

ABDICATION

EMILY DICKINSON'S FAILURES OF SELF / ESCAPE ARTIST



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EMILY DICKINSON'S FAILURES OF SELF

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INTRODUCTION

– DAN BEACHY-QUICK

Could it be that what is most holy is that which is most full of holes? If that question sounds glib, I don't mean it to be. If it sounds like a form of despair, I meant it as exalted disrepair. Kristen Case recognizes that a body is a thing full of holes. Some are the wounds we call senses; some are other kinds of wounds. Mostly, she suggests, we work so as to fill our various emptinesses, flee from flaw by an inherent abashed suspicion that to be less than whole is where what is "human" becomes cognate with what is "humiliated." But what if we were to *write towards* our humiliation, to seek in it a gifted relation, "an approach without hope of arrival"? It might feel as does waking and setting directly to work feels, when the mind hasn't re-gathered reason into its vigilant guard, when sleep still riddles the self, and health feels most like a form of incompleteness. Then you might learn to think as Kristen Case thinks. It might not feel like "thinking." It might seek the plural, the indecisive, the confused; it might bear the humbled, humiliated marks of failure, where conclusion eludes the scholar's earnest grasp, and clarity, and argument, and the system called mind, grow tender instead of growing certain, and that bulwark of authority—the author saying "I"—harms itself into the plural.

In Emily Dickinson's poems and letters, Case finds her guide to such abdication. Better than writing an apology, that classical mode whose very etymology means a motion "away from speech/word/reason," Case involves us in work of a different order, what could be called an *upology*, a working in to work one's way through and under speech, through and under self, through and under mind to undermine our "critical autonomy." It's a process that adds the negative in—not the merely pessimistic, or the merely skeptical, but doubts of deeper order, the holes that are opportunities for honorable failure, where the boundaries no longer hold, where "no" becomes the wild order, and the thinker cannot keep herself separate from what is thought about. This work of coming into actual relation means that what informs also de-forms, active and passive at once, receptive and reciprocal to such wondrous and troubling degree, that one finds oneself—as in a dream—within the world unfolding within you. Then thinking is as Case and Dickinson might have it be: the "Mutual Monarchy" that arises only "by Abdication – Me – of Me -" Maybe we'll find ourselves returned to those older laws and ancient motions whose mining, undermining current undoes the edifice of our pride. We'll be able to drift back into the grammar—or is it the grammar will drift back through us?—free of tense or multi-tensed, all these holes that riddle our bodies, all our riddled minds, not filled by predicates, but deepened by doubts, offering us return to the infinitive: to read, to think, to wake, to sleep, to live, to die, to be, to breathe, to write.

ABDICATION



We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say 'I.' This is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which is given to us to accomplish—only the destruction of the 'I.'

–Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

If there is a relation between writing and passivity, it is because both presuppose the effacement, the extenuation of the subject: both presuppose a change in time, and that between being and non-being, something which never takes place and yet happens nonetheless, as having long since already happened. The uneventfulness of the neutral wherein the lines not traced retreat; the silent rupture of the fragmentary.

–Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

I do not know what I wish to make here in the space of these pages which corresponds to the space of certain early fall mornings still in the neighborhood of sleep before the day divides everything up and gives it a name.

I am interested in moments of expansion or dissolution effected by particular experiences of sleep and waking, desire, grief, and solitude. Here I seem both without a name and closer to some health. I feel myself no longer as an object of solidity and value but as a field into which various forces enter and depart or as a web of bright filaments or as the edge of a thawing river or as a body full of holes.

This seems a possible place from which to begin a writing, which is itself a crossing, a movement of a force, a movement out of the body.

October is the right month for decreation. This brilliant death, this flaming into silence. My father speaks of himself in the third person, speaks to absent people, taps out urgent messages on a tiny invisible keyboard in his palm. In the wake of this and other nameless effacements I find myself writing toward Emily Dickinson.

I am drawn to her inhabitation of negativity: silence, failure, and non-being. I want to know what I can about the kind of self-annihilation she describes, and whether it (or my attention to it) might amount to a kind of therapy. I am interested in the sensation in the chest cavity when sadness becomes a part of your body. I am interested in what happens when you write it and in doing so write yourself out of time.

Writing toward: a relation, a secondariness, an approach without hope of arrival.

It seems best to begin before fully awake.

I never lost as much but twice -
 And that was in the sod.
 Twice have I stood a beggar
 Before the door of God!

Angels - twice descending
 Reimbursed my store -
 Burglar! Banker - Father!
 I am poor once more!

In the first stanza, "as much" (with its unspoken "as this") points to the unnamed loss, unnamed because utter, because fatal (one hears in the opening line the echo of an earlier poem, "My life closed twice before its close"). Not so much unspeakable as identical and thus emptied of identity. Bereavement is bereavement, all particularities subsumed.

