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Dickinson and Pivoting Thought

Eileen John

Abstract:

Emily Dickinson's poems hold a constructive response to an epistemic and practical predicament. We are aware of an overwhelmingly expansive reality, and we know that our knowledge is limited. Must we be disoriented or stymied as knowers and agents? I will highlight Dickinson's attention to devices that link different planes and materials, such as hinges and seams. These devices have a bearing on our predicament, as they can be understood to orient us in relation to a multiply demanding reality. Competence with using or maintaining a seam or hinge shows some understanding of what 'pulls' us toward different domains, of what is relevant to multiple fields of knowledge and action, without simultaneous grasp of the whole.

Keywords: Hinge, seam, ignorance, epistemic limitation, competence, play, Jed Deppman, Renée Tursi

... I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps. Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous.¹

Dickinson's poems often present a kind of epistemic predicament: we have limited knowledge but also expansive awareness. Within the scope of our limited experience and understanding there is nonetheless a potentially overwhelming complexity. Dwelling on either

aspect—the extent and nature of our ignorance or the prospects for comprehending what we are aware of—has the power to undermine or stymie thought. It is also a problem for action more broadly speaking. If I have an ongoing combination of ignorance and ill-managed content concerning reality, how can I understand my constraints and options, form sensible goals, or act responsibly? Can I know what I am doing? Though it does not seem promising to argue that Dickinson has a single way of responding to this predicament, I want to articulate one kind of response that I find in her work. It is a relatively constructive response, in the sense that it does not doom us to being overwhelmed and stymied. It is also, I hope, interesting in the way that it handles the ignorance and complexity. The images and metaphors that I will highlight are Dickinson’s hinges and seams. When her poems incorporate these mechanisms for linking materials and planes, they suggest a structure for being oriented in multiple dimensions without full grasp of or immersion in all of them at once. The transition evoked in the letter quoted above, the poet singing off chancel steps, is an example of the kind of multiple orientation that she explores. The poet can have a foot in song and in the most brute bodily debris of life. Being positioned in that way does not mean that there is a seamless mutual intelligibility between the two domains, but, if the seam or hinge structure works, the domains are linkable in a way that generates “tension” of some kind. They can be experienced as “pulling” in importantly different directions, and this is a state that can encompass multiplicity and failures of knowledge, without succumbing to paralysis or oblivion.

This line of thought incorporates ideas that are at work in other philosophically focused accounts of Dickinson. Deppman notes Dickinson’s “wide variety of figures for mental failure, non-knowledge, and inexplicability,” while also referring to her “knowledgeable flexibility” (Deppman 2008, 108). Tursi links Dickinson to a pragmatist commitment to “retaining systems

of metaphysical and social interconnectivity within epistemological uncertainty” (Tursi 2013, 152). Deppman and Tursi explore the potential for reading Dickinson in pragmatic terms, Deppman drawing on Richard Rorty’s pragmatic ironism and Tursi on William James’s pragmatism. My line of thought benefits from their readings while also skirting some of the commitments they entail. Very roughly, I take the hinges and seams to be more earnest than ironic as achievements, and the pragmatist orientation around human needs and goals does not seem fully in sync with Dickinson’s openness to leveling the human and non-human perspectives. As will be apparent, however, I am circling around many of the same delicate issues, concerning how Dickinson conceives of human thought and activity developing in a non-arbitrary, meaningful way, without assuming a unifying and confidently ordered structure of knowledge.

Can we know what to think?

Here are two poems that highlight a grand failure – of knowledge, thought, or expression – but also show a resistance to being diminished by it.

I found the words to every thought

I ever had – but One –

And that – defies me –

As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races – nurtured in the Dark –

How would your own – begin?

Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal –
Or Noon – in Mazarin?

(F436/J581)

The Missing All – prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World’s
Departure from a Hinge –
Or Sun’s extinction, be observed –
‘Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.

(F995/J985)

There is something big, comprehensively big, that cannot be expressed or known: the All is missed, the “One” thought cannot be formulated. But words are found for *every other* thought, and ‘Me’ manages not to miss the huge pool of “minor Things” that fall short of the World’s Departure or Sun’s extinction. These poems both end with images or acknowledgements of absorption in forms of comparatively minor activity. The suddenly specific, exotic words for red and blue — “Cochineal” and “Mazarin” deriving from the names for far-flung insects — evoke vibrant, precise experience and effort at expression.² In ‘The Missing All’, the claim of the minor things seems secure, even if there is a failure of explanatory comprehension at the highest level. The poem ends with the image of a person bent over her work, not lifting her “Forehead.” Is it

curiosity that keeps her at her work, or is curiosity the force that fails to get her to leave it aside to turn to larger things? The latter suggestion, that speculative curiosity is too weak and that something stronger binds her to her work, seems to make most sense of the syntax in those final lines. But it also seems clear that there is curiosity for “All” *somehow* motivating this thinker and worker. She is not uninterested in the big, comprehensive explanation, but the lack of it is not debilitating.

