A COMPANION TO

EMILY DICKINSON

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Malden, MA
Blackwell Publishing
2008

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Dickinson and the Exception

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In a letter from the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Emily Dickinson, almost seventeen, told her friend Abiah Root that lapses in conduct were noted there with a "*black mark*" against the offender's name. "As you can easily imagine, we do not like very well to get 'exceptions' as they are called scientifically here" (JL 18). Yet it has long been Dickinson's fate to be strongly marked as a person and as a poet in conflict with general rules – rules of comportment and sociability, of grammar and versification. Her biographical and critical reception history may, to a very great extent, be charted as a series of vacillations between assertions of her nonconformity and of the rules' inapplicability.

Against the exceptionalizing grain, however, growing numbers of her readers argue not just for the contingency but even for the familiarity of an erstwhile estranged poetics; for the historical embeddedness of what are taken to be Dickinson's views on publication, friendship, violence, democracy, religion, mourning, etc.; for what Domhnall Mitchell calls the "emphatically social nexus" of her vocabulary (*Monarch*, 2); for the circumscription of her erotic life by her family's oedipal choreography; for the traumatic etiology of her progressive withdrawal from social life; for the direct, if negative, influence on her writings of what Paula Bennett calls Dickinson's "American women poet peers" (215).

What motivates Dickinson's de-exceptionalization? The ready answer is that exceptionalizing treatments of Dickinson have had a homogenizing effect on others – on the work of her contemporaries, for example – especially her female contemporaries, whose poetry has in many cases only recently begun to receive the sort of careful and sophisticated critical consideration it amply warrants. On this view, the exceptionalists' Dickinson swaddles the immense variety of her counterparts' poetry into one bandaged moment of sentimental tendency. The de-exceptionalized Dickinson may still surprise and elude us, but not because there is something either ineffably sacred or incurably pathological about her poetic effects. Even the most intensely isolating and alienating of those effects depend, as recent scholarship on Dickinson and her

"women poet peers" continues to demonstrate, upon common conditions of gender, class, literacy, health, spirituality, ambition, and privation. Dickinson was not the only nineteenth-century woman poet to think and write creatively under pressure of the vicissitudes of those conditions, nor was she the only one to baffle, antagonize, and amaze various witting and unwitting readers, then as now. The rumors of her anomalousness have been no more greatly exaggerated than those of the homogeneity of her contemporaries. But is an allergic reaction to a critical discourse of the exception the necessary consequence of respect for particularity as such? Have we thoroughly examined the fantasies that underlie our captivation with the delegitimation of the exception?

This captivation has manifested itself most obviously in more than a half-century's worth of political debates over a specifically *American* exceptionalism, and these debates have long found their cultural correlative in debates over nationalist projects in the history and criticism of American literature. To a very significant degree, the reaction against exceptionalizing treatments of American authors, including Dickinson, is an important, though always belated, reaction against a more profound imaginative laziness – a shared unwillingness to acknowledge and resist the entanglement of the academic study of American literature with the othering regimes that have prosecuted America's imperialist ventures from Dickinson's time to our own. But this reaction is also characterized by its own form of reactionism: specifically, an uncritical aversion to the exploration of our psychic relation to the principle of the exception. Overcoming this aversion need not be in the service of establishing a sturdier foundation for exceptionalist thinking, whether about politics or culture. It may, however, be in the service of a better understanding of the limits of mutually intelligible expressive identities and of their legitimate claims on our reading practices.

"Genius" was once a more acceptable way of naming these limits, or rather of asking what happens at these limits. Richard Poirier caught the ache of its intonation when he wrote that "[t]o use the word 'genius' is to express a desire that human attributes should exist that are beyond human understanding" (68). By which he means a desire that they should exist *within us*. Psychoanalysis is a theory of genius, in this specific sense: that we can use it to train ourselves to observe and better understand the myriad ways in which we lag behind unconscious experience – our own and that of others. Each one of us is what Eric Santner calls "the bearer of an excess, a too much of pressure that is not merely physiological" (8). The discharge of this surplus is the beginning of expressivity, of the lifelong scramble to articulate our perennially elusive meanings and our often bewildering choices. If psychoanalysis is the study of what happens beyond the limits of our mutually intelligible expressive identities, then "genius" may be a kind of lay term for what Christopher Bollas calls the "special type of mutually unconscious work conducted by both participants in a psychoanalysis" (44). Writing and reading constitute another type of this work, for they exist, as Poirier puts it, "in a mutually modifying but very confused, accidental, and varying relation to other usually less calculated, less examined, and comparatively messier experiences of life" (191). On this view, to read means to come upon what Santner