The silent "this" of line one and the "that" of line two thus call to mind Hegel's analysis of indexicality, the paradoxical way that the very words that signal both immediacy and particularity are simultaneously so universal as to be hollowed out of any specific content. As Dickinson demonstrates in 260 ("I'm Nobody! Who are you?"), the same paradox applies to the intimacy of the pronouns *I* and *you*. Dickinson's advance is to insist, in spite of the interchangeability of bereavements (which the whole poem in its evocation of economy, of counting, trading, theft, and borrowing, works to support), that bereavement itself has a particular feeling. Dickinson is interested in what this particular soul-poverty feels like: among its markers, the poem suggests, is the kind of emptiness that resigns even proper names to the sod.

Before announces a spatio-temporal doubleness: we are also located on a threshold in time, suspended in a before. After the white space that is the other side of God's door, the infinite moment of divine presence, the moment God acts, the poem performs a dazzling calculus: one "God." One now ("once more," line eight). Two stanzas. Three instances of the word "twice." Most mysteriously, in the penultimate line, three names slide into two. (Or perhaps the poet corrects herself, remembers she is in the act of supplication

and must not accuse. Or perhaps all three names are really one, a triune God.) Each stanza ends with the speaker's declaration of poverty. The poem ends with the third instance at the threshold, the third humiliation. Or better to say, perhaps, that here a white space takes over the poem: the absence or blinding presence of the divine, answering not answering.

Weil:

There is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties—intelligence, will, human love—have come up against a limit, and the human being waits at this threshold, which he can make no move to cross, without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention. It is a state of extreme humiliation, and it is impossible for anyone who cannot accept humiliation.

What Dickinson knew, the paradox her poems perform over and over, is that the specifics of your loss do not matter. Bereftness is bereftness—it bereaves us of exactly the singularity of self that would mourn its particular beloveds. The terror of Dickinson's poems is in the way she keeps writing as the self falls off, the way she illustrates the miracle that writing keeps working, that syntax holds it together, even through the hollowing out of *you* and *me*. Dickinson gives us no names, no dates, no details of her bereavements. She is anticonfessional, antidescriptive, almost, it would seem, antiparticular. She knows that the hollowness at the heart of any fatal fact is the always the same hollowness, is as uniform as an *I*, a mere grammatical function.

Is it easier to know hollowness if you are a woman, if your body contains this particular anatomical hollowness, if you have carried the accusation of hollowness with you through your years?

Sometimes I wake with the sensation that my body is a form made to contain something burning.

From *Medline Plus Online Medical Encyclopedia*: "'D and C' is a procedure to scrape and collect the tissue (endometrium) from inside the uterus. Dilation ('D') is a widening of the cervix to allow instruments into the uterus. Curettage ('C') is the scraping of the walls of the uterus."

If the fetus has no heartbeat you will be scheduled for this minor surgical procedure.

We will schedule it as soon as possible, though there may be a few days' delay.

Me from Myself - to banish -
 Had I Art -
 Impregnable my Fortress
 Unto All Heart -

But since Myself - assault Me -
 How have I peace
 Except by subjugating
 Consciousness?

And since We're Mutual Monarch
 How this be
 Except by Abdication -
 Me - of Me - ?

In 709 the depiction of self-splitting and the self-eradication that is its logical consequence, the subjugation of the self by the self, is rendered in precise logical-grammatical terms, the multiplication of the first person in its different names ("Me," "I," "Myself") culminates in the momentary articulation of the self as grammatically multiple, a "We," a substitution that coincides with the speaker's clearest articulation of sovereignty: "We're Mutual Monarch." One of the selves must be subjugated, the poem insists, and yet the grammar of the poem, both the "Had" of line two and the "We're" of line ten, suspends the self in the moment of being multiple, the present moment of the assault, sovereign against sovereign.

The necessity of abdication, of subjugation, to the power of the self, the power of an *I*, seems thus logically concluded but not yet enacted. Absent from the poem is the event or situation that effected this multiplication of the subject.

Barthes: "Where you are tender, you speak your plural."

Extenuation as a moving outward and a thinning.

I wonder about this thinning, about Weil's death by starvation, about the metaphysics of a slightness of person. I too have cherished hunger.

Dickinson's poem 320, "There's a certain Slant of light," has always seemed to me an apt description of a certain clear and useful kind of headache or headache-induced despair.

It is hard to stay with hollowness. Not to narrate events but to attend to the body's knowledge of events. To render with precision the location of nonbeing "inside" the self.

Before the door.

How the body moves toward the desire for understanding. How trenchant this desire.

Understanding: neither passive nor active but a middle voice, a betweenness dissolving.

