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Contemplating language as 'an edge that never arrives'[1] in Emily Dickinson's poetry

Abstract:

The experience of being in the world, of trying to make sense of it, and of interacting meaningfully with others has always challenged us to find better ways of expressing ourselves through language, and more original ways of articulating ideas. This is why the literary arts, especially poetry, have traditionally been so important to so many cultures. Now, as our world increases in verbosity, if not articulacy, the imperative for meaningful verbal expression and exchange grows ever more pressing. Yet even the most skilled writers cannot take it for granted that they will always find 'the right words.' With the work of Emily Dickinson as its focus, this paper argues that it may be better not to try. For if we consider writing solely to be a question of 'finding the right words,' not only do we limit language's power and possibility, we also limit ourselves. Using Dickinson's poetic example, this paper contemplates language as 'an edge that never arrives', and suggests that the more we strive for, and fail, to reach the limits of language, the closer we may come to accessing, not only the originality and expressiveness we crave, but also the means to engage with a deeply enriching literacy of uncertainty.

Biographical note:

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1. Introduction

We appear to live in an age where facts, definitiveness and certitude are prized over circumspection and uncertainty. A wealth of information, helpful and otherwise, is available to most of us at the touch of a button. Yet this is also an era of 'fake news', obfuscation, and propaganda. How do we grapple with these complexities? Where do we situate ourselves, how do we become fluent in this 'literacy of uncertainty'? Perhaps most important yet challenging for us as writers, how can we celebrate the emotional and creative freedom that comes from accepting that not all things can be articulated?

My research stems from my enduring fascination with poetry's relationship to the ineffable,[2] or, as I also refer to it, the unsayable. I am exploring how language may be recast and given voice through a poetry that seizes on and amplifies the notion of the unwritten and unsaid: a poetry treating this so-called 'inarticulation' not as lack, but as a rich linguistic and conceptual poetic resource. To help me achieve this poetic exploration, I am drawing upon the principles and techniques of the ancient rhetoric of negation, known as apophasis (ἀπόφασις),[3] a traditional means of writing about and addressing the ineffable.

In exploring how far an apophatic approach can inform my attempt to engage with thematic and performative ineffability in the writing of poetry, I have been researching the work of poets, philosophers, artists and mystics whose topical or artistic concerns and explorations have required some use – explicit or implicit – of this 'language which negates and unsays itself' (Franke 2007a: 9). Where our attention is deliberately directed, through a variety of means, to the significance of the unuttered rather than what can actually be said, as happens in much poetry, there an apophatic strain may be detected.

In Emily Dickinson, 'our greatest rhetorician of loss' (Cameron 1979: 151), we have perhaps the English language's ultimate apophatic poet. Poet and critic Reginald Gibbons rightly asks: 'what major poet has thought her way more deeply into absence, emptiness and ungraspable infinitude than Dickinson?' (Gibbons 2007a: 20). Her poems act as a fulcrum between '… not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not – / A beautiful but Bleak condition' (Dickinson 1970: 577, Poem # 1331); they hover and energise the thermals and vibrations of what might lie up to and beyond the limits of articulation.

So many of Dickinson's poems inhabit a metaphysical topos that privileges the subtleties of the inner life over the outer, the afterlife over the present, and yet so often these highly conceptual matters are cast in material and quotidian terms. In Poem # 1159 (dated ca. 1870) Dickinson merges the abstract with the concrete to articulate apparently hypothetical realms:

> Great Streets of silence led away
>
> To Neighborhoods of Pause –
>
> Here was no Notice – no Dissent
>
> No Universe – no Laws –
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 517)[4]

I say 'apparently' hypothetical realms, for in some ways, under Dickinson's design, these realms are rendered as concretely as any of their physical counterparts. The 'Great Streets' and 'Neighborhoods' invoked by the above stanza form the topography of Dickinson's poetic concerns, based on a nullification of any parameters—'no Notice – no Dissent / No Universe – no Laws –'—of any identifiable world order. These are locales where the only certainty is uncertainty, and the only thing that can be relied on is a lack of reliability.