calls "the bearer of an internal alterity, an enigmatic density of desire calling for response beyond any rule-governed reciprocity" (9). To read, in other words, is always to feel the pressure of an exception to exemplifying protocols of reading.

Why frame this discussion in relation to Dickinson? Precisely because Dickinson has *never been further* from the condition of being unexceptional than she is now, which also means that she has never been more central to the problem of readerly competence. That the standard protocols of textual scholarship, literary criticism, and lyric theory have made few provisions for the solution of this problem is always the implicit and sometimes the explicit argument of some of her canniest recent readers. Susan Howe, for instance, has assailed the professionalization of competence, replacing it with the fiercely hieratic trope of possession. Sharon Cameron has made it more difficult than ever to claim that Dickinson deigns to share with us any measure of interpretive responsibility. And Virginia Jackson has argued that contemporary questions of interpretive responsibility have in any case been beggared by over a century's worth of category errors regarding what we blithely call "lyric." Reaffirming Dickinson's ability to constitute an exception (Howe), proving the power that accrues to her declarations of disablement (Cameron), and arguing for her permanently recessive relation to puristic terminologies of genre (Jackson), the cutting edge of Dickinson criticism repeatedly brings us back to the same question: How might we better shoulder the burden of readerly competence when confronting such a singular and uncanny writerly performance?

There is no serviceable decorum, these readers agree. There isn't even a satisfactory imaging technology that would obviate the often excruciatingly intense, ongoing struggle – from the earliest printings through the *Manuscript Books* and the latest Web-based editions – over diverse principles of representation for the artifacts of intention and inadvertency that Dickinson left behind. The punctuation (Anderson; Crumbley; Wylder). The chirography (Mitchell, *Measures*; Ward; Werner, *Open Folios*). The fascicles (Cameron; Oberhaus). The fragments, cuts, and erasures (Hart and Smith; Smith; Werner, *Radical*). The scraps, adhesions, and remnants (Holland; Jackson). G. Thomas Tanselle's argument that Dickinson's manuscripts in no way constitute a "unique editorial situation" (65) sidesteps the fact that the continued proliferation and transformation of Dickinson texts mark an unusual openness among many of her editors and other readers, not to Dickinson's absolute distinctiveness in relation to other writers, whose texts may indeed share a similar editorial situation, but rather to an internal alterity that persists beyond the classificatory workings of such liberal textual fantasies as the variorum edition and the hypertext.

A series of competing, institutionalized identifications constitutes the Dickinson corpus. Modern textual scholarship, with its penchant for dissection and rearrangement, has become her personal Dr. Frankenstein. And at many a turn, Dickinson seems prepared, monstrously enough, to strangle us in our mawkish efforts at appreciation. Years ago, Camille Paglia shrewdly forced recognition of the dangerous Dickinson – the one long hidden by the sentimentalists – by pulling together in one cleverly narrated chapter of her book, *Sexual Personae*, abundant evidence of what she

calls Dickinson's "sadomasochistic surrealism" (624). Paglia's catalog of Dickinsonian horrors stands as a strong reminder, not only of the poet's alienation from the genteel imaginations of her day, but also of criticism's persistent failures to recognize the violence of her aggressivity. Like a palm across the cheek, Paglia's characterization of Dickinson as "Amherst's Madame de Sade" still smacks of sense, particularly in the undergraduate classroom. But Dickinson's strange eroticism and harrowing sense of vocation leave even the West's most singular pornographer far behind. One would hardly think of calling Sade the Monsieur Dickinson of Lacoste, and, ultimately, Paglia's poet of bubbling brains, self-mutilation, and necrophilia is too easily assimilated to the decadent project of criticism itself: mere ingeniousness opposing mere reactionism.

