

USING CREATURES OF FLIGHT TO EXPLORE THE MIND-BODY RELATIONSHIP AND TRANSCENDENCE IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

REBECCA SIEGEL

ABSTRACT: Emily Dickinson is recognized as one of the most illustrious American poets of all time, famous for her explorations of profound concepts surrounding the mind and body and life and death. Yet in doing so, she does not simply paint binary understandings of the universe, but also makes evident that these dualities are not to be simply reconciled either. This literary and philosophical approach is captured in various symbolic forms throughout Dickinson's poetry, and I chose to focus on the recurring appearance of flying creatures, namely birds, bees, and angels. By first sitting down and reading hundreds of her poems in order to take a top-down approach that was thus less biased in its analysis, I pieced together what I thought were notable themes and consistencies amongst each distinct category of creature in order to weave a greater, transcendent image of how Dickinson views the world.

“I ’m nobody! Who are you? / Are you - Nobody - too?” (Dickinson Poem 260, lines 1-2) are some of the most enduring and prominent words written by the widely celebrated poet Emily Dickinson, whose character and work are both wrapped in a considerable amount of mystique despite the immense amount of scholarship that has been dedicated to these subjects. In this vein, I too feel that I am “nobody” delving into the complex but academically scoured terrain of Dickinson's poetry. Yet, I also feel personally drawn in by being the nobody. Not just through the comradery that the poem affords in breaking the fourth wall, but because if a poem is addressed to no one in particular, it is therefore addressed to anyone, and is in a perhaps unexpected way actually being necessarily inclusive of all identities through the denial of identity. That the poem's denial of identity opens it up to all identities is not a trivial conclusion; in fact, Dickinson's poetry is particularly powerful insofar as it permeates limitless, amorphous spaces through few words or relatively simplistic concepts. One such space is that of existence, or in a perhaps feeble attempt to modify its pithiness, the human's experience (in a non-sensory specific manner) of existence. Through her resistance to subscribing to the neatly explained mind-body dualism--that the mind and body are separable and distinct--Dickinson not only complicates our understanding of human consciousness in a way that is true to its nature, she also enables a conception of it that transcends mere mediation between categories. Her poetry features ubiquitous imagery of nature, namely winged, non-stationary, and dynamic creatures. Perhaps she sees the examination of these questions of life, of the mind and body, as ones that are constantly in motion, expanding and contracting,

escaping exact pinpoint in a sort of “Heisenberg-esque” fashion. Yet at the same time, within this theme of Dickinson infusing a certain capaciousness and equivocalness surrounding her ideas throughout her poetry, distinct and recurring creatures can be deciphered, including bees, birds, and angels. Through the simultaneous enigmatic and particular approach of Dickinson’s poetry, one finds that while each poem encapsulates a universe of its own, every composition is simultaneously strung together by the unification of ideas, and the contemplation of matters such as mortality, faith, identity. By using this imagery of creatures of flight and unique modulation of her poetic voice, Dickinson creates a template for investigating life within and between heaven and earth so as to explore the existences that they each entail.¹

I. The Suspension of Human Identity between Body and Soul

According to many scholars, Emily Dickinson’s poetry distinctly features “the neo-Kantian modes of apprehending the supersensible that circulated throughout German idealism and Transcendentalism” (Deppman 2008). This not only tells us about how well-read she was or her intellectual interests but is indicative of philosophical anchors tethering her to her particular brand of and approach to reality, anchors which permeate her poetry. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant argues that time and space “are merely formal features of how we perceive objects, not things in themselves that exist independently of us, or properties or relations among them. Objects in space and time are said to be ‘appearances,’ and he argues that we know nothing of substance about the things in themselves of which they are appearances. Kant calls this doctrine (or set of doctrines) ‘transcendental idealism’” (Stang). Bolstering our readings of Dickinson through the influence of this transcendentalist, a Kantian lens can help elucidate how Dickinson reached and developed her ideas on how the body and mind, brain and mind, or body and soul, which I will treat as analogous for this paper’s purposes, factor into her outlooks of life.

In her brilliant and thought-provoking essay titled “At Home in the Body: The Internal Politics of Emily Dickinson’s Poetry,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler opens her discussion with a line from one of Dickinson’s letters to Joseph Lyman, a distant relative of the Dickinson family: “So I concluded that space & time are things of the body & have little or nothing to do with ourselves” (Sewall 71). This is actually a remarkable, and concise, recapitulation of Kantian philosophies, framed within Dickinson’s experience of them within reality. What is also noteworthy is the fact that she is drawing a distinction between “the body” and “ourselves,” seemingly distinguishing between the brain and the mind. Though this debate was nothing novel at this point in time, this statement appears to introduce a complexity that diverges from a Cartesian dualism sort of conception, even in all of its brevity. She expresses that the body (or brain) have

¹All cited poems will be taken from R.W. Franklin’s edition titled *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, and is widely regarded as the recognized authority on Dickinson’s poetry, and is the edition most true to her poetry in its original form

little *or* nothing to do with ourselves, in addition to the ambiguity as to what “having to do with” something means. Additionally, she takes the Kantian perspective, which is traditionally understood with reference to the world surrounding us, and reconfigures it to adopt a more introspective approach of asking how we define the self. This leads us to ask how Dickinson might actually understand this provocative dialectic and how it might help to describe identity in her poems.

