



EMILY DICKINSON AND PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER II

The Infinite in Person: Levinas and Dickinson

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I.

Depth takes multiple forms in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Reading her, one moves from word to word, line to line, only to find oneself suddenly submerged, falling, or flying. The depth might open as "a Pit," "a sea," "a grave," or "Paradise," "Mountains," "Sunrise," or "Sky." The world contains many kinds of expanses, and Dickinson is a thinker of myriad spaces including the desert, the ocean, a cup, a daisy, the mind, and the illuminated space of a "dazzled" face:

Me – Come! My dazzled face
In such a shining place! (Fr389)

Different spaces require novel forms of navigation. It will be one thing to wade through a sea of graves, another to grope up a mountain, and yet something else to "Come!" into a "shining place." Through multiple forms of movement (standing, falling, crawling, kneeling, circling) and despite all the possibilities for spaces opening up and closing in around us, Dickinson expresses a curious, fragile hope. It is the hope found in space being unstable, ambiguous, and open. No place is secure or final, and Dickinson chronicles the effort required to keep moving through uncharted territory, to rise to the next day and acclimate to the next season.

For Dickinson all things tend toward openness, both terrifying and wondrous. Her poems pivot from the spaces she inhabits to spaces that inhabit her, illustrating a precarious differentiation between inside and outside. Sometimes the world seeps in gently, eroding the shores of the self:

So soft upon the Scene
The Act of evening fell
We felt how neighborly a thing
Was the Invisible (Fr1225)

Sometimes the world opens majestically, "magic Perpendiculars / Ascending, though terrene –" (Fr1474). Yet other times, the world intercedes violently:

I dared not meet the Daffodils –
 For Fear their Yellow Gown
 Would pierce me with a fashion
 So foreign to my own – (Fr347)

In each case something familiar (evening, trees, a flower) begins, compounds, reverberates, and ultimately dismantles the poet's sense of identity or place. Every surface seems pricked with a thousand glimmering holes. They are small; they accumulate. This is not the heroic, destabilizing all-at-once romance of the sublime. It is a much more humble, minimal variety of displacement, transcendence, and mystery Dickinson expresses: towering blades of grass, dangerous shards of frost, the tragic death of a bee who cannot say "Alas!"

To be human in Dickinson's poems is to be radically open. The self she describes, however confined, is always subject to the invasion of something exterior, as if to be a self is to be a fluid membrane or a bundle of nerves. There is no consolation or possibility of flight from an impinging world. Instead of describing subjects who merely dwell in or enter physical places, Dickinson's subjects become the objects of spaces that have inhabited them. Every space she describes is animated and precarious – potentially terrifying and potentially transformative.

Read in light of the twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Dickinson's concern with the displaced subject and the intrigue of the intimate come into relief as philosophically prescient and ethically urgent. Both Levinas and Dickinson can be read as reacting against the Enlightenment's faith in the heroic triumph of human reason and against Romanticism's heady optimism in passion and nature.¹ There is a darker, more modest, and sober thought. Dickinson wrote the bulk of her poetry from the confines of her Amherst room, churning out just over seven hundred of her nearly eighteen hundred poems between 1861 and 1865, in the midst of the Civil War. Levinas's early philosophical thought issued from the imposed captivity of a German labor camp in the years between 1940 and 1945, in the midst of World War II. Although neither of them make war an explicit theme of their work, their thought nonetheless bears

¹ Richard Sewall argues that Dickinson is not a romantic or metaphysical poet: "Her more precarious stance, her more self-conscious, detailed, and poignant exploration of the dark interior, her distant and often paradoxical God, set her apart from these poets and made for a different rhythm and language" (708).

indelible traces of violence and rupture. Interruption becomes a critical subject of their work and a dominant feature of the very syntax of their writing – a stuttering, halting verse or prose made visceral in Dickinson's dashes and in Levinas's jarring grammar.

Dickinson and Levinas are thinkers of the human and the mere. Both describe the infinite varieties of space we find ourselves subject to and the essential ambiguity of space definitive of the human condition. To be human is to be capable of feeling displaced, to be opened or knocked out of phase. For Dickinson this means that the "self" is a precarious achievement, prone to disappearance. For Levinas this means the "subject," never stable, issues out of a core of vulnerability. For both of them, the spaces we inhabit are populated with depths exceeding consciousness, and consciousness itself is a space exceeding subjectivity. Levinas helps us understand the ethical implications of Dickinson's poetry: the value of the mere, the effort required to turn or to prance, to stand in the sunrise and rise to the day. At the same time, Levinas helps illuminate a surprisingly postmodern notion of subjectivity underpinning Dickinson's poems. The self is ever opening and moving toward something other than the self – transcending toward the world.

2.

Emmanuel Levinas is among the most influential continental philosophers of the twentieth century, but above all, he is known as the philosopher who restored ethics to the center of philosophical debate. His two major works, *Totality and Infinity* (1965) and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1976), revolve around a complicated set of concerns with subjectivity, temporality, and language. Most of all, however, they question the possibility of ethics in the wake of the Holocaust. The opening lines of *Totality and Infinity* make this clear: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (*Totality* 21). Levinas's central insight is that if ethics is to be meaningful, it has to be meaningful in the face of brutal realities: in the wake of the war, everything is open to question.² Securing ethical meaning entails a radical shift in what the term "ethics" means – a transition from a notion of ethics as a codified system, a Kantian "categorical imperative," or set of discrete