Dickinson herself was not an oppositional writer. Yet she proved that poetry in America could be the bête noire of knowingness and servility. In her work one finds no anxious retreat into the bunkered solace of pleasure; no guilty relinquishment to coercion; no affectation of progressive politics. Instead, there is desire – the ruthless, utopian desire – for a sovereign space, a space free of apologetics. Her poetry eschews precaution, regret, and consolation – not out of dullness or cruelty, but in disinhibited contact with the sheer unsparingness of things: God, nature, time, language, idealism, markets, the unconscious. "I am about everything," she told Abiah Root in 1845, prefiguring, at age fourteen, the circumferential avidity of her mature writing (JL 5).

Dickinson herself linked this avidity to various manifestations of sovereignty – sovereignty not chiefly as the revanchist aristocratic idealization of "rule by hereditary and divine right" (Erkkila 15), but rather as a fantastic politics of unconstraint, limned in a wildly antithetical discourse of privacy and power. During a postwar visit to Amherst, Thomas Higginson caught an impression of this discourse's highly self-conscious affective intensity for Dickinson – and preserved that impression in a letter to his wife:

> I asked if she never felt want of employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time" (& added) "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough." (JL 342)

Higginson recognizes that Dickinson's exaggerated sense of social threat is fully flirtatious, that Dickinson's hyperbole is itself the real response, the carefully tendered self-characterization of a mind that knows nothing *but* want. In one of her poems, she calls want "a quiet Comissary / For Infinity." She entrusts it, that is, with the sanity of her soul:

> To possess, is past the instant
> We achieve the Joy –
> Immortality contented

Were Anomaly –
(FP 984)

Dickinson animates distaste for satisfaction ("Spices fly / In the Receipt" [FP 626]). Her poetry is about what gets generated, pursued, disparaged, and consumed in the intensities of aesthetic experience.

Even her correspondence as a teenager reveals traces of what would become a ravening hunger for means of self-transformation. Separation from her brother Austin, for example, fostered a style of sustained imprecation that sometimes mounted to manic crescendo:

> Answer me!! I want much to see you all at home & expect to 3. weeks from tomorrow, if nothing unusual, like a famine or pestilence, occurs to prevent my going home. I am anticipating much in seeing you on this week Saturday & you had better not disappoint me!! for if you do, I will harness the "furies" & pursue you with a "whip of scorpions." (JL 17)

Blinded to the possible by greed, the Judean king Rehoboam, son of Solomon, famously failed to make this "whip of scorpions" threat work against the Israelites. As a result, Dickinson knew, he ended up with less, rather than more, of the splendid Solomonian excess to which he had grown accustomed. Yet she dares to mock the example as well as herself. If she fears finding herself, like Rehoboam, inadequate to the command of her own desires, she snaps her fingers in the face of divine reprisal.

She herself will *be* reprisal, as she cautions her friend Abiah in another adolescent letter: "Now if you don't answer this letter soon I shall – I shall do something dreadful" (JL 9). Early master of the ineffability topos, Dickinson crafted an aggressively elliptical style with the well-stropped edge of "something." Moreover she savors her sense of possibly being lethal to those she loves. Her writings abound with what can only be called keenly psychoanalytic insights about the peril posed to our loved ones by our transformational object-seeking. To Sue she writes: "in thinking of those I love, my reason is all gone from me, and I do fear sometimes that I must make a hospital for the hopelessly insane, and chain me up there such times, so I wont injure you" (JL 77). Thus pledging herself to thwart desire's violent aims, Dickinson also imagines for herself a state of exception, in which she alone, whatever danger she poses to others, would have the power to impose such a sentence of confinement. Not subject to the conventional juristic order (she would have to "chain me up" herself), she would nevertheless remain part of it, as its potentially self-subduing agent.

