaphorically wedge themselves ‘Himself and her between’ attempting to keep male and female positions separate, a gesture that ultimately proves counterproductive.

Dickinson portrays the initial stages of poetic inspiration as horrifying and enticing, akin to the central relationships of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or the works of Ann Radcliffe. The female protagonist finds herself trapped in circumstances dominated by a hostile, yet seductive masculine presence. Female gothic texts outline the terms of reconciliation between the heroine and her masculine adversary, a strategy repeated in Dickinson’s poetry where we observe the partial incorporation of hostile alterity into the self. 50 Eugenia C. Delamotte and Michelle A. Masse argue that gothic novels persistently portray women as inert, beautiful objects at the expense of endowing them with any autonomy; women scream, cry and faint, they respond but do not initiate. 51 Dickinson’s poems seem to accept that a terrifying and involuntary imprisonment within gothic identity is the starting place from which her poetic voice must struggle to free itself. As the poem above attests, there is little point

in disavowing the Master when he ‘drills his Welcome in’ (F#243A/ J#286). The poetic self must work from within this torture chamber of inspiration, learning to incorporate the violence into a facet of autonomy.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that Dickinson’s ‘playing dead’ is both an acceptance of identity as defined by the Master and simultaneously the basis for a counter-poetics.\(^{52}\) Edgar Allan Poe’s statement that ‘the death of a beautiful woman, is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world’ succinctly articulates the masculine perspective of many gothic works, their tendency towards petrifying the female subject into an immaculate, aesthetic cipher for metaphysical concerns.\(^{53}\) Although female protagonists often resourcefully negotiate gothic encounters, Eugenia Delamotte observes that gothic novels have a tendency to lead their heroines through exotic tribulations back to marriage.\(^{54}\) Gothic heroines survive the passage of terror and their reward is to be turned into aesthetic objects or wives. Dickinson knows that promising to be the Master’s bride confers poetic power, whilst becoming his *wife* merely freezes her into a passive, aesthetic trophy. In order to maintain the ‘soft eclipse’ (F#225A/ J#199) between her girlish independence and a life in the glare of the

\(^{52}\) Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, p.222. The most obvious support for this view within Poe’s canon is his story *The Oval Portrait*. In this tale an obsessive artist dedicates himself to a perfect painting of a beautiful woman. Upon the artist’s completion of the picture he claims that ‘This indeed is life itself’ and the woman dies.


\(^{54}\) Eugenia C. Delamotte, *Perils of the Night*, p.205.
Master's power, Dickinson's speakers are forced into a dangerous poetic flirtation, partially accepting and partially resisting the oppressive intensity of her muse.

The Master's impact upon the poetic consciousness is perceived as split into contradictory, positive and negative components; he is both inspiring and horrifying. Poetry emerges through the barely endurable crisis as a volcanic force that violently forms and deforms the fragile sense of poetic autonomy. At this point I would like to remind the reader of the distinction between grotesque and sublime that I laid out in my introduction. Sublime experience involves the unequivocal recognition of transcendent power (even at those points when it is not possessed) and the experiencing self's attempt to identify with this power. The poetic subject must be sufficiently integrated and coherent for sublime recognition to take place. However, in the following poems, the Master is portrayed in highly ambivalent language, his sublime grandeur and authority often obscured by horrifying and ludicrous elements. He is equal parts 'the supple Suitor/ That wins at last-' (F#1470A/ J#1445) through sophisticated, seductive displays of power and the jumbled mixture of folk and popular motifs that comprise 'Calvinism's monster-god'. His manifestation through the disruptive jumble of coarse physicality, oppressive sexuality and subjective collapse are akin to what Kristeva describes as 'the abject', the horrifying muck and viscera of existence upon whose rejection the symbolic coherence of the

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55 Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, p. 163.
subject depends. His appearance heralds meaning and non-meaning in equal measure, he prohibits and inspires. The sublime incorporation of his power is always staged against the risk of a complete disintegration of cognitive coherence. As such, Dickinson often views inspiration as both sublimely transporting and horrifyingly meaningless. The following poem demonstrates how the Master’s emerges not as entirely cacophonous because he overloads the speaker with brutal power that cannot be assimilated.

He fumbles at your Soul
As players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on-
He stuns you by degrees-
Prepares your brittle nature
For the Ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers- further heard-
Then nearer- Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten-
Your Brain- to bubble Cool-
Deals- One- imperial- Thunderbolt-
That scalps your naked Soul-

When Winds take Forests in their Paws-
The Universe- is still-

F#477A/ J#315

The poem’s images condense three distinct actions, the playing of a musical instrument, the forging of metal and the rape of a female body. The level of

57 The notion of a female poet as an instrument waiting to be played can be found in ‘The Violin’, a poem by Harriet Prescott Spofford. Spofford portrays the poetess as a tree, enraptured by the beauty of nature yet unable to express her joy ‘Woe is me, there was no voice to sing’. The tree is felled by a woodsman and subsequently turned into a musical instrument that gives the speaker ‘pulse on pulse of rapture’. Like Dickinson, Spofford links the
violence escalates into a final explosion of savage brute force, the speaker's body both made and unmade by the hammering. There is a queasy humour about the incongruous bricolage of motifs, a humour enforced by the revelation the Master is a 'fumbling' musician. He seeks to woo his way into the soul through cacophony which, given Dickinson's enduring equation musical harmony and transcendent truth, must be something of a disappointment. There is a suggestion that 'full music' may be akin to 'The Truth [that] must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind-' (F#1263A/ J#1129). The Master's coarse seductions deny the speaker any position from which sublime recompense can be gained. Dickinson suggests that the perceived violence may be an indirect way of expressing the speaker's vulnerability to the glare of poetic inspiration. Music becomes a concrete force, a clanking, executioner's drum roll like hammers rammed through bodily tissue. This in turn is translated into a Master figure that promises to forge a new self from redemptive suffering and simultaneously invites the speaker to reject his inspiration as repellant and brutal.

The poem's conclusion finally provides these paradoxes with an explanatory context. The verb 'scalps' unmistakably finks the Master with the terrors of the Indian savage. The Native American savage was engrained within the collective American memory as the apotheosis of all the obstructions they

emergence of the musical voice to the death of the tree, concluding 'I had never sung had I not died'. Spofford's poem is perhaps more conservative in its espousal of patriarchal marriage between woodsman and instrument since the violin finds pleasure in being played, and does not regret that she will never be able to play herself. See Harriet Prescott Spofford, 'The Violin', in In Titian's Garden and Other Poems (Boston: Copeland and Day. 1897), pp.14-16 (p.16).
faced in attempting to establish the New Jerusalem. God’s kingdom upon earth. Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that this poem performs a startling revision upon the assumptions of this collective memory.

In this poem the acts of raping and scalping are rendered in precisely those savage terms; yet they are enacted not by Indians, but by the Lord Himself. It was not the devil who molested these journeying Puritans, so the verse avers, but rather the bloodthirsty Deity to Whom they had relinquished their destiny.

Dickinson recognizes that the Master-God both causes and redeems suffering. He is an intolerable and illogical combination of meaningful saviour and meaningless sadist, transcendent and grossly corporeal, unknowable and all too familiar. Equating God with a sadistic seducer undermines faith in his omnipotent, transcendent goodness and leaves the speaker fearing that her death might be a moment of mere physical annihilation, rather than a passage to redemption. The ‘Firmaments- are still-’ with a cosmic dread, held between the paws of the senseless carnivorous beast that occupies God’s vacated seat. ‘Paws’ and ‘pause’ may be synonymous, ravenous nature joins the fly of poem F#591A/ J#465 in designating an ‘in-between’ state of perpetual torment, faith and doubt. The self awaits a heavenly rebirth that may never come. Just as death invades the garden paradise in poem F#1130C/ J#1136, so the rapacious Indian

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58 I should be noted that certain sentimental writers, notably Lydia Sigourney, had begun to take issue with this view of the Indians, incorporating their plight into a more general invective against inequalities of class and gender. In 1884 Dickinson’s friend and correspondent Helen Hunt Jackson published Ramona, a fictional work of major importance in highlighting the plight of the Indians. Although Dickinson’s letters reveal that she read the work favourably (comparing it to Shakespeare), there is no indication that she engaged with or agreed with the political core of the book (L#976, p. 866).

59 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Emily Dickinson, p. 281.
invades the pure soil of the American consciousness. The Transcendentalist project to rediscover Eden through the intense communion with nature is shadowed by the serpent who appears as the dark side of the Calvinist God.

In the final stage of this chapter I want explore the parallels and contrasts between Dickinson’s work and ‘Circumstance’ a short story she had read by Harriet Prescott Spofford in the Atlantic Monthly in May of 1860. Poem F#477A/ J#315 bears a considerable resemblance to the story of ‘Circumstance’. The tale centers on a frontier woman who fends off a demonic beast (referred to as the Indian Devil) through pious singing. Dickinson read and was troubled by ‘Circumstance’. She alludes both to it and Spofford’s ‘The Amber Gods’ in correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Susan Dickinson. Dickinson’s letters indicate that Higginson offered an unprompted recommendation of Spofford, possibly acknowledging the similarity between their work. Since Johnson and Franklin have dated all the poems cited in this section after 1860, a direct line of influence can be plausibly inferred. I want to argue that ‘Circumstance’ provides Dickinson with a template for her view of poetics as a dangerous force that can, depending upon whether its impact is survived, both confirm and deny female poetic authority. Dickinson’s comment that ‘Circumstance’ ‘...followed me, in the Dark- so I avoided her-’ (L#261., p.404) provides a cryptic indication that she heeded the tale’s wisdom about the Master’s power. Where Spofford’s protagonist flees from the ‘Indian Devil’

60 Daneen Wardrop, Emily Dickinson’s Gothic, p.84.
towards her heavenly father. Dickinson realizes that God and the devil, meaning and meaninglessness are conjoined. The dark must be endured and cannot be avoided.

‘Circumstance’ is a frontier gothic tale about an unnamed pioneer woman who, whilst returning home through the forest after a day’s work ‘so busy with care and sympathy’ to her husband and child, is attacked by a wild beast. 61 Spofford’s vivid descriptions of nature evoke both ‘the sweet homefeeling of a young a tender wintry wood’ and ‘the evening star [that] hung over a tide of failing orange that slowly slipped down the earth’s broad side to sadden other hemispheres with sweet regret’ (85). She makes it clear that a new Eden has been found, but it is already tinged with a ghostly pathos, the invasion of loss and change. Within two paragraphs, paradise is breached by a shroud-like harbinger who repeats ‘The Lord have mercy’ three times. The invasion of Eden by the demonic is echoed by the invasion of natural description by supernatural and subjective elements. Anne Dalke sees ‘Circumstance’ as engaging in a critique of the ‘realist school’ of fiction that ‘is inadequate to encompass the exigencies of female circumstance’. 62 Dalke argues that:

The protagonist of Spofford’s story learns that the realistic mode of perception is inadequate to deal with the dangers which confront her and

61 Harriet Prescott Spofford, ‘Circumstance’, in The Amber Gods and Other Stories, ed. by Alfred Bendixen (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 84. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be included in parentheses within the text.

discovers simultaneously her own creative power and her power to save her family from harm. 

Although I agree with Dalke's conclusions, we must recognize that the protagonist does not strictly initiate the change from realist to non-realist modes. It is a reactive gesture brought about by the invasion of her life. The Indian Devil's attack forces the speaker to sing on the threshold of her own untimely demise. Spofford's lurid and detailed account of the beast's supernatural resonance identifies him as a dark muse, a split off part of the self, and the unacknowledged inspiration for her song.

The centrepiece of Spofford's tale involves a report of the desperate spiritual, creative struggle as the protagonist attempts to save herself from the Indian Devil's slavering jaws. Her singing is as wild and untutored, ricocheting spasmodically across a huge variety of moods to reflect her internal turmoil and spiritual uncertainty. The songs are initially drawn from happy scenes, from the ballads used to rock her child to sleep and the tunes she used to dance to, but they swiftly progress into songs about vagrants and sailors and ghastly ballads. There is a tangible degeneration in subject matter from the pure concerns of domesticity into a dangerous, worldly, coarse, and carnal masculine sensibility. The Indian Devil is seeping into her song without her realizing it. When the beast seems on the verge of triumph, the protagonist calls upon God for strength. She radically splits her muse into good and bad components, a move that denies her access to their power.

61 Anne Dalke, "'Circumstance' and the Creative Woman: Harriet Prescott Spofford", p. 74.
The influence that God and the Indian Devil have over the speaker changes in direct proportion to each other throughout the story. The protagonist’s husband is the site where God and the Indian Devil compete for influence and the speaker’s inability to reconcile her internal divisions leads to a disenchantment with her husband. The tale’s shock conclusion, where the reunited family return home, only to find their house destroyed by the ‘accomplished hatred’ of an ‘Indian tribe’, indicates that the evil Master has triumphed over his benevolent counterparts (96). Spofford’s text invites the reader to assess what significance the domestic ‘failure’ at the story’s conclusion has for the vision of female creativity outlined earlier in the tale. We must then decide what impact the story’s conclusion may have had on Dickinson.

There is a marked divergence between Dickinson and Spofford’s treatment of their respective ‘Master’ figures because Spofford’s protagonist is unable to accept the presence of the Indian Devil within the forest and, by extension, within her own identity. Dickinson seems to have realized that the static ‘Eden’ of the poetic mind must be confronted with the terrifying, destructive alterity of the serpent as a necessary condition of poetic expression. As Klein’s formulation of the paranoid-schizoid position allows us to see, the splitting of the object into good and bad aspects also splits and impoverishes the ego. It becomes a site of two competing, omnipotent forces, that leave the self

64 Anne Dalke, “Circumstance” and the Creative Woman: Harriet Prescott Spofford’, p.78.
awash with over-powering, polarized impressions and ideas. Depressive achievement of autonomy cannot be achieved without a partial integration of these good and bad components that Spofford's protagonist seems to find intolerable. She seeks to defend herself from the Indian Devil's impurity at all costs.

The text of 'Circumstance' makes it clear that the Indian Devil is synonymous with rejected, split-off aspects of the self, a receptacle for all bestial, carnal appetites associated with man's fallen nature. Spofford takes a considerable amount of time attempting to explain why death at the jaws of the Indian devil is far worse than comparable fates.

What dread comes from the thought of perishing in flames! but fire, let it leap and hiss never so hotly, is something too remote, too alien, to inspire us with such loathly horror as a wild beast; if it have a life, that life is too utterly beyond our comprehension. *Fire is not half ourselves:* as it devours, arouses neither hatred nor disgust; is not to be known by the strength of *our lower natures let loose;* does not drip out blood into our faces from foaming chaps, nor mouth nor slaver above us with vitality. (89) [italics mine]

As in poem F#1130C/ J#1136, the protagonist disavows any suggestion that carnal, earthly desire might be desirable and hence it becomes a kind of rape. Correspondingly, Spofford's shows her protagonist being impoverished by a senseless grasping after God's unattainable, but pure glory. She cannot be made creatively 'elect' whilst she flees from the acknowledgement of her own base dimension. Clearly the protagonist's efforts to put 'down the base self by
developing, suddenly, on penalty of death, the higher one’ is not endorsed by the conclusion’s fundamentally knotted didacticism. 65 There is no point in Spofford’s text at which the protagonist is sufficiently ‘integrated’ to accept the invasion of paradise as a part of her being that she must accommodate in her post-lapsarian mind.

The Indian Devil gains a double victory over the protagonist with the supernatural Indian Devil destroying God’s brittle, unattainable perfection, whilst actual Indians destroy the domestic home. The protagonist is finally forced to make the kind of adjustment that she previously refused to accept: the tainting Eden and identity must be accepted so that the internal division can be healed. Spofford’s one-line concluding paragraph paraphrases the end of Milton’s Paradise Lost- ‘For the rest- the world was all before them, where to choose’(96). 66 By refusing to recognise her own sin in the face of the Indian Devil, the protagonist has scuppered her chance of gaining God’s assistance. Yet, as the text makes clear, the retreat of spiritual paradise brings forward the possibility of a flawed, yet vital earthly bliss. As the protagonist’s strength fades, her creative voice faltering, her husband appears with a gun and ‘those eyes so lately riveted on heaven, now suddenly seeing all life-long bliss possible’(94). The fall of consciousness and exile from the frontier garden is also the beginning of autonomy and freedom, with all its attendant thrills and risks.

65 Ann Dalke, “‘Circumstance’ and the Creative Woman: Harriet Prescott Spofford”, p.77.
It was this sense of the fall's inevitability in 'Circumstance' that Dickinson refers to in her letter to Thomas Higginson. 'I read Miss Prescott's "Circumstance", but it followed me, in the Dark- so I avoided her-' (L.#261, p.404). The Indian Devil is shot by the protagonist's husband, but returns as a real Indian who pursues the protagonist in the dark to destroy her home. The splitting of God and Indian devil renders both inaccessible as a source of integrated poetic autonomy and leaves the self fragile. This is why the protagonist's music emerges wild and uncontrolled, expressing the fragmentation of the self rather than its coherence. When the Master muse is wholly rejected then the female poet's ego is denied access to the power necessary for creativity.

As such, Dickinson's creativity is premised upon modifying the hostile advances of the Master rather than rejecting their hated aspects entirely. Her claim that Spofford follows her 'in the Dark' reverses the image found in poem F#627A/ J#593 where, under the influence of 'that Foreign Lady/ The Dark- felt beautiful-'. The 'Foreign Lady' can reconcile herself to the co-presence of light and dark, good and bad in a way that Spofford's protagonist seemingly cannot. Dickinson follows the 'Dark Lady' in accepting hostile, accusing alterity as an essential component of creative endeavor. She is a symbol of poetry as the struggle to integrate the self in a hostile, post-lapsarian world. Dickinson's self-conception as a poetic volcano demonstrates her toleration of invasive, repellant

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passions as an integral part of self. As I suggested in the previous two sections of this chapter, her poetic strategies involve blurring distinctions between subject and object, reader and writer, male and female rather than forcing them further apart. The disparate aspects of the Master, devil and god, rapist and bridegroom, are fused into a single entity. Poem F#556A/ J#390 provides a good example of ambivalence inspired by fusing good and bad aspects of the Master into the same space.67

It's Coming- the postponeless Creature-
It gains the Block-and
now- it gains the Door-
Chooses its latch, from
all the other fastenings-
Enters- with a "You know
me- Sir"?