² Richard Bernstein describes Levinas's realization that "we must now give up" . . . "the [Kantian] idea of 'reconciliation', the 'promise' – being worthy of 'the Happy End The phenomenon of Auschwitz demands (if we are not duped by morality) that we conceive of 'the moral law independently of the Happy End'" (256).

rules, towards a notion of ethics as individual and incremental response and responsibility. Levinas calls this "ethics without ethical system" (*Is it Righteous to Be?* 81) and relates it to the ever-open, interruptive surplus of questions over answers, infinity over totality. The war demonstrated the failure of moral maxims to translate into ethical acts. Levinas separates ethics from laws and insists upon the daily, hourly, work of response and responsibility to the "particular and the personal" (*Totality* 26), an unrelenting attention to what he describes as "the gravity of the everyday" (*Righteous* 47). There is no way of generalizing such an ethics into a theme. Instead, every instance of ethical response is unique, requiring the reconfiguration of everything one thought one had known memorized, or practiced before.

Three deceptively mundane terms – *other*, *face*, and *responsibility* – form the core of Levinas's ethical philosophy. *Totality and Infinity* stresses the priority of the *other*, the dramatic (traumatic) interruption of the egoistic self occasioned by the exposure to an other's *face*, and the infinite *responsibility* incumbent on us to respond to the call of others. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* intensifies these themes and places new emphasis on the sensitivity and vulnerability of the subject – her flesh and blood exposure to the world. The later text also reflects an aesthetic concern with how to write ethically about ethics. If ethics evades thematization, how does one write a text that refuses the closure Levinas associates with comprehension, understanding, and knowledge?

In seeking to express his ethics of infinite opening in writing that is, itself, radically open, Levinas produces texts resistant to facile comprehension or restatement. The dominant features of his late prose include compounding repetitions and an obsessive avoidance of the copula. Alphonso Lingis, who translated *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* from the original French into English, noted the unique challenges posed by Levinas's acrobatic grammar, explaining "[Levinas's] thought succeeds in formulating itself without being set forth in predicative assertions" (*Otherwise* xxxviii). The interruption Levinas describes as characteristic of subjectivity becomes performative in texts that force their readers to navigate without closure, to read in the absence of a definitive theme. The distinctive quality of Levinas's prose has caused interpreters significant frustration and inspired Derrida to provide the following description of Levinas's nonlinear, nearly poetic, argumentation: "It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself" (*Writing and Difference* 312, n. 7).

The rupture Levinas conceives at the heart of the subject and enacts as a method of writing resonates concretely with his own historical situation: that of a Jewish prisoner whose life was irrevocably interrupted by the Second World War. Levinas began writing his first published book, *Existence and Existents*, while in captivity as Jewish prisoner of war in the years between 1940 and 1945. This early text introduced several animating concerns: questions about the disruption and discontinuity of time, about what it means to live in the margins of the living and the dead, and the possibilities for hope under such circumstances. In captivity, Levinas experienced “the distinction . . . between liberation and the mere thought of liberation” (91), realizing that returning from trauma or re-entering the world will require something more radical than naïve hope for the future. Tied to himself like an anchor to a boat, the solitary subject has no future far enough to be the basis for a new beginning: “Existence drags behind it a weight – if only itself – which complicates the trip it takes” (16). For Levinas something radically new must originate a new beginning, and the future takes shape concretely in the shape of another person who has her own time, irreducible to one’s own. The world, insofar as it is a social, *pluralistic* world, contains an infinite number of ambiguous openings, embodied touchstones of hope.

Levinas calls these openings “faces.” They are upsurges of humanizing excess that continually surprise a subject, knocking her off balance and subjecting her to more time than she imagined possible. Although Levinas refuses to provide any concrete, positive description of *what* a face might be, he tells us that faces signify “the rupture of the immanent order, of the order that I can embrace, of the realm which I can hold in my thought, of the order that can become mine” (*Righteous* 48). The face Levinas describes is not reducible to any determinate bodily location or any set of features. Instead, Levinas insists that the face eludes understanding. It remains essentially enigmatic and invisible, endlessly withdrawing in its shifting expressions. Levinas borrows the moment Descartes thinks *infinity* – a thought containing more than he can think – from the *Third Meditation* for the structural analogy of the eruption of something *more* in a seemingly closed or finite space. In Descartes, the thought of infinity, a thought he could not have supplied himself, is the first glimmer of the external – proof that he is not alone in his room. For Levinas, the dawn of a face attests to a surplus of life, a rising tide of more humanity outpacing every theory and confounding comprehension.

Prone to the incessant interruption of faces, the Levinasian subject splinters and splits an infinite number of times and in countless ways. The negative consequence of being so deeply torn up is that the subject can never pull herself fully together. The positive effect of displacement is

that the subject never hardens into a fixed identity incapable of transformation. For the prisoner emerging from the confines of a life bracketed by war, this essential plasticity and openness of the self is critical. Levinas describes the human subject as constitutionally open to the openness of the world, vulnerable to impact that reconfigures and perpetually widens the parameters of the self. Such enlivening exposure is, according to Levinas, both the privilege and the risk of being human.

The inability of the subject to petrify into a self-sufficient, finalized subject attests to the ethical structure of subjectivity – a plurality deep in the heart of the self. Every face issues a unique demand, calling the self further off-center, as if to be a subject is to be subjected to infinite centers of gravity, none of them one's own. The split self, internally de-centered, carries within it a unique capacity to pivot on a shifting, external point. Levinasian ethics requires one to respond while off-center, to rise to a demand from the outside, to call into question the ways "my spontaneity" is moved "by the presence of the Other" (*Totality* 43).