Under from the Old German *under*, meaning between or among. Related to the Latin prefix *inter* as in *interested*. *Understanding* as a standing between.

Might betweenness (absent-present) occupy the God-space?

I am avoiding writing about the temporality of these poems. Weil: "Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue."

709 inhabits the suspended present of plurality, of violent confrontation of self with self, while gesturing toward other tenses and thus other temporal (non-)locations, especially the conditional "Had I Art." In the phrases "How this be" and "to banish," the verb swallows all tenses, subsumes all temporal locations into a single eternal moment of being and banishment.

The three moments of the poem are the present moment of self-division, the non-present, counterfactual moment of the conditional, and the eternity of the infinitive. Being, non-being, and eternity in a kind of closed loop.

I have kept my critical hands off Emily Dickinson's poems. I cannot approach them with the apparatus of critique. In the vicinity of a Dickinson poem, my critical autonomy vanishes. This essay is an attempt to write not in service to that autonomy but through the process of its dissolution. It is an attempt to fail.

I am interested in the possibilities for critical writing afforded by this kind of failure: the failure to insulate oneself from one's subject; the failure to separate, which might also be seen, in psychoanalytic terms, as a sort of primal failure of subjectivity. It seems proper that such a project proceed by way of fragments, which, if they cohere, will do so only after the fact.

I cannot stop asking these childish questions: Do you feel time as I do? Light? Weather? *Are we the same?* All my writing asks them, over and over.

What would it mean to reorganize our attention to Emily Dickinson in order to understand her work as answering, personally, poetically, intellectually, erotically, the philosophical tradition from which she is excluded, a tradition which understands her only as a sign within it?

In "Against Mastery: Dickinson Contra Hegel and Schlegel," Daniel Fineman writes, "In her lyrics, Hegel's progressivism and Schlegel's pervasive pessimism are revealed to be two aspects of a shared presumption of totalization and mastery that comes from a masculine orientation. These male philosophers speak but cannot in their expansive texts heft the occasion of speaking."

How can one write from a position of abdication? How can one speak from this margin?

By hefting the occasion into it.

I do not remember the procedure, only the sensation of bearing death and waiting. Afterwards I held the word *scrape*.

Burglar! Banker - Father!

Dickinson in a letter to Otis Lord: "Don't you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer - don't you know that 'no' is the wildest word we consign to language? You do, for you know all things."

Within this provocation, words exist in the wild but are consigned to language: No a tiger pacing in a flimsy cage.

Between the sentences, across the synapse between them, power moves from the writer, teasingly withholding, to the *you*, omniscient. The power of the *you*, godlike, subsumes the power of the writer, who withholds after all only for the *you's* own pleasure, even according to his intention.

The degree of sincerity in this positioning of refusal within a larger unspoken submission is impossible to gauge, but it is a conspicuously virtuosic demonstration.

There is some speculation that Dickinson's letter responded to a marriage proposal, but it hardly matters. Submission and refusal, the real and the imagined, being and non-being are in perfect and infinite orbit around each other and I am interested in the spinning itself.

In 269 ("Wild nights - Wild nights!") the poet similarly elaborates the erotic possibility of the negative, but there it is accomplished with the conditional "Were I with thee" which establishes the images that follow as counterfactual, existing in the negative space of being in which all things, by virtue of their non-existence, are possible.

*The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.*

Oh - did I offend it -
~~Didn't want me to~~
~~to tell it the truth~~
Daisy - Daisy - offend it - who
bends her smaller life to
his ^it's meeker ^lower every day -
who only asks - a task -
~~who~~ something to do for
love of it - some little way
she cannot guess to make
that master glad -
A love so big it scares
her rushing among her small
heart - pushing aside the
blood - and leaving her
^all faint and white in the
gust's arm -

(Master Letter 2, 1861, transcription mine)

Following Dickinson into the realm of self-abdication is a rethinking of the function and possibilities of critical writing. It is to venture a (local and shallow) re-description of a critical text as a text that follows, that exists (only) in relation to another. In this following, the relation is not an agonistic one. This writing would not seek to fill the holes of the text to which it listens, but would be above all a practice of reception, of hollowness, of having holes. What it produces is a reading which is always at risk of losing its article, of slipping back into mere reading: non-productive, melancholic, dreamlike, passive, aligned with sleep, attached to a receptivity that resists articulation.

To grant primacy to this relation, to honor it, would be to enter into it deprived of a known outcome. I cannot know at the outset what this relation will be or who the self will be that emerges from it. Blanchot: "My responsibility for the Other presupposes an overturning such that it can only be marked by a change in the status of 'me,' a change in time and perhaps in language."

I resist paying attention to the Master letters. I resist rereading the words I have transcribed. I turn in the presence of abjection as if from a fate.

From Latin *abjectus*, past participle of *abjicere* "reject," from *ab-* "away" + *jacere* "to throw."