Simple Salute- and Certain
Recognition-
Bold- were it enemy- Brief-
were it friend-
Dresses each House in
Crape, and Icicle-
And Carries one- out of it-
to God-

Dickinson ‘knows’ the ‘postponeless Creature-’ of death. As the disjointed lineation of the poem makes clear, the creature is ‘post’ (i.e. after) the forgotten fall and its anonymity coupled with boundless power reminds the speaker of the

terrible cost of consciousness. Spofford’s protagonist denies her devils and as such they return to her as omnipotent, terrifying, lascivious apparitions. Dickinson is more hospitable to the Master and his mystery, because he may be considered part of herself, albeit a somewhat problematic part. As the second stanza makes clear, he oscillates between being enemy and friend, between a fearful interloper and desirable companion, between something entirely alien and something familiar. He is both ‘other’ to Dickinson’s speaker and yet sufficiently inside the domicile of her experience that he may be hesitantly welcomed into her poetic economy.

In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss a series of poems that demonstrate Dickinson’s awareness of the Master as both a source of inspiration and destructive prohibition. Following my discussion of ‘Circumstance’, I will parallel the narrative of creative inspiration with the myth of Genesis. A shattering invasion of consciousness forces the speaker to accept a painful, accusatory exclusion or violence as the basis of poetic force. Poem F#1083A/J#1059 may be seen as an ironic apology for continually singing from the Master’s ‘charnel steps’ (L#298, p.436). The speaker is forced to take responsibility for a wound that she did not solicit.

Sang from the Heart, Sire,
Dipped my Beak in it,
If the Tune drip too much
Have a tint too Red

Pardon the Cochineal-
Suffer the Vermillion-
Death is the Wealth
Of the Poorest Bird.

Bear with the Ballad-
Awkward- faltering-
Death twists the strings-
'Twasn't my blame-

Pause in your Liturgies
Wait your Chorals-
While I repeat your
Hallowed Name-

This poem both apologizes to the Master for the jumbled, visceral coarseness of her poetic expression and simultaneously blames him for the grievous wound at her core. Dickinson exaggerates masochistic meekness to the point where it becomes accusing. She proceeds from a black pun premised around the comical disparity between literal and figurative understandings of 'singing from the heart'. She revises its common association with an outpouring of emotional sincerity to one where feeling comes from a wound inflicted by sadistic death. Dickinson's poetic volcano is revealed to be a bleeding heart, a raw wound of accusing experience. 68 Death both inspires her singing and fractures her voice into a Babel-like cacophony.

68 There is a distinctly Dickensian quality to these descriptions of feeling. The opening of this poem is very similar to poem F#125A/ J#78 'A poor- torn Heart- a tattered heart.' The manuscript of this latter poem included two attached picture cuttings from Dicken's Old Curiosity Shop. Martha Nell Smith provides an excellent reading of F#125A/ J#78 in the light of these cuttings, claiming that Dickinson was revising 'Little Nell's miserable flight into angelic rescue.' See Martha Nell Smith, 'The Poet as Cartoonist' in Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller and Martha Nell Smith, Comic Power in Emily Dickinson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), pp. 63-102 (p.80).
Once death has soiled the Eden of the mind, then the speaker has no choice but to come to terms with this painful flaw at the heart of her creative enterprise. Dickinson’s speaker parodies her own culpability without claiming that its accusation can be entirely circumnavigated; she oscillates between admission and denial of guilt, playing with her powerlessness, taking pleasure in the gruesome act of writing in blood with her beak. It is death that ‘twists the strings’ of her faltering voice into stylistic discrepancies and idiosyncrasies, partial rhymes, deletions, syntactical and semantic contortions, just as the Master fumbles at the ‘keys’ of her voice in F#477A/ J#315. He does not merely pluck at the strings of her voice, but breaks and twists them. His inspiration is received as a composite jumble of meaning and non-meaning.

I dreaded that first Robin, so.
But He is mastered, now,
I’m some accustomed to Him grown.
He hurts a little, though-

I thought if I could only live
Till that first Shout got by-
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me-

I dared not meet the Daffodils-
For fear their Yellow Gown
Would pierce me with a fashion
So foreign to my own-

I wish the Grass would hurry-
So when ‘twas time to see-
He’d be too tall, the tallest one
Could stretch to look at me-

I could not bear the Bees should come.
I wish they’d stay away
In those dim countries where they go.
What word had they, for me?

They're here, though; not a creature failed-
No Blossom stayed away
In gentle deference to me-
The Queen of Calvary-

Each one salutes me, as he goes.
And I, my childish Plumes,
Lift in bereaved acknowledgement
Of their unthinking Drums-

This poem combines the sentimental depiction of vulnerable femininity with a sadistic, divine presence in Eden to critique the benevolent, assertive communion with nature proposed by Transcendentalism. The Robin announces the coming of spring and the dawn of a consciousness under perpetual sensory threat. Dickinson's speaker is an exaggerated, sentimental 'Alice in Wonderland' figure, picking her way gingerly though the minutia of nature. It is this insistence upon the smallness of things that makes the poem a bleak response to Emerson's panoramic, assertive sensory consumption of natural phenomena:

Standing on the bare ground, -my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

Dickinson opens her tiny eye only to find her retina scorched by an unfeeling sun and her body mangled by melody. For Emerson, the communion with nature

emphasized the spiritual symbiosis of self and other, part and whole. Dickinson subverts this idea by stating that the perceptual apparatus are not the basis of autonomy, but merely the receptive channels through the self can be persecuted, broken and overwhelmed by a force she cannot feasibly digest. She is literally assaulted by an alien creativity. The garden of existence is teeming with creativity but the poem makes it clear that inspiration can be profoundly damaging if the self is too fragile to receive their message. The poetic consciousness may be described as paranoid-schizoid since experience is felt to be a constellation of inassimilable entities, each malevolently seeking the self's destruction.

The sprightly humour of the piece somewhat deflates the perceived severity of the torment, but it does so at the expense of making the speaker seem pathetically small and the persecution equally petty and meaningless. The speaker is like the pitiable mouse 'O'erpowered by the Cat!' in F#151A/ J#61. If we wish to see the poem's hyperbole and humour as subversive, we must acknowledge the way in which the potentially ludicrous images undercut the ultimate preoccupation with redemption through suffering. There is no recognition for 'The Queen of Calvary', her crucifixion and bereavement go unacknowledged by 'their unthinking Drums-'. Since the poem does not indicate that the speaker has in fact earned her redemption, this is a dormant motif, unelaborated in the rest of the poem. Without the moral framework of redemption through suffering, the garden's violence can seem senseless, as
though the kaleidoscope of sound and colour cannot be transformed into poetic meaning. Unlike the comparable F#1450A/ J#1420 where the ‘ravished spirit’ is stabbed with ‘Dirks of melody’ there is no transcendental ‘inquiry’ in the travail, no sense that the speaker will ‘receive reply/ When Flesh and Spirit sunder/ In Death’s immediately-’. The fallen garden dissolves such a link between pain and spiritual truth. The speaker faces the far more horrifying task of simply trying to survive.

Dickinson emphasizes the meaninglessness of pain through the brutal banality of nature’s violence, something reflected in the coarseness of the bird’s overpowering shout, the butchery of the mangling pianos, the foreign yellow of the daffodils. The garden’s violence is not creatively inspiring, it represents the grotesque collapse of autonomy, rather than its sublime elevation. Dickinson hints at this when she writes of the bees ‘What word had they, for me?’ The speaker could be claiming that the bees have nothing to say to her, but it could equally mean that they do not endow her with words for her own poetic speech. Nature talks at her or through her rather than to her.

There is a gendered dimension to this power imbalance that becomes clearer if we compare this line to an section of F#764A/ J#754 ‘My Life had stood- a Loaded Gun-’. In this latter poem Dickinson asserts that ‘every time I speak for Him-/ The Mountains straight reply-’. When she appropriate the Master’s thunderous words and projects them volcanically, nature echoes back
in perfect symmetry. Reciprocation between poet and nature is the result of the poet’s force, rather than his or her receptivity. The speaker of this poem is so vulnerable that communion with nature is not possible; its messages are simply received as a cacophonous carping.

Poem F#347A/ J#348 deflates any pretensions towards the sublimity of suffering. Base 'Dirks of Melody' assault her, refusing to grant poetic autonomy. Dickinson tackles this paralyzing horror at the heart of poetic inspiration more directly in poem F#423A/ J#410. The poem repeats the fall to the 'Indian Devil' portrayed in 'Circumstance', the speaker emerging with a tainted poetic voice steeped in the viscera of bodily disintegration. Dickinson emphasizes how death 'twists' the strings of her poetic endeavor so that her voice can only emerge as an interminable giggling, the compromised formations of a poetry forged for the simple purpose of survival.

The first Day's Night had come-
And grateful that a thing
So terrible- had been endured-
I told my Soul to sing-

She said her strings were snapt-
Her Bow- to atoms blown-
And so to mend her- gave me work
Until another Morn-

And then- a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face-
Until it blocked my eyes-
The soul sings from 'charnel steps' commemorating the survival of the first day's trauma. The fall of consciousness represented in this poem is a nameless dread that overwhelms her most basic cognitive faculties, so that the inability to sing designates a vulnerable, threadbare autonomy, a personality without strength or definition. Images of sensory overload abound, space and time themselves become vehicles for hostility. Although this is the first day, the speaker finds herself assaulted by the pre-history of being as 'Yesterdays in pairs' proliferate, blocking up the eyes. This extraordinary trope, referring to the endless expansion of time into divided, yet united, units condenses the incomparable enormity of human sin with the infinite fracturing of comprehension in the garden of Eden and the tower of Babel.\(^70\) Condemned by the infinite cruelty of her Calvinist, master-God, Dickinson's speaker can only emit hysterical streams of incoherent laughter. The Master's violence produces a Babel-like fracturing within language during the moment of inspiration and the speaker's only recourse is a Bakhtinian carnivalisation of self and experience, an acceptance of her own fragmentation as the condition of poetic discourse.

My Brain- begun to laugh-
I mumbled- like a fool-
And tho' 'tis Years ago- that Day-
My Brain keeps giggling- still.

And Something's odd- within-
That person that I was-
And this One- do not feel the same-
Could it be Madness- this?

\(^{70}\) As Wilfred Bion observes, 'Curiosity has the same status in the myths of the garden of Eden and the tower of Babel- it is a sin'. See Wilfred R. Bion, *Elements of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1984), p.46.
Identity and poetry become '[something] odd- within-', an internal disintegration into alien components echoing the endless subdivision of time. Identity is divided across time as the speaker becomes her own other. Her confusion may be seen as an ambivalent poetic achievement since mumbling is closer to music than silence and her uncertainty about her madness makes the diagnosis more likely whilst simultaneously protecting her from the implications of such a recognition.

The brain's giggling steps in to fill the void left by the breaking of the soul's musical instrument. This may seem like cold comfort, but the speaker has survived unspeakable torments and learnt to laugh at her predicament. Her poetic language is a pale, broken reflection of the soul's initial promise, but the concluding stanzas demonstrate a certain playful, carefree capacity to laugh at her catastrophe. The shock of breaking the brain has been endured and the self may be able to enjoy the possibilities that have been opened up by the shattering of certainty.

The preceding poems have all used components of the Genesis narrative to describe the nature of poetic inspiration. The following poem describes this process as a narrative of brutal seduction focused upon a male muse. It mimics the teleology and structure of 'Circumstance' in its frantic oscillation between starkly contrasted moments of numb, horrifying rape and rapturous communion with nature. This is represented by the splitting of the Master into lover and goblin, the latter lurking inside the lover's skin waiting to chill the self into
obsolescence. Dickinson’s poem culminates in a fall of the self that blocks the poet’s voice, her body shackled and her song penetrated with staples. I would argue that (along with ‘Circumstance’ and poem F#1130C/ J#1136) this piece illustrates the thrills of splitting the Master into goblin and lover and the danger of attempting to incorporate only the latter. Explosive flights of fancy are sharply counterpoised against the speaker’s final imprisonment.

The Soul has Bandaged moments-
When too appalled to stir-
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her-

Salute her, with long fingers-
Caress her freezing hair-
Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover -hovered- o’er-
Unworthy, that a thought so mean
Accost a Theme-so- fair-

The soul has moments of escape-
When bursting all the doors-
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee- delirious borne-
Long Dungeoned from his Rose-
Touch Liberty- then know no more-
But Noon, and Paradise-

The Soul’s retaken moments
When. Felon led along.
With shackles on the plumed feet,
And staples, in the song,

The Horror welcomes her. again.
These, are not brayed of Tongue-
A cyclic oscillation between extremes of horror and joy are framed through a narrative of captivity, liberation and recapture. The narrative sequence of this poem may be understood through Wilfred Bion's formulation of creative thinking as PS+→D. The Master is a split figure, both the imprisoning force and the enabling catastrophe that allows the speaker to escape static formulations. The poetic self encounters a traumatic, yet pleasurable unbinding of its borders which permits the idiosyncrasies of creativity. The speaker initially finds herself molested by a goblin, frozen through his fearful gaze. The vividly tactile goblin recalls Spofford's description of the 'Indian devil' as brutishly physical, flooding the speaker with unbidden sexual advances and physical rigor mortis. However, for Dickinson, the goblin is as much a figure of ridicule as he is one of fear.  

The word goblin is used six times in Dickinson's verse and it always seems simultaneously horrifying and ridiculous, small, shriveled, and endowed with phallic 'long fingers'. He occupies the space where we might expect to find the powerful Master, designating hostility without true authority or power. He offers no sublime transport, merely the clammy, ignoble fate of living death.

Accepting the goblin cannot be avoided, the speaker turns her revulsion into an invitation for him to sip 'from the very lips/ The Lover- hovered- o'er-'. She clearly resents the compromise involved in such a modification, claiming it

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71 The 'goblin with a gauge' of F#425A/J#414 combines divine retribution with fussy precision: in Poem F#356A/J#511 the goblin is combined with the bee; only poem F#388A/J#430, echoes the rape motif here as he 'drinks her dew'. The other two references occur in poem F#619A/J#590 and F#757A/J#646.
is 'Unworthy, that a thought so mean/ Accost a Theme-so- fair-', but the conceptual merging of goblin and fantasy lover (as a moment of depressive integration) transforms the paralyzing chill of his touch into escape. As in 'Circumstance', horror provides the basis for a frenzied, creative drive for freedom. Yet aspirations to 'Touch liberty' and the horror of being molested by the goblin are such polar opposites, so irreconcilable that experience remains fundamentally split. The relationship between goblin and speaker allows bursts of freedom and self-assertion, but questions whether they are stable and sustainable.

Dickinson recognizes that creative freedom is spasmodic and comes in bursts of explosive inspiration. The soul's escape is described through images of pronounced physical motion, making them contrast sharply with her paralysis at the goblin's hands. The soul bursts doors, swings upon the hours, and 'dances like a Bomb, abroad'. 'Bomb' relates freedom back to the uncontrollable energy of the poetic volcano, something that emerges from within the self, but only partially at the behest of the speaker's autonomy. Freedom involves the creative transformation of the goblin's chill into frenetic energy. the PS↔D oscillation whereby the overpowering imprint of splintered objects are absorbed into a comparatively centralized autonomy.

Stanza four equates freedom with the consummation of the long-suspended union between speaker and lover, portrayed here as bee and rose.
Dickinson’s speaker identifies with the bee’s masculine agency, initiating the flight to the female rose. Clearly, freedom is predicated upon a creative assumption of masculine identity. The speaker’s newly acquired autonomy enables her to dissolves herself in the ‘noon’ of paradise pleurably rather than fearfully, memory and identity jettisoned for the sheer ‘now’ of experience. However, as I suggested in the previous section, identity premised upon sameness and non-differentiation is usually equated with female identifications in Dickinson’s verse. As Marianne Noble’s work suggests, nineteenth century masochism and sentimentalism express ‘a religious quest for spiritual transcendence in the modern terms of a nostalgic, erotic longing for reunion with “mother”’.\footnote{Marianne Noble, \textit{The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature}, p.76.} The identification with the bee creates an implied overlap between the speaker’s female consciousness and the appropriated masculine authority, rewriting the encounter between assaulting goblin and inert, female corpse as a trans-gender flight into transcendence. The feminine rose and the sun/sun of noon represent a combined space where masculine power and female reciprocation align. The speaker appropriates sufficient authority to redefine femininity away from being a corpse.

The final stanza relates captivity to the restriction of expression. The pleasures of freedom are deemed forbidden as the speaker is branded a ‘felon’ body and tongue chained and crucified. Staples are rammed through the song just as nails once penetrated Christ’s feet. Whether Dickinson’s recapture and

\footnote{Marianne Noble, \textit{The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature}, p.76.}
silence make her amongst the martyred or the damned remains unclear. She equates singing in captivity with noises 'brayed of Tongue', suggesting that the once gorgeous melodies of existence have been transformed into a donkey-call. Braying has a second meaning, associated with crushing or pulverizing implying that expression within the goblin's prison is inevitably afflicted with his coarse hostility. Perhaps to echo this failure of creativity, the stanza ends two lines short. Since escape has proved fleeting and unsustainable, the speaker elects not to bray, she disassociates herself from expression under lock and key. The poem ends two lines short because she chooses private silence, even at the expense of becoming a corpse.

In the preceding argument I tried to outline the common themes and strategies governing Dickinson's treatment of gender, the Master and poetic agency. These strategies include the necessity of masculine power feminine reciprocity (or 'sameness) in each moment of encounter with her muse; the Master as both inspiration and prohibition, meaning and non-meaning for the female poetic consciousness; the consequent overcoming of binary relations between reader/writer, male/female, subject/object as a means of producing poetic expression from an integrated, autonomous poetic self: the volcano as the definitive symbol of the pleasures, risks and compromises involved in poetic expression. As a way of consolidating these diverse, yet interwoven, strands of argument I wish to offer one final reading which may be taken as a focal point for all these themes.
Poem F#267A/ J#1737 has, in my view, been unjustly overlooked in favour of poem F#764A/ J#754 'My Life had Stood -a Loaded Gun-'. The former poem places greater emphasis upon the interconnection of violent gender transitions and creativity, upon inspiration as a kind of redemption through suffering. Underneath the traditional equivalence of masculinity with poetic authority, Adrienne Rich detects the most fundamental strategy of Dickinson's female poetics within F#764A/ J#754:

If there is a female consciousness in this poem it is buried deeper than the images; it exists in the ambivalence toward power, which is extreme. Active willing and creation in women are forms of aggression, and aggression is both "the power to kill" and punishable by death.