This is one of the poems that has a “Hinge” explicitly present, in “a World’s / Departure from a Hinge —” in the middle of the poem. It is an odd, image-built idea. If the world departs on a hinge, then it is not really gone, it has just swung out of view or, less visually, it is at a different angle or orientation from where we started with it. This would still be wildly disturbing, but it would not be an annihilation of the world. Maybe the “Hinge,” the mechanism that somehow allows for different angles, would remain accessible. It is that kind of awareness that I think Dickinson is interested in, with an insistence on beginning or continuing work while failing to reach the big thought. We might think that the justification of our commitments and grasp of how to go on living needs to rest on, say, comprehension of the Good or God or an all-encompassing ideal, but these poems seem to testify to the viability of ongoing smaller projects. There are other things worth not missing, and we are capable of not missing them, within the absorbing work and varied colors and categories at hand.

Let me briefly note two other readings that highlight similar features in Dickinson but consider them part of a more overwhelmed, stymied, or passive stance. Anne-Lise François includes Dickinson in a lineage of authors and texts that “locate fulfilment not in narrative fruition but in grace, understood both as a simplicity or slightness of formal means and as a freedom from work” (François 2008, xvi). These figures offer an ethos of “minimal

contentment” or “minimal realization,” countering rationalist and aesthetic ideals with “something more modest, wearier, and less redemptive” (xix, xix).³ François’s emphasis on Dickinson as failing to depict progressive, educative, redemptive narratives seems on target, but the model of narrative progress and fulfilment does not exhaust the possibilities for identifying immodest, even “mighty” activity (in the vocabulary of the letter above) as embodied or celebrated in the poetry. Especially through consideration of some poems focusing on work, I will suggest that Dickinson is able to find in the routines and competence involved in working life some immodest achievements and forms of knowledge.

Ted Hughes, introducing a selection of Dickinson’s poems, also emphasizes the powerful negatives—the stymied, stricken, withdrawn attitudes—that can be found in Dickinson. He takes her to have had a deep and terrible vision that was “like a contradiction to everything that the life in her trusted and loved, it was almost a final revelation of horrible Nothingness.”

Remaining true to this, she could make up her mind about nothing. It stared through her life. It stared out of every smallest thing and gave the world its awesome, pathetic importance. Registering everywhere and in everything the icy chill of its nearness, she did not know what to think. ... In its light, all other concerns floated free of finality, became merely relative, susceptible to her artistic play (Hughes 2002, 358-9).

Here Hughes reads Dickinson almost as an early postmodernist, uncommitted and floating in the face of what he calls her “Holy Trinity:” “whatever it was that lay beyond her frightening vision, and the crowded, beloved Creation around her, and Death” (Hughes 2002, 359). Hughes further offers this vivid account of her poetic practice:

There is the slow, small metre, a device for bringing each syllable into close-up, as under a microscope; there is the deep, steady focus, where all the words lie in precise and yet

somehow free relationships, so that the individual syllables are on the point of slipping into utterly new meanings, all pressing to be uncovered; there is the mosaic, pictogram concentration of ideas; there is the tranced suspense and deliberation in her punctuation of dashes ... the freakish blood-and-nerve paradoxical vitality of her latinisms; the musical games—of opposites, parallels, mirrors, chinese puzzles, harmonizing and counterpointing whole worlds of reference; and everywhere there is the teeming carnival of world-life. (Hughes 2002, 359)

I take this account to summon up a different sense of her poetry, not the mood of an “icy chill” but something intricately absorbing and lively. Perhaps such poetry, in which “words lie in precise and yet somehow free relationships,” or “whole worlds of reference” are brought into harmony and counterpoint, could indeed manifest not knowing what to think, with the forms of mobility signaling an inability to fix on thoughts and on what is worth thinking: complexity and uncertainty win out. The more positive spin I will put on the poetic data is not offered in a conclusive spirit – there is too much going on in this poetry. But I do want to explore a model of thinking that I find in numerous Dickinson poems, with the guiding ideas that there are radically different kinds of thought, that a human being is not in a position to work with only one of them, and can move between them with some competence. Words themselves, relating to each other precisely but – somehow – freely, can mark hinging or pivoting points that characterize this kind of thought. Words can show where we can pivot between different meaning-bearing dimensions and contexts.⁴