This morning I am emptied of thought. Thinking is an absent electricity. These marks circle around a hollowness. *Nothing, nothing, nothing*, the mind says, an echo in a tunnel or a tomb.

My body is a vessel for nothing, makes nothing, not even grief, which one might hold like a baby. The tapping out of these words, hollow click of the keys, my father's empty inscriptions.

Blanchot: "If there is a relation between writing and passivity, it is because both presuppose the effacement, the extenuation of the subject."

Extenuation as in thinning, *effacement* from Latin *ex-* "away" from + *face*. At once a stripping away of the face, the name, the self, and a turning away from the sight.

743

Behind Me - dips Eternity -
Before Me - Immortality -
Myself - the Term between -

Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin -

'Tis Kingdoms - afterward - they say -
In perfect - pauseless Monarchy -
Whose Prince - is Son of none -
Himself - His Dateless Dynasty -
Himself - Himself diversify -
In Duplicate divine -

'Tis Miracle before Me - then -
'Tis Miracle behind - between -
A Crescent in the Sea -
With Midnight to the North of Her -
And Midnight to the South of Her -
And Maelstrom - in the Sky -

The dizzying overlay of time onto space in this poem, accomplished by the reverse-tracing of the movement of the sun, the prepositions “before,” “behind,” and “between,” and the disorienting effect of its mirror tricks—death as sunrise, life a single darkness, the self a finite term shuttled between two infinities—induces, increasingly the closer one reads, a kind of mental fog, Dickinson’s specialty, in which selfhood dissolves. That is, she both describes and effects a sort of drowning of selfhood in the infinite. Each line ending with its little plank.

From the bewildering multiplicity of the cosmic map, in which both time and cardinal directions are spun into a single wheel, we enter the endless, repeating Kingdoms of Himself. We enter by way of the fullness or emptiness of white space—Dickinson’s God-margin—the endlessly repeated, endless absence-presence of God, fathered by Himself or fathered by None, infinitely multiple, infinitely self-identical.

In the third stanza, “before,” “behind,” and “between” return us to space-time, but the position of the self has been occupied by a “Crescent in the Sea,” mirrored (as this whole stanza mirrors the opening stanza) by the “Maelstrom - in the Sky - ,” maelstrom and moon here reversed from their normal positions, as in a mirror. Both first and last stanza multiply opposing pairs. In the first: East, West; Eternity, Immortality; sunset, dawn. In the last, North, South; sea and sky. Against this diversification, or necessary to it, Miracle and Midnight perform the logic of divine duplication, insist upon the logic of infinite identity. In this bewilderment, the Me, whose position was the primary concern of stanza one, has disappeared.

Thoreau: “If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career.”

What is this suicide by knowledge?

A fact, any fact. Any fatal fact.

It is easy to use philosophy to arrive at the idea that reality is no ground beneath us but instead a matter of convention and expectation—a *construction*, we say, with varying degrees of mourning or of celebration, depending on our allegiances. Holding some version of this view does nothing to diminish the impact of watching a mind sink into its own neural sea. It is a fatal fact that my father believes things are happening that are not happening, believes he is where he is not, talks to absent people.

Heft the occasion. Heave it.

God: *Himself Himself Himself Himself Himself Himself Himself Himself Himself Himself*

Writing these words pulls me letter by letter toward silence, toward the white space that will meet the end of this sentence, toward the final failure. Dickinson held off periods like the little deaths they are.

*Little cousins,
Called back.*

A sentence, too, may be a fate or an effacement. A sentencing.

How common words, belonging to no one, in an order determined by no one, by grammar, may nevertheless cause this sensation beneath the ribcage, may affect a body so materially, may alter the mechanism of breath.

I could write my life as a series of such sentences (anyone could) but they would not tell much. The sentences that have hollowed me and the ones that have hollowed you are all the same, are only grammar.

Non-productivity threatens the I. Not-writing threatens the I. Blankness threatens the I.

Not-writing is a kind of discipline indistinguishable from laziness.

To be a body full of holes is to be penetrable by light. For example this October light which seems to possess the weight of objects.

To be a body full of holes is to carry a host of small abandonments, to keep each one intact, to make it part of the form.

Writing through the effacement of the self gives one back a written self. Writing makes a writer. A body full of holes *knows in singing not to sing*.

To carry this hollowness, to speak it, is to open to the possibility of knowing others here, in the space of unbecoming, this room in which we have no names.

I want to imagine the possibility that the hollowness I feel waking might be the space of kenosis, might be an emptiness that enables a sacred attention.

Such attention must require a slipping out of time, the way any verb may slide into its infinitive. The way this sentence slides between this October morning and the nameless future of (your) reading.

Might I empty myself into that temporal drift by means of grammar?

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