Poem F#267A/ J#1737 demonstrates Dickinson's ambivalence to the Master's power through the graphic intersection of violence and gender transfusion. The speaker invites a massive infusion of inspiration, portrayed as a combination of rape and surgery. As body, self and gender are broken and recreated in the action of the poem the speaker is able to use the freedom of a bi-gender identity to assume masculine authority. Ambivalence illustrates that the speaker's perception and identity are split into conflicting and complementary male and female dimensions, but also that there are points where identity can profitably traverse the divide between them.

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73 Credit for the attention paid to this poem must go primarily to Adrienne Rich and Susan Howe, whose book length reconstruction of Dickinson's life and work around this poem remains its most exemplary reading. See Adrienne Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson' pp.190-191; Susan Howe, My Emily Dickinson (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985).
Rearrange a “Wife’s” Affection!
When they dislocate my Brain!
Amputate my freckled Bosom!
Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness-
Blush, my unacknowledged clay-
Seven years of troth have taught thee
More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped it’s socket-
Trust intrenched in narrow pain-
Constancy thro’ fire- awarded-
Anguish- bare of anodyne!

Burden- borne so far triumphant-
None suspect me of the crown,
For I wear the “Thorns” till Sunset-
Then- my Diadem put on.

Big my Secret but its bandaged-
It will never get away
Till the Day it’s Weary Keeper
Leads it through the Grave to thee.

The poems discussed in this section have all equated poetic self-becoming with a redemptive transformation of the Master’s alterity. His presence damages and accuses in the manner of the sadistic Calvinist god, demanding that the female poet accept the negativity within consciousness as something to be worked through, endured and transformed into poetic expression. Here Dickinson’s speaker invites the gruesome surgery. she commands the anonymous addressee to tear into her body so that she might imbibe his power. Dickinson outlines the speaker’s transformation into the masculine Christ, whose pain provides the guarantee of redemption and election. She transforms the identity founded on

the restrictions of 'Fastness', 'Trust' and 'Constancy' into one that expresses faith in the rupture of pain. This process of identification allows the speaker to relinquish the unrewarding status of "Wife". Perhaps more than any other this poem discloses Dickinson's clandestine poetic design; she only offers to marry the Master as a means of partially becoming him.

The status of wifehood is portrayed as a restrictive bodily stasis whilst the infusion of masculinity promises energy and transformation. Dickinson clearly associates female flesh with the sins of Eve through her use of the adjective 'freckled'. The poem clearly indicates that the self has not been entirely redeemed through wifely constancy, the 'Love that never leaped its socket-' and the 'Fastness' of the spirit (i.e. to stand fast, fixedly, securely). The poem strives to break identity away from the marriage of male and female selves to the internal marriage of body and spirit. It is her mortality, her 'unacknowledged clay' and the 'fastness' that has taught her more 'troth' 'than Wifehood ever may!'. 'Troth' can simply refer to truth or fidelity, but it can also refer to the betrothal of marriage. The betrothal of body and spirit to be consummated in death is more satisfying than the purely female destiny of wifehood. At this point, I invite the reader to recall my prior distinction between 'bride' and 'wife' in Dickinson's poetry. The anticipation or promise of their betrothal rather than their ceremonial realization sustains the 'truth' of body and soul. Dickinson's speaker is reborn as a masochistic, female Christ, awash in diffuse pleasure and anxiety. Her ascent to the grave is achieved through the bodily congruence
between masculine power and the fluidity of feminine identifications that break
open the rigid mold of 'wifehood' to permit the pleasurable subversion of
discrete, masculine identity.

The exclamation marks that conclude each line of the first stanza can be
seen as both contesting and encouraging the transformation. Dickinson makes us
aware that seeing the female body as passive can be rephrased so that we see it
as receptive. Inviting the piercing masculinity somewhat overcomes the tendency
of the Master's power to render the female self an objectified 'other' within the
field of its own experience. Once suffering has been accepted and internalized, it
becomes a volcanic crucible for a raw, new, idiosyncratic 'aliveness', pregnant
with anticipation. The internalized 'gift of screws' cracks open the static
existence, disclosing the possibility of spiritual and poetic 'election' through
dismemberment and suffering. The female Christ's earthly crown becomes
her/his diadem in heaven.

As I have attempted to suggest throughout this chapter, Dickinson's
poetic achievement is not formulated solipsistically or autoerotically. There is
no escape from the Master, or the tropes of marriage, even if their complete
dominion is questioned. There is also no escape from the grotesque ambivalence
of inspiration. The final stanza reaffirms the centrality of consummated union to
Dickinson's imaginative vocabulary. The surface acquisition of a beard does not
dissolve the 'bandaged' secret, the hidden wound of longing for union beyond
the grave. The beard of Christ enables her to justify her redemption through suffering, but this is something of a spiritual drag act, a partial appropriate that enables her to conceal her longing under the garb of immolation. The combination of the crown and the hidden secret align self-election with marriage to the anonymous addressee. Triumphant self-becoming is always tempered with the hungry torment of anticipation, the promise of further revelation. Dickinson's poetic project promotes betrothal anticipation on all levels of being, between male and female identities, between body and soul, between pain and pleasure, between heaven and earth. Each tier of existence echoes the ambivalent encounter between male and female elements as a way of allowing the self to renegotiate a position outside the finalized identity of wifehood.

The symbol of the volcano is Dickinson's purest evocation of what I have termed grotesque ambivalence. It designates a site where the fusion and diffusion of such binaries as reader/writer, subject/object, male/female, master/servant, creation/destruction take place. What governs each encounter is the knowledge that no single part of any binary can be creatively compelling without the challenge or threat of its opposite. Few poets have written about poetic triumphs with the kind of inspirational clarity that we find in Dickinson's work. But it is also true that fewer poets have stressed the horror that motivates and attends triumph at each and every turn. Dickinson can identify with the spiritual triumph of crucifixion, but she also makes the reader graphically aware of nails penetrating flesh. The poems selected in this chapter have included
gruesome accounts of corpses, internal hemorrhaging, rape, goblins, death and imprisonment. Any critical account that celebrates Dickinson's poetic triumph over adversity must experience a tangible pause over the extent to which the poems dwell over the horrifying cost of success and the immanent possibility that each poetic assertion involves a risky encounter with power that might simply result in the poet's destruction. This is the essence of grotesque ambivalence, the reader's hesitation before a set of predicaments that simultaneously outline the terms of success and the prospect of failure. Dickinson's volcano is ultimately a symbol of potent yet precarious agency, a constant prevarication between the assertion and dereliction of the creative ego. Never the less, these poems demonstrate a more genuinely ambivalent grotesque than those discussed in my chapter on the gothic. The emergence of autonomy is more clearly delineated and celebrated. My final chapter continues this move towards the more positive, Bakhtinian pole of the grotesque through an examination of Dickinson's treatment of the body.
‘Abyss has no Biographer’: Emily Dickinson’s Embodied Self.

4.1. Discursive Contexts for the Embodied Self

In the preceding chapters, I attempted to demonstrate how the uncertainty that precipitates grotesque experience can be experienced as positive or negative according to the context in which it appears. Gothic themes always underscore the negative, horrifying aspect of Dickinson’s grotesque because Calvinism equates uncertainty with non-election. Where incomprehension is most closely associated with spiritual turmoil, then the pleasures of uncertainty will inevitably be lessened. Dickinson’s portrayal of poetic inspiration involves a more balanced grotesque, with her muse encouraging creative enfranchizement and disintegration simultaneously. The trope of the volcano, which unifies questions of gender, power and creativity, is poised between meaning and non-meaning, uncertainty as creative and uncertainty as destructive. This final chapter on Dickinson’s depiction of the body finds her grotesque at its most assertive, regenerative and humorous. Usually negative aspects of experience such as pain and death are entirely transformed into something positive, the poetic self thriving on the disintegration of certainty. As such, Dickinson’s bodily grotesque is closer to Bakhtin’s description of a new, emergent wholeness through carnival than it is to Kayser’s more conservative fear about the threat to individual identity.
Dickinson identifies her body as a site where the self became partially and involuntarily responsive to public concerns and ideologies, but also as a site where these ideologies may be contested. A combination of scientific, religious, social and economic discourses converged upon the body, regulating the self through diet, conduct, manners, mourning, reading habits and sexuality. However, since Dickinson seems to have found these embodying discourses coercive rather than totalizing and unavoidable, the body is also available as site of individuation, resistance and personal expression. Dickinson’s poetry underlines the disparity between public ‘gesture’ and private, internal feeling and she critiques the discourses that measure bodily behaviour against publicly endorsed standards. As the second section of this chapter will suggest, she does this in two different ways. The first approach involves refutation through parody. Dickinson concisely locates and describes specific popular beliefs and either explodes them through absurd juxtaposition or unravels them through quizzical exposition. Her second approach is less concerned with counter-discursive maneuvers and more interested in locating those bodily sensations that escape discursive inscription. Vivian Pollack observes that Dickinson has an eye for those circumstances where neither sexuality nor names had any jurisdiction, such as the condition of being a corpse. In the final section of this chapter, I will extend Pollack’s observation through an examination of those poems where the phenomenology of extreme, bodily sensation operates to remove the self from social restrictions or interpersonal influence. In Wilfred

Bion’s terms, embodying discourses are restrictive or parasitic containers that render the depressive coherence of identity stagnant and restrictive. The disjunctive, paranoid-schizoid loss of ego unity becomes (like Bakhtin’s carnival) creatively liberating. As the title quotation suggests. Dickinson chooses identity-as-abyss because an incoherent, unknowable self cannot enjoy a cogent relation to the socio-economic circumstances in which it appears or the persons contained within those circumstances. Dickinson equates the bodily abyss of sensation with privacy, freedom and agency.

Since ‘the body’ has become such a fiercely debated area of philosophical and critical thought, it is essential that I outline exactly what claims I am and am not making about the interrelation of self and discursive structures. Dickinson’s treatment of the body fits, at least superficially, into the two competing positions currently available to theorists of the body. Elizabeth Grosz categorizes these theories as describing either ‘the inscribed body’, or the body that is ‘lived through’. Theories of inscription describe the body as a ‘blank slate’ through which discursive forces produce, structure and control the subject. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler believe that autonomous subjectivity is largely subordinated to these invisible inscriptions. Those most treasured marks of individual subjectivity such as interiority are actually produced as an effect of the structural interrelations of power itself. Foucault’s work on the

human sciences postulates a hermetic interrelation between knowledge and power so that the self is simultaneously produced and managed through the process of becoming conspicuous and knowable. Certain aspects of mid-nineteenth century American middle-class society lend themselves to such an analysis, particularly those practices centered around the enforced public manifestations of interiority through feeling or 'sentiment'.

If I refrain from a full 'inscribed body' analysis of discursive and counter-discursive formations then I do so because I am not certain that a Foucauldian approach can, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, 'explain the individuating effects of socialization'. Bryan Turner has also argued that post-structuralist accounts ignore the effectiveness of discursive formations or takes their effects for granted. Dickinson's social awareness is uneven, demonstrating formidable acumen and seeming ignorance in equal measure at different times. Recent work by Martha Nell Smith, Betsy Erkkila, Paula Bennett and Domhnall Mitchell has emphasized that Dickinson is, to paraphrase Smith, privileged by class even as she is disenfranchized by gender. Erkkila in particular has emphasized how Dickinson's desire to abstract herself from marriage, publication and public life reveals the economic prosperity that enabled her to enjoy such unfettered privacy. Whilst I would fully agree that

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there is a certain amount of unconscious political ‘positioning’ within
Dickinson’s verse, I have resisted the temptation to elevate her position with the
political spectrum to the defining principle of her work. The simple assignation
of one or several demographic categories are insufficient to fully account for
Dickinson’s distinctive, individual ability to judiciously locate, evaluate and
resist the discursive influences that channel her subjectivity. Dickinson uses her
body as a means by which the self negotiates and exceeds political and social
commitments, even when it does not fully transcend them.

The ‘lived body’, described in psychoanalytic and phenomenological
writings, provides a partial model for Dickinson’s evasion of discursive and
interpersonal commitments.\(^7\) I do not subscribe to the purely endogenous
unfurling of the self, but Dickinson’s poetry does focus upon the body’s
ungovernable ruptures and stubborn resistance, extremes such as pain and death
that seem to resist discursive inscription. As Simon J. Williams and Gillian
Bendelow observe, the idea that our bodies can be molded in a ceaseless
process of political compliance occasionally runs up against the ‘obdurate
physical effects and deleterious consequences of aging, sickness, disability and
death’.\(^8\) Dickinson’s portrayal of the body as dead or in tremendous pain locates
an ‘Element of Blank’ (F#760A/ J#650) within the self, a point that resists

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\(^7\) The definitive phenomenological reading of the body remains Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The
Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962). For a recent,
scientifically-updated version of Merleau-Ponty’s argument, see George Lakoff and Mark
Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*

\(^8\) Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes. Embodied*
sympathetic identification or discursive recuperation.

Dickinson's bodily grotesque echoes Bakhtin's descriptions of the open body, where unfettered access to the disavowed, material reality of death, unsightliness, vomiting, and bleeding 'carnalizes' the relationship between self and world. Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as 'in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world'. These moments of bodily experience provide both the reason and the means by which social conformity is evaded.

Although there are many points of comparison between Bakhtin's theories and Dickinson's bodily grotesque, they diverge radically over how and why such moments of bodily excess transform identity. Bakhtin is politically committed to the dissolution of individual identity that he regards as the product of bourgeois ideology. He argues that carnival promotes the collective above the individual, reciprocation and interchange between persons above discrete, private identities. In a diatribe against the Romantic appropriation of carnival, Bakhtin criticizes Romanticism's depletion of joyous, intersubjective freedom in favour 'an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation'. By contrast, Dickinson achieves freedom through the unequivocal withdrawal from social doctrines, sympathetic ties and interpersonal relations.

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She has a greater awareness of the normalizing tendencies embedded in the myths of the communal ‘body politic’. She sees the individuation provided by the bodily grotesque as a point of political dissention rather than conformity.

Dickinson’s work is a response to the mid-nineteenth century, bourgeois picture of ‘true womanhood’ predicated upon the systematic and perpetual regulation of body and mind. Restraint and moderation emerged as quintessential domestic ‘occupations’. These regulations proceeded at least in part from the prevailing, pseudo-scientific preconception of women as pious, moral vessels with correspondingly sensitive nervous dispositions. Diet, manners, reading habits, and sexual behaviour were all regulated to edit out dangerous eruptions of intellectual independence, hedonistic selfishness and non-reproductive sexuality. These discourses were by no means monolithic or unchallenged, but Dickinson’s verse and letters all point towards a clear positioning against this picture of womanhood without any noticeable allegiance to the more progressive, political counter-strains of nineteenth-

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10 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p. 37.
century culture. What emerges from Dickinson’s work is a broad, overarching skepticism towards any form of collective or socially responsive identity. Her bodily carnival does not promote a new, liberating set of social promiscuities, but the implosive disappearance of the self into the infinite depths of its own sensation.

As Gillian Brown observes, the domestic space was not merely another site for surveillance and discipline, but also fostered spaces where individualism could flourish through introspection and privacy. The female body that follows the stringent, behavioural criteria within the domestic space can also find a locked door or secret space for idiosyncratic reflection. This duplicity between privacy as social space to be shaped through an omnipresent web of interpersonally or discursively generated compulsions, and privacy as something on the margins of political and social responsibility plays across Dickinson’s work. Her body is the place where thought, feeling and self are believed to become conspicuous, but it is also the site of her private idiosyncrasy, her unspeakable alterity.

What I want to suggest in the initial stages of this chapter is that Dickinson does, in fact, use her disruptive, private body in a political and

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socially responsive fashion. Her aim is to make the impenetrable mystery and isolation of human existence the paradoxical basis of communal relations. As such, although her verse strains towards the dissolution of cultural and interpersonal relations through the unrestrained eruptions of the body, she often addresses a fellow consciousness or witness during her triumphant instance of disappearance. When she asserts in F#260A/ J#288 that 'I'm Nobody!' she immediately asks 'Who are you?/ Are you- Nobody- Too?' In spite of the cheery tone of this poem, Dickinson suggests that becoming 'nobody' is often an involuntary and less than pleasant experience for herself and her audience.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that

Dickinson's poetry apotheosizes this central human paradox: the poignant, inevitable isolation of each human being - the loneliness and the yearning to be seen, acknowledged, and known - on the one hand; on the other, the gleeful satisfaction in keeping one part of the self sequestered, sacred, sacred, uniquely powerful, and utterly inviolate - the incomparable safety in retaining a secret part of the "self" that is available to no one save self.¹⁴

Dickinson accentuates this paradox by promoting the unknowable, unassimilated abyss of her being as the most truthful thing that can be said about her. She believed that recognition could only work on the principle that 'those who know her, know her less/ The nearer her they get.' (F#1433A/ J#1400).

4.2. Dickinson and Higginson: the Embodying Critic and the Woman Poet.

'Mr. Higginson.
Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? (L#260, p.403)'

In this section I will argue that Dickinson uses bodily imagery as a means both of critiquing and provoking the misunderstanding of renowned writer, editor and champion of liberal causes, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Positioning Higginson as a figure of tutorial authority and ideological blindness, Dickinson brings out the embodying subtext of his comments whilst making the body of her text into an abyss that resists the biographer. The lines cited above began the correspondence that would continue until her death in 1886. Higginson is not the only person who Dickinson sought out for comment on the nature and quality of her verse, but the initial stages of their correspondence shed a unique light upon the predicament of a woman writer addressing a contemporary male editor. 15 Although Higginson's half of the correspondence does not survive, Dickinson's own letters responded directly and concisely to suggestions, comments and requests, which we can assume are in the missing letters. Throughout the correspondence Dickinson continually indicates that Higginson misunderstands her, yet she took his advice seriously enough to offer a response. His voice clearly required deconstructing rather than ignoring.