Dickinson's poetry demonstrates how the 'unsaying' of apophasis in both mode and inflection hovers and inhabits the margins of a linguistic, temporal and topological disintegration, sustaining a combination of vocabulary, style and attitude that is imaginatively and intellectually oriented towards the unseen, invisible, intangible and unknowable. Accordingly, in this paper, I attempt to show how, in terms of approach, subject matter and style, Dickinson's relentless (and fearless) jousting with the unknown – 'the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God …' (Dickinson in Linscott 1959: 307) – leads her into poetic territory traversing and teasing the edge that never arrives.

2. The 'departing light': Dickinson's poetic approach

Dickinson's poems are bound together by their interrogation of humankind's greatest ontological, theological and existential questions circling round the nature of being, the existence of God, and life after death; interrogations that often look to everyday phenomena – the flowers or creatures of her garden for example – to expose some intimation of mortality. Dickinson's poetry consistently seems to gesture towards what remains either out of sight or beyond speech. Even in letters, Dickinson reveals a leaning towards the tacit and withheld: 'saying nothing, My Aunt Katie, sometimes says the Most' (Dickinson 1971: 219) Dickinson writes to Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser in 1874.

With an approach that is as expansive in content as it is succinct in style, Dickinson invites the reader to acknowledge that, in the metaphysics of human experience, there is much that language cannot fully explain or encompass. Dickinson's whole mode of enquiry, her purposeful engagement with poetic language, is to probe the unlanguaged side of being and belief.

The world with its griefs and joys, as filtered through Dickinson's prismatic gaze, thus takes on a unique cast in her poetry. Her poetics offer an object lesson in the oblique glance, and the poetic and apophatic possibilities of being able to glance *off* a subject as well as fleetingly glancing *at* it. Poem # 1714 (undated) notes:

> By a departing light
>
> We see acuter, quite,
>
> Than by a wick that stays.
>
> There's something in the flight
>
> That clarifies the sight

And decks the rays.

(Dickinson 1970: 696)

By losing or abandoning illumination, the speaker seems to be saying, we hone a keener perception, and perhaps receive, as compensation for being left in the dark, a sharpened inner vision. I read this poem as a parable of loss, detecting in the words 'quite' and 'something' a hint of weary acknowledgement that the wisdom gained – that very perspicacity without which the speaker could not make the declaration that constitutes the poem – does not quite make up for the radiance forfeited in the making of that wisdom. This poem thus encodes a double loss while seeming only to refer to one. Great poems (and especially Dickinson's poems) seem to serve as lenses that I try to position and reposition as I imagine the poet perhaps might have, continually refocusing and adjusting the depth of vision to capture what may be hidden in plain sight.

To illustrate these points about Dickinson's approach, I will use her well-known Poem # 986 (dated ca. 1865) about the snake: 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' (Dickinson 1970: 459), a fine example of how Dickinson blurs the edge between the material and the abstract. Like all of Dickinson's poems, this one can be read and interpreted in myriad ways; however, I want to focus on this poem for the perspectives it prompts regarding what we think of as 'seeing,' and how Dickinson skews and plays on those perceptions:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass

Occasionally rides –

You may have met Him – did you not

His notice sudden is –

The Grass divides as with a Comb –

A spotted shaft is seen –

And then it closes at your feet

And opens further on –

(Dickinson 1970: 459))

The two opening stanzas invite me to look over the shoulder of the poem's speaker as if, with them, I am discerning a presence through contours—'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' – or becoming aware of what 'we' are looking at through its movement: 'Occasionally rides –'. We are 'seeing' this creature through the effects of its presence, rather than perceiving it directly: the grass parting obediently like hair at a comb's angle, only to close and then part further on, showing the trajectory and direction of the snake's progress, and hinting also at the inexorable speed, precision and smoothness of its 'ride' in the sibilance of 'Grass', 'shaft' and 'seen.'