Poem 1050 is utilized by Sánchez-Eppler as a springboard for discussing how Dickinson conceptualizes the body and soul:

I am afraid to own a Body—
 I am afraid to own a Soul—
 Profound—precarious Property—
 Possession, not optional—

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure
 Upon an unsuspecting Heir—
 Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
 And God, for a Frontier.

According to this lyrical prescription, Dickinson refers to the body and soul as a “Double Estate,” wherein “human identity is suspended between the irreconcilable but inseparable requirements of a body and a soul” (Sánchez-Eppler 105). With this understanding, these perceivable divisions within human identity that are so often explored within Dickinson’s poetry cannot be neatly explained away by either synthesizing or hermetically separating these two entities. Rather, these divisions exemplify the human condition as an elusive suspension that cannot be captured by any particular duality.

This understanding also offers insight into how the formation of identity might be approached in Dickinson’s poetry, perhaps counterintuitively enabling the expansion of the conversation beyond the self. Sánchez-Eppler looks at how for some authors, such as Whitman and Jacobs, their concern with the politically charged “corporeality of identity” is transformed within Dickinson’s writing “into a poetic, ahistorical and ontological dilemma.” Thus, in delving into how Dickinson’s writing resists historical and political constraints in its atemporality, Sánchez-Eppler enumerates an even loftier, more personally driven societal imperative for man wherein the differences that incur conflict amongst people are not merely relegated to external circumstances, but framed as “a split within the self” (130). So just like the “compartments” of the soul and the body are simultaneously tenuous and ineluctable, so too does Dickinson’s poetry “lay bare the paradoxical complicity between the ideal of liberty and the structures of bondage,” underscoring the complexity inherent within the freedom of the self, especially as a microcosm for the world at large as according to Dickinson’s perspective (130). Given this emphasis on understanding Dickinson’s writings in an elevated fashion outside of the historical arena (though there is much valuable

scholarship available on her work within it), I am interested in looking at Dickinson's poetry independently from its historical context.

To take this expansion of the meaning behind the body and soul further, if the soul is seen as a product of heaven while the body is a structure of earth, it should then follow that each may serve as a representation of their origins or attributions. In poem 1240, Dickinson explores heaven and earth while considering faith and reason:

So much of Heaven has gone from Earth
That there must be a Heaven
If only to enclose the Saints
To Affidavit given – (lines 1-4)

Once again, we can see here that the language used is not strictly divisive regarding heaven and earth, situating them as wholly separate spheres. Rather, it paints them as a sort of incompatible mixture. Heaven, even if in some limited capacity, seems to inhabit earth while also entailing a restricted area. The poem continues:

The Missionary to the Mole
Must prove there is a Sky
Location doubtless he would plead
But what excuse have I? (lines 5-8)

Too much of Proof affronts Belief
The Turtle will not try
Unless you leave him – then return
And he has hauled away. (lines 9-12)

The missionary here is an interesting figure, as it can be understood to be both a bodily figure of the earth and a saintly figure of the heavens. He is trying to serve as the emissary of heaven, as he “must prove” to his fellow earthly creatures that “there is a sky.” Yet there is something that simply just does not connect; any effort to explain the phenomenon is not only insufficient, but fundamentally characteristic of the thing itself. Meaning, if heaven were physically perceivable, that would belie its nature as heaven. Its existence in a separate register of reality is what defines it and makes it so elusive, precluding a satisfying mediation between the two. Dickinson is essentially saying that the human efforts to define heaven are futile, not in an effort to deny or invalidate faith but in a leap to better characterize its nature. On the other side, a confronted turtle conceals its true self within its shell, and “will not try” to offer proof of its life. Even as an earthly, self-evident creature, the turtle illustrates that perhaps it likewise cannot be demonstrated to the heavens to be a turtle. To prove himself would be to diminish himself, so therefore he diminishes himself on his own account in a show of not providing proof, and that is the victory. The internalization of its knowledge comes from the turtle's absence when “he has hauled away,” potentially connecting to a much larger transcendentalist notion of finding presence within absence.

This poem is perhaps more complicated than exploring the separation between heaven and earth, as they are foregrounded in a discussion of faith. Dickinson's characterization of heaven through the frame of religion is that it is actually a mode of confinement for those who claim to know exactly what heaven is, rather than some ultimate spiritual freedom. The religious figures are thus enclosed on account of their very own defining conceptions of what heaven is. The claim here is thus how fragile belief really is, because not only does "Too much of Proof [affront]" it, but because its essence really lies in its delicateness. On the whole, too much earth overwhelms the heavens, and likewise too much brain affronts the mind, and surely this relationship is bidirectional. This makes the idea of finding presence within absence all the more poignant, as it is seemingly perceiving the absences of earth within heaven and the absences of heaven within earth which allows them to be respective, yet simultaneous, entities.