15 Richard Sewall’s biography argues that Dickinson’s sought Samuel Bowles’ opinion and support for her writing. In many senses, Bowles’ reaction to Dickinson’s poetry proved to be something of a forerunner of the mixture of surface encouragement and latent bafflement that she was to encounter in Higginson. However, as Sewall indicates: ‘For all her rhetoric of humility, Emily Dickinson never underestimated herself. She may have loved Bowles, but she never confused her values with his.’ Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), p.494. Martha Nell Smith argues that Sue Dickinson was the most significant reader of and influence on Dickinson’s poems. See Martha Nell Smith,
The line cited above begins an epistolary struggle over how Dickinson's poems should be judged, conducted through a series of bodily images. Thomas Johnson notes that the line may be an oblique reference to a comment in Higginson's 'Letter to a Young Contributor' published in the April 1862 edition of the Atlantic Monthly, mere days before Dickinson's letter was sent. The line in question reads 'Charge your style with life, and the public will not ask for conundrums'. Dickinson's question indicates that she took Higginson's dictum to mean that the poet should create a verse that might 'live', and be judged to live, independently of its creator's biography. She overlooked, intentionally or otherwise, that this phrase can also mean that the verse must be imprinted with some evidence of the poet's experience and personality. Higginson's reply in subsequent letters presumably betrayed this perceived initial promise of evaluating her verse as a living force in its own right.

Dickinson sought advice on her poetry, but Higginson seemed as interested in her own life. This complex relationship between the desire of the male editor to understand the female writer, and the desire of the female writer to remain private stems from a prevalent belief that female poetry offers a direct representation of the author's conformity to or disavowal of a complex network of discursive assumptions governing female mind, body, and behavior. Dickinson recognized the tendency to render the poet synonymous with the poetic persona as she claimed 'When I state myself, as the Representative of the
Verse- it does not mean- me- but a supposed person' (L#268. p.412). Since this is a rare instance of Dickinson offering an emphatic, unequivocal statement of intent. it gives the critic some idea of how wrong an assumption she felt it was. The issue of what makes 'appropriate' women's poetry is mapped directly onto the preceding question of what a woman is or should be and, more importantly, why they should be this way. As Mary Kelley's work makes clear, the acceptance of women as creators of culture had to be accompanied by a corresponding shift in women's capacity to create and shape the path of their own lives. As such, many female authors described in their work how creative aspirations could be congruent with a proper, domestic life. The prevailing view of the place, function, and nature of white, bourgeois women within the mainstream press was extended to a surveillance of literary content and form, which became a kind of political register.

Before the ideological framework under discussion becomes too crudely drawn and monolithic, some qualifying statements are necessary. To Higginson's credit, the evidence provided by his published writings suggests that Dickinson may have underestimated his own powerful critiques of the dominant ideologies surrounding the public and private roles provided for women. Richard Sewall, Joanne Dobson and Marianne Noble all note that Higginson was a passionate advocate of Abolition, the plight of the poor and, most pertinently, the damaging consequences of women remaining silent.

uneducated and socially emaciated. If Dickinson believed that Higginson was attempting to embody her writing by tying it to a reductive set of gender expectations, then she may have judged him somewhat unfairly.

Yet Dickinson is clearly responding to certain tangible features of literary culture within the mid-nineteenth century, features that Higginson did not entirely escape. Roger Lundin notes that the rapid expansion of publishing in the 1860's placed demands upon editors to keep track of promising new writers, thus suggesting that Higginson's requests for biographical clarification were commonplace and not gender-specific. Nina Baym's study of Antebellum reviewers concludes that a single point of view in fiction was automatically assumed to offer a direct equation between the author and the narrator, or poet and poem. This is not, as is the case with modern biographical critics, the task of speculatively reconstructing legitimate gaps in the biographical picture, of preserving rather than judging an author's idiosyncrasies. It is a simple case of using the writer's life to account for deviancy of form or content, asking how a work adheres to the immutable foundations of gender yet rarely questioning how literature might challenge the

20 Nina Baym, Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America, p.146.
21 See, for example, Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951); John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971); William Schurr, The Marriage of Emily Dickinson (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1983).
definition of these foundations. The highest tribute that a more conservative critic could pay a female writer was that her literary achievements confirmed her humility, homely devotion and moral fortitude.

Dickinson forces the political subtext of the correspondence to the fore, painting Higginson as a critic who demands a transparent and sincere depiction of her life, circumstances, family, occupation and moral character rather than a display of genius. Although appreciative of her abilities, Higginson was somewhat quizzical about her 'spasmodic' (L#265. p.408) tendency to flout the requirements of order, rhyme, transparency and proportion. Dickinson's verse defeated the critical visions of her contemporaries, her poetic 'body' refusing to yield a coherent picture of her poetic mind. If such independence of vision and style is greeted as genius in men, then it castigated as mere aberration in the case of women. Emerson once commented that 'Great geniuses have the shortest biographies. Their cousins can tell you nothing about them. They lived in their writings, and so their house and street life was trivial and commonplace.' 22 If male geniuses are admired for their capacity to extend or transcend the worldview around them, the women writers are admired for sustaining the homogenity of their sex and, by extension, the stability of the domestic sphere and society.

Since there was no discursive space available to describe distinctive.

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original work by women writers in terms of 'genius'. Dickinson could only ever account for her creative aspirations as a kind of nervous morbidity, an over-stimulation of her fragile, female person. In a letter to Mrs. J. Howard Sweeter, Dickinson commented 'I have long been a Lunatic on Bulbs, though screened by my friends, as Lunacy on any theme is better undivulged, but Emerson's intimacy with his "Bee" only immortalized him-' (L#823, p.775). She recognizes that unrestrained poetic aspiration is comparable to insanity and illicit eroticism; Emerson's relation with the bee and nature can be 'intimate'. but Dickinson must be chaste. Although comic in tone, Dickinson confirms Nina Baym's analysis that reviewers stressed the individuality of male writer whereas women writers could only confirm their 'true womanhood'. Higginson clearly believed that Dickinson's words concealed rather than revealed truth:

Certainly I should have been most glad to bring it down to the level of simple truth and every-day comradeship; but it was not altogether easy. She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell (L#342b/ p.476).

Higginson feels that biographical truth should be simple, that oblique phrasing is an obstruction to be worked through. He disappoints Dickinson by not seeing enigma as a superior kind of biographical 'truth'. When Higginson asserted 'Charge your style with life, and the public will not ask for conundrums', he clearly had not reckoned on encountering a poet for whom identity was best expressed as a conundrum. Higginson sees female genius as deficiency and there for her reads mystery as a symptom to be 'solved'.
In implying that her editor sought to embody her work through surveillance, modification, and moderating judgement, Dickinson observes that the body is both a site of conformity and means of resistance. She unraveled the different layers of the phrase ‘living verse’ through their correspondence, burlesquing herself as a wayward degenerate, lacking the strength, or the will to correct her verse and person. These letters polarize bodily conformity into black and white extremes, denying the option of waywardness by degrees and therefore any common ground between Higginson and herself. If she is to be unregenerate then she will be utterly so. Her concession to Higginson’s descriptions stress the extent of her inflexibility. Through images of sheer corporeality she casts her self-image as immutable and irredeemable. ‘Unregenerate’ is the only available female equivalent of Emerson’s male genius.

Dickinson chose to present her critique of embodiment in dialogue with a figure that she endows with authority. She casts Higginson as ‘preceptor’ (L#265, p.409) by whose tutelage she will grow, but although she clearly entertained some of his suggestions, she was unwilling to compromise her valued quirks. Dickinson emphasizes the coercive, embodying tenor of their relationship as a means of demonstrating how his preoccupation with the ‘simple truths’ of life and verse leads him to miss about her originality. Richard Sewall argues that the letters demonstrate Dickinson’s initial willingness to
accept Higginson's opinions, and that Dickinson only became defensive when he failed to offer unqualified praise for her artistic vision. Although this interpretation seems partially correct, I would argue that Dickinson enjoyed tantalizing and thwarting the expectations of her readers and correspondents. She gives Higginson authority with one hand only to take it away with the next. However, her resistance to his questions are not the means of obscuring or concealing a comprehensible self. Dickinson's linguistic conundrums are the very essence and evidence of a selfhood established dialogically, yet (paradoxically) beyond comprehension.

Dickinson's second letter to Higginson provocatively establishes the embodying framework of their relationship. Presumably commenting upon Higginson's stylistic recommendations, she wrote 'Thank you for the surgery- it was not so painful as I supposed' (L#261, p.404). Elaborating the paradigmatic interweaving of verse and life, Dickinson exaggerates the ideological subtext of Higginson's words into lurid hyperbole. If Higginson elects to change her 'living' verse then he will be portrayed as a surgeon, saving life and verse, setting bone and rhyme simultaneously. In the following line, the associations of surgery are further extended to encompass judicial approval- 'Men do not call the surgeon, to commend- the Bone, but to set it, Sir' (L#268, p.412). If Higginson chooses to see deviance, then he must be willing to intervene amongst the viscera and correct it. Yet perhaps there is a subtle double meaning in this line. Men may not require commendation, but do

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women call the surgeon for different reasons? Surgery is done by men for their own reasons, women are not mentioned. Dickinson identifies Higginson as healer, teacher, surgeon and editor and then suggests that his authority may be impotent. She is simultaneously apologetic and defiant, stressing that she is beyond redemption in Higginson’s eyes, and, by extension, in the eyes of those conventional attitudes that he represents:

You think my gait "spasmodic"- I am in danger- Sir-
You think me "uncontrolled"- I have no Tribunal. (L#265, p.409)

Dickinson slyly refuses to either confirm or deny the implied moral condemnation implied by her inappropriate deportment. Having ‘no tribunal’ means that she must ignore Higginson’s suggestion that she tighten up her meter and rhyme. However, as much as the legal terminology imposes a distance between them, her personal ‘danger’ draws Higginson in through sympathy. Her body spills over the bounds of epistolary decorum and, by extension, over the detachment intrinsic to Higginson’s editorial authority. She inflects their relationship with an ‘inappropriate’ degree of emotional resonance and personal involvement. In an earlier letter Dickinson had asked ‘-Could you tell me how to grow [as a poet]- or is it unconveyed- like Melody- or Witchcraft? ’ (L#261, p.404). She asks if poetry can be gauged by an instinctive intimacy, itself seemingly poetic. That Higginson obviously gave a qualified ‘no’ in response did not dampen Dickinson’s enthusiasm for presenting poetry as an aberrant seduction. The allusion to witchcraft covertly aligns poetry with
the illicit eruptions of female desire which cause responsible readers to stray from their lives and senses. This possession by poetic force is extended into an aggressively physical language in a subsequent letter to Higginson—'I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organise—my little Force explodes— and leaves me bare and charred—' (L#271. p.414). This quotation is significant for its play upon the word 'bare', linking bodily exposure and with truth with a paradoxical sense of impoverishment. The implication of these double meanings is that the more 'truth' she gives of her body, and the more Higginson focuses upon this aspect, the more empty she becomes.

In essence, Dickinson invites Higginson to become a bemused and bewildered participant in her amorphous, enigmatic and defiant self-becoming so that the concrete estrangement between them might be seen as the defining quality of her verse. She invites and repels him, becomes more intimate and yet more estranged. In claiming that poetry is 'unconveyed' between herself and Higginson, Dickinson is inviting her 'preceptor' to relinquish his critical faculties, his probing for the recognizable qualities of meter and rhyme. The word 'unconveyed' dissolves the idea of poetry as a tangible, coherent communicative act between distinct persons. Dickinson's poetic body is an occurrence, a seductive, invisible influence that brings her closer to Higginson but only in a sense that cannot be rationally appreciated or endorsed.

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold that 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. Is there any other way (L#342A, p.473).

Eight years after the start of their correspondence Dickinson knows perfectly well that Higginson does not fully concur with her vision. She boldly links her poetic appetites to morbid, nervous excitement but she reverses our understanding of this predicament, confusing the distinction between joy and concern. She challenges the assumption that good poetry confirms the ideological necessities of regularity of form and admirable transparency of authorial intention. She defies the notion of the poetry as a tacit endorsement of literary and social conventions, choosing instead to see it as the moment at which she vanishes from the cultural radar.

Dickinson’s poetic body is used in a duplicitous fashion, whereby certain sensations that form the basis of a seemingly unreflective, asocial being can also seen as socially responsive. The issue of whether she should govern herself for the good of a wider reading public is not attacked directly, it simply vanishes from specific consideration. Dickinson’s letters to Higginson entail an oscillation between the exaggerated acknowledgement of authority and an assumed naivete. Graphic displays of sensual abandon allow Dickinson to critique the insistence that women’s poems should confirm their authors conformity to publicly sanctioned standards. Yet sometimes the tactic of concisely locating and satirizing social vanishes in favour of seemingly unselfconscious and solipsistic states of rapture, pain and discontinuity. Dickinson seemingly wishes to reform public taste by avoiding it all together.
Early on in her correspondence with Higginson, she was keen to stress that her verse was not intended to either benefit or change the reading public. She wrote, "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’ (L#261, p.404). 

Dickinson’s language and persona in her letters casts poetry as a solipsistic, and suggestively auto-erotic expression of the self for the self. Christopher Benfey argues that when Dickinson turns her back on the audience, she is merely emphasizing the intrinsic qualities of the lyric consciousness as private and monologic. In requesting Higginson’s assistance because ‘The Mind is so near itself- it cannot see, distinctly- and I have none to ask’ (L#260, p.403), she is not merely expressing uncertainty about her levels of self-knowledge and control. Her phrasing also hints that he is intervening in a private drama for her own benefit. Bodily metaphors are appropriate to describe the relationship between poet and reader, because the latter is always a voyeur. If she feels vulnerable when Higginson enters the private chamber of her verse, this is always counterbalanced by the possibility that she can shame and appall him.

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17 Johnson observes in his editorial notes that ‘The two editors who recently had asked her for her mind may have been Bowles and Holland’, but there is no evidence that these offers took place. It seems plausible that Dickinson could be lying to spur Higginson into a favourable judgement, chastize him for a previously negative one or simply ruling out the question of publication at the earliest juncture.

18 See Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1989), p.631. Sartre’s work makes a fundamental distinction between Being-in-itself which ‘overflows the knowledge we have of it. It is a plentitude, and strictly speaking we can say of it only that it is’ and Being-for-others in which ‘my Self exists outside as an object for others[...]The For-others involves a perpetual conflict as each For-itself seeks to recover its own Being by directly or indirectly making an object out of the other.’

19 Christopher Benfey, Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p.31. Benfey’s theoretical framework is drawn from Northrop Frye.
into leaving- 'While my thought is undressed- I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown- they look alike. and numb' (L#261. p.404). The 'gown' represents the formal structures of her verse, which constricts the quality of her thought for the benefit of public decorum. Linking her nudity with private acts of expression, Dickinson demonstrates that her idiosyncratic individualism is both erotically enticing and denuded of those qualities that could make her social comprehensible or available. Poetic eruptions that leave her 'charred and bare' merely highlight the prospective reader's exclusion. These moments of solipsism, fully understood by neither Dickinson or Higginson, are paradoxically the occasion of communication. Dickinson seeks the input of the world as a means of refuting its necessity.

As I have tried to demonstrate, these early letters to Higginson acknowledge that verse, body and gender are all linked via a pervasive sense of law and accountability. Just as a woman's body must support social structures through specific levels of food, procreation and domestic activity, so her verse must sustain the regulation of the body through an adherence to the commonly understood ground rules governing women's poetic practice. In her fifth letter to Higginson, Dickinson included a statement of her inability to compromise her body or artistic vision by including one version of poem F#381A/ J#326.27

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27 As Domhnall Mitchell notes, the poems that Dickinson sent to Higginson were not necessarily composed with recipient in mind. Mitchell argues that there is no unifying theme to the poems she sent, nor any indication that they were produced concurrently. He argues that 'Dickinson's practice of sending quatrains from poems rather than full poems in letters suggests a much looser attitude to their potential applicability, a fluidity of potential range which I and other see as the quintessential genius of the poetry'. See Domhnall Mitchell, Emily Dickinson:
I cannot dance opon my Toes-
No Man instructed me-
But often times, among my mind
A Glee possesseth me
That had I Ballet knowledge-
Would put itself abroad
In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe-
Or lay a Prima- mad-

And though I had no Gown of Gauze-
No Ringlet, to my Hair-
Nor hopped to Audiences- like Birds-
One Claw opon the Air-
Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls-
Nor rolled on Wheels of Snow
Till I was out of sight in sound-
The House encore me so-

Nor any know I know the Art
I mention easy- Here-
Nor any Placard boast me
It's full as Opera-

Dickinson equates her speaker’s inability to write poetry according to the dictates of form, rhyme and meter with the inability to dance in a socially respected fashion. This echoes an earlier remark where she informed Higginson that ‘-My Barefoot- Rank is better-‘ (L#265, p. 408). Artistic purity is defined through denuding herself of decorum, bare feet strip away worldly concern. Dickinson accentuates the gender expectations surrounding poetic composition, stressing distaste for the public display and surveillance of a private action. Indeed, the speaker’s dance is the very antithesis of socially responsive. it is a quintessentially autoerotic activity. She cannot dance or writer properly because ‘No man instructed me-‘. indicating that she has not yet married personally.

Monarch of Perception, p. 197.
socially or poetically. The concluding four lines of the stanza subvert the usual association between technical conformity and social acquiescence. If she learnt to dance well, Dickinson suggests, the power of her art would ‘blanche a Troupe-/ Or lay a Prima-mad-’. Since this would hardly sustain the social equilibrium of the ball, the wider public should be relieved that she can do them no harm through dazzling technique. If female creativity is bound to the promotion of modesty and social harmony, then the speaker’s dancing would surely violate these conventions.

As the second stanza progresses, respect for the social ‘ballerinas’ dissipates into ludicrousness. It is they who are ‘spasmodic’, not she and it is social posturing that is truly bizarre rather than the desire to be private. Dickinson confirms her defiance of Higginson, stating that she should earn the applause of the house in spite of her technical idiosyncrasies. As the hyperbole of the ballerina’s dance increases, so that the dancers ‘tossed their shape in Eider Balls-’ and ‘rolled on Wheels of Snow’, they become ‘out of sight in sound-’. The more socially conspicuous the dancer becomes, the more her identity vanishes beneath the roar of praise. By contrast, Dickinson’s poetic design seeks to be out of sight in silence. She wishes to lose herself in her own dance, not in the ostentatious, public display of technique. Dickinson has no placard to boast her achievements, but at least she was spared the absurd contortions of public performance. Her poetry remains essentially clandestine and private even though, as she knew, idiosyncratic behaviour and verse draws
attention to her character rather than diverting from it. Her speakers wish to
vanish through her audiences’ incomprehension rather than their restrictive,
misplaced praise.