Death and housework

One shift of context that Dickinson returns to many times is the shift between life and death. Her poems try out numerous perspectives on that transition and the resulting divide between the living and the dead.⁵ What being dead is, and what it is like, if anything, to be dead, is one of the central limitations of our knowledge. We know that we die, but being dead seems to be a state we have no informative access to. Death, then, seems like a blank wall that we run into; there is not a way to “pivot” in thought so as to be knowledgeably or competently oriented toward it. I want to consider one of Dickinson’s poems that deals with the dead-living divide and that might seem to occupy or accept this stymied position. “How many times these low feet staggered” addresses the occasion of a housewife’s death. The woman’s life is evoked through reference to her housework and the unacknowledged effort she gave to it.

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 – Iain!

(F238/J187)

In line with François's approach to Dickinson, this is not a poem that offers or hints at a life story of redemption or progress. To the extent that her life is portrayed, we learn that she exhausted herself keeping flies and dust at bay, and that her efforts are quickly, effortlessly undone after her death. The first stanza gives a disturbing image of death soldering her mouth shut and imprisoning her, as if within a suit of armor. It is true that the poem ends with a surprisingly cheerful image of her lying in daisies, but that image is part of the strange rupture of her death – her body buried, destined to merge with the soil and plant life – rather than an intelligible outcome of her own life's activity. The question of whether her labor was worthwhile, whether she had good reason to spend her life mending, washing, and the rest, seems not to be posed, perhaps set aside as not likely to get an encouraging answer.

Granted that the poem records the dissolution of a wearying life, is the force of the poem itself resigned, weary, modest? Let me make two claims, one broad and one slightly fussy, about what Dickinson does in this poem. The three stanzas are each quite different in mood and focus: the first is dramatic and dreadful in its imagery of the staggering feet and the now sealed-off life; the second will not leave the body alone and dwells intrusively on the lost feel of skin, hair, and hands; and the third breezily notes the encroachment of oblivious flies, sunshine, daisies, and non-living (but swinging!) cobwebs. The sum of these parts is not knowledge of "what it is like to be dead," answering our fearful questions, but it is an unflinching survey of aspects of death that we do know about. The poem shifts through different "worlds of reference" relevant to acknowledging death, from the finally inaccessible and perhaps never expressed experience of

the dead person, to the loss of intimacy and interaction for “you” still living, to the many beings and processes for which the death is not a loss and makes no mark as an event. The impact of the life is not grasped or weighed in the same way, or in a steadily evolving way, across the stanzas. That could signal the onset of chaos, but I think it is the ambition of the poem that we hold these aspects of death side by side and find that we have “hinges” that let us swing, grudgingly, between these aspects. The reason the final stanza is powerful is that it stretches the putative life story as far as possible away from the labor and suffering of a person, but the path taken by the body indeed stretches between those poles. The drama, gruesomeness, and insouciance appropriate to the various aspects have those qualities because of the others – the gruesome sensation of a living body become mere thing and the oblivious insouciance of the daisies have those meanings only as counterweights to the passionate experience of the life. That’s the broad point: adequacy to death involves different vanishing points, as it were, that do not follow out the meaning of death in shared terms, but in acknowledging one we do not lose all contact with the others.

To illustrate the detailed workings of the poem, and the hinge-like or pivoting functions of specific words, consider these lines in the second stanza: “Lift – if you care – the listless hair – / Handle the adamantine fingers”. The phrase ‘if you care’ is able to summon up two other phrases via ‘care’: ‘if you can’ and ‘if you dare.’⁶ It is an accident of English that it can do that, but such accidents are poetic resources. ‘Care’ itself suggests both what one wishes to do and the concern felt for another, and there is a hint of reproach here – perhaps you already do not wish to touch this hair, and perhaps your concern has already evaporated. But the specific caring for the living person that gripped “you” has to dissipate. In letting what one can and dares to do also be heard as alternatives, ‘care’ efficiently evokes the radical transition the witness has to undergo.

Of course it remains physically possible to lift hair, but it cannot be a comforting gesture.