Paradoxically, though we may 'spot' the 'spotted shaft' mainly by how the grass behaves, the poem hints that more often the snake will have spied us first: 'His notice sudden is –'. Who is then the watcher; who is the watched? What is 'real'? If we cannot trust our sight—the sense many of us most commonly rely on – what can we trust? Yet

this is the world as conjured by Dickinson, in which trust and reliability are only relative, contingencies in a domain where only the uncertain is certain, and what appears to be 'so' may not be. Indeed, in the next stanza, the speaker recalls an experience that confirms this paradigm of deceptiveness and illusion:

> Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot –
>
> I more than once at Noon
>
> Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
>
> Unbraiding in the Sun
>
> When stooping to secure it
>
> It wrinkled, and was gone –
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 460)

Full noon, direct sun, and 'more than once': and yet the barefooted boy repeatedly comes so close to danger. The implication is that even his keen young eyes cannot see the whip for what it truly is; for if they had, he would surely never have come so close to take his life (and Death) in his hands. For Death, embodied by the snake, is in this poem: unspoken; disguised; perceived yet not seen. Or, for the speaker, there is a more disturbing possibility: a disconnect between his sight and his mind. With this report of how he mistakes the snake for something else, we may infer this is what he 'saw.' Yet the speaker actually says he 'thought' he passed a 'Whip lash,' and this thought puts in doubt not so much his vision as his mind.

For the speaker, shaken by this near miss, all snakes are now the archetypal snake. Become adult, the speaker is still constantly on the lookout for it, just as some may nervously watch for Death. Yet nobody can 'see' Death coming. All we can do is intuit a 'sudden notice' when Death brushes past us, and we experience '… a tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone –' (Dickinson 1970: 460). The apophatically-charged word 'Zero' ascribes a collapsing, negative value to something solid, a hollowing-out of the bone's ability to support flesh and sinew. It is expressive of the adrenalin-filled reaction, a weakness at the knees, perhaps, engendered by encountering a snake at close proximity. But again, a double meaning suggests itself. Might not this physical disintegration, coupled with 'a tighter breathing,' rehearse just what happens to us when we actually die?

This poem shows how, even when her poetic speakers are discussing phenomena that no living human can know, Dickinson succeeds in offering an unsettling sideways glimpse over the edge at an afterlife, at eternity; and because her language seems deceptively simple relative to the complexity of the ideas she discusses, Dickinson dares readers to be literal – the snake – *and* lateral – Death – in our interpretive approach to her poems. For it is only by adopting both dispositions that we can begin to accommodate the multiple directions of Dickinson's poetic outlook and the multiple layers of her poetic introspection.

While a poem such as haiku, studied at length, holds the sense of a little door unlocking a big space, Dickinson's most enigmatic poems do not necessarily 'unlock.' The more one looks at even the shortest of Dickinson's poems, the more abstract and evasive they

seem; and yet, despite the ambient uncertainty swirling around the subject matter, the poetic voice in them is so sure, so authoritative. In poem # 1251 (dated 1873), the speaker remarks:

> Silence is all we dread.
>
> There's Ransom in a voice —
>
> But Silence is Infinity.
>
> Himself have not a Face.
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 548)

This is #1251 in its entirety: just four lines, four statements in effect. It offers three concrete nouns – a Ransom, a Face and a voice – yet the most definite statements, involving the copula 'is,' relate to the abstract nouns of Silence and Infinity. The key to the poem lies in these two authoritative statements: 'Silence is all we dread' and 'Silence is Infinity.' The other two lines depend on these for some measure of sense-making. Dickinson's speaker seems to be asserting that one can obtain some return or benefit – a 'Ransom' – from hearing a voice, or from using a voice to speak. Speech and listening take place in 'real' time, so we can ascribe a temporal as well as communicative value to both acts. With Silence, however, there can be no such gain, no such 'purchase,' for Silence is not beholden to time, but just is: timeless, mighty and infinite. Thus, in offering us no verbal response that we can pin to a moment, however fleeting, the faceless Silence/Infinity withholds any clue or evidence that we exist in relation to it, nor even that we exist at all.