Seen in this light, ethics is not a set of rules for behavior or maxims one might memorize and unreflectively enact. Instead, ethics is the more mundane, yet more incessant, responsibility to respond to new faces. This is a radically minimal account of ethics insofar as it does not attempt to articulate *what* is demanded, or *how* one should go about responding. There is very little prescription Levinas offers beyond what he calls "the simple, 'After you, Sir'" (*Otherwise* 117) – the seemingly banal imperative to hold the door and let the other go ahead of oneself. This may seem vague to the point of being meaningless. And yet, Levinas's account is radically demanding insofar as there are no limits to the faces one might encounter or the slow, cumulative labor of letting the other go ahead of oneself, holding open every door – every time.

Despite the nominal effort required to hold a door, the responsibility Levinas describes can seem crushing, overly difficult, perhaps inhuman. He uses traumatic imagery and expressions of excess in his descriptions of ethics – along with nonstandard capitalizations and disjointed syntax. All of this can make Levinas seem like a philosopher of the extraordinary and the otherworldly. As a result, Levinas is sometimes accused of making ethics rely on an impossibly impractical and metaphysical demand or of engaging in something that might have *religious* significance but that is certainly not philosophy.³ He insists that the other takes precedence over the same and that infinity

³ The first criticism is one leveled by Richard Rorty. See in particular "Response to Simon Critchley" in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. Alain Badiou articulates the second criticism in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

prefigures totality. Yet this philosopher of infinite responsibility is also the philosopher of the face. To be a subject means to be punctured by a face, by a height that is no higher than a head, no more distant than a person.

It is, therefore, not toward another world that Levinas turns. Insisting on the infinite depth of the interhuman and the irresolvable complexity of the interpersonal, he instead calls for a revolution, a turning around toward the things closest to us – toward the faces so near we have ceased to register them, to the overlooked, the abandoned, and the neglected. Seen in this light, Levinas's ethics is an ethics of the ordinary and the mere, a realization of the infinity *in* the world, depths that open, repeatedly, from here below.

3.

Describing the human subject as fractured, Levinas emphasizes its ambiguity and the impossibility of describing it through any paradigm or concept. Humanity appears excessive, overflowing every frame. At the same time, Levinas articulates both the hope and risk of being de-centered, a sense of possibility and trepidation in the face of an unbounded world.

Similarly, the self Dickinson describes emerges as plural and broken, and this turns out to be both traumatic and exhilarating. The split subject can be seen in a variety of anxiety poems where one aspect of the self, an "I" or a "Me," cries out toward a "Myself." Perhaps the most poignant example of this traumatic split occurs in "Me from Myself – to banish" (Fr709), a poem about the impossibility of consolidating or collecting oneself:

Me from Myself – to banish
Had I Art –
Invincible My Fortress
Unto All Heart –

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

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

A battle rages between two aspects of the self, each with its own rightful claims. Levinas uses the terms "ego" (*le Moi*) and "self" (*le soi*) to express "an essential lack of simplicity" characterizing the vying aspects of subjectivity,

explaining, "the ego has a self, in which it is not only reflected, but with which it is involved" (*Existence* 16). In later work, Levinas explains subjectivity in terms of "a malady of identity" (*Otherwise* 69) and describes the psyche as "a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity" (68). Levinas's point is that the human subject is irreducible to any identifying theme: whether ego, consciousness, a Spinozan *conatus*, or a Darwinian drive for self-preservation. The subject exists in tension with herself. Such "ambiguity of subjectivity" (165) renders her enigmatic and deeply unknowable (even to herself), and allows her to exist in complicated ways, rather than blindly in accordance with a single overarching drive or a brute natural force.

Concerned with a similar complexity and ambiguity, Dickinson differentiates "Me" from "Myself." She describes a dramatic struggle for psychic control in which any resolution or "abdication" would entail utter collapse – a subjugation of consciousness. She wonders whether consciousness defines subjectivity, questions the existential consequences of suppressing consciousness, and leaves open whether such suppression might amount to sleep, to madness, or to death. The psyche she envisions is essentially and irrevocably plural and tensed.

The battle between competing aspects of the self is one of Dickinson's obsessions. She envisions herself populated by others who threaten to pull her apart. Schism and tension figure centrally in poems where the heart severs from the soul, the brain from the body, or the mind from brain, as in "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" (Fr867) and "The Soul has Bandaged moments" (Fr360). In "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted" (Fr407), Dickinson conceives the brain itself as a rambling, haunted house with "Corridors – surpassing / Material Place." In a much later poem, "The Heart is the Capital of the Mind" (Fr1381), she forgoes the architectural picture of the brain and returns to geographic, political imagery familiar from "Me from Myself – to banish" to describe the antagonistic struggle for power between "Heart" and "Mind." In "The Mind lives on the Heart" (Fr1384), she meditates on the sovereignty of the heart, intensifying her imagery as she compares the mind to "any Parasite" and the heart, the host, to "Meat." In all of these poems, subjectivity exceeds the bounds of consciousness. The sense of things overspilling their containers reappears in "The mob within the heart" (Fr1763), where Dickinson returns to spatial metaphors to describe the heart as a crowded arena of deafening mayhem, a space of uncontrollable "riot," "growing like a hurricane."