Touching the dead body begins to become a taboo intimacy, and it may take boldness simply to attend to the reality of the body. In the care-can-dare pivot the changes in what can be done and cared about, what needs to fall away, what can be experienced and known—are identified at once. I think that ‘Handle’ in the next line has a similar effect, in the way it evokes both holding a hand and dealing with a handle, an object unable to return one’s grasp. The mourner loses the malleable warmth and responsiveness of the woman’s hand, and the interactive pressure of her ordinary presence.

A question that lingers concerns the work involved in this housewifely life. As suggested above, the poem does not seem to celebrate the inherent value of the work that gave the life, for purposes of the poem, its identity. The poem opens up vantage-points – of eternity, of the steady advances of dust and decomposition – from which the unstinting labor of keeping a household clean and orderly seems to lose point. If the staggering “low feet” refer to the poet’s feet as well, there is a parallel question for steady poetic output, which, like fending off household neglect, is not demanded by any cosmic imperative.⁷ This is a juncture at which the larger failures of knowledge – is it really over when I die? does what I do fit into a grand design? is there a God or Good that gives point to all of this? – can cast a pall over the miscellany of choices and activities that fill up a life. One way to adapt to this is to let the human terms – what we need, find satisfying, can conceive of – be the terms that matter. Tursi, in developing a pragmatist approach to Dickinson, gives a nicely balanced sense of what this comes to as a solution or adaptation to our uncertainty. On the one hand, in various poems (as here Tursi comments on “How many schemes may die”), Dickinson gives “the underbelly of pragmatic contingency ... an unflinching look:”

Nothing here could be predicted. But it is human attention to this or that detail and the resulting decision that shapes all. This human power carries no triumph or joy or quiet satisfaction, not even when it saves a life. Also absent is the optimism that could accompany the sense that anything is possible. Rather, while it is difficult to say whether the speaker views this universe as indifferent, the schemes themselves have a leveled equality ... The moral quality here is up to us. If there is free will, then we are responsible; however blindly, we must proceed (Tursi 2013, 156-7).

On the other hand, if blindly and without triumph, the work of human attention and decision is central to reality: “we come to know or understand what we know through a series of choices about this moment or that one. There is a chance that a transcendental whole does indeed exist, but if so, it will do so only because we experience it as a result of a need for it” (Tursi 2013, 164).⁸ We can “delimit the chaos into some kind of personally or socially agreed upon line in the sand as a first step to a program of action – a conquest by way of the mind’s own authority” (Tursi 2013, 162). The mood may not be that of conquest, but the framework implicitly affirmed puts human interests and actions, and the mind’s work on their behalf, at the center.

When focusing on the work of a poet, there is no way to avoid the prioritization of human delimiting, composing, and choosing activity. A poem cannot help but embody and affirm the reality of such activity. In my claim about Dickinson’s pivoting moves, I too am highlighting the ambitious conceptualizing and epistemic structures that the poems offer. But I resist putting Dickinson in a fully pragmatic frame because her poems, even if they cannot avoid the “brand” of their human hand, do so much to situate human concerns in a larger world found or presumed

to run on other diverse principles.⁹ The flies and cobwebs are given prominent places because they “do their own thing” or, in the case of cobwebs, are their own thing despite not being agents at all. The housewife and the poet, and the more abstract person bent over her work in “The Missing All,” are absorbed in their activities without being able to center them or single them out as *the* determiners of meaning and value. Here we can see the appeal of a Rortyan pragmatic ironism, in which one abstains from centering, or from being non-ironically committed to, the conceptual, evaluative terms one happens to use.¹⁰ Though Deppman does not simply align Dickinson with this type of pragmatism, and in his title notion, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*, foregrounds the ongoing positive drive to think in her poetry, he also emphasizes a negative achievement of abstention or hesitation:

Her ‘hesitation’ does not derive from any arbitrary preference for indeterminacy or obstinate refusal to answer questions; it is a way for her to avoid making the ontological mistakes of strong metaphysics, for example, looking for accurate descriptions and ‘presence’ in a structure of being that denies them (Deppman 2008, 203).

These pragmatist alternatives help to isolate the difficulty of making room for my claims about Dickinson. I want to say that at least some of her poems find a way to maneuver between human-interests-centered commitment and ironist non-commitment, within the acknowledgement of larger ignorance and uncertainty. My way of locating this room to maneuver is by saying Dickinson affirms some important knowledge of relationships, in which different planes or frameworks “meet” and have some mutual relevance, although we cannot assimilate one to another, unify them, or fully grasp why it is possible for them to meet. In my concluding section,

I will discuss two further poems that explore some of these “hinges” or “seams,” aiming to show that Dickinson does not use them to embrace either swinging, de-stabilizing movement or the governing power of human connections.