Yet how can Dickinson personify Silence/Infinity as 'Himself' and yet this 'self' not have a Face? As God said to Moses (Exodus 33.20, authorised King James version) 'Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.' Perhaps 'Himself' is another name for God?

The jolt of this sudden switch in logic, as well as in syntax ('He' would surely be more grammatically correct than 'Himself') swells the interpretive challenge as well as the metaphysical ambit of this poem into something far more expansive than four short lines can contain. While abruptness of syntax or ungrammatical language is typical of much poetry, to see these techniques so blatantly deployed in just nineteen words totalling twenty-six syllables is unusual. The brevity and density of the poem accentuates the ungrammaticality, which in turn accentuates the ambiguity of its content. Concluding with the negation: 'Himself have not a Face' (Dickinson 1970: 548), these four lines, condensed and gnomic, epitomise Dickinson's poetics:

> words as manifestations of presence. Words as adjacencies to presence. Words as ropes flung over impossible spaces, caught and held firmly at the receiving end, their origin, by definition, unknown. (Cameron 1979: 187)

Critic Sharon Cameron's analysis describes the complex architecture, not just of the poems themselves, but of the spaces Dickinson makes them span. The following examples I have selected show how one end of an idea may be fastened, only for its other end to pitch out over the edge into answerlessness: 'The Object Absolute – is

nought –' #1071 (Dickinson 1970: 486); 'Unto the Whole – how add?' # 1341 (Dickinson 1970.: 580); 'The Finite – furnished with the Infinite –' # 906 (428).

In the art of 'unsaying,' while teasingly appearing to 'say,' Dickinson is unsurpassed. Not only that, in the emotional and psychological scope of her poetry, its variations of mood, and shifts of poetic voice from vatic to didactic to confiding, Dickinson creates a body of work that, the more it purports to reveal, the deeper and more cryptic it becomes.

3. 'Subjects that resist': Dickinson's subject matter

Tilting with ambiguity, skewing the truth, hinting and teasing, in terms of subject matter, nothing is off limits in Dickinson's writing, and yet – because she probes further into the fabric of these topics with the needle of her intellect in search of more to be said if it *could* be said – she extends those limits and then subverts them. Thriving on 'subjects that resist' (Dickinson 1970: 605), Dickinson writes in Poem # 1071, dated circa 1866:

> Perception of an object costs
>
> Precise the Object's loss –
>
> Perception in itself a gain
>
> Replying to its Price –
>
>
> The Object Absolute – is nought –
>
> Perception sets it fair
>
> And then upbraids a Perfectness
>
> That situates so far –
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 486)

Through a poetic register that borrows from economics, reprising Dickinson's interest in the relationships between gain and loss, the poem seems to be teasing out the idea of what knowledge is, relative to possession and perception. Seeing an object may imply an approximation of knowledge, however, this 'surface' information (what an object looks like to the eye) comes at the cost of possessing or knowing the essence of the object. If we can perceive something, the speaker seems to warn, we must not mistake perception for knowing this object, and we certainly must not conflate perception with possessing the object. Perhaps some 'Objects' require perception to be more intuitive and oblique, for too much direct and forensic attention will cause them to disappear. And the second stanza hints that any value we ascribe to an object is a figment of how we perceive it anyway; unregarded, the 'Object Absolute' is nothing but the 'Object', and as such does not rate on any pecuniary scale. This changes, however, once 'Perception sets it fair', and ascribes to it some value, mediated perhaps by the ego of the viewer: 'If *I* am finding this worthwhile to look at, then that makes it worthwhile'. Dickinson's speaker seems to be gently skewering human nature, which finds it difficult

to distinguish these relative subtleties between perception, knowledge and possession, tending to assume a direct causality between seeing and knowing.

