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"The Missing All": Emily Dickinson's Apophatic Poetics

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> The words the happy say
> Are paltry melody
> But those the silent feel
> Are beautiful—
>
> —Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson has long been regarded as a peculiarly enigmatic figure for her puzzling and oftentimes paradoxical poems, as well as for her evidently idiosyncratic religious faith. I will make no attempt to investigate that faith, except as it is expressed in the poetry.[1] However, if we focus on the faith together with the poetry as having the character of a negative theology, much that is enigmatic, without ceasing to be so, begins also to make a clear kind of sense. I contend that Dickinson's poetry is best understood as a form of negative theology, or as what I will call "apophatic" discourse. My guiding idea is that Dickinson's exploration of modes of negation in poetic language enabled her to discover and express what are, in effect, negatively theological forms of belief. I will use "apophasis," the Greek word for negation, to designate the sort of radical negation of language per se, of any language whatsoever—rather than only of specific formulations and of certain types of linguistic content—that characterizes this outlook, or rather sensibility, which suspects and subverts all its own verbal expressions.

Author's Note: This critical discussion is an expansion of the brief introduction with anthologized poems by Emily Dickinson in my *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2007). I thank Jim Dougherty, Douglas Burton-Christie, and Richard Brantley for their suggestions concerning earlier drafts.

This term "apophasis" and its adjectival form "apophatic" evoke in the first place the ancient Neoplatonic tradition of speculation concerning the ineffable One as supreme principle of reality. Likewise commonly designated as apophatic are certain traditions of medieval mysticism concerning an unutterably transcendent deity. In such traditions, the encounter, in incommunicable registers of experience, with the Inexpressible is marked by a backing off from language (*apo*—"away from," *phasis*—"speech" or "assertion"). Of course, this backing off is itself then registered in language, language that in various ways unsays itself.[2] The resultant apophatic modes of discourse, in their very wide diffusion throughout Western culture, especially in the domains of philosophy, religion, and literature, can be seen to have had a decisive bearing on Dickinson's writing. This can be inferred from the poetry itself, whether it is conscious and deliberate on her part or not. The apophatic tradition, I maintain, whether directly or indirectly, influences Dickinson's reflections on the limits of her ability to express the reality she endeavors to approach and the experience she aims to convey in her poetry. Precisely the impediments to expression become her central message in telling ways, for they tell obliquely of a "beyond" of language.

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

Dickinson Criticism and the Apophatic Paradigm

Although the poems often proved impossible for her contemporaries to penetrate, they have won immense appreciation in more recent critical appraisals, particularly those attuned to apophasis and the poetics of the unsayable. Even if rarely with explicit acknowledgment of the apophatic tradition as a primary context, this framework has already been operative in scholarship aiming to illuminate Dickinson's poems. Readings of Dickinson

pointing in this direction have insisted on compression and abbreviation as features that distinguish her style, especially as against the stylistic canons of her own time. Cristanne Miller's analysis in *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* of Dickinson's versification shows ellipsis—the omission and deletion of logical and syntactical links—to be its governing principle.[3] Carla Pomarè finds in this elliptical technique the means of producing the silence that paradoxically gives Dickinson her distinctive voice. Margaret Freeman, who analyzes Dickinson's poetry in terms of cognitive principles of discourse, similarly stresses omissions and absences as the signifying elements that grant the poetry its power, a power "through silence to capture the true essence of intimacy."

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

Wolosky does situate Dickinson within a tradition of "theo-linguistic" thought deriving ultimately from "Hermetic and Platonic traditions" crystallized in classics such as Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*. She notes how such traditions were reflected in the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and in Horace Bushnell's *Dissertation on the Nature of Language as Related to Thought and Spirit* in Dickinson's immediate cultural milieu. Yet Wolosky, in "The Metaphysics of Language in Emily Dickinson and Paul Celan," emphasizes particularly how this type of metaphysical framework is thrown into crisis and collapses in Emily Dickinson's poems.[4] However, this sort of critical negation of concepts is in fact traditionally how apophatic

or negative theology frees faith and spiritual experience from rigid metaphysical and theological dogma: it does not necessarily interpret the crisis of modernity. This could be said also for even more modern poets such as T. S. Eliot ("Burnt Norton" II and III) and Geoffrey Hill (for example, in *Tenebrae*, 1978): they continue and affirm this negative theological vein more than they negate it.