Playing, sewing, and knowing what you are doing

Some of the things we can fail to know concern ourselves. What are the roots and consequences of my actions? Do I know what is worth doing? To what extent is my activity *mine*, in the sense of being under my control and responsive to my discernment of value? As we have seen within the scope of the staggering “low feet” poem, Dickinson can set such questions aside, perhaps suggesting that they can be hidden (and not well-answered) within the suffering, exhaustion, and social constraints of a working life. In philosophical discourse, these questions take center stage in arguments about agency, free will and determinism, and the epistemology of value. The two poems I will discuss in this section are interesting, in part, because they engage with these questions, but not by considering, for instance, a person questioning how to live or facing a specific morally meaningful choice. Dickinson explores conceptions, and the practical undergoing, of important divides and transitions, such as the movement from not having evaluative discernment to having it. In pivoting between different conceptions that matter to those transitions, we do not end up with full comprehension – e.g., knowing the full nature and value of an action – but we can grasp how different contexts, processes, and kinds of meaning intersect in an action. In one poem the context is quite abstract and metaphorical, and in the other extremely concrete but also metaphorical; the poems come at these questions oddly, from a philosopher’s perspective. Nonetheless, I think they get some traction on the issues. Let me grant

that it is very difficult to say how a short metaphorical poem gets traction on a philosophical problem; I hope some of the examples from Dickinson are suggestive. My somewhat simple thought is that, to the extent that readers pivot imaginatively, conceptually, and inferentially in response to the poems' language and structure, they get an experience of some complex philosophical relationships. That kind of experience does not settle the adequacy and justificatory questions that philosophers pose, but the experientially traced relations are not irrelevant to adequacy and justification either. Part of the appropriate testing of a philosophical view is whether it has some perspicuous bearing on what we do and do not understand, and Dickinson's poems strike me as often providing images and ideas that illuminate what we need to be perspicuous about.

In "We play at Paste," learning to discern value, which is also a process of transforming oneself, is the central topic. Like "I found the words to every thought," it is a brief, two-stanza poem in which the second stanza seems to talk back to or re-direct the confidence of the first.

We play at Paste –

Till qualified, for Pearl –

Then, drop the Paste –

And deem ourself a fool –

The Shapes – though – were similar –

And our new Hands

Learned *Gem*-Tactics –

Practicing *Sands* –

(F282/J320)

The first stanza sketches a confident evaluative hierarchy: paste jewels, and our initial pleasure in these imitations, are ultimately to be disdained in relation to pearls and less foolish selves. Playing is lesser than being qualified. The second stanza seems to re-cast the naïve play by linking it to the transformational process of forming a pearl—the learning hands and practicing sands are aligned. The hands learned, wonderfully, “*Gem-Tactics*.” Consider that as a pivoting word. The mind and tongue are likely to trip over it, perhaps groping toward ‘gymnastics,’ ‘fantastic,’ or ‘syntactic’ as possibly informative cousins. But it is not obvious what to do with it. Taking the pearl to be an exemplar, it seems gems would be the result of slow, non-tactical activity, initiated unwittingly. Play, if not quite so un-thinking, is also not supposed to be tactical or instrumental. Aren’t these precisely contexts without tactics? And of course, this is not a word in the first place! Maybe ‘*Gem-Tactics*’ is not a functioning hinge word at all, but a pleasurably colliding-rebounding impact site. Does the second stanza offer anything that really works to transform the confident dismissal of the first?

The sense and importance of *Gem-Tactics* arise in part from the word being a new and willful construction. It registers as at least poetically tactical, something the poem asks us to learn to say before we could know how to think and use it. We will presumably try to join the things that collide in it: the gem as an emblem of perfection and value—think of the Biblical “pearl of great worth” (Matthew 13:45-6)—tied to a word that speaks of human planning and choice of means to reach ends. The sound of ‘Tactics’ can also summon up what hands are good at, tactility or touch. The first stanza puts the question of our value into the picture; we ourselves are some of the gems in formation, learning to “deem” ourselves properly. A pivoting move that