The potential differences among ways of seeing, knowing, receiving and perceiving is a theme that Dickinson regularly explores, and to great effect and affect in Poem # 1417 (ca. 1877):

> How Human Nature dotes
>
> On what it can't detect.
>
> The moment that a Plot is plumbed
>
> Prospective is extinct –
>
>
> Prospective is the friend
>
> Reserved for us to know
>
> When Constancy is clarified
>
> Of Curiosity –
>
>
> Of subjects that resist
>
> Redoubtablest is this
>
> Where go we –
>
> Go we anywhere
>
> Creation after this?
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 604-5)

This poem appears to circle issues of the unknown, and question the wisdom of knowing too much. The first two lines are perhaps the least ambiguous, making a statement about the mind's attraction to the unknown. Yet the question of what this 'unknown' might be pitches the reader straight into trying to unravel the poem's intriguing riddle. Thus even before the first stanza is halfway through, the veracity of the opening statement is being proven.

The 'Plot' of the third line of the first stanza could be interpreted as the plot or structure of a story, and because the word 'plumbed' comes in quick succession, also as the grave. The elements of a narrative can be 'plumbed' (the story read to the end), and at burial, the coffin with its occupant plumbs the depths of a grave: the story of a life reaching its conclusion. In both cases, a conclusion or resolution, a 'knowing the end of the story' seems to be implied.

Yet, if human nature dotes on what it cannot detect, then once the fleeting revelatory moment is reached, the speaker suggests, human nature also finds coming to the end of the story ultimately a disappointment. And it is counterproductive, for knowledge destroys the anticipation, the thrill – 'Prospective' – that animates the desire to keep searching in the first place. If the speaker is intimating that knowledge is dull, are they

also implying that knowledge is 'death' to an inquisitive, insatiable life-force? Returning to the Plot/grave analogy, surely one of the biggest mysteries is what happens after death? Yet in the final line of the first stanza, the speaker is implying that once one is intimate with the grave, this mystery becomes 'extinct' – not just comfortingly solved – but extinct; not dead so much as totally died out, wiped out, erased. So yes, by this measure, it is possible to consider that the speaker is suggesting death is knowledge, and knowledge is death.

If we wish to preserve this life-force, this hunger for knowing, the speaker counsels, perhaps we should consider 'Prospective' more as a 'friend' who holds us back a little, in order to make the journey to knowledge a little more leisurely and pleasurable, rather than as something to be conquered. Inevitably, whether we like it or not, we will reach the end of the story: *our* stories. In our coffins, we will eventually plumb our own Plots, and thus be 'clarified / Of Curiosity –' (Dickinson 1970: 605). For by the last stanza, it does seem that the poem has pulled the focus fully onto the mystery of death and the afterlife: the most formidable, redoubtable, resistant subject of all, and the one to which we are all subject:

> Where go we –
>
> Go we anywhere
>
> Creation after this?

By finishing with this eternally unanswerable question about life after death, posed by Dickinson's speaker on our behalf, the poem comes full circle, triggering again that human compulsion to know the unknowable: 'Where go we – / Go we anywhere?', thus reinforcing the sagacity of the speaker's opening lines. This circular logic also expresses something else. In the restlessness of the quest for knowing, this logic suggests, we indeed encounter an edge that never arrives.

4. 'An edge that never arrives': Dickinson's poetic style

Scholar Thomas Gardner suggests that contemporary poets who wish to follow the example of Emily Dickinson's 'world-opening celebration of limits' (2006: 6) – the limits of language, emotion and thought – must somehow 'explore ways of awakening language to what it is unable to master' (Dickinson 1970: 178). Dickinson's example shows that even when language buckles and decays, its poetic power is enhanced rather than diminished.

As I have been suggesting, Dickinson's work is shaped by a strong dynamic of withdrawal and denial alongside a creative responsiveness to uncertainty, and a passion to keep reaching for, probing, and desiring communication with the unknown. Even in her attitude to language, Dickinson maintains an ambiguity, challenging any limiting 'either/or' interpretation. This is a writer who can invoke a 'cool – concernless No –' (Dickinson 1970: 132) in her poetry (Poem # 287), and also invest such passion in declaring, in a letter to Otis P. Lord (ca. 1878), '[D]ont [sic] you know that "No" is the wildest word we consign to Language?' (Dickinson 1971: 246).