Dickinson tends to use the body to denote immutability where others
would see correctable deficiency. Higginson may have been called upon to
guide and correct Dickinson’s poetic embodiment, but the nature of their
dialogue draws attention to her insistence upon the a-social permanence of body
and poetry. By insisting that her nature is immutable, Dickinson can
surreptitiously insist that it is Higginson’s view of her deformity is merely a
distorted, subjective reflection:

Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that- My Business is
Circumference- An ignorance, not of Customs, but if caught with the
Dawn- or the Sunset see me- Myself the only Kangaroo among the
Beauty, Sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I thought that instruction
would take it away (L#268, p.412).

The kangaroo is a coarse, wild and butch/muscular animal that contrasts with
the traditional portrayal of the female poet as delicate ballerina or chirping
songbird. Dickinson’s identification with the ugly kangaroo anticipates
Higginson’s response and therefore cannot be seen as an unmediated or pure
comment. There is a contradiction between being assertively ‘not of Customs’
and the aspiration that ‘instruction would take it away’. What exactly is to be
instructed here, her exclusion or Higginson’s perception? Her letters clearly
indicate that she does not care for an initiation into public cordiality and
conformity, but seeks an opportunity to nurture the idiosyncratic. bodily poetics that interrupt the sense and civility of their exchange. The sunset has a double meaning here, referring not merely to public judgement, but the more profound impact of nature, its sublime import ravishing the self with the unbidden representation of its own insufficiency. Such a power would overwhelm the dictates of custom and prove far harder to resist. It would also suggest to Higginson that the defective body he perceives in her poetic eccentricities may be his own blindness to her genius. Dickinson’s bodily images acknowledge Higginson’s charges of deficiency whilst obliquely undermining the contingent social conventions and discourses that sustain his inquiries. Indeed, so willing is she to extend his worst fears for her that a reevaluation of his value judgements becomes almost a necessity.

In exaggerating the denigrating, embodying assumptions of her accusing audience, Dickinson portrays their authority as an unthinking brutality. She was clear enough that intrusive perceptions could damage in their urge to comprehend. Poem F#522A/ J#443 makes clear that dissembling is legitimate when the motivations behind the inquiry are insalubrious:

To simulate- is stinging work-
To cover what we are
From Science- and from Surgery-
Too Telescopic eyes
To bear on us unshaded-
For their- sake- Not for Our’s-
This poem describes the unacknowledged tendency of social, scientific and medical discourses to crush beauty through superfluous terminology and spurious classifications. However, the proximity of 'science' and 'surgery' underlines how the urge to heal is interchangeable with the urge to know. control and survey. Higginson’s purported 'surgery', is not only painful and dehumanizing, but also self-serving. Dickinson had some formal education in the sciences, but since scientific education for women intended for practical application in the domestic sphere rather than intellectual development for its own sake. Her poems and letters offer a general, amorphous view of science, rarely referring to specific theories or advances but rather reacting to a hazy, generalized, vernacular and populist caricature. 28

As this chapter progresses, it will become increasingly clear that Dickinson opposed embodying doctrines because she felt they obscured introspective appreciation of divine mystery. As Sewall notes (with specific reference to F#202A/ J#185 and F#1181A/ J#1770) her encompassing skepticism may have encouraged the appreciative references to microscopes and experiments, but she clearly found science as monolithic dogma entirely unappealing since it merely gave people another excuse not to think deeply about the mysteries of being. 29 She may have sensed the same impulse towards reductive utility in her learning that dominated medical discourses surrounding

28 Poem F#595A/ J#630 notes the inadequacy of approaching lightning 'With Insulators- and a Glove-'. Poem F#962A/ J#812 praises the melancholic appreciation of autumnal fields 'That Science cannot overtake, But Human Nature feels'.
the body. Science and surgery were regarded as conspirators in an arid, secular colonization of the spiritual world, a philistine operation of crude surveillance and control that dissipated her spiritual and poetic vocation.

I pull a flower from the woods-
A monster with a glass
Computes the stamens in a breath-
And has her in a “class”!

Whereas I took the Butterfly
Aforetime in my hat-
He sits erect in “Cabinets”-
The Clover bells forgot.

What once was “Heaven”
Is “Zenith” now-
Where proposed to go
When Time’s brief masquerade was done
Is mapped and charted too.

Classification, rule and appearance are castigated for obscuring deeper, heavenly truths. The ‘monster with a glass’ provides a vivid metaphor for the surveillance and regulation of embodied existence that Dickinson sees as antithetical to her poetic project. As this poem makes clear, it is the voice of medical, moral censure that is truly monstrous, not the quirky poetic self. In presenting herself as a kangaroo to Higginson or as less troublesome than ‘The Mouse, that dents your Galleries’ (L#265, p.409), she acknowledges her perceived oddity whilst inviting a revision of the contingent values upon which such judgement depends.

In my introductory chapter I aligned my position with those Dickinson
scholars who see regard her oeuvre as intentionally ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. Her verse forces acts of strenuous interpretation whilst simultaneously asking her reader to reflect upon precisely why individual interpretations and responses are made. In line with these conclusions, I would argue that her correspondence with Higginson is less self-revelation and more a poetic site where his interpretations and their motives can be critiqued. Several of her supposed biographical revelations are either tangentially related to the truth or are entirely dishonest. Dickinson’s poetic and epistolary body is without closure, a fact that can be read in one of two distinct ways. Higginson described her as ‘partially cracked’, a product of ‘an abnormal life’ (L#342B, p.476) yet he later admitted ‘She interested me more in her- so to speak-unregenerate condition’. Yet Higginson could not fully bring himself either to condemn or accept Dickinson’s quirks and therefore resists a final commitment to reductive biographical speculation and medico-moral censure. It is tempting to see their correspondence as an opportunity for Dickinson to present her own vision of the body as unfettered dissolution and sensory abandonment. However, as I have suggested, she is not strictly interested in directly presenting the ‘truth’ of her feminine body, but is more concerned with using bodily tropes and gestures to call into question the very possibility that full,

30 For example, her comment that she ‘made no verse- but one or two- until this winter- Sir-’ (L#261, p.404) is, at best, understatement. The citation of Thomas Browne and Ruskin as favourite writers is probably more a reflection of Higginson’s approval in ‘Letter to a Young Contributor’ than an honest depiction of Dickinson’s own tastes. For a full account of Dickinson’s evasive attitude towards Higginson see Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson, pp.532-577.

dialogic recognition can exist between two people. Her poetry and letters invite Higginson to relinquish his dogmatism and participate in her 'unconveyed' meaning through intimate and estranging hermeneutic relations.

The image of her poetic body laid out on a surgeon's slab has echoes of the self 'shut up in prose' (F#445A/ J#613). Science and patriarchal literary tradition are both authorities that conspire to reify the female body, reduce it to convenient, finite spaces. It was for this reason that Dickinson preferred to communicate without actually being present.

Dear Friend

A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone (L#330, p.460).

Specters appear after the body has died. They occupy the space between life and death, presence and absence, between identity and its dissolution. The gothic tinge of spectral power balances benign spiritual transcendent with a sinister, fearful presence in a fevered imagination. Dickinson knew that regular understanding hankered after 'attitude' and 'accent' as a means of defense against people's essential strangeness. She knew that critical surgeons feared the specter because it approximated to a kind of life they could not survey, evaluate or hold accountable. its very existence called into question their intentions:

Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife!  
Underneath their fine incisions  
Stirs the Culprit- Life!

The critical surgeon does not promote life, but the living death of regulation and conformity. Approximately two years after her correspondence with Higginson began, Dickinson wrote a poem that elucidated how critical surgery upon her poetic corpus estranged the reader from her the ‘unconveyed’, mellifluous sense of her verse. She did not send the poem to Higginson and there is no evidence that it was written specifically about him, but the centrality of the body as a site of contestation will allow us to tie the threads of this section together. It confronts the disparity between secular accountability and divine truth through a scenario of brutal surgery.

Split the Lark- and you’ll find the Music-
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled-
Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning
Saved for your Ear, when Lutes be old-

Loose the Flood- you shall find it patent-
Gush after Gush, reserved for you-
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?

Dickinson raucously sends up the idea that the addressee can find the ‘truth’ of her poetry by dissecting her body. The description of music as ‘Bulb after Bulb, in Silver Rolled-‘, spilling out like pristine giblets is both comedic and horrifying, conflating the discovery of music with an examination of internal
organs. We cannot be entirely sure whether this line is a sarcastic comment upon what such a butcher would expect to find, or whether music has actually been found, but the price of the ‘Scarlet Experiment’ is the bird’s death. She is killed by the effort to understand the ‘truth’ of her creativity. Dickinson is using the word ‘true’ in two different senses here, one stating that she is true of heart, the other that her singing can offer truth on its own terms independent of prying inside her body and soul. Love and verse are sufficiently understood on their own terms.

Dickinson’s use of ‘Sceptic Thomas’ identifies faith in the songbird with faith in Christ. She also referred to ‘doubting Thomas’ in one of the ‘Master’ Letters- ‘One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy’s bosom- then would you believe? Thomas’ faith in Anatomy was stronger than his faith in faith’ (L#233, p.373). In both cases the body and the anguish it suffers are insufficient. In the absence of true faith, which accepts the condition of ignorance, Dickinson’s speaker must be mutilated to assess the authenticity of her character and song. The addressee of the poem should not have to put his hands in Dickinson’s side to tell the truth about her singing. The message of the poem is intentionally convoluted since it expresses, in advance, anguished misgivings about certain types of reader. The poem catches the reader in a split identification between sympathetic involvement with bird’s suffering, and the forced, accusatory identification with the surgeon. The sympathy aroused by her wounded body seemingly reinstates the speaker’s desire for the verse to be read without further consideration for her suffering. Dickinson is subverting
certain reading practices, letting readers know that if they choose to peek inside
her body and brain, then they must be prepared to get blood on their hands. The
sincerity of the speaker's plea and the gruesome images work against each
other, one encouraging sympathetic alignment with the speaker, the other
denying it. Dickinson makes this tension between strangeness and familiarity,
the unknown and certainty, the basis of her dialogue with Higginson and, by
extension, the basis for the contemporary critics relationship to her text. It is
only bodily death, presented as bodily excess that reveals the addressee's
fundamental error. It is only when the bird has been lost that the truth is
discovered. It is only in death that the body communicates the truth that
surgeons seek in the living. Once Dickinson's speakers are lost to us in
confusion and horror, once they have died to common understanding, then they
begin to truly live.

4.3. Dickinson's Disruptive Body and 'Un-Sentimentality'.

In this section I wish to situate Dickinson's poetry in relation to the
politics, discourses and concerns surrounding the body and feeling which come
together under the rubric of sentimentalism. Following my discussion of her
relationship with Higginson, I will demonstrate that Dickinson works against
the uncomplicated transmission and reception of sentiment and feeling between
individuals. Since she regards sympathetic communities as socially
authoritarian and spiritually glib, Dickinson seeks out extreme bodily states as a
means of dissolving intimate homogenizing relations in favour of the shock
reappearance of strangeness and alienation. She accepts recognition solely through the inevitability of mis-recognising others.

'Sentimentalism' comes from the neighbouring term 'sensibility'. If sensibility denotes the spontaneous, untutored emission of emotion through blushes, tears and sighs then sentimentalism involves the culturing and civilizing of these raw feelings so that they might become the basis of sympathetic reflection and relation. Sentimentalism may refer to a relatively coherent set of literary practices, and a political and cultural ideology that circumscribes relations between individuals and between the individual body and the body politic. Initially premised upon the receptivity of the senses explained by Newton and Locke, sentimentalism came to define the debate over the malleability of the self and the possibility of sympathetic identification with the emotional states of another body. In defining the nature and circumstances of emotional response, sentimentalism not only described the human condition as something that could be transmitted, but that could be modified, controlled and improved. As G.J. Barker-Benfield and Bruce Burgett both argue, the sentimental body proved politically unstable and duplicitous. Burgett observes:

The body thus served two contradictory functions within sentimentalism: it provided a surface upon which sensations were

\[\text{As described in Jerome McGann, } \text{The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).}\]

\[\text{See G. J. Barker-Benfield, } \text{The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) for an excellent summary of sentimentalism's development with the eighteenth century.}\]
expressed for a public that could imagine itself as respecting the autonomy of every body, and it provided a literary site for the management of those sensations through collective and potentially heteronomous means.  

This split conception of sentimentalism as coercive and expressive has been repeated by the two most influential works on nineteenth-century American women writers. Jane Tompkins emphasizes sentimentalism's capacity to provide democratic weight and voice to individual feelings, whilst Ann Douglas stresses its coercive, normalizing affiliation with a white, bourgeois status quo.  

Both writers narrow the scope of nineteenth-century American sentimentalism, rendering it synonymous with the values of white, bourgeois Christians and the politics of domesticity. Given Dickinson's broad disinterest in the world beyond her own demographic, it is not surprising that her critique is directed at this domestic branch of sentimental ideology. Her obliviousness to the stratification of power, money and class may account for her tendency to castigate sentimentalism's female practitioners rather than the insidious economic, patriarchal power structures that promoted domestic sentimentalism as the apotheosis of the female vocation.

Although sentimental ideologies are not intrinsically gender biased, it became common place to suggest that women were more 'sentimental'.

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receptive and vulnerable than men. Between the 1790’s and the 1830’s, medical science and contemporary theology merged to produce a view of women as (in Nancy F. Cott’s phrase) ‘passionless’, spiritually pure, receptive. and more prone to nervous imbalance. 37 True womanhood, predicated upon ‘piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity’ and sustained by the belief in women’s nervous vulnerability, enabled husbands, neighbours, clergy and conduct manuals to find an ideal model of behaviour for every occasion. 38 The careful management of nervous receptivity became indistinguishable from spiritual purity. This view was by no means monolithic, not least because it failed to entirely quell the previous suspicion that women required supervision because they were carnally voracious. 39 However both views proved to be politically expedient in promoting surveillance, control and moderation of the female body and occupation. 40 The difference was that women would now police themselves out of their superior moral instincts rather than requiring an ever-present.

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39 As Nancy F. Cott observes ‘the daughters of Eve were considered more prone to excess of passion because their rational control was seen as weaker.’ See Nancy F. Cott. ‘Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850’, p. 222; See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Peter Gay argues that the dominant bourgeois ideology concealed a far greater diversity of sexual practices and knowledges than has generally been recognized. See Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud, vol. 1: Education of the Senses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
40 Men’s bodies were regulated in a similar fashion. The temperance movement, for example, was founded at least partially upon medical doctrines. The conservation of semen and masculine potency were widely praised, guarding against an effete absorption in the marital home or activities such as masturbation that wasted precious energy. See G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in
authoritative husband. Domestic sentimentalism ensured that women were no longer the sinners, they were sinned against. The price was an internal surveillance amongst bourgeois women and the eternal production of behavioural ‘evidence’ to substantiate their new, lofty position.

Domestic sentimentalism regarded occupation and behaviour as the external validation of character. This all-pervading sense of coercion and moral accountability subtly appears in several places within Dickinson’s canon. The subject of sewing, an emblem for the domestic and moral sanctity of the middle-class women, proved a fertile metaphor for Dickinson’s subversive imagination. As an activity it joined both literally and figuratively, stitching women of a comparable background together in a seamless, sympathetic community. Once again, Dickinson proves her waywardness as a means of critiquing these assumptions.

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind-
As is my Brain had split-
I tried to match it- Seam by Seam-
But could not make them fit-

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before-
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound-
Like Balls- opon a Floor-

F#867B/ J#937

Psychological discontinuity is described as an organic failure of the brain, whilst the attempted recovery is relayed in the vocabulary of a seamstress. The

poem endorses sewing as a corrective to mental imbalance. It concludes with a metaphor which links mental breakdown with balls of thread spilling across the floor, denying productive management of body and home. However the verb 'to Cleave' can be taken to mean both to split apart or to stick/adhere. Perhaps, for Dickinson, it is adherence to a domestic identity, complicity of thought and being that causes her brain to split. Stitching the brain proves counter-productive. She will not match the seams of her life together, because she wishes to deny both internal coherence and interpersonal union. Instead, the poem links bodily discontinuity with Dickinson's own descriptions of her poetic practice. Her verse unravels words out of 'sequence' so that they become disparate and individuated. By relating her poetic production to 'Sound-', Dickinson indicates that her verse will not stitch her into the fabric of social comprehension. Her split poetry will roll 'Like Balls- opon a Floor-' spreading the madness of her genius, but not unity.

A Weight with Needles on the pounds-
To push, a pierce, besides-
That if the Flesh resist the Heft-
The puncture- Coolly tries-

That not a pore be overlooked
Of all this Compound Frame-
As manifold for Anguish-
As species- be- for name.

F#294A/ J#264

Needles and sewing do not unite or create in Dickinson's verse. Like the

ideology they designate, they penetrate the self, puncturing any attempted resistance tracking down any attempt to evade surveillance so that 'not a pore be overlooked'. However, the multiple meanings of compound indicate that the 'enclosure' of domestic anguish also reveals how many 'manifold' components are bound together under a purported unity. The painful, enforced internalization of domestic labor creates a compound fracture within the self, revealing the multiplicities and tensions within the self it was supposed to conceal. Dickinson turns needles into a means of fragmentation, discontinuity and exclusion rather than benevolent tools for creating social and textual unity.

Dickinson finds that domestic sentimentalism negates the tremendous uncertainties of consciousness, the untapped depths of the mind and the contingent struggles that ennoble the mind through intense introspection. As I suggested earlier, it is possible to look such as concerns as politically simplistic and highly conservative. Both Betsy Erkkila and Domnhall Mitchell argue that Dickinson's disdain for domestic labour clearly articulates a fear of change within the social and economic circumstances of New England society. 42 However, as these poems attest, Dickinson's objections to domestic sentimentalism, with all its attendant social and economic ramifications, were premised upon its very denial of change, difference, discontinuity and idiosyncrasy. Richard Rabinowitz argues that sentimentalism's partial equivalence between spiritual well being and conduct/ bodily management had

42 Erkkila charges Dickinson with disdain towards the influx of commercial interests and a strong preference for identities based upon traditional, aristocratic hierarchies. See Betsy Erkkila, 'Emily Dickinson and Class', p.4.
profound consequences for the definition of sin.\textsuperscript{43} Spiritual crisis relinquished its stark, incomprehensible break between unregenerate being and grace in favour of a practical, ongoing process of brain, body and conduct management. Spiritual torment was reduced to a mere opportunity for self-improvement.\textsuperscript{44} What was sacrificed in this transition is the endless depth and mystery of the individual consciousness and divine meaning.