Dickinson is documented to have debated extensively on the matter of faith with her own father, having come from a very religiously involved family, as well as with Ralph Waldo Emerson, a significant mentor of hers. What is particularly interesting about this is that while she challenged each of their positions, what she was fundamentally doing was protesting the notion that there could be any valid faith to begin with. Hyatt H. Waggoner in his scholarship on "The Transcendent Self" within Dickinson's work mentions that while her father subscribed to divine revelation he accepted as fact, Emerson possessed a "somewhat pantheistic 'Idealism,'" the latter being noteworthy on account of its essential conflation of God and the universe, or in other words, heaven and earth (Waggoner 320). All in all, both pivotal male figures in Dickinson's life subscribed to faith on the basis of some sort of revelation, a form of proof, even if the definition of said revelation differed. To Dickinson, however, "far from being required by anything we could 'know' about a reality outside ourselves, faith was simply a 'first necessity' of our being, resting on nothing but need" (Waggoner 320). With this, Dickinson displaces faith from being implicated in the knowledge of any matter outside of the individual, as similarly expressed in Kant's notion of transcendentalist idealism wherein nothing of substance can be known about objects in space and time. Instead, Dickinson centers faith within the self in a rather Cartesian--evocative of Descartes' famous philosophical first principle "I think, therefore I am"²--rendering of a self that necessarily embodies faith, thinks, and is spiritually manifest on account of its mere existence. But this spiritual conception of the self, of course, is impossibly but intrinsically coupled with the body, and both components can be found throughout Dickinson's poetry in decoupled instances through the exploration of flying creatures, whose mobility captures the elusiveness of this compartmentalization in the first place. Displacing the conversation of the body and soul onto these creatures thus provides an avenue for contemplating each component independently, since it

² See Part IV of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* for the original appearance of this idea.

removes them from the original conversation within which their decoupling is definitionally impossible (as per Sánchez-Eppler's lens).

2. Analysis of Creatures of Flight as Representations of Body and Soul

While generally perusing Dickinson's poetry, it soon becomes readily apparent that the text is replete with mention of bees. Bees can be seen as representative of the earth due to their low-flying capabilities that mostly anchor them to flowers and plants, as their nourishment is a direct product of the earth's growth and they are depended on to pollinate further vegetation. In one demonstrative selection, poem 979, the bee is framed as a soldier and laborer amongst the greenery of the earth:

His Feet are shod with Gauze -
His Helmet is of Gold,
His Breast, a single Onyx
With Chrysophras, inlaid -

His Labor is a Chant -
His Idleness - a Tune -
Oh, for a Bee's experience
Of Clovers, and of noon!

The bee's "Labor is a Chant" and is also marked by "Idleness," connoting a certain automation and mindlessness about its performance of activities, since the bee is dedicated to and exerting itself for a specific endeavor, yet remains idle within these supposedly concerted actions. What this poem appears to be getting at, even if not explicitly, is what is actually a crucial biological feature of bees, explored at length by scientist Jürgen Tautz who coins them as a "superorganism" with its "own, almost eerie, emergent group intelligence" (Tautz 4). They are described as a mammal in many different bodies, as they are a "self-organizing and complex adaptive system based on a network of communication" which Tautz declares "a fascinating result of evolution" (Tautz 247). Therefore, not only is the bee characteristic of the earthly sphere due to its natural properties, but its soldier-like and mechanical tendencies also seem to be a defining element, separating the bee from the heavenly realm not just in body but in spirit as well by portraying them as conquerors; a systematic force selected for by biology.

In poem 1213, the bee is similarly portrayed as a force of inhabiting and conquering the earth:

Like Trains of Cars on Tracks of Plush
I hear the level Bee -
A Jar across the Flowers goes
Their Velvet Masonry

Withstands until the sweet Assault
 Their Chivalry consumes -
 While He, victorious tilts away
 To vanquish other Blooms.

While the bee is seen reveling in its victoriousness, this poem actually does more to expound on the “Bee’s experience” mentioned in the previous poem, using more delicate language to offset the harshness of its foray into the flowers. There is something very artful about the description of the bee’s noise, its “Velvet Masonry” and the event of the “sweet Assault.” Scholar Victoria Morgan picks up on this thread, writing that “Nowhere is the connection between life and art made more apparent than in Dickinson’s bee imagery, which pressurizes and reconfigures a cultural paradigm of usefulness to accommodate experience. Dickinson invests the bee with the power and force of an emblem to symbolize the nature of that experience and the struggle involved in processes of transformation” (Morgan 76). This is a really interesting statement that ties bees to the profoundly earthly endeavors of utilitarianism and sensory experience, as the bee so aptly exemplifies the tension between the two. The bee is thus able to serve as a symbol of the earth in a way that both captures its complexities but also presents it as a unified whole that is categorically different than what might be seen as “endeavors of the soul,” which are characterized by a freeness of spirit untouched by earthly notions of purpose or the boundaries created by societal constructs and the constraints of the physical world.

A way in which the bee and its terrestrial role might be further investigated is by considering it against the backdrop of meta-earthly factors. Poem 1297 details an account of how a bee was almost consumed by the sky:

A single Clover Plank
 Was all that saved a Bee
 A Bee I personally knew
 From sinking in the sky —

'Twixt Firmament above
 And Firmament below
 The Billows of Circumference
 Were sweeping him away — (lines 1-8)

The bee here was only saved by virtue of its clinging to a clover plant, and perhaps this was not so much an anchoring from being swept away as much as a testament to the fact that realm of the sky is simply not where the bee belongs; it just cannot be found there. What is particularly interesting here is that the bee is described as being caught in a sort of in-between position within the firmament, so it was not yet lost to the full magnitude of the heavens, but it was getting lost in “The Billows of Circumference.” The word circumference is actually a much more loaded term than might meet the eye, as it is a concept of circularity and

limitlessness that appears quite frequently throughout the work of transcendentalist thinkers, particularly Emerson. Waggoner quotes a letter which Dickinson wrote to author Thomas Wentworth Higginson, wherein she shares with him that “My Business is Circumference” (Waggoner 309). With the contextualization of Emerson in mind, Waggoner proposes that for Dickinson to “explore circumference would be at once to explore her own unknown limits and to explore the mysteries of life and death, of Immortality and the Possible, of finite existence immersed in the infinite” (Waggoner 313).