I think “Gem-Tactics” enables is between two states or processes we know are linked: long stretches of unwitting experience, on the one hand, and being “qualified,” having taste or competence in judgment of value, on the other. Does the poem offer an explanation of the transition from experience to judgment and taste?¹¹ It at least offers a complex set of directions for thinking about it, some images and contexts relevant to an explanation, though the pearl-formation metaphor resists construal of this as a process we can take charge of and fully understand. If “Practicing Sands” is the model, that steers us to a cumulative, grinding, polishing process, with a long timeframe in which things go through very gradual mutual adjustments. While that sounds like sheer cause-and-effect, with no role for tactical action, the notions of practice and play, and use of hands, bring in more than unwitting causal impact. There is pleasure-seeking in play, which can initiate preferences, and practicing involves awareness of repetition and change and an emerging ability to control change. Hands again are interesting in this poem, as they are excellent causal impression-takers, but also our most adept manipulators and makers of shapes. With these assorted resources, the second stanza, though less punchy and less resolved, pushes back against the first stanza’s clear, even abrupt abandonment of play. It seems that play, whether imitative, foolish, or idly arranging, lets a slow transformation occur, a kind of learning that is not knowledge- or qualification-led, and that we cannot properly notice as it happens. What is in fact a tremendous transition, from impacts with shapes (such as word-shaped things), to discerning, responsive shaping and appreciation, is made with many small, often not acknowledgeable interactions.¹² The “Gem-Tactics” pivot does not mark a successful explanation, or intelligible smoothing out, of the transition, but it makes clearer what we link in making such transitions, offering some constructive terms and models for thinking about the relevant states and processes.

My last poem takes on the voice of a seamstress, someone who presents herself as a competent, discerning agent. The seam rather than the hinge is a structuring image, which, though similarly an image of flexible joining of independent things, has some different associations as well. The detailed stitching that makes a seam is a paradigm of “close work,” with thread rather than metal as the joining medium, and it is associated with (if not in reality restricted to) women’s labor. What counts as a good seam is also distinctive. The seam faces two ways, and the outer face of it should ideally be hard to see, while the hidden inner face shows the seam clearly. Another quality of seams that I think is interesting with respect to the notion of pivoting thought is that, in the workings of thread and fabric, the stitches need to have the right tension. The elements of the seam have to pull on each other properly (not too much, not too little, not unevenly) for the seam to be strong and enduring. ‘Seam’ itself is a great pivoting word, with its philosophically provocative homophone ‘seem.’ The relation between real and seeming experience is broached at the end of the poem, as the speaker seems to be both dreaming and observing (and critiquing) her merely dreaming sewing. Perhaps the final stanza refuses to let the dream/reality alternatives be a crushing skeptical problem, since the dream scenario seems to be subordinated to the demands of sewing, whether dreaming or awake.¹³ I will in any case focus on ‘so,’ the poem’s other great pivoting word.

Don’t put up my Thread and Needle –

I’ll begin to Sew

When the Birds begin to whistle –

Better Stitches – so –

These were bent – my sight got crooked –

When my mind – is plain

I'll do seams – a Queen's endeavor

Would not blush to own –

Hems – too fine for Lady's tracing

To the sightless Knot –

Tucks – of dainty interspersion –

Like a dotted Dot –

Leave my Needle in the furrow –

Where I put it down –

I can make the zigzag stitches

Straight – when I am strong –

Till then – dreaming I am sewing

Fetch the seam I missed –

Closer – so I – at my sleeping –

Still surmise I stitch –

(F681/J617)

The speaker is at the end of a long day, assuring either a silent critic or herself that her stitching will be better in the morning. From this weary, self-critical position, the speaker veers into speculative and exuberant claims, as she predicts or imagines her finest sewing achievements.¹⁴

The two uses of ‘so’ are visually like stitches: “—so—” in the first stanza and “—so I—” in the last. They also perfectly echo the verb *to sew*, providing an easy, sound-borne relation as well as the unexpected visual relation, linking ‘so’ to what the speaker is doing or imagining herself doing. But what is connected by linking ‘so’ and ‘sew’? As I will briefly illustrate, I take the poem to use sewing as a vehicle for examining different kinds of status we have in our own activities – forms of knowledge, control, and appreciation that bind us more or less intelligibly to what we do. ‘So’ turns out to be helpfully flexible in meaning and function for this purpose.