The apophatic discursive paradigm that operates in Dickinson's poetics, then, has perhaps still not been fully realized and reflectively thought through.[5] And yet this paradigm can furnish a necessary key to interpretation of at least a central axis of Dickinson's poetic *modus operandi*. My contention is that it will prove profitable to read Emily Dickinson in relation to a spiritual as well as an aesthetic tradition of apophasis. There are innumerable spiritual poets who have privileged the theme of silence, and certain of them have linked this theme with the spiritual traditions of apophatic mysticism. John of the Cross represents the confluence of the two, the poetics of silence and a theology of negation such as that expounded also, for instance, in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and he is echoed by Silesius Angelus, who works Meister Eckhart's mystic philosophy (transmitted via John Tauler) into spiritual ("*Geist-reiche*") verse. In such poetry, I believe, can be found some of the strongest affinities to crucial aspects of Dickinson's work. Her poetry, accordingly, is in some sense to be understood as a spiritual exercise, a use of poetry as a means of approach to an unknowable "divinity," or at least as an instrument for registering an impossible, inarticulable absoluteness in her experience of the ultimate reality.

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

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

Harold Bloom employs apophatic terms to describe Dickinson's poetry when he comments that her "unique transport, her Sublime, is founded upon her unnaming of all our certitudes into so many blanks; it gives her, and her authentic readers, another way to see, almost, in the dark" (308-09). And Marjorie Perloff acutely observes a number of the key characteristics of apophatic discourse in Emily Dickinson yet without actually viewing her in the context of, or even as associated with, this tradition. She does place Dickinson in the "other tradition," other with respect to Romanticism and Modernism and their Symbolist aesthetic—another tradition that has long captivated Perloff's interest (*The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, vii). Tellingly Perloff writes, "She did not believe that words were in themselves irreplaceable" ("Emily Dickinson and the Theory Canon"). Dickinson's poetics, Perloff points out, are contrary to the Symbolist doctrine of the *mot juste*, according to which "the chosen word is the *only* word that can convey a desired set of meanings." Perhaps no word can be exactly right for Dickinson, and perhaps the words used do not ultimately matter, if her poems are concerned above all with what is beyond words, with what cannot be said.

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

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

This is all implicitly apophatic in tenor in that it retreats from words as definitive, negating them as always inadequate; yet Werner, like Perloff and virtually all other critics, overlooks the traditional spiritual paradigm of apophasis, and their doing so is liable to give rise to certain distortions and confusions. For example, Perloff's idea that Dickinson distrusts beauty and musicality and is seeking only truth in her poetry results from the effort to categorize Dickinson's poetics by clear conceptual contrasts to other styles of poetics, particularly the Romantic and aesthetic. Yet Dickinson herself not infrequently praises beauty and music, albeit of a more sublime sort than the ordinary:

> The words the happy say
> Are paltry melody
> But those the silent feel
> Are beautiful—
> (F 1767; J 1750)[7]

Indeed melody and beauty both—like truth—are placed by Dickinson, in true apophatic fashion, beyond definition in a heaven that is indistinguishable from the unnameable divinity Himself:

> The Definition of Beauty, is
> That Definition is none —
> Of Heaven, easing Analysis,
> Since Heaven and He
> Are One —
> (F 797; J 988)

Dickinson writes the same thing verbatim in exactly parallel fashion about melody in another variation of this verse:

> The Definition of Melody — is —
> That Definition is none —
> (F 797; J 988)

Dickinson does not mistrust beauty and music more than other forms of representation; she simply sees the Unrepresentable as hiding behind them all. Leaving this crucial distinction out of account, Perloff tends to overdraw the contrast with modernist and symbolist poetics. It is true that Dickinson's poetics have an essential component well beyond aesthetic symbolism, but

so did the poetics of many others among the canonical Romantics and modernists. And like them, Dickinson sometimes evinces a rather powerful desire for totalizing, even apocalyptic vision, though she is aware that it can be expressed only fragmentarily and fictively.[8] On another front, whereas Perloff strives to categorically differentiate Dickinson's view of language from that of the deconstructive critics, and so claims that Dickinson does not cancel or take back meaning, this *does* happen repeatedly, not to say systematically in Dickinson's poems.[9] The aim is not the deconstruction of metaphysics (to this extent Perloff is right) so much as spiritual experience at the limits of language—apophasis vis-à-vis what defies linguistic formulation. There is, after all, a convergence between post-structuralist poetics of indeterminacy and Dickinson's poetics, but Perloff struggles not to see it in order to make her case that Dickinson is not comprehensible in a deconstructive theoretical optics like the poetry typically cited as exemplary by post-structuralist critics.