If these unknown limits and mysteries of life are what is embedded in circumference, then certainly the bee, a markedly earth-bound creature, would get swallowed up in it, its vastness consuming that which could not fathom or inhabit it. Poem 1297 concludes:

This harrowing event
Transpiring in the Grass
Did not so much as wring from him
A wandering "Alas" – (lines 13-16)

This ending to the traumatic episode is rather striking in the bee’s seeming nonchalance. One can glean from this that the bee does not preoccupy itself with existential contemplation. In its embodiment of the earth specifically, to the exclusion of the heavens, perhaps the bee does not even realize its brush with death, if we might call it that, or at least not in a manner that is impactful. An even bolder speculation in this vein might be that the bee fully realizes what took place during this incident, but in its lack of “soul” simply does not “care.” That is to say, in contrast, perhaps humanity is particularly plagued by the existential dread of death on account of its soul, since the “double estate” allows us to recognize the soul, but never to isolate it, i.e., to know death.

On the other side of matters is the isolated soul, for all intents and purposes, in the figure of the angel. Though angels’ appearances throughout Dickinson’s poetry are definitely subtler, they have a noteworthy presence. In poem 73, Angels are found tending to their surroundings:

Angels, in the early morning
May be seen the Dews among,
Stooping - plucking - smiling - flying -
Do the Buds to them belong? (lines 1-4)

The speaker of the poem very poignantly implies that these angels have no right to the buds that they are beholding by asking “Do the buds to them belong?” They are creatures of the heavens and as such can exercise no ownership over the terrestrial features. The poem concludes:

May be seen the sands among,
Stooping - plucking - sighing – flying -
Parched the flowers they bear along. (lines 5-8)

When the heat peaks and nature responds, the angels are powerless against it, perhaps sighing in defeat or frustration as the flowers over which they have no claim remain parched and unrevivable in their grasp. At this level of interpretation, there just seems to be a general disconnect between the angels and the earth, perhaps on account of their unmixable natures. But maybe there is a deeper reading here that is more representative of the role of angels and their heavenly work in contrast to the perceptions of those who are earth-bound, with each realm being represented by each stanza, respectively. The “early morning” and “Dews” convey a sense of youth and newness, while the angels are “stooping” and “plucking.” But why, and how, would angels be plucking earthly ornaments? And why are they smiling? Perhaps these buds and flowers are metaphorically representing souls that are being removed from the earth, underscoring their previous anchoring and growth on earth up until the angels have come to gather them. The angels, in their knowledge of the true celestial clock and understanding of the transcendent (and transcendentalist) notion that there is no true loss in the universe, smile because in their omniscience they see a bigger picture, and bring these fresh souls to another dimension. The question “Do the Buds to them belong?” leads to how the limited, subjective human views the situation in the second stanza. To the human, the angels should be “sighing” in tragedy, plucking “Parched flowers” that have withered and lost their life force. With this dualistic understanding on the part of angels and humans, angels can be seen as the purest keepers or representations of the soul, only being able to interact and coalesce with this aspect of humanity, but still in their doing so are fundamentally disconnected from them.

Poem 154 features a more classically known vision of the angel:

She died – this was the way she died.
 And when her breath was done
 Took up her simple wardrobe
 And started for the sun –
 Her little figure at the gate
 The Angels must have spied,
 Since I could never find her
 Upon the mortal side.

This poem appears more readily concerned with the embodied quality of death rather than the separating out of the soul that is inherent to it, but like the previous poem which likened flowers to souls, the language used employs familiar images in descriptions of things that are physically not known to us, perhaps to likewise emphasize that there is a passage from one realm to the next due to the human’s suspended condition. The angels are portrayed as the gatekeepers of heaven, and the speaker realizes that there is some sort of dimensional transmutation of the human spirit once life has been left behind, because though obviously this girl or woman left a body behind, she “could

never find her,” the person whose identity was inextricably defined by the containment of the mortal body and the immortal soul.

Another way in which the human condition might be understood as a function of the “Double Estate” is that the body and soul simultaneously interact synergistically and limit each other, reflective of how the “identity provided by the compounding of body and soul can be neither assured nor escaped” (Sánchez-Eppler 108). The soul contains metaphysical, omniscient knowledge and awareness, bringing humanity the capacity for spiritual connectivity and higher wisdom, while also being necessarily limited in the extent of that capacity because of the earthly and physical bounds of the body. In turn, humans do not operate in an unbridled biological and animalistic manner, even though many of those drives still exist, because of what the soul bestows. Poem 714 implicitly leans into these ideas, exploring the awareness and limits of the human mind:

No Man can compass a Despair -
As round a Goalless Road
No faster than a mile at once
The Traveller proceed -

Unconscious of the Width -
Unconscious that the Sun
By setting on His progress
So accurate the one

At estimating Pain -
Whose own - has just begun -
His ignorance - the Angel
That pilot Him along –

Intriguingly, the angel here is portrayed as that which saves man from madness and utter despair. The all-knowing angel who is able to internalize the totality of time and thus the ultimate “goallessness” of the man’s travels and the endlessness of his suffering, is “pilot[ing] Him along” by serving as “His ignorance.” What propels the man forward in life is not having a grasp on the extent of his pain or his limits. The angel thus guides man not by imbuing him with this impossible other-worldly knowledge, but enables man’s progress through tempering this knowledge by scaling back the truths of the soul for the palatability of man, who could not function if made privy to all that it contains. Even if man’s impression of progressing through life is a farce, it enables him to be constantly moving forward since doing so would be impossible down a “Goalless Road” (or rather impossible if he was aware of it). In fact, scholar Charles Altieri reads within Dickinson’s poetry³ that “the soul’s power [within man] stems directly from its compressed realization of what finitude entails,” and thus its ability to be the maker of one’s life (Altieri 71).