Several of Dickinson’s poems deal with what she perceived to be the consequent trivializing of introspective rumination. In poem F#1218A/ J#1274 Dickinson combines a circumspect parody of domestic sentimentalism, criticizing spirits for not being ‘useful’ to self or society.

The Bone that has no Marrow.
What Ultimate for that?
It is not fit for Table
For Beggar or for Cat-

A Bone has obligations-
A Being has the same-
A Marrowless Assembly
Is culpabler than shame-

But how shall finished Creatures
A function fresh obtain?
Old Nicodemus’ Phantom

\textsuperscript{43} Roger Lundin has suggested that this influx of rationalism into personal conduct may be partially attributed to the influence of Whiggery. This political movement, Lundin argues, favours the cosmopolitan over the national, rational over irrational spontaneity and self-control over self-expression. See Roger Lundin, \textit{Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief} (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p.13.

Contemporary sentimental dogma runs up against the material body's refusal to confirm its most salient concerns. In John 3:1-13 Jesus teaches Nicodemus about spiritual regeneration by contrasting how flesh is born of flesh and spirit is born of spirit. Jesus notes Nicodemus' failure to grasp the true meaning of rebirth by drawing attention to the latter's crippling adherence to a corporeal, literal conception of regeneration. Dickinson repeats Nicodemus' lesson by demonstrating how the corporeal, political, social and 'useful' body has obscured spiritual truth. The marrowless bone should not regenerate its fleshly usefulness, but nurture its spiritual dimension. Dickinson parrots crass social demands upon the body through posing a series of questions about the usefulness of the 'Bone that has no Marrow'. The subtle use of carnivorous metaphors implies that the bone's 'further function' is to be devoured by the greedy 'cat' of society. Dickinson strips away at the pretence of fleshless piety and selfless devotion that comes from domestic sentimentalism. If the dedication of the body can feed neither the pampered cat nor the hapless beggar then the implication is that the body's usefulness merely serves as a snack for a hypocritical self-indulgence masquerading as social concern. Once bodily life is finished, spiritual questions must be addressed.

Dickinson' subversion of embodying doctrines draws strength from a modified form of Calvinist piety. She constructs a dialogue between these two competing paradigms, using her religious sensibility to castigate domestic
sentimentalism for its social, material solutions to spiritual predicaments. In a brief 2 line letter written to Mrs. James S. Cooper, Dickinson asks a telling question: ‘Is sickness pathos or infamy? While you forget to decide please confirm this trifle’ (L#607, p.642). If sickness is pathos, then Dickinson’s suffering becomes a existential drama, the self tragically assaulted by the unknown. If sickness is seen as infamy, then illness is a simple question of character, or personal failing rather than a confrontation with overpowering forces; the unknown, transcendent reality above the material, finite world becomes broadly irrelevant. Dickinson’s verse examines states of nervousness, bodily channels overloaded with sensual excess. She promotes morbid states of mind, drunkenness (in defiance of the temperance movement with which her father was involved), and attacks on the underlying hypocrisy of so-called pious female behavior. She demonstrates that managing the body will inevitably fail most to register those mysterious moments when experience resists assimilation and consequently critiques embodying assumptions. With conduct manuals, literature and certain socially progressive religions working so hard to precisely delineate and prescribe the exact specifications of proper conduct, Dickinson’s project reevaluates the ways in which the competing descriptive vocabularies/paradigms of ‘pathos’ or ‘infamy’ work against each other.

The following poem is another key example of Dickinson’s strategy of matching the pronouncements of ‘surgeons’ with a dimension of human experience beyond the scope of mere physical suffering, social usefulness and

45 Morbidity referred to an unrefined sensibility, an overloading of the nervous system.
responsibility. In this case, it is the finality of death, its capacity to overwhelm and challenge social dictates, which tilts the balance between pathos and infamy:

If your Nerve, deny you-
Go above your Nerve-
He can lean against the Grave.
If he fear to swerve-

That's a steady posture-
Never any bend
Held of those Brass arms-
Best Giant made-

If your Soul seesaw-
Lift the Flesh door-
The Poltroon wants Oxygen-
Nothing more-

The simple, sanctimonious tone of the conduct manual confronts the unalterable condition of a dead or traumatized body. Good, regular breathing was an essential part of personal management, but it is also primary means by which a spectator can tell whether a body is alive. The nerves provided the biological underpinning for the all-embracing management of behaviour. Due the vague, pseudo-scientific formulation of such doctrines, over-stimulation and excessive inhibition were equally considered undesirable. This poem indicates that death was sufficient to legitimize nervousness without incurring a charge of 'infamy' for the sufferer. As her health declined in the mid 1880's, Dickinson

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46 See Joan Burbick, 'Emily Dickinson and the Revenge of the Nerves', Women's Studies, 7 (1980), 95-109 (p.100).
penned a defensively phrased note to her cousins Louise and Frances which neatly encapsulates her tendency to oppose trite medical pronouncements.

I had fainted and lain unconscious for the first time in my life. Then I grew very sick and gave the others much alarm, but am now staying, The doctor calls it “revenge of the nerves”; but who but Death had wronged them? (L#907, p.827) [Italics mine]

The question is arguably rhetorical. Dickinson was only too aware that her existential diagnosis was likely to be translated into a secular, medical explanation that doubtless would have drawn support from the circumstantial peculiarities of her life. Death as an existential predicament rather than a physical condition confronts the social surgeon with the limits of his or her authority. The body assumes a kind of gross materiality that thwarts improvement or condemnation.

The crisp strategies of bodily management become absurdly irrelevant when confronted with the realities of death. In the first stanza Dickinson’s assumed voice suggests that one should simply ‘go above’ one’s nervous failing whilst simultaneously acknowledging that the nerve can choose to ‘lean against the Grave/ If he fear to swerve-’. The second part of this stanza logically undermines the assertion of the first, since the nerve’s decision to lean against the grave would indicate that the addressee was dead, rendering useless any attempt to rise above the nervousness. In offering death as a preferable option to nervous mismanagement, Dickinson’s speaker presents an extreme conclusion which undermines its seeming concern for the self’s well being:
Better a corpse than a nervous aberration.

The second stanza continues this comic mockery by offering ironic praise for the dead body’s ‘steady’ posture. The dead body never bends or breaks; it remains a paragon of the still, constant, regulated virtue demanded of contemporary womanhood. The parallel between the pious, virtuous body and the dead one is further confirmed by the image of ‘Brass arms’, which simultaneously invokes the brass handles on a coffin and presents a social constriction as an insensitive, mechanized limb. The tension between the explicit moralising of the poem’s voice and the absurd, counterproductive consequences for the addressee is brought to a head in the third stanza. Stabilizing the soul by ‘Lifting the Flesh door-’ to allow it access to oxygen contains two separate meanings. The first, which adheres of the teachings of medical and biological law, indicates that the crisis of nerve can be alleviated simply by increasing the oxygen supply through the ‘flesh door’ to the mouth, which would regulate the body’s organs towards a more healthy disposition. Alternatively, lifting the flesh door could refer to the separation of body and soul after death, indicating the final consequence of the nerve’s failure. Dickinson subverts social dogma through indicating that the best way to ‘go above’ your nerve is to float above it as a spirit.

Dickinson’s work represents a highly individual strain of a wider reaction by women writers against sentimental depictions of womanhood. By the late 1850’s, women writers had begun to critique domestic ideologies.
demanding the right to political power and influence outside the home and rejecting idealized pictures of domestic bliss as restrictive.\(^{47}\) However, whilst the majority of these writers directed their attention outwards at reform of the domestic and public sphere, Dickinson’s resistance towards the socially-useful body led her to a blanket condemnation of body and writing as socially useful or politically sentient.

Dickinson’s critique is aimed at what Paula Bennett refers to as ‘high sentimentalism’, which is ‘an epistemology based discourse. It claimed that the intuitions of the heart could serve as reliable guides to moral and spiritual truths’.\(^{48}\) Since high sentimentalism represented embodying ideologies at the point where they appropriate spiritual and divine authority, they became Dickinson’s principle point of attack. Although Bennett suggests that sentimentalism relinquished its claims to epistemological superiority in the 1850’s, Dickinson’s work, predicated upon a condensed and convenient stereotype, tends to equate the coercive, sanctimonious presumptions of feeling in all expressions of sentiment. Poem F#788A/ J#709 claims that ‘Publication-is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man–’ linking publication with slavery, the market place and a compromise of ‘Our Snow–’. Going ‘White- unto the White Creator–’ is not a question of publicized piety, but a ‘Poverty’ of expression.

Since the pure, domestic heart of high sentimentalism was endowed with such

\(^{47}\) See Paula Bennett, "'The Descent of the Angel': Interrogating Domestic Ideology in American Women's Poetry, 1858-1890", American Literary History, 7 (1995), 591-610 (p.593);
omniscient authority, the public expression of poetry drew authority from the private sphere. Consequently, sentimental poetry and fiction stressed communication above complexity, clarity and sincerity above irony.\textsuperscript{49} It is premised upon ‘An emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal’.\textsuperscript{50} Poetry like Dickinson’s that stressed spiritual or epistemological truth through idiosyncratic, ambiguous language was regarded quizzically. It was Dickinson’s task to turn the accusations back against her hypothetical attackers, reclaiming spiritual and epistemological authority from any affiliation with the sentimental body and the purified mind.

Dickinson’s anti-sentimental strategies operate on two levels. First, as we saw in the preceding two poems, she produces biting, caustic satirical critiques of those discourses that insist upon the body’s social utility. She describes a latent insensitivity or cruelty, a base, sadistic urge for domination that undermines the pretence to an unblemished spiritual brilliance.\textsuperscript{51} The second strategy involves the systematic deconstruction of poetry as a vehicle for sympathy, transparency of meaning, and the confirmation of bourgeois sentimentalism’s core values and assumptions. Poetry and the discourses on

\textsuperscript{49} Emily Stipes Watts, \textit{The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1945). I do not follow Stipes in regarding Sentimentalism as synonymous with nineteenth-century women’s writing as a whole.
\textsuperscript{51} For an excellent account of the violent, assertive subtext of domestic sentimentalism, see Laura Wexler, ‘Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform’, in \textit{The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth Century
the body are united in their preference for a sense of order, proportion and responsibility towards a wider public. Dickinson’s views on the social responsibility of producing verse are widely cited:

Of Miss P- I know but this, dear. She wrote me in October, requesting me to aid the world by my chirrup more. Perhaps she stated it as my duty, I don’t distinctly remember, and always burn such letters. so I cannot obtain it now. I replied declining. She did not write to me again- she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch... (L#380, p.500).

Although seemingly callous, this letter does not so much indicate a specific disinterest in suffering so much as the distinction between pious exteriors and true spiritual worth. The well-meaning Sewing Society receives a similarly sarcastic dismissal: ‘now all the poor will be helped the cold warmed- the warm cooled- the hungry fed- the thirsty attended to- the ragged clothed- and this suffering- tumbled down world will be helped to it’s feet again- which will be quite pleasant to all’ (L#30, p.84). Dickinson’s skepticism towards public sentiment is so severe that she rejects nearly all surface manifestations of feeling. She accused domestic sentimentalism of being, quite literally, only skin deep.

Speech- is a prank of Parliament-
Tears- a trick of the nerve-
But the Heart with the heaviest freight on-
Doesn’t-always-move-

F#193A/ J#688


Johnson speculates that Miss P. might be Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, a prolific novelist, poet, essayist and short story writer who penned The Gates Ajar, a massively popular consolation novel.
The 'prank' and 'trick' of visible sentiment is rejected in favour of emotions that shatter sympathetic connection through their sheer gravity. Spiritual and emotional truths are characterized by powerful, isolating silence, their stillness and the fact that they do not 'move' others.

Dickinson recognized that the politics of gesture and sentiment produced a correspondingly ephemeral and epidermal church where the humble contemplation of God's mysteries takes second place to finding a panacea for earthly suffering. Rendering feeling reciprocal and communicable reduces complex, spiritual truth to a cosmetic surface—'Much Gesture, from the Pulpit-/Strong Hallelujahs roll-' (F#373A/ J#501). Dickinson suggests that the 'narcotics' of easy solutions 'cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul-'. James Turner observes that the nineteenth century saw the division of God into two separate conceptions, one satiating spiritual hunger and secular anxiety, the other satisfying the mind through providing an explanatory framework for the workings of the universe. Calvinism had seen these aspects as inseparable and consequently their morality was dedicated towards the worship of God for his own glory. Religious developments influenced by 'high sentimentalism' believed that religion aimed at the good of mankind and reduced the glory of God to a secondary consideration. Dickinson's poems focus upon the body as a means of describing the reduction of spiritual truth to secular concern because

the more gruesome aspects of bodily existence refute the rigid codifications that accompany it's workings.

The following poem has often been read as Dickinson’s comment upon the power of her own poetic voice, but I have read it as a critique of high sentimentalism’s insensitivity and hypocrisy.\(^55\) The poem returns us to the distinction I made earlier between the sentimentality (the sophisticated, ennobling refinement of feeling) and sensibility (the unreflective, animal primitivism of raw untutored emotion). The doyennes of high sentimentalism profess sentimental purity and moral authority, but the thin veneer of civility barely conceals the seething appetites that motivate their stringent enforcement of social codification.

She dealt her pretty words like Blades-
    How glittering they shone-
And every One unbared a Nerve
Or wantoned with a Bone-

She never deemed- she hurt-
    That- is not Steel's Affair-
A vulgar grimace in the Flesh-
How ill the Creatures bear-

To Ache is human- not polite
The Film opon the eye
Mortality’s old Custom-
Just locking up- to Die-

\(^{55}\) Since the poem is written in the third person, and the speaker is identified with a kind of social conduct that Dickinson found distasteful, I think it is unlikely that the central figure
The speaker at the heart of this poem uses her 'pretty', superficially well-meaning words as weapons, enforcing a system of social concerns, expressed consistently through the use of words such as 'affair', 'vulgar', 'polite' and 'custom'. Dickinson makes us aware that underneath the apparent social concern lies a sadistic insensitivity to true suffering. Her shining words 'unbared a Nerve' and 'wantoned with a Bone', aggressively tearing into the flesh of her audience and projecting her own unacknowledged carnality into those around her. The combination of sadism and sexuality violates the two central foundations of domestic sentimentalism: woman as a nurturing, maternal pinnacle of moral self-sacrifice, and the corresponding picture of woman as sexually passionless. The subject of the poem dominates the social sphere, but only through undercutting the purported moral purity of pretty words that sustain her authority. Perversely, she is far more of a threat than those whom she castigates. Unfettered female sexuality was feared because of the danger it posed to domestic stability, but this poem also sustains the primordial fear of being drained/castrated by a woman of insatiable sexual appetites. Dickinson partially aligns herself with male denunciations of sentimentalism such as Henry Giles diatribe in Harper's New Monthly.

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66 see Nancy F. Cott, 'Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850', p.221. Cott observes that views of women’s sexuality are ‘never monolithic’ and correctly notes that ‘notions of women’s inherent licentiousness persisted, to be wielded against women manifesting any form of deviance under the reign of passionlessness.’

57 See Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 629. G.J. Barker-Benfield argues that men feared the loss of their 'spermatc potency', the energy and zest that sustained their competitive expeditions outside the home. The male heterosexual commitment to marriage was believed to involve a regrettable diversion of energy away from the vigorous labour and valued independence that sustained contemporary masculine identity. See G.J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life, p. 38.
We would say that sentimentalism is either a disease of the moral nature, or a perversion of imagination: either the illusive confounded with the actual, or fancy taken in preference to fact: either an emotional self-deception, or a pretentious unrealism[...]. When passion and inclination take the place of truth and duty, woman is easily beguiled by sentimental phraseology. 58

Although Dickinson would hardly follow Giles’s endorsement of truth and duty, her work echoes his dismissal, however unfair and inaccurate, of sentiment as shallow, and morally deluded. Giles speaks out in the name of a different moral and social order where women control their feelings in the name of a greater good. Dickinson herself must swerve from such moralizing since she does not seek to communicate a point of view, but to argue against the possibility of a shared point of view itself. Her parodies notably lack that commitment to a superior model that characterizes revisionist literature. They present blank spaces or conundrums where the reader may see his/ her own fears about the speaker’s disorderly body reflected back at him/ her.

In her letters to Higginson, Dickinson used accusing images of gross corporeality to illustrate how he misses her true meaning by focusing on the supposed aberrations of her body. In this poem, the array of nerves, bones and vulgar grimaces are the direct result of the speaker’s unacknowledged tendency to impose lacerating restrictions upon the bodies of others. As such, this poem

offers a bleak parody of the kinds of sympathetic identification that predominated amongst communities of middle-class women. Karen Halttunen argues that in the 1830's with the 'cult of sincerity', bourgeois women adopted homogenous set of manners to facilitate smooth relations with strangers. Feeling became codified as dialogically responsive and socially coercive. The sincere body sustains a fantasy of social narcissism. it reflects back to others the image of themselves. Dickinson argues against the notion that manners express a benevolent, consensual recognition of mutual sentiment and interest. They are a brutally compelling projection, cutting the unwilling recipients through razor-edged words. In F#458A/J#479 the communal narcissism is actually sustained through the speaker molding others in the unacknowledged image of her own sordid flesh. Bodily imagery sympathetically draws attention to the victim's pain as a means of breaking apart the illusion of benign, voluntary complicity. In describing the wounds inflicted as 'a vulgar grimace in the Flesh'. Dickinson stresses how the speaker reinterprets the damage done by her words as a failure of social etiquette, transferring the culpability away from herself. Even death has become a matter of 'custom' and etiquette.

Dickinson commented to Higginson that 'women talk: men are silent: that is why I dread women' (L#342A, p.473). 'The Landscape of the Spirit', she writes on a prior occasion 'requires a lung, but no Tongue' (L#315, p.450). Talk of the spiritual obscured its truth. It was the possibility of being surgically

59 Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870, p.34.
carved up by the razor words of chattering women that leads Dickinson to isolate herself in moments of bodily silence and rupture. Aching, the poem claims, ‘is human- not polite’, a line which gives away exactly how unrealistic Dickinson believed sentimentalism to be. Proud and pious women are accused of rejecting so much of themselves and their experience that humanity’s redeeming qualities are also thrown out. To recall L#607 cited above, they are so keen to banish any thought of ‘infamy’ that they are incapable of ‘pathos’.