The space of the self Dickinson conceives is vast and labyrinthine: a haunted house, a parasite-riddled host, a hurricane. Her conception of

subjectivity includes a Levinasian acknowledgment of the futility of trying to know exhaustively or describe what it means to be human and a recognition of subjects as nonidentical pluralities.⁴ Levinas often invokes "flesh and blood" (*Otherwise* 78) sensibility to underscore the raw sensitivity of a subject who is not only able to think and reason, but who also finds himself exposed and vulnerable in his own skin, "panting, shivering" (68). "The self," Levinas explains, "is the very fact of being exposed" (*Existence* 118). Dickinson's myriad descriptions of what it feels like to be vulnerable and at the mercy of an impinging world include strikingly postmodern emphases on fragmentation and the turmoil of psychic/embodied life. And yet, when seen in light of Levinas's ethics, the hypersensitized, plural, and broken self emerges as structured for de-centering – uniquely prone to reconfiguration and response.

4.

"I dreaded that first Robin, so" (Fr347) is emblematic of Dickinson's sense of disorienting and painful exposure to the world. It begins with a feeling of dread, a paralyzing fear of spring. Levinas also described a feeling of "horror" in connection with "the future" or with something that seems "alien and strikes against us" (*Existence* 17, 9). In her poem, Dickinson chronicles a visceral vulnerability that the poet is, initially, at pains to blunt or avoid. As with so many of her poems, a noticeable decrescendo commences from a first economic line that unravels into increasingly chaotic pieces. Concretely, the poem records the way the early spring inevitably swells into heady summer heat.

I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though –
I thought if I could only live
Till that first Shout got by –
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me –
I dared not meet the Daffodils –
For fear their Yellow Gown

⁴ Thomas Gardner explains, "Fragmentation, discontinuity, use of pauses, opacity, wandering and loneliness, dread, uncertainty, silence, disorientation are equally, often simultaneously, explored [by Dickinson] as nontotalizing responses to what can never be grasped" (7).

Would pierce me with a fashion
 So foreign to my own –
 I wished the Grass would hurry –
 So when 'twas time to see –
 He'd be too tall, the tallest one
 Could stretch to look at me –
 I could not bear the Bees should come,
 I wished they'd stay away
 In those dim countries where they go,
 What word had they, for me?
 They're here, though; not a creature failed –
 No Blossom stayed away
 In gentle deference to me –
 The Queen of Calvary –
 Each one salutes me, as he goes,
 And I, my childish Plumes,
 Lift, in bereaved acknowledgement
 Of their unthinking Drums – (Fr347)

In the first stanza we hear the poet's anxious apprehension. The robin, the first sign of spring, is a source of pain, as if his steps reverberated through the poet's own body and represented the agonizing thaw of frostbitten limbs. The "dread" inspired by something as innocuous as a robin recalls the anxiety over the ordinary and the temporal expressed in Dickinson's early poems, where she cries out in panic "A Day! Help! Help! / Another Day!" (Fr58) or admits that "the least push of Joy / Breaks up my feet" (Fr312).⁵ The threats are pedestrian, banal, but all the more menacing for their ubiquity. By the second and third lines, the robin is "mastered," learned like a difficult lesson. And yet, by the fourth line the poet qualifies her mastery in a childlike admission that everything is not all better after all. Mastery is always partial in Dickinson's work. The thaw commences, but the pain persists.

In the second stanza, what began as ambiguous dread becomes a pain that has more localized, embodied form. The robin is not visually unbearable (though he could have been with his flaming breast) but *audibly* intolerable in his shouting song. Silent snows of winter have given way to the cacophony of spring, with the Robin, personified, aggressively shouting the news.

⁵ Levinas writes about a sense of paralysis in the face of the future, quoting a line from Maurice Blanchot's *Thomas l'Obscur* as he exclaims, "Tomorrow, alas! One will still have to live' – a tomorrow contained in the infinity of today. There is horror of immortality, perpetuity of the drama of existence, necessity of forever taking on its burden" (*Existence* 58).

Dickinson often expresses an extreme sensitivity to noise, the sense that the most muted rustling blares and that there is something indecent and excruciating in sound – as in “I was the slightest in the House” (Fr473), where she confesses: “I could not bear to live – aloud – / The Racket shamed me so – .” Levinas also thinks about the vulnerability of the ear and insists on the ethical priority of the audible over the visual insofar as the ear is uniquely sensitive, permanently open and exposed. In Levinas the ear becomes emblematic of the viscerally raw sensitivity of the human subject and the degree to which she lives defenselessly prone to impact. This is one reason Levinas says that “the face speaks” (*Totality* 66) (that is, is audible) even as he insists that it never *appears*. The ears access more than the eyes (which rely on the broad light of day) can see. A face audibly registers in the dark, making itself heard before one has any sense of *who* is speaking.⁶ The concrete significance of contesting the philosophical obsession with light and vision (sight itself etymologically connected with the Greek *theoria*, a visual *spectacle*) is to suggest that not everything that is meaningful offers itself in a glance and that ethics, in particular, does not rely on an external light or operate only in the day. Responsibility extends into the shadows and the darkness, into the places where one cannot see clearly and the times when no theory guides.