³ Particularly within poem 876, beginning with “To be alive – is Power -”.

Though I will not be quoting the poem in its entirety here, poem 145 relates the biblical story of Jacob battling with the angel, which is the center of the discussion in John Wargacki's fascinating article that characterizes Dickinson's poetic approach to the story of the battle with the angel as being Midrashic (a form of Jewish Biblical exegesis) in nature. With Jacob in the clear lead during their confrontation, the angel begins to surrender, and in the words of the poem "begged permission / To Breakfast – to return!" (lines 7-8). Notably, this description "depicts a pivotal reversal in the divine-human hierarchy," affording a human-like vulnerability to the angel (Wargacki 67). This poem in particular caught my attention due to its subtle yet compelling parallelism to the bee who was almost enveloped in the sky. The angel simply cannot function or endure on earthly terms, engaged in combat, an endeavor of the bees; tied to the physicality of the world.

As we have explored, bees, in exemplifying the earthly realm seem to be analogous to the body, while angels, in their omniscience and occupation of the heavenly realm are analogous to the soul, so it should follow that a flighty creature in a similar fashion is analogous to the double estate of the universe. In the aforementioned poem 1240, Dickinson expresses that "Too much of proof affronts belief," but at the same time, poem 1609 expresses "Who has not found the Heaven – below - / Will fail of it above - " (lines 1-2). In comparison to her contemporaries such as Herman Melville and Friedrich Nietzsche, Dickinson "was among the first to take the full measure of the loss of God," a statement more in line with the sentiment from poem 1240, but "Instead of acceding to the inevitability of unbelief, for the whole of her adult life Dickinson sought to articulate a vision that could incorporate that loss within a more expansive faith," a vision more aligned with the sentiments expressed in poems like 1609 (Lundin 47). Taking these ideas--of too much of proof (i.e., body) affronts belief (i.e., soul), and that those who cannot find heaven on earth will not be able to find it above--in concert, along with the examinations of bees and angels and their encounters with their non-respective realms, may lead us to conclude that maybe there is not so much a fundamental separation of heaven and earth as much as there is an imperative for a proper balancing and distinction of the two. Perhaps grappling with the futility of proof for the heavens and the inability of the heavens to be captured within the physical world somehow engenders a "hope" as a "more expansive faith," rather than the faith merely being a "first necessity of our being" as previously discussed:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops - at all – (lines 1-4)

In this text, poem 314, we see an interesting coming together of ideas of the infinite and finite, as the spiritual and physical seem to be intermingling. Though the bird is perching, a physical action, it is also doing so within the soul.

Additionally, though the bird is singing, which is a vocal, corporeal endeavor, it is described as doing so forever, bringing it into the realm of the heavenly and immortal. The bird thus shows us what it means to contain the multitudes of both. This is actually quite evocative of the poem which introduced the concept of the “Double Estate,” and thus the framework of this entire discussion, since the last two lines read “Duke in a moment of Deathlessness / And God, for a Frontier.” Here, the Duke, a human figure, is paired with the term connoting immortality, while God is paired with the term that is markedly earthly in its associations. Also notably, according to this poem there is never “too much” of hope; if anything, there is a call for its perpetual maintenance. Hope, in essence, is a reframing of the faith initially introduced as an inwardly facing necessity of the self as a faith developed on the basis of some given reality, a reason given to yearn for the future, and an embodiment of the body and soul balancing act.

Though the bird is seemingly a resident of both the sky and the earth, it is necessarily limited in its position according to the simultaneous irreconcilability and non-separation of these spheres, further indicating the bird’s role as the “Double Estate” exemplar found in nature. In poem 93, Dickinson explores a theory of negative attributes, wherein once again something is recognized through its absence:

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land – by the Oceans passed.
Transport – by throe –
Peace, by its battles told –
Love, by memorial mold –
Birds, by the snow.

Each line leading up to the final one flows quite logically in terms of their pairings, putting opposites in conversation with each other, but when it comes to the description of how birds are “taught,” it is curiously written that it is through the snow. This could be considered with respect to motion, as snow can be seen as a non-flying counterpart, since it falls instead of soars, but perhaps the message here goes beyond direction of flight. While snow is able to be a fixed occupier of both the skies and the earth, forging a continuous, natural cycle between the two, birds are the nomads of the earth and the sky in a way, never quite settling in either, making nests as earthly dwellings but only transiently and only to spend a fraction of the time there as they do in the sky.