In the following poem, Dickinson critiques those women who are too pure, too above their own humanity to connect with what she calls the ‘freckled deity’. She mocks their aspirations to improve on religion by demanding that it respond to their earthly needs and aspirations.

What soft- Cherubic Creatures-
These Gentlewomen are-
One would as soon assault a Plush-
Or violate a Star-

Such Dimity Convictions-
A Horror so refined
Of freckled Human Nature-
Of Deity- Ashamed-

It’s such a common- Glory-
A Fisherman’s- Degree-
Redemption- Brittle Lady-
Be so- ashamed of Thee-

F#675A/ J#401

Dickinson presents a vision of fragile, moral goodness so pronounced that the very thought of doing these women harm is inconceivable. Parodying the
connection between women's impregnable moral superiority and their physical frailty. Dickinson notes that even redemption is afraid to approach. Dickinson's criticisms of the sewing circle are repeated here in the odd phrase 'Dimity Convictions'. Identifying the pinnacle of moral sanctity with the domestic occupation of sewing matches their absurd sensitivity. Dickinson's objection to their 'Horror so refined' is premised upon their shame of 'freckled Human Nature' and 'Deity'. This is Dickinson's key objection to the religions of the heart, their 'sensitivity' is so acute God himself is castigated for having taken on human form. As I argued in my chapter on the gothic, Dickinson's finds notions of sin, redemption, election and transcendence useful for the cognitive action they inspire, for the sense of transcendent truth it promotes, and the sudden, inspiring break with immanent identity that comes from a sense of election. By rejecting Christ as 'freckled', these brittle ladies also dismiss the private mysteries of consciousness, the internal divisions and gulfs that sustain the possibility of transcendence. In the final section of this chapter, I intend to show how Dickinson turns to her own unruly, agonized body to uncover the terrifying depths that sentimentalism sought to ignore.

4.4. 'Praise it- 'tis dead-' Dickinson's Grotesque Corpse.

Dickinson found the depth and uncertainty of the Calvinist

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60 The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* lists dimity as 'cotton fabric with raised stripes or
consciousness to be a valued point of resistance against the perceived philistine reductionism of domesticity, sentimentalism, medicine and other embodying discourses. The readings in this next section will suggest that Dickinson's view of Calvinism, regarded with trepidation in connection with the gothic, is entirely transformed when brought into conjunction with embodying discourses. The poems I have chosen to analyze all portray the dead body as a site of liberation. The corpse is a site of catastrophic uncertainty, but this operates to Dickinson's full advantage, liberating her from coercive and restrictive opinions, influences and social dogmas. As I suggested earlier in the chapter we might understand this enthusiastic deployment of uncertainty in terms of Wilfred Bion's theories of catastrophic change and cognitive growth. Sentimental and embodying cultures are perceived to be restrictive 'containers', stagnating and suffocating the flow of consciousness rather than contributing to it. The balance of PS→D shifts towards the dissolution of the ego's boundaries and the voluntary surrender of reified certainty (PS) as a means of stimulating cognitive activity and growth. The pained or dead body instigates this beneficent catastrophe, clearing away vacuous obstructions and allowing an expansive carnivalisation of the poetic consciousness. In the final stages of this section, we will encounter poems where Dickinson focuses upon the phenomenology of bodily sensation as a means of asserting the mysterious depth of consciousness concealed by the surveillance of behaviour and conduct.

Dickinson's poetry disavows the surface expression of feeling through checks.
blushes, tears and sighs. These things may be present, but they are related with a distinctive emotional detachment, interrogated for their capacity to estrange far more than offered up as evidence of a shared, social identity. Her preferred emotions or sensations are pain and numbness, although these are not used to encourage sympathetic identification. Sensation in Dickinson’s work is intense, visceral and overwhelming, it undercuts the assumed unity of the self and, by extension, the basis of a sympathetic community. The idiosyncrasy of her bodily sensations may initially appear to invite the application of an embodying moral framework, but the poems ultimately work against these values. These excesses of corporeal body sensation cannot be transformed into something socially useful or communicable. By illustrating the points at which sentimental assumptions break down, by presenting her identity as an abyss of sensation, Dickinson reintroduces her reader to the spiritual mysteries and complications abandoned in the name of sentimental, secular panaceas.

Dickinson critiques high sentimentalism’s use of the dead body to seamlessly unite earthly concerns with the heavenly spheres. As Ann Douglas notes, the presumed symmetry of earthly and heavenly values comes directly from the unitarian softening of evangelical zeal.61 ‘Consolation literature’ (to borrow Douglas’ term) indicated that God was responsive to manifest earthly needs and requirements. Sentimentalism overcomes the bodily facts of death by defying the social death of the individual, sanctifying the deceased to colonize

heaven with familiar, consoling faces. If (as the title of this chapter suggests) Dickinson aligned herself with 'abyss', then I would argue she was attempting to use bodily death to break these consolations apart.

If much antebellum mourning literature sought to console, then Dickinson seeks to unsettle.62 Philip Fisher argues that 'unlike the modern novel it [sentimentalism] draws upon novel objects for feeling rather than novel feelings'.63 Sentimentalism presumes that certain kinds of shared feelings are a universal human trait. By contrast, Dickinson introduces unfamiliar, estranging sentiment into familiar descriptions. I would now like to compare poem F#614A/ J#519 with Lydia Sigourney's 'Death of an Infant', which provides a model for the kind of ideology under attack. I am not making a case for 'Death of an Infant' as indicative of nineteenth-century women's writing in its entirety. I am merely following Dickinson's specific positioning against generic sentimental ideologies.64 Consolation verse (particularly in the 1820's) centers around the dyad of grieving mother and dead child. The domestic, and therefore matriarchal, setting of such poems excludes the father and therefore provides some rationale for Dickinson targeting middle-class women rather than their

62 It should be pointed out that Dickinson is not consistently critical of sentimental elegies and some of her poems come close to the very stereotypes she pillories elsewhere.
64 In correspondence with me, Paula Bennett has argued that Sigourney's work changed as high sentimentalism receded after 1850. 'Death of an Infant', dated 1827, is an early elegy, but Bennett suggests that Sigourney's later works are far more politically radical. I agree with this observation. Never the less, Sigourney provides a convenient, contemporary reference point for certain stereotypes that Dickinson (and, of course, Twain through the satirical character of Emmeline Grangerford) attacks in her work. I am grateful to Professor Bennett for sharing her
husbands.  

The dyadic communion between grieving mother and corpse is extended through the clear, accessible language that provides a secondary dyad between poem and a sympathetic community of readers. Sigourney's poem is predicated upon a collective, homogenous involvement with the experience being depicted. The sentimental aesthetic manifests itself through the supreme perfection and purity of the child's corpse. Flesh becomes a surface upon which the shared experience of grieving can be written. The gross reality of the body's decaying flesh is concealed under a glossy tableau that signifies spiritual perfection through unblemished physical beauty.

Death found strange beauty on that cherub brow. 
And dash'd it out. – There was tint of rose 
On cheek and lip;– he touched the veins with ice. 
And the rose faded.– Forth from those blue eyes 
There spake a wishful tenderness, -a doubt 
Whether to grieve or sleep, which Innocence 
Alone may wear.– With ruthless haste he bound 
The silken fringes of their curtaining lids 
Forever.– There had been a murmuring sound, 
With which the babe would claim its mother's ear 
Charming her even to tears. –The spoiler set 
The seal of silence.–But there beam'd a smile, 
So fix'd and holy from that marble brow.– 
Death gazed and left it there;– her dared not steal 
The signet-ring of Heaven.  

Sigourney's poem condemns the 'ruthless haste' of death's actions through a description of the dead child's 'silken fringes' for eyelids, 'blue eyes' which

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‘spake a wishful tenderness’ and ‘a smile/ So fix’d and holy from that marble brow’. In identifying death as masculine, yet differentiating him from god, Sigourney relates the child’s death to a callous invasion of the female, sentimental space by an aggressive, masculine interloper. The sanctity of the sentimental community reconstitutes its foundations upon the collective rejection of death as incomprehensible and intolerable. By rendering the dead child a mirror for his mother’s unimpeachable virtue, Sigourney indirectly attacks the injurious treatment of women, their spiritual and epistemological privilege ultimately reaffirmed. The infant’s virtue displaces the physical fact of his death and provides an essential, steadying bridge between the certainties of this life and the uncertainty of the next.

It is important to understand the sentimental depictions of death in a wider historical context. Philippe Ariès argues that after the Middle Ages, when physical mortality was accepted as an organic fact of life, western culture progressed towards a denial of the corporeal body. He suggests that the dissolution of truly communal life deprived death of its wider social understanding and support. It became a family affair heightened by the inevitably more intense, affectional ties. Ariès sees ‘beautiful death’ as the ideology that replaces the understanding of death as an organic, social process, the spiritual and aesthetic responses to the corpse masking the increasing incomprehension of death. Sigourney uses the codification of the beautiful.

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body to construct a comforting space of communal, public concern between private individuals, she masks the reality of loss with an aesthetics of continuity. Dickinson prefers to return us to the body’s core material strata. She seeks not to reaffirm communal values but to shock and awaken her readers and her self to more profound truths that have been obscured.68

Dickinson believed that ‘Looking at Death, is Dying-’ (F#341A/ J#281). The corpse does not promote the values of the living, it represents death as the hole in comprehension and certainty. ‘Death of an Infant’ works to conceal the possibility that death might be an occasion for profound uncertainty, a break with what is known rather than its continuation. The serene aesthetic perfection of the sentimental corpse stamps it with the air of permanence, ‘the signet ring of Heaven’. Sentimental elegies use the infant’s body as a canvas upon which to communicate and enforce shared needs and values. Promoting the unsignifying, material ‘thing-ness’ or alterity of the body allowed Dickinson to disrupt sentimentalism’s benign continuity between mortal life and heaven. The spectacle of the dead body enacts a Bakhtinian, grotesque moment by overcoming the gap between spectator and object, but it does so in a way that affirms chilling alienation and uncertainty rather than the shared values of the living.69 By destroying the sentimental assumptions imposed upon the beautiful corpse, Dickinson’s poetry was able to revitalize the neglected concept of a

68 For an excellent account describing Dickinson’s critique of sentimentalism, see Maria Magdalena Farland, “‘That tritest/brightest truth’: Emily Dickinson’s Anti-Sentimentality’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 53 (1998), 364-391 (p.382).
transcendent experience and identity which were beyond earthly comprehension rather than molded in its image. Both the observation and experience of death provided precisely this kind of counter-discursive moment. They interrupt the smooth, reciprocal interchange of meaning between the living and the dead by asserting an estranging experience which resists assimilation into sentimental ideologies. This unspeakable experience forces a re-evaluation of the bodily truth that the sentimental economy hopes to obscure.

'Twas warm- at first- like Us-
Until there crept opon
A Chill- like frost opon a Glass-
Till all the scene - be gone.

The Forehead copied stone-
The Fingers grew too cold
To ache- and like a Skater's Brook-
The busy eyes- congealed-

It straightened- that was all-
It crowded Cold to Cold-
It multiplied indifference-
As Pride were all it could-

And even when with Cords-
'Twas lowered, like a Weight-
It made no Signal, nor demurred,
But dropped like Adamant.

Unlike 'Death of an Infant', the identity of the body, even down to standard details such as age and gender, are not disclosed. It is horrifyingly anonymous and thing-like, indicating that social death has already occurred. The body is
present to consciousness only as that which is dying, the sufferer’s individuality having already vanished. Poetic consciousness and reader can only respond to the body on terms that defy comprehension. It is only initially deemed to be ‘like Us’ through the abstract, tactile quality of bodily warmth, testifying to corporeal existence but not its character or humanity. The chill of the body is ‘like frost upon a Glass’, the sentimental mirror of feeling is clouded rather than heightened. Since the body ceases to communicate information visually. Dickinson uses tactile imagery to stress the creeping claustrophobia that the dying body induces in the speaker, the sense that her identity is absorbed into the clammy skin of the corpse. Subject and object positions are blurred. observing death becomes experiencing death. The poem’s conclusion describes the final transformation of person into thing, the body dropping into the grave like ‘Adamant’ just as the speakers perception has dropped into a corresponding black hole of incomprehension.

The body is presented as silent, ‘indifferent’, proud and arrogant, it makes ‘no Signal, nor demurred’. Dickinson values silence over talk just as she values individuality over community. The dead body imitates her lofty disdain towards the banal chatter of women; its mysterious silence cracks the treasured, homogeneous belief system of well-meaning mourners. The body ‘multiplied indifference’, it is both physically and socially cold, numb and callous. Dickinson understood that consolation literature attempted to tame the strangeness of the dead body whilst she preferred to see such moments as a test
of secure preconceptions.

I've seen a Dying Eye
Run round and round a Room-
In search of Something- as it seemed-
Then Cloudier become-
And then- obscure with Fog-
And then- be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be
'Twere blessed to have seen-

Death is not a striking, consoling tableau of tranquility, but a series of frantic jerks and movements. The process of dying is relayed mechanically in stages until death brutally solders the eyelids. The poem's jolting action overwhelms the confidence in the spiritual reality 'Twere blessed to have seen'. The opening line links the spectator with the dying object through the homonymic I/Eye. To see the dead body is to be absorbed into its fleshly convulsion, to dissolve identity's boundaries into the numbing actuality of dying, suffering flesh.

The capacity of the dying body to engage and overwhelm the attention provided a powerful tool for Dickinson's body politics. She could attack embodying ideologies at the place where they were simultaneously most invested and yet most vulnerable. In the following poem she once again parodies the ideology of the pure and 'useful' female body and shows how the corpse resists the demands of domesticity. The corpse generates uncertainty by

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How many times these low feet staggered-
Only the soldered mouth can tell-
Try-can you stir the awful rivet-
Try-can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead-hot so often-
Lift-if you care-the listless hair-
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble-more-shall wear-

Buzz the dull flies-on the chamber window-
Brave-shines the sun through the freckled pane-
Fearless-the cobweb swings from the ceiling-
Indolent Housewife-in Daisies-lain!

Dickinson fuses two distinct and incompatible perspectives on the dead or
dying body. First is the scene prior to death, the deathbed confession where the
state of the soul's preparedness to face God is luminously disclosed. Secondly,
the inert flesh of the corpse is seen as an 'indolent housewife', slovenly in her
neglect of a dirty, unkempt house. This second perspective comes to the fore as
the poem progresses. Dickinson is playing a trick on the implied reader's
cultural expectations, acclimatizing us to the spiritual terror provoked by the
dead body's silence before supplanting terror with misplaced moral outrage.
The initially confusing reference to 'low feet' only becomes clear when the
final line reveals that the subject is an 'Indolent Housewife'. Dickinson invites
us to revise our reading in the light of this final line, recasting the moment of
death as domestic ineptitude. Though the image of 'dull flies-on the chamber
window-' and the cobweb swinging from the ceiling may initially appear
gothic, they are swiftly turned into evidence of a sluttish disposition. Dickinson satirically lambastes the absurdity of this shift in values. If concepts of the body are bound merely to its manifest role in maintaining the fabric of the home, then the terror of death is neglected.

Dickinson singles out the corpse as a site of rupture where the moral certainties accompanying domestic competence are unable to accommodate the extremity of death. The lazy, immobile body intrudes over and above sentimental communion or a deathbed revelation of saintly purity. The phenomenological description of the cadaver is acute, rendering its 'thing-ness' through cumulative images of physical inertia, dirt and collapse. The body begins in unacknowledged death throes, staggering on 'low feet' to a static and unyielding condition where the soldered mouth, the listless hair and the adamantine fingers will not move. The undignified, unappealing bodily movements give way to equally offensive and unaesthetic inertia. The simultaneous death of body and character form a contrast with the corpse's resplendent glow in Sigourney's poem. The mouth is welded shut, it tells us nothing of the character of the afterlife and nothing of its prior life beyond its failure to maintain the standards of domestic existence. The dead body is an aesthetic abyss, the end of the most heartfelt hopes and aspirations of those who use the occasion of mourning to reaffirm communal values. Since the corpse has failed to live an exemplary life, it can offer no guarantee of security to the implied mourner/reader.
If consolation literature required the dead body to guarantee collective spiritual sanctity through its virtue, then Dickinson discloses the basis of this virtue in the trivial realm of domestic competence. The body couldn't possibly be mourned if it hadn't done its chores first! Peter Gay argues that the female domestic space was far more practical, far more connected with the viscera of caring for the sick, nurturing infants, dismembering animals for food than accounts of domestic occupation usually suggest.\textsuperscript{71} Dickinson's unflinching dedication to the mess, the unpleasantness of the domestic space and the physical body, provides a secondary tier to her critique of domestic ideology. She brings the unpleasant grind of domestic existence to the fore as a means of countering sentimental pictures of domestic contentment. This is not, I think, a battle cry for greater recognition of women's labour, but part of her broader plan to obliterate the link between domestic work and spiritual superiority. Dickinson praises death for its ability to supercede 'Color-Caste-Denomination-.'. He is the great equalizer whose 'large-Democratic fingers/Rub away the Brand-' (F#836A/ J#970). Death liberates from 'branded' slavery, from the trivialities of conduct and character. Underneath these seemingly class-insensitive comments, Dickinson is promoting respect for mystery. Her focus upon the corpse enables her to critique normalizing literary, medical and social norms as insignificant.

Dickinson absorbs the shock alterity of the dead or pained body as a means to purge her consciousness of its communal and dialogic aspects. The

\textsuperscript{71} Peter Gay \textit{The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud}, vol. 1, p.345.
account of mourning in poem F#312A/ J#252 continues Dickinson’s assault on the notion that grieving provides an opportunity to strengthen social ties. Grief overwhelms its occasioning subject, it is transformed from a reflection upon loss into a spiritual test. Dickinson returns mourning to a more Calvinist introspective process where examination of the soul takes priority over management of the body. The body can only signify the gulf between persons rather than affirming a positive presence.

I can wade Grief-
Whole Pools of it-
I’m used to that-
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet-
And I tip-drunken-
Let no Pebble- smile-
’Twas the New Liquor-
That was all!

Power is only Pain-
Stranded- thro’ Discipline,
Till Weights- will hang-
Give Balm- to Giants-
And they’ll wilt, like Men-
Give Himmaleh-
They’ll Carry- Him!