Again and again, Dickinson introduces us to sovereignty at the point of indistinction between loving and doing violence to the beloved. Surrounded at home by a veritable Goblin Market of October fruits, she writes, juice-drenched, to Austin of her sorrow that he is not with her to share the bounty: "you resign so cheerfully your birthright of purple grapes, and do not so much as *murmur* at the departing peaches,

that I hardly can taste the one or drink the juice of the other." And yet she tastes, she drinks, despite Austin's absence. "The grapes . . . are fine, juicy, and *such* a purple – I fancy the robes of kings are not a *tint* more royal. The vine looks like a kingdom, with ripe round grapes for kings, and hungry mouths for subjects." Austin's "birthright of purple grapes" has become the body of his sister's regicide – "the first instance on record," she exclaims, "of subjects devouring kings!" (JL 53). The relish Dickinson takes in this projected totem-feast, staged for her brother as a stay against the pains of separation as well as the pangs of hunger, beckons them both into a giddy fantasy of cannibalistic incorporation of their father Edward, whose relation to the siblings' "expenses" and "expenditures" is the subtext of Emily's letter.

Austin's "birthright of purple grapes" makes Edward the object of the totem-feast. And Edward's purple presence also connects the daughter as well as the son to broad themes of politics and state power. By the time of this letter, Edward had already been for years a leader in Massachusetts affairs: Representative to the General Court, State Senator, member of the Governor's Executive Council, and a major in the state militia. And his national career was very shortly to commence with his delegacy to the Whig Convention of 1852 and his election to the US Congress that same year (Sewall 52). In a letter hand-delivered by her father to Sue, then residing in Baltimore ("your absence insanes me so" [JL 107]), the site of the Convention, Emily complained, "Why can't *I* be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention? – don't I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law? Then, Susie I could see you, during a pause in the session – but I don't like this country at all, and I shant stay here any longer! 'Delenda est' America" (JL 94). Dickinson's riff on Roman statesman Cato the Elder's habit of ending all of his speeches between 175 and 149 BC with the words "delenda est Carthago" – an imprecation that, hammered home, helped lead to the Third Punic War – makes one wonder is she ever fantasized that her words, like Cato's, might become policy.

Perhaps she entertained such notions just a few years later, when she visited Washington City herself, disparaging, in a letter to Elizabeth Holland, the courtly pomp of the capital's dinner circles ("the value of the diamonds my Lord and Lady wore," etc. [JL 179]). Yet during the three weeks she spent there, Dickinson seems to have renounced whatever claim or occasion she might have had for the performance of Diva Citizenship. A bit of Dickinson family lore has Emily remarking on a flaming plum pudding at some such dinner: "Oh . . . may one eat of hell fire with impunity, here?" (Bianchi 14). But this apocrypha hardly lends itself to a situated conception of political subjecthood. And there is little record left of *what* Dickinson did during her visit, with the sole exception of her pilgrimage to George Washington's tomb at Mt. Vernon. It's the one national site she writes about in detail. Yet she reports that while standing there with her unspecified companions, "no one spoke a word" (JL 179). Dickinson's discursive autonomy seems reduced here to the cheesiest of nationalistic pieties.

Could Emily Dickinson ever have positioned herself as a vocal flash of public illumination? Perhaps not. Yet throughout her writing, one "diva-tinged strategy,"

as Lauren Berlant might call it, is its "royalist strain" (224). The epistolary record of Dickinson's most intimate relationships abounds in figures of monarchial authority that oscillate between assurances that a friend is better than a kingdom and fantasies that quasi-regal power may be derived from unsublimated affect. "I had rather be loved than to be called a king in earth," she once wrote to her great friend Elizabeth Holland (JL 185). On another, later occasion, she asked the same addressee, "Is not the distinction of Affection, almost Realm enough?" (JL 525). During the war, she wrote to Samuel Bowles, "We hope often to see you – Our poverty – entitle us – and friends are nations in themselves – to supersede the Earth" (JL 277). This idea of being a nation in oneself more than begs the question, in 1862, of the relation between the body and the state, the person and the sovereign. From the frontispiece to Hobbes's *Leviathan* to the Great Seal's *e pluribus unum* to Bull Run and Shiloh, the entanglement of the politicized human body and the body politic has been emblematic of modern sovereignty. In her meditations on love and power and war, Dickinson anticipated certain powerful critiques of this emblem – critiques succinctly characterized by Kam Shapiro. "The conceit of sovereignty," he writes,