It is clear in other instances throughout Dickinson’s poetry that she paints birds in a whimsical light, emphasizing their free spirits along with their dualistic allegiances, such as in poem 462:

Of Being is a Bird
The likest to the Down
An Easy Breeze do put afloat
The General Heavens – opon –

It soars – and shifts – and whirls –
 And measures with the Clouds
 In easy – even – dazzling pace –
 No different the Birds –

Except a Wake of Music
 Accompany their feet – (lines 1-10)

Here, of great interest to the speaker is not necessarily the components of the bird itself, but the qualities which are afforded to its surroundings, defining the bird through those instead. Interestingly, these qualities are characterized through planar reference points on the bird, specifically from above, unto its wings, and from below, onto their feet. This is a very intriguing delineation, almost suggesting a bird's existence in two different dimensions, or at least, in two different spatial compartments. The space above the bird is also described as "The General Heavens" rather than "skies," "horizons," or some other term traditionally associated with a more telluric conception of the ether. Looking at the other end, the poem qualifies the lower realm with "a Wake of Music," implying a dichotomy encapsulated in earthly life. While "Wake" is typically taken to mean a vigil, it brings imagery of mortality into the picture while "Music" is a creative, but decidedly earthly, endeavor. Additionally of note is that according to the Emily Dickinson Lexicon, the term "wake" can be used in word play to describe an "air current." According to this, the music is actually the very thing which holds up the bird from its feet; that its gift of song from the earth is what brings it up, while the breezes from the heavens push it down from upon its wings. This very intertwined imagery paints the bird as a true creature of suspension between the two realms, because its placement is not unilateral in the sense that the heavens keeps the bird fixed above while the earth simultaneously maintains the bird as a creature of the earth. Rather, the earth both holds and pushes up while the heavens do the same thing on the other end, also precluding the bird from really finding any sanctuary in one particular domain.

3. Birds and the Sublime

If we are to understand birds as natural representations of the suspended human condition, perhaps one might also take their dynamic, flighty essence as being prescriptive in nature in addition to descriptive. In this way, the bird may serve as a symbol of promoting human access to both parts of the human self in more balanced proportions. Despite Dickinson's seemingly authentic and thoughtful lyrical capture of birds, at the end of the day, the bird still, in the words of Robert Kern, "flies off to a place where it cannot be followed or pursued or readily observed by a judgmental or even an admiring onlooker--and to this extent the speaker's assumptions about a human/natural connection are repudiated" (Kern 332-333). However, in this physical repudiation of the human and natural connection, there may still be a connection of a higher order. The

bird cannot be empirically or materially accounted for and its path “can only be described, let alone encountered, indirectly and imaginatively, through a language of virtually magical or visionary inventiveness that attempts to speak the silence of the bird's world and experience” (Kern 333). I do not think Dickinson's poetic language is a mere “attempt” to animate the bird's world, which implies a certain insufficiency and reductive quality of the language, though the inadequacy of language to capture the world is certainly a worthwhile question. But questions of the fundamental capacities of language aside, the attempt of any human being to completely characterize the bird through fact and observance would not in fact be a maintaining of a human-nature connection, but a vehicle for its further distancing. In his work on the relationship between humans and birds, Gibson asks, “I wonder if there ever was a moment when a cardinal outside my window sat there in blazing splendour signifying nothing”⁴ (Gibson 17). The more one allows the brain/body to approach the bird rather than the imagination/soul (or vice versa), the more the bird can only facilitate “human/natural” bifurcation and exemplify only one half of the “Double Estate.” A bird that signifies nothing is not one that doesn't exist, but one that is not assigned any extraneous constructs of meaning belying its essence; it simply is. According to Kant, the sublime is *a mental process*, a “particular subjective experience that presents the limits of human knowledge to the subject. By emphasizing the subject and the limits of human cognition, the Kantian sublime ultimately rests not in Nature itself, but in the human capacity to reason about Nature” (Faruqee & Driscoll). Thus, employing the soul in creativity and spirituality with respect to beholding the bird once it is out of view and can no longer be considered by the body necessarily manifests the sublime in its recognition of the brain's limits. In this way, the bird is not only a natural symbol of the “Double Estate,” but it is also a creature that enables humanity to transcend the “Double Estate” while considering the bird, because it embodies a mode of synthesis for the body and soul.

According to Sánchez-Eppler, “the double bind of human identity impinges on all attempts to imagine or give image to transcendence,” but I respectfully disagree given the examination of the bird and the framework of Kant, who lays out in *Critique of Pure Reason* that there is a profound connection between the ability to possess self-consciousness (a higher, soul-awareness) and the ability to experience a world of objects⁵ (the sensory, physical world of the body) (Sánchez-Eppler 180). Kant describes that the mind is able to figure the form of objects and maintain its own independence simultaneously through a process of synthesis, a synthesis that was initially presented by Sánchez-Eppler as being impossible given the simultaneous precariousness and inevitability of the “Double Estate” (Kant, 224-228). In an account that demonstrates the transcendental potential imbedded within observing the bird and resisting the

⁴ This idea is more aligned with the concept of transcendental realism rather than transcendental idealism, but nonetheless underscores how objects in themselves are separate entities from the representation of objects in human thought (see Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*).