Perloff's own theoretical perspective is informed especially by Language Poetry, by writers like Charles Bernstein, David Bromige, Ron Silliman, and others like Rosemarie Waldrop and Lyn Hejinian working poetically with Wittgenstein's texts and philosophy of language (Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*). Jerome McGann in *Black Riders* (particularly the Afterword), describes how this type of poetry grows out of the "literalism" of modernism. Its inspiration lies largely in eliminating symbolic reference to everything beyond the text, particularly to a world or a subject, and thereby riveting attention rather to the literal scene of writing itself. At least *prima facie*, apophatic poetics, with its orientation to a beyond of writing and language, is diametrically opposed to such a perspective. It seems that Wittgenstein's inspiration can be taken in both of these apparently antithetical directions: it has galvanized the writing of Language Poetry, but it can also turn us away from language toward the beyond of language. The latter is the dimension explored by the type of poetry I am calling apophatic. It is distinguished by its recalcitrance to any definitive linguistic formulation whatsoever of what it seeks to express. There is currently considerable excitement over discovering in Dickinson some of our own recently acquired obsessions and enthusiasms for the materialities of language, for the text's literal surfaces, and for the self-reflexive scene of writing: current critics are keen to perceive the letter liberated from the spirit, from subjectivity and intentionality and such-like metaphysical ghosts. However, in the midst of this ferment, it is important not to lose sight of Dickinson's continuity with the apophatic tradition as a specifically spiritual tradition endowed with a powerfully poetic dimension.

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

> Gratitude — is not the mention
> Of a Tenderness,
> But it's still appreciation
> Out of Plumb of Speech.
>
> When the Sea return no Answer
> By the Line and Lead
> Proves it there's no Sea, or rather
> A remoter Bed?
> (F 1120c; J 989)

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

Illustrative Poems

The characteristically apophatic technique of the poems can be approached most simply and perspicuously on the poems' own terms by

attending first to the topic of silence along with the thematics of the intrinsic limits and foundering of language. There are numerous very short poems that effectively announce the theme of silence and suggest that its potency is infinitely greater than that of any possible utterance, for example:

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

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

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

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

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

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

wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which paradoxically is repeated, yet is always unique and incomparable:

Your thoughts dont have words every day
They come a single time
Like signal esoteric sips
Of the communion Wine
Which while you taste so native seems
So easy so to be
You cannot comprehend it's price
Nor it's infrequency
(F 1476; J 1452)

Such thoughts that defy comprehension and articulation seem to be "native," familiar, as if *déjà vu*, and yet, at the same time, they seem to escape, never to return: they are assignable to no time and as such are timeless and ineffable:

A Thought went up my mind today—
That I have had before—
But did not finish—some way back—
I could not fix the Year—

Nor Where it went—nor why it came
The second time to me—
Nor definitely, what it was—
Have I the Art to say—

But somewhere—in my soul—I know—
I've met the Thing before—
It just reminded me—'twas all—
And came my way no more—
(F 731; J 701)

Dickinson's poetry is pregnant with the sense that unsayability itself can signify and that the poem's very failure to say what it strives to say may harbor its most powerful significance. She says as much in a poem like the following:

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
(F 1725; J 1668)

This incapacity of speech, or apophasis, is a sign of how far removed from "mathematics," that is, from any rationally calculable, articulable knowledge, is the intimation of the Eternity that Dickinson dwells on but cannot express. Still, her "hindered Words"—a good expression for apophatic rhetoric—are the key to telling of this Nothing (nothing that can be said, which is nevertheless everything), and thereby to renovating the world:

By homely gifts and hindered words
The human heart is told
Of nothing –
"Nothing" is the force
That renovates the World –
(F 1611; J 1563)

As so often, something which is indicated as Nothing makes the poem and clinches its significance.