In the first stanza’s “Better Stitches – so –” the use of ‘so’ is colloquial and extremely economical. It means, to unpack it slightly, “just so” or “this is how you do it.” We might wonder why ‘so’ is able to mean that, but at any rate it is a usage that claims local competence with something shown, some know-how that is perhaps difficult to articulate or not worth articulating. But even this small claim to competence marks some ambitious connections: one has some control over given materials, and the “—so—” conveys confident evaluation of one’s own effectiveness. The material input is successfully linked to one’s purposive action. The modest effectiveness claimed here is not the same as producing something elegant, beautiful, or dizzyingly fine, as envisioned in the next two stanzas, but I think the relations between these types of achievement, and between the judgments of value they involve, is also one of the pivoting moves the poem makes. The stage of “just so” competence is one of the bases of those aesthetically evaluable achievements. You need to do the basically effective work to get powerful aesthetic effects. As with “We play at Paste,” there is a known relation between two

kinds of activity, a person's ordinary, practical competence and an artist's pleurably absorbing, even exhilarating work.¹⁵ They are recognizably distinct achievements, and call for different kinds of satisfaction, but they meet around some shared activity – say, stitching or word use, and the contrasting qualities of either one help illuminate what is distinctive about the other.

When we reach the final “ – so I – ”, there is an ‘I’ in the stitch. We already have the “just so” reading of ‘so’ and might then read this ‘so I’ in those terms, as a sort of claim to local self-competence: “this is how I am me” or “this is how I do it,” namely, whatever I do in being myself. But “so I” also sounds like we are in the middle of an explanation or justification. ‘So’ as a connective can convey something like “I am pausing to note that I am about to go on in a certain way, and to suggest that this can be explained and possibly justified.” It is a casual alternative to ‘therefore’ or ‘thus,’ and it claims at least minimal orientation – I know in some sense where I have been and where I am going – but it can also gloss over uncertainty as to the kind of intelligibility my continued activity has. It might seem that we would know very well what we are doing when sewing (or otherwise acting) and why, but the poem does not give the “I” that kind of clear, independent confidence. There is unintended “zigzagging,” her sight is crooked, and her mind is not plain. In construing this “—so I—” as a pivot word or phrase, I take it to signal, laconically, the very mixed status of a self in the midst of its activities. “I” have some know-how or competence in being me, but I also figure in intersecting processes and contexts that stretch beyond my competence.

This poem and the others discussed offer numerous examples of the kinds of process and context, and differing forms of intelligibility or meaning, that can intersect in a given self. “I” may be “stitched” into the tendencies of unthinkably many things: tiny causal impacts, God’s plans, the growth, responsive instincts, and the death of living things, the movements of the earth

and sun, the structure of time from individual moments to eternity, and the variously controlled and comprehended activities we ascribe to ourselves (such as perceiving, naming, dreaming, playing, practicing, working, knowing, neglecting, tiring, fulfilling a prescribed social role, experiencing beauty, making a mistake, assessing loss and value, and wondering what to think). It would be reassuring to know how to prioritize these things, and to know what structure of knowledge and hierarchy of goals was demanded or most adequate to this complexity. Dickinson does not offer that kind of reassurance. She is rather fascinated with the multiplicity and with what it is like to be implicated in it. My claim, glancingly supported here, is that Dickinson's poems nonetheless seek and offer structure that is appropriate to the kind of being we have. We can only partially grasp much of what influences us or is at work in us, even in our own capacities for learning and growth. But we can be aware of important joining points, the hinges and seams, e.g., where unwitting and skillful activity converge, or physical patterns support aesthetic delight, or bodies turn into things, or words get attached to colors. Her pivoting words are one way in which this kind of structure can show up in a poem. They mark points at which we can swing to or feel the pull of another relevant context or process. On this model, there will often not be a straightforward account of "what I am doing and why," for example, and that can sound like an admission of philosophical defeat and confusion. However, my further sense of Dickinson's achievement is that, in highlighting the pivoting moves, she affirms our complex possibility space and encourages her readers to acknowledge the relationships and constructive tension between different contexts and bearers of meaning.¹⁶

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¹ From Emily Dickinson 1864 letter to Louise and Fanny Norcross (L298).

² Addressing "races nurtured in the dark" is likely to strike us as a denigrating reference, but I am not sure what distinction Dickinson aims for (race, religion, geography?) or if she includes herself in the dark. The stanza at least seems to pose a genuine question, not assert superiority. Linda Freedman links these races to Plato's cave-dwellers who only get "second-hand" experience: "To have a thought is equivalent to knowing the sun; to hear about it is only comparable to seeing a rough and primitive drawing, or a flickering shadow thrown upon the cave's wall" (Freedman 2011, 5). I take the fact that the supposed primitive cave-dwellers have wonderful names for the colors of beetles and butterflies to be rather a challenge to Plato's priorities.