⁵ An interesting supplementary exercise here would be examining the different types of a priori propositions (see Kant's *Critique of Judgement*).

urge to simply judge or categorize, Richard Nelson, the author of *The Island Within*, recounts a tale of when he stopped being able to see a group of seabirds and says, “So I quit the exercise [of consulting the bird book] and simply take them in, give myself fully to these moments of wildness, to the pleasure of moving through galaxies of living flight. There are no names, no thoughts, no principles to ponder; only the loops and gyres of wings, like droplets spinning in the clouds of mist” (113). Nelson, in giving himself over to the bird in mind and superseding intellect, has an experience of the sublime, taking in the creatures of flight in all of their glory. The sublime being described here, however, is not the Kantian one we have passively developed until this point. In a 1961 article for *Art News* entitled “The Abstract Sublime,” Robert Rosenblum describes the sensation of the sublime from looking at the paintings of Mark Rothko, Clifford Still, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock and likens it to the sensation of the sublime that Romantic landscape painters Friedrich and Turner sought in their work: “The infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the sublime; we can only submit to them in an act of faith and let ourselves be absorbed into their radiant depths” (qtd. in Faruqee & Driscoll). Rosenblum seems to be expressing the notion of the sublime as irrational,⁶ “not the Kantian notion that privileges reason’s ability to present the sublime in its totality, however indefinitely. But nevertheless, the statement does privilege the Kantian dictum, particularly the mention of intuition and its inability to fully grasp: relating thus to Kant’s indefinite concepts of the understanding and reason” (Faruqee & Driscoll). Remarkably, in another letter to Higginson, Dickinson herself expresses that, “It is delicate that each Mind is itself, like a Distinct Bird” (Anderson 303). If we are to understand the mind in this instance as the coming together of the brain and the soul, it is delicate insofar as it is the precarious double estate, and the description of distinct is qualifying what has already been explored about birds thus far throughout Dickinson’s poetry. In the journey of the sublime, the bird is observed but not reduced in a futile attempt to define its essence, but rather exists on its own terms, powerful in its unique inaccessibility and the external recognition of that inaccessibility, just like each individual mind.

In Gary Lee Stonum’s book “The Dickinson Sublime,” he points out that Dickinson’s poetry figures well into Thomas Weiskel’s 1976 structuralist study of the sublime experience during the Romantic period. In his analysis, he says that the sublime experience written during the Romantic period could be generally captured within three stages. The first stage of any experience is moving unproblematically through the ordinary routines of individual life. The second stage is traumatic, as one is suddenly overwhelmed or uplifted by an exciting, ecstatic experience. The third stage is reactive: one gains or regains a new clarity or understanding of “totality, individuality, order and identity” (Stonum 6). Through Stonum’s insightful analysis, there is a fascinating stringing together of the three creatures of flight that were explored, bees, angels, and birds,

⁶ Particularly Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime (see Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*).

respectively, yielding an ultimate path to the sublime that incorporates all three. The first stage is characterized by the mundane mechanics of day to day life, like was observed with the bee, the second stage is a traumatic burst into a seraphic, diametric realm, as in the angels, and the third stage is a synthesis of sorts after the presented dialectic; a sustainable double estate, a bird, where transcendence is possible.

4. A Deeper Look at Dialectics

Lawrence Buell, in his important work on ecocriticism, *The Environmental Imagination*, declares that “the nonhuman environment [should be] present not merely as a framing device but as a presence” and that “the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest” (7). Buell says that the artist must realize nature’s presence through “disciplined extrospection” (104). Extrospection essentially means expanding the mind to outside the self in order “to see or articulate the natural environment on its own terms” (81). Dickinson clearly incorporates extrospection into her poetry, as we have seen with all of the creatures she has described in her poems, by affording them a deep attentiveness and a consciousness in observation that seems almost continuous with their natures rather than being a removed framing for the sake of a contrived human interest. Analyzing the previously explored cardinal, Kern contends that “observing a bird, and writing about it, are acts that can be totally at odds with each other... The problem here may belong to language or writing itself, or it may belong to the particular sensibility and sensitivity of the writer, who cannot abide the gap between the artifice that signifies, and the thing that just is” (334-335). In his book *The Life of the Skies*, Jonathan Rosen describes what he calls “birding at the end of nature”:

Ideally, birdwatching gives you both the symbol and the living bird. [. . .] [It] is an exercise in balance. It has a built-in acknowledgment that nature is finite: you don't shoot the bird, you look at it. You bring along a guidebook, emblem of the library world, even as you wander out into nature in pursuit of something wild. You get the thrill of seeing an untamed creature, but immediately you cage it in its common or scientific name, and link the bird, and yourself, to a Linnaean system of nomenclature that harks back to an Enlightenment notion that nature can be ordered. And behind Linnaeus lurks the biblical belief that, like Adam, we name the animals. It is simply our job. (24-25)

This idea that “birdwatching” gives both the symbol and the living bird in a balancing act factors rather well into analyzing Dickinson’s poetic voice and how she employs the figure of the bird to elucidate the mind body relationship through extrospection. Harold Bloom refers to the Ursula Le Guin parable in which Eve unnames the animals, in contrast to Adam, by suggesting that the title “She Unnames Them” would be a good description for Emily Dickinson: “If I could, I would use that as the title instead of *The Complete Poems of Emily*

Dickinson. She never does stop unnamings them as she sublimely and outrageously unnames even blanks. . . . Her unique transport, her Sublime, is founded upon her unnamings of all our certitudes into so many blanks; it gives her, and her authentic readers, another way to see, almost into the dark” (Bloom 275–288). In other words, another way to see the bird as “distinct” and thus seeing it in arguably the realest of ways, even if not the most typical or familiar.

