Emily Dickinson has long been regarded as a peculiarly enigmatic

—Emily Dickinson—

the beautiful
the beautiful
the beautiful
the beautiful

William Franke

Emily Dickinson's Apphalous Poetics

"The Missing All"
This term "apophasis" and its adjectival form "apophatic" evoke in the first place the ancient Neoplatonic tradition of speculation concerning the ineffable One as supreme principle of reality. Likewise commonly designated as apophatic are certain traditions of medieval mysticism concerning an unutterably transcendent deity. In such traditions, the encounter, in incommunicable registers of experience, with the Inexpressible is marked by a backing off from language (apo—"away from," phasis—"speech" or "assertion"). Of course, this backing off is itself then registered in language, language that in various ways unsays itself. The resultant apophatic modes of discourse, in their very wide diffusion throughout Western culture, especially in the domains of philosophy, religion, and literature, can be seen to have had a decisive bearing on Dickinson's writing. This can be inferred from the poetry itself, whether it is conscious and deliberate on her part or not. The apophatic tradition, I maintain, whether directly or indirectly, influences Dickinson's reflections on the limits of her ability to express the reality she endeavors to approach and the experience she aims to convey in her poetry. Precisely the impediments to expression become her central message in telling ways, for they tell obliquely of a "beyond" of language.

Dickinson's highly original writing makes her a maddeningly difficult poet, one whom eminent critics confess baffles them. Yet her poems become startlingly readable when read according to their apophatic grammar and rhetoric: the words and phrases fall into place—the place they make for what they necessarily leave unsaid but let show up distinctly silhouetted in their hollows and shadows. The poems selected to illustrate Dickinson's apophatic poetics in this essay generally thematize a negative method of thought and perception, but they are only the most explicit representatives of a poetic corpus that is, throughout, profoundly apophatic in nature and inspiration and that rewards being read as such, while it stilly resists readings that ignore this orientation.

Dickinson Criticism and the Apophatic Paradigm

Although the poems often proved impossible for her contemporaries to penetrate, they have won immense appreciation in more recent critical appraisals, particularly those attuned to apophasis and the poetics of the unsayable. Even if rarely with explicit acknowledgment of the apophatic tradition as a primary context, this framework has already been operative in scholarship aiming to illuminate Dickinson's poems. Readings of Dickinson pointing in this direction have insisted on compression and abbreviation as features that distinguish her style, especially as against the stylistic canons of her own time. Cristanne Miller's analysis in *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* of Dickinson's versification shows ellipsis—the omission and deletion of logical and syntactical links—to be its governing principle. Carla Pomarè finds in this elliptical technique the means of producing the silence that paradoxically gives Dickinson her distinctive voice. Margaret Freeman, who analyzes Dickinson's poetry in terms of cognitive principles of discourse, similarly stresses omissions and absences as the signifying elements that grant the poetry its power, a power "through silence to capture the true essence of intimacy."

Beyond such attention to linguistic gaps and lapses, the apophatic logic informing Dickinson's poetics has been discerned in a more conscious and comprehensive way by Shira Wolosky, particularly in her essays interpreting Dickinson's poems in light of their translation into German by the post-Holocaust poet Paul Celan. Reading through this lens, Wolosky stresses the valence of silence not as affirming a metaphysical reality, a transcendent ultimacy beyond telling, but as indicating a cataclysm of history, an irruption of time into the presumably metaphysical order. This irruption is likewise beyond telling, though for a different reason: "silence represents the collapse of meaning within historical processes" (82). This view of silence builds a certain modernist bias into her readings. It foregrounds affinities with later writers more than with the ancient apophatic traditions from which these modes of expression hail. According to Wolosky, the realm beyond language has become contested and is agonized over by Dickinson and Celan alike: "What Dickinson's and Celan's poetry repeatedly traces is a rupture between earthly experience and transcendent reference" (68).