> has been shown to mask a complex set of relations and exclusions that both constitute and compromise individual and collective agency and identity. We are possessed of neither mind nor body – understood as a unified cogito or a universal morphology – but a psyche, an unconscious, a race, class, gender and sexuality, a set of sensory capacities and limits. (2)

The war gave Dickinson an unprecedented and demanding context for the recognition of such alterities, both internal and external. I believe this is why the war years were her most richly productive. The intensity of her insights in this regard is not limited to her wartime writings. But it is in those writings – including one extraordinary poem that has received virtually no critical attention – that Dickinson most dramatically aggrandizes and complicates affective dispensations within and between ostensibly private subjects, by figuring them as problems of political consequence to which a national audience might respond.

The poem "One Anguish – in a Crowd" invites such a response. Copied out during the war (as most of her poems were), its martial language lends it a topical feel. But it is also vividly expressive of violence as the perennial situation of political subjecthood:

> One Anguish – in a Crowd –
> A minor thing – it sounds –
> And yet, unto the single Doe
> Attempted – of the Hounds
>
> 'Tis Terror as consummate
> As Legions of Alarm

Did leap, full flanked, opon the Host –
'Tis Units – make the Swarm –

A small Leech – on the Vitals –
The sliver, in the Lung –
The Bung out – of an Artery –
Are scarce accounted – Harms –

Yet mighty – by relation
To that Repealless thing –
A Being – impotent to end –
When once it has begun –
(FP 527)

"Anguish" is the poet's signature, but that is only the beginning of this poem, which proceeds via the royalist metaphor of the hunt to characterize the relation of the embodied subject to the body of the state as one of profound helplessness, of "Terror." The first two stanzas help figure the disorientation of extreme fear by confusing the one and the many – by frustrating the reader's desire for reassurances that it is always possible to know where the body subjected to violence begins and ends. The "single Doe" of stanza one seems to find its corresponding figure in stanza two in the word "Host." That is, "host" may be understood to mean some sort of sacrificial victim. Furthermore, its capitalization hints at a specifically Christological meaning. But other associations tax the strength of this reading. In relation to the martial context, "host" suggests not a single, sacrificial victim, but rather a military body of men – an army of many, beset or besetting. "Host," that is, is both a synonym and an antonym for the "Legions" of line six. The reader is made to lose track of both the agency of violence and the site of innocence – made, in other words, to feel the peculiar self-division of civil war, of warring brothers and sisters arriving at the point of indistinction between loving and doing violence to the beloved.

The simultaneous riving of American bodies and of the American body politic is the poem's fitting though by no means essential occasion for posing the question of the relation between "Unit" and "Swarm." Both terms are caustic. "Unit" suggests a crass administrative abstraction or depersonalization of the subject – the expendable soldier or the hunted slave as objects of the sovereign right to do harm. "Swarm" suggests a very poorly administered totality – an undisciplined army, a violently subordinated people on the move. Their capitalization hints at a mischievous acronymy (US = Unit Swarm), and they make line eight a bitter parody of *e pluribus unum*.

The subsequent stanza may be thought specifically to evoke the mayhem and morbidity of the battlefields and the army hospitals. Dickinson was just about as far removed from such scenes as it was possible for a newspaper-reading American to be. Yet the poem is charged with a sense of the poet's implication in the contemporaneity of warfare's mass violence – complicity, that is, by way of elective estrangement from the actual bodies presently being subjected to the "repealless" inscriptions of the

state's nominally emancipatory projects. The very sound of the word "repealless" is inflected with all the awkwardness of attempting to undo what has already been done. The word occurs in only one other place in Franklin's edition of Dickinson's poems – in a poem she wrote, around the same time, on the imperishable memory in the mind of God of all the scattered and unidentified dead, a poem about their survival on what she calls God's "Repealless – List," the basis of his ability to "summon every face" (FP 545).