Dickinson foreshadows the Levinasian hierarchy of the audible over the visual, suggesting it is not the eye, but the ear, that is paradigmatically susceptible and uniquely attuned. This is why spring in its acoustic register intervenes with a brutality more menacing than any visual spectacle, against which one might draw the curtain or close one’s eyes. The ears remain uniquely passive, unable to shut, and this turns out to be both a curse and a blessing. In another poem, Dickinson implicitly associates the vulnerability of the ear with the fluid permeability of memory, writing “My Hazel Eye / Has periods of shutting – / But, No lid has Memory –” (Fr869). Sounds, like memories, flood in. Both of these indicate a nonintentional level of receptivity, or the degree to which the subject is at the mercy of things outside her control. The ears, memory, and also the heart, figure as thresholds in Dickinson’s poems, the entry points for populations invading the self. In “The saddest noise, the sweetest noise” (Fr1789), she thinks about the painful complicity of the ear and the heart, writing “An ear can break a human heart / As quickly as a spear. / We wish the ear had not a heart / So dangerously near.” Earlier in the same poem, she hears the birds’ songs on the cusp of spring, which make her remember “all the dead / That sauntered

⁶ Dickinson writes, “I see thee better – in the Dark – / I do not need a Light” (Fr1862).

with us here," memories that, once conjured, she cannot evade. Unable to distinguish the ear, memory, and the heart, she wishes "those siren throats / Would go and sing no more." This is the same admixture of spring, sound, dread, and memory we find in the earlier poem. Quickly the robin's first shout, which was suffered and endured, compounds into "Pianos in the Woods"; a swelling flock of birds alights in every tree as the robin's solo trumpet multiplies into a deafening, atonal orchestra that "mangles" her.⁷

The next three stanzas of the poem come in quick succession and with a military beat, as if the entry wedged open by the robin explodes with the throng of spring's advancing line – the daffodils with their piercing gowns, the shoots of grass, and finally, the terrifyingly indifferent, buzzing bees. Each of them threatens in their own way, torture finding ever more novel and subtle articulations. The flowers menace with a yellow so intense it seems to scramble the senses, piercing like a sound directly through the eye. The grass, too new to provide camouflage or cover, is useless, reckless stubble, while the bees enact the particularly insidious and acute punishment of indifference. They buzz with the numbing dumbness Dickinson often associates with nature, God, and the dead – each of these refusing to speak to her, and yet singularly, *wordlessly* expressive. The bees, who are so prevalent in Dickinson's poems, seem uniquely resilient and single-minded, rumbling on like the interminable drone Levinas associates with what he names *il y a* (there is); "a swarming of points" (*Existence* 53) characteristic of impersonal, anonymous existence. For Levinas, *il y a* expresses the world in its chaotic, interminable upsurge – the horrific sense of something that remains inarticulate, but defiantly present. Describing the distinctive threat of *il y a*, Levinas explains, "the *il y a* is unbearable in its indifference" (*Righteous* 45). Dickinson's bees, like Levinas's *il y a*, indicate a refusal of the stark alternatives between being and nothingness, introducing a residual nonsense that has its own, prelinguistic sense.

At last, in the sixth stanza, a tentative truce is drawn. Resigned to the inevitable, the poet admits, "They're here, though; not a creature failed – / No Blossom stayed away." The height of spring arrives with the bees: militant swarms marshaling summer. Nature, in the service of unrelenting time, refuses to pause or stall, refusing to acquiesce to a frozen soul. Not only does spring arrive, it unfurls flamboyantly, without restraint or modesty, without "deference to me – / the Queen of Calvary." The spring

⁷ In another poem, "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad" (Fr334), we learn that there are sounds more tolerable, namely the nearly silent murmur of air: "...that old measure in the Boughs – / That Phraseless Melody – / The Wind does – working like a Hand – / Whose fingers comb the Sky –."

remains stoically indifferent, even to the majestic suffering of one who is not merely tortured, but who commands the Biblical site (Calvary) of Jesus's crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem, a place also called "The Skull," littered with the remains of the dead.⁸ Calvary, the site of dying, stands in starkest opposition to the resurrection and explosive life of spring. To be "Queen" of such a site (queen of a mound, not even a minimally inhabited place) is to be the royal inheritor of the world's desertion. And yet, in spite of all of this, the poet-Queen in the final stanza "lifts" her "childish Plumes," her regal skirts, her quills, or the nascent sprouting wings Plato envisioned in the *Symposium*, when, provoked by the stunning beauty of the beloved, "the shafts of the feathers swell and begin to grow from their roots all over the entire form of the soul" (*Phaedrus* 251b). The poet's soul softens as she literally lifts her pen to write her poem. Simultaneously, she becomes more undifferentiated from the natural world that initially seemed so alien and threatening. Dickinson routinely personifies the animals, plants, and elements littering her verse, but by the end of the poem the poet is becoming animal, lifting her young feathers like a newborn bird awkwardly attempting first flight.

The poem concludes with a tentative upward gesture. Dickinson, however, qualifies the "Lift" of the last stanza (as she did the "mastery" of the opening stanza) by conjoining it with "bereaved acknowledgement." There is no joyous reconciliation, no triumphal resurrection.⁹ Instead, the poet soberly accepts the perfunctory "salutes" and the "unthinking Drums," the percussive beat of spring's creatures, which, with military precision, round out the full orchestra of the season. Nature is not speaking to her (as it would to Whitman or to Wordsworth), but she discovers ways of making the inarticulate sounds bearable, even meaningful.

In the end we find a minimal rise so familiar across Dickinson's poetry – perhaps most famously in the token differentiation she expressed in the lines: "It was not Death for I stood up, / And all the Dead, lie down" (Fr355). Dickinson is a master of drawing an unnerving similarity between the banal and the profound. She makes the distinction between standing up and lying down equivalent to the difference between life and death, creating a strange feeling of the difference being both more than one imagined, and far less.

⁸ "The place of the skull" is the literal translation of the Hebrew "Golgotha," the name of the site of Jesus's crucifixion used by Matthew (27:33), Mark (15:22), and John (19:17). Luke is alone in his use of "Calvary," the Latin derivative of Golgotha. See Luke (23:33).