In contrast to Dickinson’s approach is the ordering, caging “Enlightenment” outlook on the bird, and nature more broadly. Enlightenment is commonly characterized by a general societal and intellectual commitment to the abstract universal, employing reason and rationality in the gesture of objective observation. Though this kind of shift is ideally supposed to be a vehicle for progress and positive change, it can come at a price, or perhaps, following this to its extreme conclusion, is ultimately self-defeating. Scholars such as Horkheimer and Adorno of the Frankfurt School, who lived during a time overrun by totalitarianism, examine Enlightenment by identifying a strange existential hollowness that comes along with reducing everything to an object of thought. As a result, instrumentality ultimately defeats itself, with Enlightenment begetting totalitarianism rather than social revolution. In their piece “The Concept of Enlightenment,” Horkheimer and Adorno explore a binary of art and knowledge through the lens of Enlightenment concepts. A common feature of literature during this time, a product of considering the world through the objective lens, was to approach other people and nature as fixed orders, “othering” them in the process.

As I came to reading the very last poem, poem 1789, featured in the Franklin Edition of Dickinson’s poetry, I could not believe that it was about sirens, the ultimate bird form, and also a very prominent feature in the “The Concept of Enlightenment”:

It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,
By separation’s sorcery
Made cruelly more dear.

It makes us think of what we had,
And what we now deplore.
We almost wish those siren throats
Would go and sing no more. (lines 9-16)

Horkheimer and Adorno explore the tale of Odysseus and the Sirens, wherein Odysseus is bound to the mast of the ship so as to be able hear the beauty of the Sirens’ song which promises mantic truths, while being restricted from being lured in by it which would lead to certain death.⁷ If the self is defined at one extreme as a function of thought and intellect, the surrender of the self

⁷ Though I am not discussing it here, the idea of death actually being the gateway to all truth is certainly a subject explored at length within Dickinson’s poetry

exists on the other end by renouncing one's self to desires, to other life, and to the joy of "power as art." The temptation of the latter, represented by the Sirens, results from "the urge to rescue the past as something living, instead of using it as the material of progress," as they make people "think of what [they] had" (Adorno & Horkheimer 25, Dickinson line 13). According to this conception, the self thus only exists in separation from nature and the world, as thought's "function [is] of separating, distancing, and objectifying" (Adorno & Horkheimer 31). In this way, the "autocratic intellect... detaches itself from sensuous experience [i.e. the Siren song] in order to subjugate it" (Adorno & Horkheimer 28). By being shackled to the mast, Odysseus is able to detach himself from the experience of the song enough to not experience death as a result, but this detachment also means that "their lure is neutralized as a mere object of contemplation" (Adorno & Horkheimer 27).

Considering this understanding of Odysseus' circumstance, it seems as though "the separation of the two realms [those of knowledge and art, or the self and the Other] leaves both damaged" rather than providing a "best of both worlds" kind of scenario (Adorno & Horkheimer 28). This is because Enlightenment does not allow "the split between subject and object... to be bridged," as "The distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled" (Adorno & Horkheimer 31, 9). This reality therefore only allows for two ways to move forward: either as Odysseus, who is only able to experience the world through his separation from and thus domination over it, or as his comrades- whose ears were plugged with wax in order not to hear the Siren song altogether- powerless, and forgoing any form of experiencing art and beauty, but therefore not needing to other and separate in the process. Perhaps rather boldly, I would like to propose a synthesis of Adorno and Horkheimer with the ideas developed within Dickinson's poetry, and frame the comrades, Odysseus, and the sirens as the bee, the angel, and the bird, respectively. The bees are the mindless, productive workers, always taking commands and not experiencing the heavenly aspect of the universe, the angels possess the attitude that the world cannot affect them, holding themselves superior over a world beholden to the physical, and the bird contains the mantic truth of the sublime.

All of these connections are testaments to the how much greatness Dickinson possessed as a poet. In her explorations of humanity, the soul, and nature, she managed to both capture the images seamlessly, even with a simplicity that often belied their true depths, and never exercised it as a dominating, calculating endeavor. In the words of Wargacki, the "stillness of her *outward, physical existence* stands in sharp contrast to her perpetual *restlessness of spirit*, a chasm that could only be bridged ultimately by her ever-probing imagination—an imagination that could build a bridge between the two, not made of steel and stone, but of the word" (82). These words, inspired and true, however, still come from an external, categorizing source (albeit of another scholar). But even Dickinson herself struggled and commented on her artistic,

existential position as a poet (in another letter to Higginson), saying, “I thought that being a Poem one's self precluded the writing Poems, but perceive the Mistake” (Anderson 296). Dickinson perhaps once thought that she could not possibly bridge subject and object, to be art and create art, but she ultimately found the verity within her own words; her own self. She realized that divisions are brought together yet remain nuanced through embracing the bird, the mantic truth, and the potential of the sublime, all bound by the transcendent power of the word that she accessed. Above all, Dickinson was an instantiation of her very own observations, a beautiful and brilliant manifestation of humanity’s “Double Estate.”

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REBECCA SIEGEL, BC ‘22, double majored in English and Neuroscience with a cellular and molecular concentration. She currently works as a Research Assistant at the New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University Department of Psychiatry where she is involved in neuroscience research studying autism and neurodevelopmental differences. She is interested in Existentialism, Critical Theory, poetry, experimental fiction, and the exploration of complex psychological themes in literature. She is also passionate about the intersection of science and the arts and hopes to integrate writing into her future career as a physician and researcher.