Wolosky does situate Dickinson within a tradition of "theo-linguistic" thought deriving ultimately from "Hermetic and Platonic traditions" crystallized in classics such as Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*. She notes how such traditions were reflected in the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and in Horace Bushnell's *Dissertation on the Nature of Language as Related to Thought and Spirit* in Dickinson's immediate cultural milieu. Yet Wolosky, in "The Metaphysics of Language in Emily Dickinson and Paul Celan," emphasizes particularly how this type of metaphysical framework is thrown into crisis and collapses in Emily Dickinson's poems. However, this sort of critical negation of concepts is in fact traditionally how apophatic
or negative theology frees faith and spiritual experience from rigid
metaphysical and theological dogma: it does not necessarily interpret the
crisis of modernity. This could be said also for even more modern poets
such as T. S. Eliot ("Burnt Norton" II and III) and Geoffrey Hill (for example,
in TenEB, 1978): they continue and affirm this negative theological vein
more than they negate it.

The apophatic discursive paradigm that operates in Dickinson's poetics,
then, has perhaps still not been fully realized and reflectively thought
through. And yet this paradigm can furnish a necessary key to interpretation
of at least a central axis of Dickinson's poetic modus operandi. My contention
is that it will prove profitable to read Emily Dickinson in relation to a
spiritual as well as an aesthetic tradition of apophasis. There are innumerable
spiritual poets who have privileged the theme of silence, and certain of them
have linked this theme with the spiritual traditions of apophatic mysticism.
John of the Cross represents the confluence of the two, the poetics of silence
and a theology of negation such as that expounded also, for instance, in
The Cloud of Unknowing, and he is echoed by Silesius Angelus, who works
Meister Eckhart's mystic philosophy (transmitted via John Tauler) into
spiritual ("Geist-reiche") verse. In such poetry, I believe, can be found some
of the strongest affinities to crucial aspects of Dickinson's work. Her poetry,
accordingly, is in some sense to be understood as a spiritual exercise, a use
of poetry as a means of approach to an unknowable "divinity," or at least as
an instrument for registering an impossible, inarticulate absoluteness in
her experience of the ultimate reality.

The diffuse presence of apophatic ideas and conceits in Western cultural
tradition, in many of its poets and philosophers and divines, as well as in
writers and artists of various stripe, would have sufficed to enable Dickinson
to pick up the requisite hints for developing her own perceptions and
reflections along apophatic lines. Surely, if the links were explicit and direct,
they would already have been made the object of intense scholarly study.
The fact that apophasis has not been such a focus in Dickinson studies suggests
rather that Dickinson develops these ideas largely by her own lights and
on the basis of her own experience of language and its "beyond." So perhaps
it is not really that she belongs within this tradition, as one who integrally
receives and hands down a certain knowledge or teaching or technique,
so much as that she is an original discoverer of the aporetic condition and
predicament of language, and conjointly of a faith in a beyond of language.
This would make for parallels between her and poets like John of the Cross,

poet of the dark night (la noche oscura), or Silesius Angelus, for whom the
rose is without why (die Ros' ist ohn warumb). Of course, in less concentrated
form, apophatic topos and techniques can be found in Romantic poets from
Wordsworth to Shelley and Keats or Whitman. But none enacts this mode
as intensely, incisively, and pervasively as Dickinson does: her poetics can
hardly be understood without some reference to this paradigm.

Harold Bloom employs apophatic terms to describe Dickinson's poesy
when he comments that her "unique transport, her Sublime, is founded
upon her unhappening of all our certitudes into so many blanks; it gives her,
and her authentic readers, another way to see, almost, in the dark" (308-9).
And Marjorie Perloff acutely observes a number of the key characteristics
of apophatic discourse in Emily Dickinson yet without actually viewing her
In the context of, or even as associated with, this tradition. She does
place Dickinson in the "other tradition," other with respect to Romanticism
and Modernism and their Symbolist aesthetic—another tradition that has
long captivated Perloff's interest (The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud
to Cage, vii). Tellingly Perloff writes, "She did not believe that words were
in themselves irreplaceable" ("Emily Dickinson and the Theory Canon").
Dickinson's poetics, Perloff points out, are contrary to the Symbolist
discipline of the not juste, according to which "the chosen word is the only
word that can convey a desired set of meanings." Perhaps no word can be
exactly right for Dickinson, and perhaps the words used do not ultimately
matter, if her poems are concerned above all with what is beyond words,
with what cannot be said.