⁹ Marilynne Robinson noted in an interview with Thomas Gardner: "There is never any rapture or transport or anything [in Dickinson's poems]. The sense of herself and her smallness and so on is always painfully present" (58).

The span of movement between standing up and lying down is like the utterly marginal interval Levinas expressed as the minimal, and at the same time *infinite* gap between waking up and “putting the foot down off the bed” (*Existence* 13).¹⁰ It is not very far to move, and yet the thought of getting up and the *act* of getting up can be separated by an abyss. Ultimately, the cumulative failures of the smallest gestures compound and reverberate into tragic magnitudes. Levinas thinks about instants that become interminable and chasms that open in the most confined space. Dickinson also conceives the maximal in the minimal and the compounding of seemingly insignificant details. The entire trajectory of “I dreaded that first Robin, so” moves from dread to “bereaved acknowledgement,” from the robin to the bees, from early to late spring. That is to say, the poem barely moves at all. The subtle “Lift” of the pen closing the poem mirrors the incrementally increasing height of the robin seeking its worm, the daffodil, the grass, and finally the bees, each of them drawing the poet skyward – yet none of them advancing very far above the ground.

Despite the linearity of spring’s progression, the textual movement of “I dreaded that first Robin, so” could be described as a spiral. The poem begins in one place and rotates around an opening line, descending from a single thought, word, or image, deepening as it goes. Often one can feel disoriented by Dickinson’s poetry, unsure of how a poem that began with a robin arrives at Calvary and drums, and yet sensibly aware of having been turned around with each new line. Dickinson, like Levinas, shows us what it looks like to turn around to the things closest, the things beneath one’s feet or just behind one’s back. The ethics inherent in this more modest variety of turning requires an attention to detail and particularity, and a reverence for the everyday. There is nothing heroic or grandiose in an ethics based on holding the door, and yet incremental acts of turning around become the basis for every other act of decency and respect. Dickinson reminds us of how much lies beneath our feet and within arm’s reach, providing us with an implicit ethical imperative to be more aware and alert to the world’s neglected, meager, and ordinary creatures and more alive to the world’s intricate texture and depth. It is not a great distance Dickinson crosses, not an epic span of time. But in keeping her spaces tiny and her time compact, she discovers the infinite packed into the finite.

¹⁰ Levinas borrows this example from William James, who makes it a centerpiece of his chapter on “Will” in *The Principles of Psychology* (2:524 ff).

5.

At the close of *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas uses the imagery of breathing to illustrate the subject's immanent expansive space and bodily core of vulnerability, calling the human subject "a lung at the bottom of his substance" (180). This description indicates a living, "panting, trembling" (180) space at the heart of the subject, a pliable and expanding reservoir for more air, which keeps the subject from condensing into dead matter. Levinas, blurring any distinction between the physical and the metaphysical, links the elemental, unintentional act of breathing with "transcendence in the form of opening up" (181). He then identifies the subject's ethical potential as her capacity to, like a lung, "open [herself] as space" (180). A few lines later he makes the ethical link more explicit, calling the "exposure to the openness of a face" a "further deep breathing" (180), as if a face functions like a gust of air forcibly expanding the lungs and rendering the subject more spacious, radically open.

Dickinson also thinks about degrees of openness and space discovered within seemingly narrow confines, though she does not articulate the ethical implications or use the term "transcendence" to describe the self's inner, untapped expanse.¹¹ In "I dreaded that first Robin, so," one senses the release from the solitude and the captivity of winter forced by surrendering to the birds, the flowers, and the bees. These draw Dickinson out: literally out of doors, and figurally out of her protective shell. In the end her plumes lift, as though buoyed by a breeze.

Wind, breezes, and breath occur repeatedly as themes in Dickinson's poetry, often personified. The wind has "tapped like a tired Man" (Fr621), the breezes become "pretty Housewives" "with their Brooms" (Fr137) or lend supernatural powers (breath operates like "Witchcraft") (Fr1712). The imagery in one poem from 1863 closely resembles Levinas's imagery for the subject's openness; Dickinson describes the rending open of a drowning subject gasping for air, caught between life and death.

Three times – we parted – Breath – and I –
Three times – He would not go –
But strove to stir the lifeless Fan
The Waters – strove to stay.

¹¹ Dickinson only uses the word "transcending" once in her poems. In "A something in a summer's Day" (Fr104), she writes "A something in a summer's noon – / A depth – an Azure – a perfume – / Transcending extasy." It is instructive to note that she invokes "transcending" on the heels of "a depth," coming close to the notion of "transdescendence" Levinas borrows from Jean Wahl in order to describe a transcendence with a new, immanent, directionality.

Three times – the Billows threw me up –
 Then caught me – like a Ball –
 Then made Blue faces in my face –
 And pushed away a sail
 That crawled Leagues off – I liked to see –
 For thinking – While I die –
 How pleasant to behold a Thing
 Where Human faces – be –
 The Waves grew sleepy – Breath – did not –
 The Winds – like Children – lulled –
 Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis –
 And I stood up – and lived – (Fr514)

Here breath takes on heroic magnitude, illustrating Dickinson's recurrent strategy of blurring the ordinary and the extraordinary. Breathing is a natural, routine, and effortless (nearly passive) activity. Yet it is also among the most critical functions of a living being, and one that becomes exponentially complicated the more one dwells on it or finds oneself denied its regularity. The habitual turned impossible quickly inspires panic. "Three times we parted breath and I" seizes on the mortal struggle to do the most basic thing.