In the final stanza of "One Anguish," the word "relation" suggests a communicative act. The assaults on the physical body enumerated in stanza three may, line twelve suggests, initially be discounted, but they are subsequently rendered "mighty" by virtue of being told. They are "mighty," that is, as commemorations of great power – not unlike the presence of Christ's macerated body in the Eucharistic "Host" of stanza two. "Relation" may suggest consanguinity with Jesus Christ, or with the brother-enemies whose deaths underwrite the war's politics of sovereignty. The cryptic might of stanza four also entails a tough ontological riddle. What *is* "that Repealless thing – / A Being – impotent to end – / When once it has begun –"? God, again, perhaps. But there are at least two other possible answers to this riddle. One is the nation-state, as something that will inevitably persist despite the international economic consolidation and internal social fragmentation that made loving or doing violence to one's beloved country so costly for Americans of the 1860s and beyond. The other is the figure of the reader, or addressee, who is neither the poem's sovereign author nor its powerless instrument, but who is made to share the relational dilemma that is the poem's subject.

The fundamental dilemma is the relation of witness: the powerful powerlessness of the subject who encompasses the traumatic dimension of her encounter with the other. She finds herself, that is, confronted with a spectacle of violence that confirms her powerlessness to help ("impotent to end"), even as her impassive gaze implicates her in the intense enjoyments of the sublime ("mighty – by relation"). Does the poem treat this relation of witness as a fantasy of warfare (the real possibility of the other being killed)? Or does it treat warfare itself as a fantasy of meaning (the real possibility of adapting oneself to the world)?

Neither of these questions is very interesting to contemplate if we merely stipulate that the relation of witness is characterized by feelings of guilt – guilt at maintaining the safe distance of the observer ("It feels a shame to be Alive" [FP 524]), guilt at identifying with the imagined pleasure of the victim ("A *wounded* Deer – leaps highest" [FP 181]). Dickinson knows that harm must be done before it can be undone, and one source of the uncanny power of "One Anguish – in a Crowd" is its limning of a subject that seems able to tolerate the presence of the other in advance, even in despair, of harm's undoing – "to endure the proximity of the Other," as Santner puts it, "in their 'moment of *jouissance*,' the demonic and undying singularity of their metaethical selfhood" (82). "Endure," however, is too weak a word for Dickinson's relation to that proximity. Her project is to *overtake* the other as a bearer of a "demonic and undying singularity" beyond the range of nominal and descriptive predication.

The first two stanzas of "One Anguish – in a Crowd" identify the other as a predicate of the pathos of the part's identification by and with the whole: the individual isolated by pain; the "single Doe" cut off from the herd; the "Unit" to be expended by the "Swarm." The third stanza pursues this pathos into the body itself, where injury meets insult in the crass triage of the world ("scarce accounted – Harms"). The poem, that is, seems to be arcing inexorably toward death, sentimentally opposing the war's logic of strategic loss – or perhaps opposing what Freud would later call the drive of species-preservation (the part expended for the sake of the survival of the whole) before moving on to theorize a death instinct that could either be directed inward, at the ego, or outward, at the world.

What is it then, in the final stanza, that lifts the poem out of the natural cycles of life and death and frustrates the determination to die? This frustration is felt elsewhere in Dickinson: at the end of "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun," for example ("For I have but the power to kill, / Without – the power to die –" [FP 764]), and also at the end of "It would have starved a Gnat," where the speaker wishes for "the Art / Opon the Window Pane / To gad my little Being out – / And not begin – again –" (FP 444). In both of these poems, the determination to die is linked, via first-person pronouns, directly to the subject. "It would have starved a Gnat" seems to come especially close to the idea of suicide as an expression of sovereignty over one's proper being – a sovereignty circumvented or renounced here we know not how nor why. To refer to the gnat's self-pulverization, in its frantic efforts to free itself, as an "Art" is not simply to mock the speaker's fiction of the gnat's consciousness, but also to ironize more subtly the poem's figure of poetic production as the perennial recommencement of errant wandering (gadding about). A "gad" may be a spear or other pointed tool; a gad pierces flesh; it breaks rocks, not windowpanes. A gad may also be a stylus – like Titus Andronicus's "gad of steel" (Shakespeare 1039). "To gad my little Being out" may be to write in such a way as to mock the pathos of expressivity, the delirium of the hunger-artist pursuing what Maud Ellmann calls "the supremacy of lack" (27). To "begin – again" is the refrain of all practice: the break, in Dickinson's case, that is also a repetition of poetic structures, of meter, stanza, poem, and fascicle. The compulsion to repeat is the source of poetry whose "Art" is the artistry of dying, the artistry, as Freud might put it, of the detours we live on the way to dying.