Perloff characterizes Dickinson's poetry as "process poetry," and she
salutes the approaches to Dickinson's "variorum poetics" by Martha Nell
Smith, Susan Howe, Sharon Cameron, and especially Marta Werner.6
There has been a great deal of stir about the editing of Dickinson's works,
particularly in the wake of the newer facsimile and variorum editions
of her poems and letters, leading to new and acute attention paid to her
manuscripts, fascicles and folios. Werner writes,

Driven on by the desire to establish a definitive, or 'fixed,' text—an
end requiring among other things the identification and banishment of
textual 'impostors,' errors and stray marks—a scholar-editor ends
up domesticating a poet. How do we apprehend an author's passage
through a forever unfinished draft? ... Today editing Emily Dickinson's
late writings paradoxically involves unediting them, constellation these
works not as static points of meaning or as incorruptible texts but, rather,
as events and phenomena of freedom. (5)
poetic dimension

As a specifically spiritual vision endowed with a positively
profound relation to a specific spiritual concept when the poetic
imagination is a source of differences and, moreover, it allows
the theatrical images to flow from the spirit, from spirituality and
intransigenza, and to offer an integrated scene of visualizing
the constraints of the body, and the body's mental states.

Dictionary does not mislead beauty and make more than other forms of

(p. 792; 1998)
The definition of beauty is

The definition of beauty is

(beauty in another variation of the verse:

(p. 792; 1998)
Are One
Since Two and the
Of Division of meaning,
That meaning is not
The definition of beauty is

beauty in another variation of the verse:

From the unmediated clarity this
Adorable vision, extended definition in a version that is indifferent and

Are beautiful—
In whose skin red
Are very modest
The world's happy day

Adorable vision, extended definition in a version that is indifferent and

Adorable vision, extended definition in a version that is indifferent and

Adorable vision, extended definition in a version that is indifferent and

The world's happy day
Many poems become almost easy and perspicuous, and in any case understandable, once we see them as not about what they say but about what they cannot say. They point to a remoter abyss or “Sea” which language can mark but not articulate. This recess of speech darkly backgrounds almost everything in human life, including everyday emotions like gratitude. It lies beyond the reach (or “Plumb”) of speech and the meanings or “Answer” that language can fish for with its verbal threads and cues, its “Line and Lead”:

Gratitude — is not the mention
Of a Tenderness,
But it’s still appreciation
Out of Plumb of Speech.

When the Sea return no Answer
By the Line and Lead
Proves it there’s no Sea, or rather
A remoter Bed?
(F 1120c; J 989)

The difficulty, then, is not so much in the poem itself as in what it points out beyond itself and allows to be sensed or fathomed, but not to be comprehended. The extremely dense, discriminating, hair-splitting hermeneutics required by typical modernist poems, aiming at always greater precision, is not always called for nor necessarily conducive to letting Dickinson’s poems happen and have their most clear and intense effect. The assumptions of a mastery of language by the artist and of the formal perfection of the artwork cannot be applied so rigorously to Dickinson’s kind of writing. If, as Perloff persuasively argues, Dickinson has not been part of the canon of poets regularly referred to in discussions of poetic theory, this suggests that some important key to the theoretical significance of her poetry may have been missing from the tools of her interpreters. I wish now, by placing some poems into this framework, to illustrate the aptness the apophatic paradigm to unlock their most general intellectual significance and open to view the language-theoretical and spiritual underpinnings on which these poems are based.

Illustrative Poems

The characteristically apophatic technique of the poems can be approached most simply and perspicuously on the poems’ own terms by attending first to the topic of silence along with the thematics of the intrinsic limits and foundering of language. There are numerous very short poems that effectively announce the theme of silence and suggest that its potency is infinitely greater than that of any possible utterance, for example:

There is no Silence in the Earth - so silent
As that endured
Which uttered, would discourage Nature
And haunt the World.
(F 1004; J 1004)

Silence must simply be endured. Any attempt to master it and give it utterance would be an artifice forcing it to be what it is not, manufacturing an unnatural unreality that would haunt the natural world.

Other lines intimate the approach, venturing well beyond the natural world and all its appearances, to a faceless divinity, or Infinity, that can sanction silence alone as its expression:

Silence is all we dread.
There’s Ransom in a Voice -
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.
(F 1300b; J 1251)

Silence, in its desolation and emptiness, is dreadful, and so naturally we prefer that it be “ransomed” or redeemed in human and natural terms by a Voice. "But,” just as God “Himself” does not have a face, so Silence itself can have no proper finite form or voice: it “is Infinity.” This indeterminacy of its object in terms of language and concepts is the predicament of apophasis, and it is perhaps finally to be preferred to the “Ransom in a Voice.” In any case, this silence is nearer to the nature of God Himself. It leads to the silence of the mystic, as well as to the mystic poet’s struggles and declarations of failure to find an adequate expression.