Like "I dreaded that first Robin," "Three times" begins with a sense of panicked dread. Rather than a conflict between the poet and the natural world, now there is a rupture between the poet and the elemental. Separated from "Breath," she is literally severed from the source of life and metaphorically cut off from the *inspiration* (from *inspirare*: to breath or blow into) that fuels her poems. The panting pace of the first line (with four dashes) inverts the steady, drumlike, beat of "I dreaded that first Robin so," which commences decisively with an "I" who subsequently softens and dissolves. Here the "I" hangs between two dashes at the foot of the line, suspended precariously.¹²

The robin refused to be silent, and now we meet a "Breath," personified by the masculine "He," who refuses to be still. In the midst of her own drowning, a battle ensues between two elements, air and water, the one drawing the poet's soul up, the other submerging her body below. The second and third stanzas introduce the cruel, toying waves (like a band of schoolyard bullies). Dickinson often conjoins the childish with the serious,

¹² In "Drowning is not so pitiful" (Fr1542), Dickinson echoes "Three times we parted breath and I," providing additional explanation for her use of the number "three" as she writes, "Drowning is not so pitiful / As the attempt to rise. / Three times, 'tis said, a sinking man / Comes up to face the skies." Three also signifies the holy trinity and Dickinson's own trinity: "In the name of the Bee – / And of the Butterfly – / And of the Breeze – Amen!" (Fr23).

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showing us the ambiguous threshold between games and realities and the degree to which the utterly momentous dramas of childhood reverberate through the whole of life. Here playfulness and mortality coincide, as if the poet is the subject of a game gone horribly awry. "Billows" toss her "like a Ball," make "Blue faces in [her] face," and drive off the single "Thing," the receding sail of a boat that is the sole indication of a human world and the only prospect of salvation. She is seeing herself from above, looking down almost lovingly on her own reeling body. In the midst of her near-death experience, she enjoys a detached, reflective moment as she envisions "Human faces" on the distant boat – a rare admission in Dickinson of the potential comfort found in the proximity of other human beings.¹³

By the last stanza, the raging seas are exhausted. The winds whipping the waves into a frenzy, "like Children," have worn themselves out. Only "Breath" remains undaunted and unfazed. As in "I dreaded that first Robin, so," we find a reversal in the last lines of "Three Times," but the reversal is dramatic and conclusive. In the earlier poem, the speaker accommodates to the new reality, however grudgingly. Spring arrives. Here, darkness dissipates, pushed aside by the first rays of the rising sun. The sun, like a parent dispelling a nightmare with a kiss, emerges as the third, overpowering, natural element in the poem. The rising sun mirrors the relentless march of spring, forces too powerful to resist or evade. Touched by an external light and warmth, the poet finds herself released and reborn, as a butterfly from the confinement of its rigid cocoon. Recalling the last lines of "I dreaded that first Robin, so," the poet discovers herself softening, becoming more flexible, spacious and ambiguously depersonified – paradoxically rendered animal in becoming increasingly humane and more alive.¹⁴ She *stands*, repeating the minimal rising gesture (over and over, never a single, final stand): raising her pen, taking a step, keeping her in the margin of life.

6.

The sun that rises at the close of "Three times we parted breath and I," functions like a Levinasian face, dawning above and beyond the poet to draw her up and out. Though many of Dickinson's poems deal with the

¹³ Although she invokes "human nature" several times, the only other *explicit* use of the phrase "human faces" in Dickinson's poetry occurs in the poem "Myself was formed – a Carpenter –" (475), where she personifies her tools: "My Tools took Human – Faces –."

¹⁴ Levinas has a much less articulate sense of animals than Dickinson, but he does invoke "creature status" as the "hither side" of human identity, a reduction of the ego to a "self prior to all self-consciousness . . . older than the plot of egoism woven in the *conatus* of being" (*Otherwise* 92).

agonizing reality of death, they are, like Levinas's philosophy, more about survival and the excessive (sometimes painful, sometimes joyful) thrust of life – death's failure to be a final end, the haunting traces that remain for the living, and the rising of the next day.

The minimal rising gesture of standing, coaxed from the outside by a gentle heat, is not a heroic self-assertion but an involuntary, bodily turn. Levinas also thought about such minimal bodily confrontation – breath and incremental steps. In Levinas there is a sense that turning around to what is closest is simultaneously a turn toward what is deepest and most mysterious. Asked about the priority of ethics in a 1986 interview with François Poirié, Levinas responded, "More, often, especially now, I think about holiness (*sainteté*), about the holiness of the face of the other" (*Righteous* 49). Continuing this train of thought, he added "to respect the other, to take the other into account, to let him pass before oneself. And courtesy! Yes, that is very good, to let the other pass before I do; this little effort of courtesy is also an access to the face" (49). Later in the same interview he explains, "The human is the possibility of holiness" (55). For Levinas, the human is the possibility of letting another go ahead of oneself. This nearly insignificant, and at the same time monumental gesture indicates the human being's ability to act against the mandates of self-interest and the natural instinct of self-preservation. Although the notion of the "holy" has religious connotations, one should remember that Levinas describes religion in immanent terms as "horizontal . . . remaining on the earth of human beings" (*Entre Nous* 70). Both holiness and religion derive their meaning from something pedestrian and everyday.¹⁵ Levinas's sense of the "holiness" of the human face, more evident in the "saint" of the French *sainteté*, therefore entails an emphasis on the holiness situated in the here and now, a constant reminder that the world exceeds our grasp and that faces are concrete sources of infinity all around us – aerating perforations, unplumbable wells. Within this deflationary, humanized picture of the holy, the only temple is the crowded streets, and the only afterlife is the life of another person, who lives on, after one's own life.