Negative Theology as Paradigm for Dickinson's Poetics

Primed by glancing through examples like these, we are now in a position to appreciate how Dickinson's poetry continually approaches and even coincides with characteristic themes of negative theology taken as a paradigm of spiritual understanding and experience. Negative theology is the kind of apophasis pertaining specifically to God, about whom we can only know (and therefore can only say) what "he" is *not*. God is Nothing (that can be said), even though he is the source and ground of all beings. Still, he has no finite content, no attribute whatsoever by which he could be anything that can be articulated in language. In various ways, Dickinson articulates the principle that the Nothing is the All, the Absolute (1071). Even more acutely, she says that this is so because the All *is not*: it is "The Missing All."

The Missing All, prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World's
Departure from a Hinge
Or Sun's Extinction, be observed
'Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.
(F 995b; J 985)

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

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

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

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object's loss –

Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to it's Price –
The Object Absolute – is nought –
Perception sets it fair
And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far –
(F 1103a; J 1071)

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

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

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

Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –
His lisp – is Lightning – and the Sun –
His Conversation – with the Sea—
"How shall you know"?
Consult your Eye!
(F 429a; J 420)

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

On the basis presumably of this sort of "intuition" and not of "terms" (420), Dickinson feels her way to the same kind of vocabulary, revolving around the ineffable One, as was used by the Neoplatonic negative theologians[12]:

I found the words to every thought
I ever had - but One -
And that - defies Me -
As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races nurtured in the Dark -
How would your Own - begin?
Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal -
Or Noon - in Mazarin?
(F 436; J 581)

It is impossible to find the right word for the One, if it is thought of strictly as without any determination or multiplicity. In like fashion, the sun, symbolically the source of all, cannot itself be delineated or illuminated, since everything visible can be delineated or illuminated only by *its* light. Absolute brightness cannot be perceived apart from the colors or dyes that alone make it visible by toning down its total intensity, so as to bring it within the range of finite perception. A similar idea was expressed by another celebrated poetic Platonist in the familiar verses: "Life like a dome of many-colored glass / Stains the white radiance of eternity" ("Adonais"). But Shelley's flowing eloquence and rhetorical grandeur are far removed from Dickinson's laconic anti-rhetoric, with its hard-edged, rare-dye quality, that safeguards a peculiarly apophatic effect of the mystery of the unsaid. Whereas Shelley's language becomes transparent like light, Dickinson's poetry, with its rare words and rhythmic arrests—marked especially by her idiosyncratic use of dashes for spacings within and between lines—tends towards verbal viscousness and opacity.

These poems offer some of the most poignant expressions anywhere in literature of how linguistic negation, the self-erasure of words that act to cancel themselves out or to proscribe verbal expression, becomes the positive source of all that is perceived and that can be said. They oftentimes place this experience in an aesthetic dimension of beauty, enchantment, and rapture, exclaiming, for example:

To tell the Beauty would decrease
To state the spell demean –

However, this spell is itself but the sign of something yet more indefinite and inarticulable:

There is a syllable-less Sea
Of which it is the sign
My will endeavors for it's word
And fails, but entertains
A Rapture as of Legacies –
Of introspective mines –
(F 1689; J 1700)

There is no adequate expression for this experience that issues rather in a "syllable-less Sea." Yet the rapture left as a result or "legacy" of such experience testifies to interior riches that cannot be put into words, and so be exteriorized or objectified, but remain lodged, nevertheless, in "introspective mines"—where "mine(s)" suggests perhaps something irreducibly private and personal, even though this very expression crystallizes the subjective sensation as a grammatical fact.

Even some of Dickinson's lighter poems can be illuminated by being placed in the context of this problematic of negative theology and its corresponding apophatic rhetoric. It is fundamental to the poetic theologic through which she sees the world. The reference to the unsayable and indefinable as the necessary background for all that she does say and articulate in her poems underlies even such a playful expostulation as:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!
(F 260; J 288)

Anyone who is merely *some*one is boring by comparison with the infinite mystery of the person who recognizes herself as Nobody. Of course, this is what must not be told ("Don't tell!"), for translated into words, it would be immediately betrayed: then it would be degraded to the level of the public gossip or "advertising" that passes so facilely from mouth to mouth, unthinkingly, like the croaking of frogs in a bog. What is articulated in this way becomes sound without meaning—the opposite of a plenum or

surplus of meaning for which there is no adequate articulation. In this latter perspective, that of the experience of and even immersion in the unsayable, we may finally be indistinct from the divine, to the extent that we remain nameless—like the Unnameable God, the great Nobody, worshipped in mystic raptures of apophatic discourse across the ages. In her own ingenious accents, Emily Dickinson, too, is participating in this tradition. In poem after poem, she demonstrates a powerful belief in the infinite positivity of Nothing. Likewise in her life, by her fabled reclusiveness, she seems to have said nothing, the nothing that actually contains everything.