If we harbour any notion of an edge as being a demarcation or cut-off point rather than a fluid construct, this implied resistance of the either/or, the dualistic, of keeping language and interpretation open would surely disrupt that notion. Framed by idiosyncratic punctuation and parataxis, Dickinson's language and phrasing captures the sense that 'the poem's very failure to say what it strives to say may harbor its most powerful significance' (Franke 2008: 70). Dickinson's 'math of the missing' (McHugh 1993: 3) is calculated imaginatively through a performative and intellectual reckoning with the 'deficiency of speech' (Franke 2014: 23) through deflection, circumlocution and fragments.

Moreover, her work gives insight into how the notion of the edge harbours temporal concerns of significance to the writer. After all, apart from language, what is more complex, slippery and unstable, than time? And again, apart from language, what is more crucial to our understanding and articulation of – and bafflement with – all our experiences, than time? The situating and describing of our experiences – maybe as past reactions, current ordeals or anticipated anxieties or reliefs – is governed through temporal as well as linguistic logic. Time dictates, and through myriad subtleties of language – including participles, gerunds and tenses – we reveal the when, where and what of time's dictation. Time also allows us to project into the future.

Here, the edge represents T. S. Eliot's ever-shifting 'frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist' (Eliot 1953: 55). Right at the moments *when* those meanings and words diverge, Dickinson stretches the imaginative and expressive capacity of language, and our cognitive and hermeneutic powers, literally to the limits of what we as humans, are capable of knowing, imagining or describing. Yet proximity to these limits does not necessarily mean an arrival at clarity or coherence, either in what is left on the side of 'saying,' or yet in what that 'saying' gestures towards beyond itself. This, however, is partly the point; as Franke notes: 'precisely the impediments to expression become [Dickinson's] central message in telling ways, for they tell obliquely of a "beyond" of language' (Franke 2008: 62). And not just of language. Through seemingly abrupt leaps of logic or syntax, forays into the conditional tense, or poems using the flash forward device of prolepsis where, extraordinarily, her speakers seem less conflicted by the impossible act of *reflecting back* on a hypothetical future than they are in dealing with the present, Dickinson realigns and reconstructs perceptions of time.

Not content to stay a mourner at the edge of another's grave, Dickinson's speakers experience their own deaths. The most famous examples of this are Poem # 280 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain' (Dickinson 1970: 128), Poem # 465 'I heard a fly buzz' (223) and Poem # 712 'Because I could not stop for Death' (350).

In Poem # 712 (Dickinson 1970: 350), the speaker is already dead, and is being chauffeured to their grave 'a House that seemed / a Swelling of the Ground –' by Death, the courteous undertaker. On the way, they pass landmarks of childhood, such as the school, and then 'the Fields of Gazing Grain', awaiting a harvest that the speaker shall never see, and perhaps symbolising also the harvest of life and its fertility that the speaker shall never now experience. Apart from 'the Setting Sun', there is no hint of

any milestone being passed on this last journey that could connect to a long life and old age. So the speaker can be assumed to have been still quite youthful at death.

To look a little more closely at how time is handled in this poem, written circa 1863, I shall briefly look at the first and last stanzas:

> Because I could not stop for Death –
>
> He kindly stopped for me –
>
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
>
> And Immortality –

Was the speaker otherwise occupied? In a hurry to be somewhere else? Taken by surprise? Trying to get away? Whatever the speaker was doing before the beginning of this poem, the reader has to acknowledge that 'because I could not stop' an unwritten and thus unspoken event was already in train when Death 'kindly stopped.' One can infer that the speaker's death was thus sudden and unexpected, a supposition congruent with its being the death of a younger person. Yet there is no escaping Death, as the speaker seems ruefully? – acidly? – to admit, because 'He *kindly* stopped for me –' (emphasis added). No carriage can be big enough to accommodate Immortality (which is indivisible from Time) *and* Death, yet this one does. How can this be so? Immortality is 'exemption from death; endless life or existence' (*OED* 2019). No wonder then, by the last stanza, the speaker says:

> Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
>
> Feels shorter than the Day
>
> I first surmised the Horses' Heads
>
> Were toward Eternity –
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 350)

Several temporal shifts are at work in this poem. The tenses Dickinson uses in the first five stanzas of its six stanzas are the simple past: 'I could not', 'he stopped' and the past perfect: 'I had put away'. Yet in this concluding stanza, starting 'Since then – 'tis Centuries' swerves the whole poem away from the sense that the journey has taken place in the recent past.