Indeed, Freud came to believe (or at least to maintain vehemently) that the determination to die was instinctual – that it was life itself that interfered with the aim of inanimateness. Debate over his late dualistic theory of life drive and death drive rages on, in large part as a way – a profusely discursive and circuitous way (Dufresne) – of keeping attention focused, not merely on aggressive impulses, but even more disconcertingly on the haunting sensation of an unknowable but also inescapable surplus or excess in psychic life. The hunger-artist pursues "the supremacy of lack" precisely because she feels herself to be the "bearer of an excess, a too much of pressure." For Santner, the death drive signifies both "this uncanny vitality – this 'too much' of pressure – as well as the urge to put an end to it. The *destructive* face of the death drive is thus aimed not at life per se – the natural cycle of growth and decay

– but rather at this uncanny, expressive 'life' that comes to human being by virtue of its thrownness amidst enigmatic messages" (36–37). When Dickinson, mistress of *Geworfenheit*, asked Higginson if her verse was "alive" (JL 260), this is the "life" she meant, the life of "death-driven singularity" (Santner 145). No wonder Higginson didn't know how to respond.

And who does? If we don't want to admit our own death-driven singularity, then we certainly won't want to encounter Dickinson's. But this is precisely the burden of readerly competence she invites us to take up: to tolerate, to willingly encounter, even hungrily to pursue and overtake the transformative insistence of the other's immanent unknown life. We act upon each other obliquely, like Dickinson's non-rhyming rhymes, like "thing" and "begun," for example, in the final stanza of "One Anguish – in a Crowd":

> Yet mighty – by relation
> To that Repealless thing –
> A Being – impotent to end –
> When once it has begun –

"Begun" harkens back further in the poem, not stopping at "thing," but resonating more deeply with "Bung" in the previous stanza. The bung is out of the artery; the mighty flow ("mighty – by relation") cannot be stanched; it is "impotent to end." Written down early in 1863, just months after Antietam and Fredericksburg, a ceaseless exsanguination sounds very much like hemorrhagic civil war. But if we are attuned to historical resonances, we might also hear echoed in this poem, which has already seemed to us to encompass the terror of the hounded slave, the radical undoing of the sovereign decision on life that slavery represents: the production of the inhuman.

The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 – despite its limited dispensations and its conditional stance – fundamentally and unalterably changed the ethos of the war by emphatically recasting the terms of its meaning in the fate of the slave: the non-identical, incommensurable person. It brought questions of freedom and of situated conceptions of political subjecthood to the extremest verge of intersubjectivity, to the point of indistinction between loving and doing violence to the beloved, where Dickinson could not have helped but to encounter them. The "Repealless thing" she finds there is not Lincoln's Proclamation (the entire antebellum period rang loudly with the repeals of legislative and executive instruments of freedom), or even the poem itself (which, as such, could easily be revoked, burned, unread, forgotten). The "thing" she finds there is the remaindered aspect of the other that exists beyond the reach of nominal and descriptive predication, beyond "slave" or "mid-nineteenth-century American woman" or "reader." It is that which haunts the margins of relationality, not in a space of ideological confinement, but as an uncanny presence, a constant reminder that our predicative fictions of meaningful intersubjectivity, based on respect for particularity as such, may be among our chief psychic

defenses against the potentiality of what might be our most transforming encounters.

Author's Acknowledgments

Thanks, first and foremost, to Mary Loeffelholz and Martha Nell Smith for their crucial enthusiasm and advice; to Toni Bowers, Virginia Jackson, Meredith McGill, and Emily Steiner for their suggestions and contentions; and, as ever, to Matthew Parr, whose ear and whose judgment are practically infallible.

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