Alongside such acknowledgments of a dimension of silence that is closest to the sacred source of all that is and of all that is said, Dickinson frequently alludes to indescribable moments of epiphany that she experiences as religious revelations and miracles and that transcend ordinary verbal expression. They consist in “thoughts” that are unique and incomparable, thoughts that “come a single time” and that cannot be reduced to any common currency of words. They must rather be tasted, like the communion
Phrasing: All

Even more strikingly, the phrase "there is so much in a poem of the
significance and that the points of failure to see when it strikes to say
nothing of the epigrams which paradoxically is repeated, yet

I should not be so bold
If I could tell how glad I was

D. J. Enright, I 1976

Phrasing: All

That remain the void:

Nothing is the force.

Nothing is the void.

The human heart is void.

Of multiply gifted and gifted words.

The human heart is void.

Nothing is the force.

There remain the void. —

(From "The Chalk" I 1953)

Phrasing: All

I could not be so bold
If I could tell how glad I was

D. J. Enright, I 1976

Nothing is the force.

There remain the void:

Nothing is the force.

Nothing is the void.

(From Greenhill's Garden)
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.

(F 995b; J 985)

This is exactly the status of the Neoplatonic One, which is no thing, but which everything that is anything emanates from and deeply depends on and indeed is in the abyss of its being. Whatever is something is incomparably less than this missing All, and therefore even the destruction of the entire finite universe would be insufficient to distract the speaker’s attention from the contemplation of this infinite All that she knows is infinitely greater than anything finite whatsoever.

The mystic philosophy devolving from Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) known as Neoplatonism, as distinct from the Middle Platonism that evolved between Plato and Plotinus, inspired revivals far beyond the Hellenistic world of its origin, all through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as well as in the seventeenth century among the Cambridge Platonists and their successors even in the Romantic age. Thomas Taylor (1758-1835) in particular was influential in disseminating Neoplatonic thinking among the Romantic poets from Shelley to Emerson.10

According to this philosophical outlook, which accentuates the theological inspiration of Plato’s thinking as oriented towards a transcendent, unifying principle of the universe as a whole, the One is All, the Absolute. But this also makes it Nothing, no thing that is determinate or finite, nothing that can be defined or said, for then it would not be absolute and unconditioned. As Dickinson writes: “The Object Absolute — is nought” (1071). While this Nothing in itself may be All or Absolute, whatever part or aspect of it is definable or even perceptible is not absolute. Something may be gained by perception for the appropriating subject but only at the cost of losing the Absolute as absolute, the perfect and divine, which thereafter we typically blame or “upbraid” for being so far removed from us:

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object’s loss —

Dickinson here intuits that the presence of the Absolute as the absolute being of any object whatever is lost in being perceived and thereby reduced to the status of an object. The Object Absolute is the deeper reality of any object, but it is no object at all itself, and it is made to be naught by being objectified through perception.

Dickinson postulates an indistinct kind of knowledge of aura or “glory” that does not circumscribe any object of knowledge, since an object could only be finite and consequently not be this Absolute.11 She figures such objectless knowing rather as an intuitive, mystic seeing:

You'll know it — as you know 'tis Noon —
By Glory —
As you do the Sun—
By Glory—
As you will in Heaven —
Know God the Father — and the Son.
By intuition. Mightiest Things
Assert themselves — and not by terms —
"I'm Midnight" — need the Midnight say —
"I'm Sunrise" — Need the Majesty?

Omnipotence — had not a Tongue —
His Lisp — is Lightning — and the Sun —
His Conversation — with the Sea—
"How shall you know?"
Consult your Eye!

(F 429a; J 420)

Midnight and sunrise, as the zero degrees of night and day, are absolute and therefore not to be said but "seen."

On the basis presumably of this sort of “intuition” and not of “terms” (420). Dickinson feels her way to the same kind of vocabulary, revolving around the ineffable One, as was used by the Neoplatonic negative theologians12:
Emily Dickinson: A Poetic Pliability

William Franke
Emily Dickinson: Apophatic Poetics

William Franke

NOTES


Smith, Martha Nell. "Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992)."