This abrupt reassigning of timeframe is reinforced by the present tense 'feels shorter' in the second line. Yet we were assuming the speaker was relating discoveries and experiences still fresh in the memory: that the schoolchildren were at recess, the precise moment when it began to get chilly. The 'then' that we recognise as the beginning of the poem is now centuries ago, and the moment we entered the poem (*after* the moment of death), is not the moment at which we leave it. Compounding this dizzying contraction of time is that, for the speaker, the centuries have been way quicker to pass than that first day in the carriage with Death, when 'We slowly drove – He knew no haste', and 'I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity –'. Yet the temporal distortions in this stanza show how Immortality and Death can coexist the same space. This speaker's account of death's aftermath acknowledges the passing of time, yet the poem shows that the speaker's *experience* of death is eternally current –

immortal – and will remain so. In death, one is preserved by the memory of the living, and if that is not possible, one is nevertheless memorialised by the unalterable fact of having been: thus, one can be said to be immortal.

Another means of having a speaker negotiate with a temporal edge by inhabiting and concretising a hypothetical space or mindset is through Dickinson's use of the conditional tense. This is Poem #1668 (undated):

> If I could tell how glad I was
>
> I should not be so glad –
>
> But when I cannot make the Force,
>
> Nor mould it into Word,
>
> I know it is a sign
>
> That new Dilemma be
>
> From mathematics further off
>
> Than from Eternity.
>
> (Dickinson 1970: 680-81)

Dickinson's use of the second conditional – '*If* I could tell how glad I was' (emphasis added) – ordinarily would signal that the situation being imagined does not, cannot, exist. Yet this hypothetical is not a barrier to Dickinson's speaker. The conditional heightens the sense of language's possibility while simultaneously hinting at the impossibility of language to express the speaker's strength of emotion (thereby underlining the strength). This impossibility the speaker admits in the next line: 'I should not be so glad –', suggesting that there is a hierarchy to be observed in action here, where language and emotion vie for supremacy. If the emotion, or 'Force', can be captured and contained in language, or 'Word', then that emotion cannot be as strong as one for which words will not suffice. Yet by admitting this shortcoming or omission of language, Dickinson's speaker signals an awareness that the aim of expressing the extent of the emotion has been achieved, and indeed, this almost inverted apophasis is how we realise that the speaker is in fact supremely glad. The speaker seems to recognise moreover, that when they 'cannot make the Force / Nor mould it into Word', this supposed inability to identify and describe is not a setback, but a sign they are on the edge of some 'new Dilemma', and some new unknown to probe.

Had the speaker been able to fit 'Word' to 'Force' in the first place, this 'new Dilemma' might never have presented itself. As critic Joan Burbick notes: 'Dickinson's speakers often embrace a posture of self-denial for which they are rewarded. Only by not-having does that which is desired "gain" in value' (1996: 81).

5. Conclusion

'Literacy of uncertainty' is my term for a perceptive and sensory practice which – while acknowledging that we rely on language to navigate and articulate what we *do* know – concerns itself more with exploring and reflecting on how we engage with and make

meaning of what is beyond description, or perhaps beyond words altogether. It is a way in which we are able to explore what language is capable of 'unsaying' as much as it is of saying; and what meaning, affect and eloquence we can still achieve through language, even when words seem inadequate.

Poetry offers the ideal medium through which the mutability of language, and the mutability of life, with its often ineffable moments, can be assayed and questioned. Poetry makes a virtue – makes art – out of the challenges we face in expressing ourselves. Open to conjecture, destabilising, difficult and ambiguous: these are characteristics often ascribed to poetry. They are also the shifting, exciting, perplexing conditions poets contend with all the time in our poetic practice, a focus on and merging of word and emotion in which we contemplate language as 'an edge that never arrives'.