If the dead body substitutes the experience of a living person for the negativity of dead flesh, then Dickinson’s mourner internalizes death’s radical, enigmatic isolation. The eruptions of corporeal existence merge the poetic consciousness with the cadaver in a living death of sensation. The grieving self takes on the corpse’s ‘Adamantine’ heaviness’. The poetic self has absorbs death, the abyss that can have no biographer, rather than the living memory of the person. The
decimation of self that accompanies grief produces a new and quite distinct asocial self, unresponsive to domestic and sentimental discourses. Although grief impares the self through its phenomenological ‘heaviness’, this very heft of emotion may be said to constitute a solidity or coherence, a discrete, solipsistic unity of self paradoxically constituted from the blank discontinuities of death. Joy, by contrast, ‘Breaks up’ the feet and lets the speaker fall. Whatever the presumed negativity of private grief, it offers the poetic consciousness a sense of coherence and delineation that joy cannot match.

The coherence of grief is a trial of strength and endurance, an opportunity to wade through and flex the spiritual muscles. Joy is called a ‘New Liquor’, intruding into an accustomed climate of grief. In comparing joy to drunkenness, Dickinson indicates that such happiness may be considered reprehensible by moral guardians such as the temperance movement, who focused upon excessive alcohol consumption as leading to the waste of a socially useful life. It is tempting to align this image with poem F#207A/ J#214 where Dickinson gorges on the pleasures of nature and ends up the spectacle of Saints as ‘the little Tippler/Leaning against the- Sun-’. However, to read the poem this way would undermine its dedication to spiritual redemption through suffering. Melancholy sustains the continuity of self whereas joy threatens the spiritual seriousness of grieving. Dickinson rejects joy as an easy solution to a complex problem, just as she rejects consolation as a cure for spiritual torment. The pain of grief is rendered useful through the attribute of ‘discipline’. Giants
do not require the balm of comfort and neither should she. Grief prepares the consciousness for its solitary trials by loosening the dependence upon the lost 'other'. As we note in the second stanza, the assertion that 'power' is disciplined 'pain', whilst congruent with the feminine ethos of virtuous endurance, is ultimately self-glorifying rather than self-effacing, egocentric rather than interpersonal. The grieving body uses its container of pain and death to sever itself from the balm of sentiment and continue its internal struggle alone.

Dickinson uses the phenomenology of pain to obliterate any awareness of the body as socially responsive, focusing instead on the opportunities it provides for solipsistic recuperation of the self’s neglected interior mysteries. Pain shatters the order of the regulated, useful, domestic body, but it ushers back in the disorientating depths of consciousness. Elaine Scarry and Didier Anzieu both describe pain’s capacity to make the most basic coordinates of self and other disappear. They echo Dickinson’s notation of pain as an ‘Element of Blank-‘ (F#760A/ J#650) which redefines the self as a site of dislocation and absence. Scarry notes that bodily pain completely overloads the wider functions of the ego, reducing them to pure sensation: ‘the path of worldly objects is swept clean not, as in religion, to make room for the approach of some divinely intuited force[...]but the unexperienceable absence of oneself from the world’.72 Anzieu echoes this view, and draws a further interesting conclusion: ‘pain

cannot be shared, except by being eroticized in a sadomasochistic relationship.\textsuperscript{73} The pained or dead body cannot share its pain, without sadomasochistically relinquishing its autonomy to the authority of another. It becomes an abyss without a biographer, something that displaces language and sympathy, but cannot be affected by either.\textsuperscript{74} What is shared between the poetic consciousness and the implied audience is the indisputable fact of their asymmetry. This point is extended by Scarry's observation that unlike emotions such as love, hate and fear, pain is a feeling without an object.

Though the capacity to experience physical pain is as primal a fact about the human being as is the capacity to hear, to touch, to desire, to fear, to hunger, it differs from these events, and from every other bodily and psychic event, by not having an object in the external world.\textsuperscript{75}

The idea of sensation without an object displaces the self beyond the discursive formations that seek to reduce life only to its visible, controllable, surface manifestations. As such, the body functions to delineate the contours of the self and provide a point of interaction with external forces, but the phenomenology of pain operates to dissolve unity and continuities.

There is, it must be said, an immediate theoretical and political


\textsuperscript{75} Elaine Scarry, \textit{The Body in Pain}, p.161.
objection to 'equating unmediated bodily expression with political freedom'. This need to recuperate the sheer materiality of the body as a site of resistance proceeds, at least in part, from seeing discourses and ideologies as things that produce the autonomous self, rather than simply underwriting its possibilities. Since I have already stated in the introduction to this chapter that I do not endorse the notion of discursive determinism, I do not see the need to defend the point again here. Dickinson's work is best considered as a conscious preference for Calvinism's superior capacity to inspire great acts of cognitive and linguistic originality through ferocious introspection. As such, I would argue that Scarry and Anzieu can help us to understand Dickinson's treatment of pain, but not how it is integrated into her economy of ideas and identity. Dickinson consciously deploys pain, even if it ultimately breaks away from the place she had assigned it. It is a voluntary resignation of ego boundaries and autonomy in the hope that they will return in an improved state.

Pain is a refusal to take the world as an object and equally a refusal to allow one's body to be objectified. It virulently opposes the regulation and control of the body for the purpose of social utility and compliance.

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-

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76 Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies*, p. 18.
Dickinson asserts that self-control is made easier by allowing the idiosyncratic splinters of painful thought to divert the brain to fresh pastures of experience. Joan Burbick notes that the reduction of mental aberration to brain deficiency is premised upon conservative, Christian assumptions about the soul-body split: it is only the material brain that can be diseased, never the mind. Dickinson takes this conception of the brain and turns it into an organ characterized by regular, automated movement. The female brain, like the female, domestic body requires strict regulation. However, the poem claims that it is 'easier for You' to 'let a Splinter swerve'. Original thinking painfully skewers the brain with shocks of freedom. The poem compares the aberrations of the brain to the work of floods upon the hills that 'scooped a Turnpike for Themselves-/ And [have] trodden out the Mills'. Turnpikes are affiliated with the control of passage through land, invoking questions of ownership and control. Dickinson is insisting that the floods of the brain are not lawless, merely that they create their own 'turnpike' laws and possess their own landscape. The 'even truth' of a regular, controlled brain is superceded by the free currents of thought which leave new, superior grooves in their wake. Ultimately, this is a poem about the complementary nature of freedom and law. Dickinson correlates the splinters of

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freedom with an overturning of an industrialized, regulated landscape. Images of turnpikes and mills compare the regulated brain with the locomotives then making inroads into the New England landscape. Dickinson compares any attempt to regulate the brain with soul-destroying industrial labour. Splinters of freedom initially seem grotesquely unappealing, but the poem clearly weighs heavily in their favour.

In order to understand how Dickinson transforms pain into a positive attribute, it seems important to draw a distinction between her conception of pain and what I will call ‘suffering’. The latter may be described as a distinctively negative, subjective reception of pain that registers its impact upon the feeling subject. Pain considered in abstract from suffering injects a unique, alien, phenomenological quality that may fascinate consciousness for its ability to resist coherent formulation in thought or language. Dickinson’s positive treatment of pain stems from this alterity that it injects into experience. Pain’s somatic potency challenges the belief that identity must be founded upon constancy, as poem F#760A/ J#650 demonstrates:

Pain- has an Element of Blank-
It cannot recollect
When it begun- or if there were
A time when it was not-

It has no Future- but itself-
It’s Infinite contain
Its Past- enlightened to perceive
New Periods- of Pain.

78 For an excellent account of Dickinson’s response to the railroad, see Domhnall Mitchell, Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception, pp. 15-44.
This is clearly an objective study of pain rather than an elucidation of its experience. Pain has become hermetic and self-generating. It rids the self of memory and desire, commanding the attention through its infinite unfolding. The poem erases the line between the reporting speaker and the experience— it is pain that remembers, not an experiencing subject. The self has become an 'element of blank' because pain cannot assess its own origins or limitations. It is self-generating and self-perpetuating, erasing its point of origin and any possibility of an experience beyond itself. It is both 'blank' (nothing) and 'infinite' (everything), it is described in temporal terms and yet cannot be strictly placed within space and time. The poetic consciousness vanishes as a site for sympathetic identification, but it continues in the motion of pain as it floods new tracks and motions across the infinite. The specifics of experience and identity are left behind, but there is clearly freedom in this annihilation. Although neither of these last two poems employ manifestly religious language, the insistence that pain can cause a transcendent break with immanent identity is a familiar mark of work steeped in Calvinism.

As a way of concluding this chapter I wish to turn to a poem F#1088A/J#1046, which is perhaps the most comprehensive, unifying treatment of the issue surrounding the body examined in my account. Here Dickinson brings together the tensions between identity formed through the medium of sympathetic reciprocation and the solipsistic satisfaction that can be drawn
from the abyss of bodily experience.

I’ve dropped my Brain- My Soul is numb-
The Veins that used to run
Stop palsied- ’tis Paralysis
Done perfecter in stone-

Vitality is Carved and cool-
My nerve in marble lies-
A Breathing Woman
Yesterday- endowed with Paradise.

Not dumb- I had a sort that moved-
A sense that smote and stirred-
Instincts for Dance- a caper part-
An aptitude for Bird-

Who wrought Carrara in me
And chiselled all my tune
Were it a witchcraft- were it Death-
I’ve still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere- Motion- Breath-
Through Centuries beyond,
And every limit a Decade-
I’ll shiver, satisfied.

The poetic self is simultaneously trapped and liberated by a ‘living death’ that transforms her body into a work of art. The dead body chiseled from marble conflates the private moment of death with its sympathetic absorption as a work of art into the public act of mourning. This carving ‘chiselled all my tune’. external forces sculpting body, mind and art simultaneously. Daneen Wardrop suggests that the poem examines the predicament of women who ‘killed into art’, who are objects but not creators of beauty.79 Middle-class women and male artists mutually conspired to produce a vision of the female body done

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'perfecter in stone-. The immaculate marble stillness of the statue provides a false sense of beautiful ennoblement that masks for the painful rigor mortis underneath the oppressive, sentimental myth. Each description of physical pain or disfunction is matched by a more aesthetic, metaphoric counterpart. The surreal body comedy of the speaker dropping her brain like a careless housewife drops a pudding is immediately transformed into the more abstract, serene and figurative 'My Soul is numb-. The congealing blood and still nerves are submerged under the smooth white marble. The physical dimensions of life are being entirely written out of the poem. The suggestion that being 'A Breathing Woman/ Yesterday- endowed with Paradise' is a desirable condition seems implausible when paradise is equivalent to a marble, aesthetic paralysis. If her oppressive sculptor seeks to beautify her into stillness then Dickinson's speaker seeks a kind of expressive movement, a 'sense that smote and stirred'. Frozen into a statue, her infinite interior opens up to provide her with a space where her 'Instincts for Dance-' might be released.

As with poem F#381A/ J#326, the trope of irregular, spasmodic dance provides the speaker with her glimpse of freedom, 'Aptitude for Bird-' clearly recalling the image of a bird with 'One Claw opon the Air-. These moments of bodily movement are both counter-discursive and solipsistic, dissolving consciousness in sensation. The influx of bodily sensation may be compared to the volcano poems I discussed in chapter three. They are potent yet highly ambiguous, disclosing themselves as nothing more than 'a sort that moved-."
These pulsations provide an internally generated counter-chiseling identified with illicit witchcraft or death. Violent bodily eruptions give her 'still a chance to strain' against the marble ideologies governing her body. Dickinson selects the word 'caper' since refers both to a particularly frisky dance and a fantastic, adventurous proceeding. This wildness allows motion and breath to expand infinitely across space and time in the final stanza. Across infinite time, the self produces a 'shiver' of satisfaction that recovers its infinite interior depth. Although shivering is seemingly inadequate for a body that sought to caper, I would argue that this shudder of movement provides a final retort to embodying ideologies. The beautiful corpse refuses to remain still, but displays its own jerky, spasmodic dance that shatters sentimental conventions and provides a limitless dance floor of space in which such autoerotic escapades may proceed unhindered. With this poem, the grotesque comes full circle from the spiritual unrest represented in Dickinson's gothic. Each certainty is a marble chain waiting to be shattered by abundant, grotesque uncertainty.
5.1. 'Reorganizes Estimate': The Consequences of This Study for Dickinson Criticism.

In the coda to this thesis, I want to demonstrate how my argument invites a new approach to studying Dickinson's work. I have suggested that Dickinson's grotesque is occasioned by an urgent fracture in the field of comprehension, so that either celebrating or recoiling from uncertainty forcibly occupies her speaker's attention. However, over and above the specific arguments of each chapter, this thesis has argued that reading Dickinson as a poet of the grotesque shifts our attention away from organising her work into singular, coherent patterns, done most often through themes, but also through manuscript arrangement or a critic's own critical persuasion. Reading Dickinson through the prism of the grotesque shifts our attention away from coherence and singularity, inviting us instead to consider the variable synchronic relations between perspectives, themes, images, and discursive concerns brought together at any given time within the same poem, or a group of interrelated poems. Whether it is the simultaneous love and hatred of God, the fear and desire for death, the contrast between transcendental egotism and Calvinist humility or between secular and divine meaning, Dickinson's verse is engaged in a continual process of reorganising its own estimate. It revises meanings, challenges them, undermines them but also fixes and stabilizes them when appropriate. The task of this thesis has been to demonstrate how and
under what circumstances the friction between competing perspectives is encouraged or resolved.

Since Dickinson’s interests in religion, gothicism, sexuality, creativity, nature, the body, etc. can be juxtaposed in any number of different combinations our task as critics must be to understand how and in what context these elements may transform, or be transformed by, neighbouring elements. As I have demonstrated across the course of three chapters, the poetic self’s terror at gothic Calvinism is entirely transformed when juxtaposed with secular, embodying discourses. What occurs in the space between these two perspectives is that the existential terror of uncertainty is transformed by this new context into a powerful celebration of interior mystery. Works on Dickinson that begin by sectioning off a particular theme or subject often gloss over contradictions or inconsistencies within her canon or take them for granted as a logical response to complex issues. If, however, we start from the grotesque presumption that multiple perspectives or interests may be converging in a single poem then our attention will shift from the discrete, hermetic analysis of themes and poems to the relationship between different themes and poems at any given instance.

The interplay between conflicting beliefs is perhaps the most important aspect of this study, but studying Dickinson’s grotesque is more than accounting for the friction between her contextual parts. If the grotesque is
characterized by ambivalent responses to areas of uncertainty, then chapters one and three remind us that the grotesque is also produced through the reader's engagement with the text and through the poetic self's reflection upon its own creative faculties. The first chapter argued that the relationship between Dickinson's text and her current critical audience generates a friction between competing and often incommensurable hermeneutic paradigms. I have indicated that these paradigms diverge most sharply in their description of the relationship between uncertainty and identity, with one side designating uncertainty as beneficent and desirable, the other as a fearful void to be plugged at all costs. Since Dickinson's verse encompasses both these perspectives, occasionally giving a slight preference to one. I have argued that the Dickinson critic must become critically apperceptive. Our analysis of Dickinson's grotesque must begin with an honest acknowledgement of our own theoretical inclination towards fear of or desire for uncertainty. If I have slightly favoured the conservative, fearful aspect of Dickinson's grotesque then it has been to provide a necessary check to a sizeable body of criticism that strongly favours the subversive and assertive dimension. It is not a question of bolstering our commitment to one side of this divide, but recognising the divide itself as a legitimate aspect of interpreting Dickinson's grotesque aesthetic.

If I have portrayed the grotesque as a form of paradigmatic clash in chapters two and four, then chapter three argues that Dickinson's poetic consciousness is not simply produced by overarching discursive formations.
The poetic self emerges as a variable principle between juxtaposed paradigms as it interprets, processes and digests the impact of new, uncertain experience upon the contours of its identity. It fears and desires the cognitive changes of a force that (to quote F#830A/ J#906) 'Reorganises Estimate.' Yet it is not always merely reactive. Following Klein and Bion, I suggested that a grotesque consciousness may react against extremes of certainty and uncertainty. It eludes rigid identifications, translates threatening uncertainty into liberating achievement. However, this process is so fraught with ambivalence that no unqualified victory can ever be claimed. Hence the 'I' found within a huge majority of Dickinson’s poems does not strictly represent either a powerful centralized poetic ego or a victimized mouth piece for terrifying historical contingencies. Dickinson’s ‘I’ designates self-as-process, oscillating between regressive and progressive reactions to the unprecedented, spontaneous challenges to the circumference of identity. Reading Dickinson’s grotesque through these unpredictable spasms in her poetic self involves careful attention to the specificity of each poem, evaluating the strain of ambivalence expressed towards intrusive experience.

As such I have argued that Dickinson’s grotesque involves the simultaneous charting of uncertainty on three distinct levels. The first involves the empirical location of contradictions, overlaps and blind spots within the cultural contexts of Dickinson’s writing, be they literary, religious, economic, scientific, cultural etc. The second requires that we follow the idiosyncratic and
unpredictable responses of Dickinson’s poetic consciousness as it manoeuvres between these contradictions, sometimes inspired and sometimes crushed by its preoccupations with the unknown. The third level involves an awareness of how our own critical position may shape our response to her poems. If these very broad principles are accepted then the thematic and structural division of this thesis can be seen as representative rather than conclusive or exhaustive.

There are as many different Dickinsons as there are critics, ranging from troubled Calvinists¹ to sophisticated transcendentalists,² proto-modernists³ to genteel, mid-Victorian conformists,⁴ father-fixated sadomasochists⁵ to feminist pioneers.⁶ Each of these areas could have provided a thematic focus for the grotesque, but the conclusions would have remained largely the same since fraught contradictions and interpretative vagaries will be encountered in Dickinson’s treatment of these areas. Since the grotesque proliferates in the dynamic relationship between things (between discursive paradigms, in the introspective divide of the poetic self, between reader and text), this thesis

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offers a useful, supplementary perspective to this other secondary material. I would hesitate to describe every poem within Dickinson's canon as grotesque since although many poems are ambiguous, the highly-charged response from the poetic self/reader is not always evident. However, the majority of poems support my contention that the acceptance of idiosyncrasy and the ongoing negotiation of uncertainty must become the definitive critical approach to Dickinson's work. As critics, we must use interpretation, collation and contextualisation to secure meaning where necessary, and we must review the basis for our judgements at those points where the circumference of our understanding is being challenged. We must consolidate and relinquish our structuring interpretations as our attention spans between poems, encountering new or divergent factors. The reorganisation of our critical estimate is the largest proof that her work is ultimately grotesque.
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