³ See readings of specific poems as, e.g., setting "aside illusions about the difference 'complete knowledge' can make", annulling "the possibility of a morally educative *peripeteia*," expressing "the uninflected passage from possession to destitution or ... from as yet unmet possibility to its simple disappearance," and marking "the growing downward of 'something passiver' out of hope's own passiveness" (François 2008, 173, 177, 179 – the last passage quoting Dickinson's "A Prison gets to be a friend").

⁴ Morag Harris explores the idea that individual words in Dickinson are vehicles of thought: "Both Coleridge and Dickinson discuss the issue of one 'word' or sign symbolizing/evoking multiple things and all their relationships" (Harris 2002, 22). Harris is also very interesting on "hinge" relations in Dickinson, "mapping the meeting-and-parting points of component elements," as "'feasible distinctions,' not 'hardened dichotomies'" (75). J. H. Prynne says thought, in Dickinson, "may be present by means of little or no argument ... with origins implicit in gaps and silences between often apparently simple words. ... the expression of enlarged reaction in the reader (even, a kind of sublimity) is provoked initially by sudden localised shifts of reference within the poem's structure, by heroic and sometimes giddy extension of perspective" (Prynne 2010, 606).

⁵ E.g., "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died," "Because I could not stop for Death," "I never hear that one is dead," "I've seen a Dying Eye," "If anybody's friend be dead."

⁶ Vendler 2010, 77.

⁷ See Miller 1983: “The staggering ‘low feet’ of weakness, read differently, become the staggering ‘low feet’ of poetic power” (135). More broadly, Miller argues that “Dickinson attempts to build up the possibilities of personal choice and control in her poems [...]. The poet attempts formally to create that fragile equilibrium in which two forces—a man and a woman, a personal weakness and a strength, the norm and the singular, or a word’s grammatical, lexical rules and its metaphorical meanings—attain a temporary reciprocity” (134).

⁸ See Tursi on “The Outer – from the Inner:” “for her, the ‘Inner’ is the true origin of all that transpires. It acts upon the outer, not the other way around. But not as a changer; the inner pragmatically creates the outer. The outer forces ... provide the raw sensory materials, but we compose the picture. The result is ‘precise’ for being the real thing of the seer – ‘the inner Brand’” (Tursi 2013, 163).

⁹ See Tursi on “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre”, for the “pragmatic speaker’s” role in unifying the scene (Tursi 2013, 172). I take the poem to be doing its best to mark the intersection of the squirrel, boy, wind, sun, God, and poet around the trees, without prioritizing the poet’s composing work.

¹⁰ See Rorty’s conception of the “liberal ironist” (Rorty 1989, especially Ch. 4).

¹¹ Hume 1965 affirms the role of practice and comparison in forming the true judge, but he asserts more than explains the route from practice to evaluative discernment.

¹² Miller 1983: “we see that creation is repetitive, ongoing, and that a symmetry evolves in the relation between the poet’s new form and her environment or what she is disrupting” (145).

¹³ Deppman’s readings of numerous poems are relevant and challenging here. He emphasizes Dickinson on the “contact or crisis point between paradigmatic discourses fitfully trying to cohere.” Of “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind,” he says, there are “two halves of a brain, or two thoughts, next to each other and needing to be sewn together” (Deppman 2008, 97, 99).

¹⁴ See Bennett 2002 for a strong critique of Dickinson’s sewing poems, contrasting them with socially engaged sewing poetry by her 19th century female peers. Dickinson wanted “to have her cake (use her poems to maintain her connections in the social world) and eat it (write transcendently; achieve sublimity and immortality) too” (232). However, “this double-sided poetics left traditional gender roles intact and Dickinson batting irresolutely between them” (218). Though without contesting Bennett’s specific argument, I am trying to put a more positive spin on some of the “batting between” that the poems offer.

¹⁵ I find the “sightless Knot” and “Tucks – of dainty interspersions – / Like a dotted Dot –” somehow exhilarating. They present the fineness of the sewn features as outstripping our perceptual abilities. The hems and tucks are humanly sewn, but the patterns and structures emerge from and disappear into features we cannot perceive.

¹⁶ Great thanks to Elisabeth Camp and to Antony Aumann, Christina Britzolakis, Richard Eldridge, Rick Antony Furtak, David Hills, Oren Izenberg, Tina Lupton, Emma Mason, Magdalena Ostas, and Karen Simecek.