Yet, as I have suggested this notional edge has a yet more complex and exhilarating challenge for the writer. This edge is where precision, paradoxically, is not as precise, or as apt, or even as aesthetically resonant, as ambiguity. This is where the edge blurs, becomes the very material of uncertainty.

Whether she is looking outward at the world, or at the interior workings of the mind, Dickinson manages to animate, and to suspend the tremor between known and not-yet-known (or may-never-be-known) just long enough for an attentive reader to apprehend that her poetry is glancing, not only off and towards the unsayable and unfathomable, but also beyond. In reflecting the quizzical and equivocal nature of Dickinson's perception of her subjects, the ambiguity of her pronouncements in her poetry perfectly articulates language's struggle to capture the constant shifting between what can and cannot be said.

In the midst of, and attempting to mediate this situational instability with its own innate instability, meanwhile, is language; and poetic language, moreover, with its heightened emphasis on structure, syntax, and ambiguity. Words, sounds, spaces, silences and hesitations; denials, diversions, ellipses, apostrophes and negations, mapping out the thoroughfares, impasses, short-cuts, crossroads and detours of Dickinson's poetic cosmologies. The absence of titles, the short lines, unresolved riddles, dashes, and mercurial syntax in Dickinson's work also show vividly how language, even in supposedly systematic patterns of poetic metre and form, can manifest a brokenness that points to unseen domains of the inarticulable that hover each halting utterance.

Dickinson's oeuvre holds many examples to which every poet – and especially a poet engaged in stalking the edge to capture the unsayable – can usefully, if not easily aspire. How close can a writer approach this edge, disrupt and challenge it, and not fear the fall? That is the test that poetry sets for poets: integral to the writing of every poem, the business of striking a conceptual and artistic balance between venturing and withholding, brazenness and restraint.

Endnotes

1. Coles 2017

2. That which 'cannot be expressed or described in language; too great for words; transcending expression; unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible' (*OED* online 2019) or: 'that which is particular to an experience, and cannot be communicated' (Blackburn 2008). There are relatively few specialist definitions of 'ineffability'. *Encyclopaedia of aesthetics* (2014) gives perhaps the fullest definition:

> The word 'ineffable' literally means 'unspeakable,' but the two words are fringed in different auras of connotation. 'Unspeakable' suggests the forbidden, even the monstrous – unspeakable practices, unnatural acts; but 'ineffable' suggests a divine power too great for words. In the seventeenth century, 'ineffable' was sometimes used in a quite literal manner, as a synonym for 'unpronounceable': a writer on the Chinese language, for example, noted that certain single brush strokes represented ineffable letters. But throughout the history of the English language, 'ineffable' has typically been used as a word of mystification, appropriate to the sacred matters beyond the range of language. In Hebrew, the name of God was represented by a sacred formula that could only be written, never spoken: the tetragrammaton, traditionally given in English as 'Jehovah.' Through such taboos, the notion of cannot-be-pronounced easily shades into the notion of must-not-be-pronounced. (Kelly 2014)

3. For centuries, apophasis – 'the rhetoric of negation' – has pervaded spiritual, philosophical, mystical and artistic texts and practices in both East and West. In Western cultures apophasis has been used since Platonic times as a means of dealing in language with what lies beyond language, usually by defining things in terms of what they are not. In modern times the apophatic approach has evolved to encompass an understanding of and approach to the unsayable, or as leading scholar William Franke explains, to accommodate recognition of 'an implicit presence of the unuttered and even the unutterable as a necessary supposition underlying every utterance' (Franke 2007a: 9). See Franke (2007a, 2007b) for a full discussion of apophasis and its practitioners.

4. Quotations and numberings of Dickinson's poems are taken from the 1970 Faber and Faber edition of the Thomas H. Johnson edition. For a remarkable insight into the fascicles, Dickinson's bundles of poetry, see Miller (2016).

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