Levinas discovers the holy in the human, while Dickinson discovers "The Finite – furnished / With the Infinite –" (Fr830). Both of them are concerned with an immanent transcendence available here on earth, though Dickinson's

¹⁵ In one his essays on Judaism, Levinas links the emphasis on the here and now with an essential tenet of Jewish faith, explaining: "If Judaism is attached to the here below, it is not because it does not have the imagination to conceive of a supernatural order, or because matter represents some sort of absolute for it; but because the first light of conscience is lit for it on the path that leads from man to his neighbor" (*Difficult Freedom* 100).

sense for otherness extends beyond human faces toward myriad forms of life. Surrendering to the complexity of a world that frustrates every concept one might form of it, Dickinson demonstrates, in poetry, the fractured subject and the revolutionary movement (the spinning or turning) so critical to Levinas's ethics. Rather than ascending for an overview, Dickinson descends to the tiny and the mere. In the process, she, more than Levinas, actively celebrates the world's lack of closure and cohesion, finding myriad occasions for greater sensitivity and "nimbleness."¹⁶ Her obsessively invoked "Heaven," like the face Levinas insists "remains terrestrial" (*Totality* 203), dawns from below. It is an unanswerable question – "Is Heaven a place – a Sky – a Tree?" (Fr476) – a locale without any definitive spatial location. In "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," Dickinson contests the pomposity, rigidity, and self-assurance of organized religion, preferring daily rituals at home and outdoors and concluding "instead of getting to Heaven, at last – / I'm going, all along" (Fr236), insisting that heaven is not a trophy earned at life's end but places encountered on life's way, however impermanent and mere. Similarly, in "I went to Heaven" (Fr577) we learn that "Heaven / 'Twas a small Town." Later she announces "The Fact that Earth is Heaven" (Fr1435), and later still describes the earthy, perfect bliss of the bumble bees, insisting: "The most important population / Unnoticed dwell. / They have a heaven each instant / Not any hell" (Fr1764). This is not an ultimate, happily-ever-after heaven where all sins are forgiven and debts are paid. It is a more precarious, "Brittle Heaven," (Fr724) a heaven bordered by, and sometimes indistinguishable from "a Pit" (Fr508).

Dickinson renders the insecurity of every space visceral, and this means that she does not offer us a consoling picture. Reading her, one is subjected to the full spectrum of human emotion – the heights and depths. Often despair, fear, and panic resound in the most memorable lines. Her unsteady, uncertain step – always small – leads from *this* to *this*, and never, as Hegel nobly tried to proceed, from *this* to *that*. Her dashes, capitalizations, and dissonant rhymes accentuate her progression "from Blank to Blank – / A Threadless Way" (Fr484). We find ourselves bereft of explanations, stalled or led in a circle. In some sense, the thought leads nowhere. And yet, in spiraling downward, Dickinson turns us around to what is so close we have ceased to register its presence. Exclaiming, "Behold the Atom – I preferred" (Fr279) and confessing, "the very least / Were infinite – to me –" (Fr522), she shows the

¹⁶ In a letter to Otis Phillips Lord in 1882, a few years before her death, Dickinson wrote: "On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings* – . . . we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (L728).

significance in the seemingly least significant things and encourages her readers to relinquish the futile quest for an overview in order to be present to what is (in Derrida's words) "very little, almost nothing" (*Writing* 80).¹⁷

The value of this movement lies in returning us to the things we are most apt to take for granted and overlook. For Levinas, this means that ethics begins with the minimal, nearly banal gestures of decency – holding the door, saying "After You." There is a temptation to reserve ethics for crises, for gut-wrenching situations. Levinas reminds us that in the heat of the crisis we are already too late. He reminds us that life is rife with less melodramatic interruptions calling for immediate response – faces rising all around. His sense of ethics entails an attention to the particular and the personal, an obsessive vigilance to the here and now. There is no guarantee that such vigilance will eradicate violence or mystically resolve any global problems. Life remains precarious and open to traumatic interruption. But in reminding us of a more incremental, concrete variety of ethical attention, "individual goodness, from man to man" (*Righteous* 81), Levinas gives us a profound responsibility to attend to things one face at a time, without getting ahead of ourselves. This is the crux of Levinas's ethical thought, and yet it is Dickinson, a thinker of increments and minutiae, who articulates the consequence of overlooking a face, warning: "The Face we choose to miss – / Be it but for a Day / As absent as a Hundred Years, / When it has rode away – (Fr1293). The face one ignores, even momentarily, recedes with a compounding distance, until it lies beyond memory, beyond retrieval.

Insofar as Dickinson returns us to what is always there beneath our feet, she reminds us, as Levinas does, of the value and the immensity of the intimate and the ordinary. Her poems prefigure the horrific historical ruptures that fueled Levinas's ethical thought, inciting him to question the possibilities for ethics and the structure of the self. And yet Dickinson is a presciently postmodern poet in the sense that she intuited both the world and the human subject as fragmented, broken beyond repair, and nonetheless saw the sober hope available to those who might learn to move among broken pieces. Levinas defined hope as the embodied time of other lives. Dickinson, thinking of the infinity of skies, trees, blades of grass, insects, and animals, also conceives an infinity fleshed out in a world teeming alive. Reading her, we are "prevented . . . From missing minor Things" (Fr995). Reading her in light of Levinas, we are reminded that the minor things are the only things of any real significance; they are instances of the infinite in person, and to miss them would be to miss all.

¹⁷ Derrida uses this phrase to describe the paradoxical scope of Levinas's project in *Totality and Infinity*.