Some will undoubtedly say that it is futile to speculate about what the poems do *not* say, and even more absurd and presumptuous if this be what they *cannot* say. True, it is not a matter of positive proof so much as of projection beyond what can be stated. This is nothing if not a spiritual exercise. Poetry of this order is, after all, a matter of faith, even if faith *in what* proves impossible to say. Where all categories of determination lose their grip in reference to what exceeds all terms of description and expression, religion and literature tend to coalesce: both aim at what neither can express, and an apophatic discourse is engendered as the effect of this impasse in the face of what Dickinson has christened, somewhat oxymoronically, "The Missing All."

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NOTES

[1]For more direct examination of Dickinson's faith, see Richard E. Brantley, *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson*. Brantley's emphasis on the "radical skepticism" underlying Dickinson's oscillation between her Calvinist and her Armenian heritages (p. 154 and *passim*) provides a historical analogue to the present argument for Dickinson's art as an instinctive contribution to apophatic poetics. Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, treats Dickinson as "one of the major religious thinkers of her age" (3). But Lundin seems finally to find atheism more than apophaticism at the bottom of Dickinson's art. He considers her one of the first "to trace the trajectory of God's decline" (4).

[2]A general orientation can be obtained from Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, and Sainford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. The Neoplatonic background is presented in detail by Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence, I: The Rise and Fall of Logos* and *From Word to Silence, II: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek*.

[3]More recently, see Paul Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson*, and the essays, including Miller's "Dickinson's Experiments in Language," in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, edited by Gudrun Grabher, Roland Habenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller.

[4]Wolosky is also the author of *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*.

[5]A notable exception is Anthony Hecht, "The Riddle of Emily Dickinson." Hecht detects in Dickinson's resort to riddles "a religious seriousness, however unorthodox, and a profound sense that neither life itself nor the holy text by which we interpret it is altogether intelligible, and both require a riddling mind or interpretive skill" (162). He discovers in Dickinson an "ignorant knowledge" like that of the Book of Revelation, which reveals only a mystery—how "perfect understanding of love (which is ignorance) makes love inexpressible, an ineffable mystery, a riddle" (161).

[6]These critics can be grouped as attentive to aspects of Dickinson's writing practice in which language is never definitive but is projected always beyond itself. The works cited by Perloff working along these lines include: Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden* (1992); Sharon Cameron, *Choosing not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*; Marta L. Werner, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*; and Susan Howe, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Values," in *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. There is more on the manuscripts and fascicles, including essays by Smith and Cameron, in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* edited by Grabher, Hagenbüchle, and Miller. For a recent "common sense" study of Dickinson's "variorum poetics" see Domhnall Mitchell, *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts*. One important thing this material reveals is how tentative and changeable, rather than final, Dickinson's verbal formulations were.

[7]*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Variorum Edition, edited by R. W. Franklin. Citations of the poems follow the text of the Franklin edition (abbreviated F), but I also give the numbering of the poems in the Johnson edition (abbreviated J): *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

[8]See, for example, Beth Maclay Doriani, *Emily Dickinson: Daughter of Prophecy*, and Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime*.

[9]Dickinson's poems' ways of unsaying what they say, their poetic of the "suspended syllable," is treated effectively in relation to:

> When what they sung for is undone
> Who cares about a Blue Bird's Tune—
> Why, Resurrection had to wait
> Till they had moved a stone— (F 1353)

by Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, p. 31ff.

[10]See, for example, Thomas Taylor, *Essays and Fragments of Proclus the Platonic Successor*, and *Thomas Taylor the Platonist: Selected Writings*, edited by Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper.

[11]The apophatic tradition is intertwined with a broader tradition of theological aesthetics (for which, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: Eine theologische Aesthetik* trans. as *Glory: A Theological Aesthetic*), just as negative or apophatic theology works necessarily in tandem with affirmative, kataphatic (*kata*—"according to" + *phasis*—"speech") theology right from the source texts in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth to sixthcentury A.D.).

[12]The most radical and culminating development of this tradition in the ancient world can be found in the Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius (c. 462 - 538?). See my "Damascius. Of the Ineffable: Aporetics of the Notion of an Absolute Principle."

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