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Reader Interrupted: Poetry as Thing in the Lyrical Works of Emily Dickinson

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READER INTERRUPTED: POETRY AS THING IN THE LYRICAL WORKS OF
EMILY DICKINSON

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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ABSTRACT

This paper stemmed from a desire to place Dickinson's poetry in conversation within the broader discourse of Thing Theory, namely using Bill Brown, Theodor Adorno, and Jane Bennett collectively. These claims derive as well from my own experiences in reading Dickinson's poetry: those times when faced with delightful frustration, enjoyably utter-confusion, followed closely by a frantic desire to understand at all costs. Dickinson's poetry is that which truly "plunge[s]" us "for a moment into [a] torrent of sensation" (Santayana 260). Nestled somewhere between my chest and my gut, there is this unnamable feeling that arrests me in a physical way, one that I would assume is similar to Dickinson's response to "poetry" which would make her feel "physically as if the top of [her] head were taken off"—perhaps her selfsame "cleaving" of the brain mentioned in her poetry (L341a).

What struck me was that the same feelings I had in response to Dickinson's poetry were almost identical to those I experienced when "forced to confront an object's thingness." Such connections led me to believe that Dickinson was writing particular poems in such a way as to fabricate a similar discovery as Theodor Adorno's recognition of the "nonidentity" and the "nagging feeling" that Jane Bennett describes. Had I, in my utter confusion, actually achieved even a small part of that which Dickinson strove for in her poetry? It is hard to deny that, by the purposeful defamiliarization and cleaving in two of the poetic focus, Dickinson repeatedly calls attention to our own failures of perception. She orchestrates a readership liminal space that grants the poem the power to insist that it be noticed in the same way that Brown's "things" manifest themselves through material

interruption. “Thingness” becomes synonymous with the “experience” of her lyric materialism, and her poems position themselves against the cultural and academic biases of critical literary theory. With Dickinson’s poetic voice as a guide, my endeavor has been to discover a more concrete praxis of how to read without reading; to extrapolate and formulate an affective materialism from the two-dimensional plane of ink and paper.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This paper ultimately stemmed from a desire to place Dickinson's poetry in conversation within the broader discourse of Thing Theory, namely using Bill Brown, Theodor Adorno, and Jane Bennett collectively. However, these claims derive as well from my own personal experiences in reading Dickinson's poetry: those times when I am faced with delightful frustration, enjoyably utter-confusion, followed closely by this frantic desire to understand at all costs. There had to be *something else* there. Anyone can write utter nonsense on a page, but Dickinson is able to craft a work that confounds and enlightens all at the same time, and, consequently, her poetry is that which truly "plunge[s]" us "for a moment into [a] torrent of sensation" (Santayana 260). Nestled somewhere between my chest and my gut, there is this unnamable feeling that arrests me in almost a physical way; a way that I would assume is similar, but not quite as dramatic, as Dickinson's response to "poetry" which would make her feel "physically as if the top of [her] head were taken off"—perhaps her selfsame "cleaving" of the brain mentioned in her poetry (L341a).

What struck me was that the same feelings I had in response to Dickinson's poetry were almost identical to those I experienced when "forced to confront an object's thingness," to put such sensations into Bill Brown's terminology. There was *something else* that I was experiencing, I just could not grasp it through the literary

theory I had at hand. Eventually, such connections led me to believe that Dickinson had to be writing particular poems in such a way as to fabricate a similar discovery as Theodor Adorno's three-step recognition of the "nonidentity" and the "nagging feeling" that Jane Bennett describes in her works. Had I, in my utter confusion, actually achieved even a small part of that which Dickinson strove for in her poetry? It is hard to deny that, by the purposeful defamiliarization and cleaving in two of the poetic focus, Dickinson repeatedly calls attention to our own failures of perception. She orchestrates a readership liminal space that grants the poem the power to insist that it be noticed in the same way that Brown's "things" manifest themselves through material interruption. In a sense, "thingness" becomes synonymous with the "experience" of her lyric materialism, and her poems position themselves abruptly against the cultural and academic biases of critical literary theory. With Dickinson's poetic voice as a guide, my endeavor here has been to discover a more concrete praxis of how to read without reading; to extrapolate and formulate an affective materialism from the two-dimensional plane of ink and paper.

As mentioned above, Thing theorist Bill Brown would describe this experiencing of an object's—or a poem's—*something else* as a "confront[ation] [of its] thingness" (Brown, "Thing" 15, 4). To clarify, "objects," for Brown, are that which we take for granted and accept into our everyday lives and assume that we fully know their identities. "Object" as a toothbrush mechanically swished across teeth without thought, a coffee mug pressed automatically against chapped lips, a workout shirt tossed in the dirty clothes hamper, and glasses resituated on the bridge

of the nose. Conversely, an object turned “thing” manifests itself as alien, unapproachable, and ambiguous, often adopting a Freudian sense of the uncanny. According to Brown, we experience the thingness of the material world only when these “objects . . . stop working for us . . . when their flow has been arrested, however momentarily” in our lives (Brown, “Thing” 4). Whether it be the car breaking down on the side of the road, the pencil lead snapping mid-sentence, or a toe stubbed against the worn carpet of the staircase, such uninvited, and often unwanted, interruptions allow these objects the ability to assert themselves as having an existence *outside* of us, independent of our acknowledgment or agency. Brown illustrates that “things” do not wait meekly for our approval or notice. Equally, Dickinson’s poems can be seen to stand alone, divorced even from Dickinson’s power as creator or fashioner, interrupting the literary reader’s natural inclination to read the works as they have always done in the past: “[The] object attains a new stature precisely because it has no life outside the boundary of art—no life, that is, within our everyday lives” (Brown, “Thing” 15). Dickinson, whether intentionally or not, uniquely and poetically replicates Brown’s object-interruption, and her written works are permitted to emanate their own power, autonomous of either Dickinson’s or the reader’s human agency.

In his introductory article, “Thing Theory,” Brown begins by discussing A. S. Byatt’s novel, *The Biographer’s Tale*, in which the author details the musings of a doctoral student fatigued with the endless, unfulfilling theory of his profession. Discouraged, the student stares at the “filthy” window above him, saying to himself,

“I must have things” (Brown, “Thing” 1). Rather than peering *through* the window for meaning outside of it (as window panes are most often utilized for), the student looks instead *at* the window itself in order to “relinquish theory [and] relish the world at hand: ‘A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*’” (Brown, “Thing” 2-3). Brown uses this example to further attest that we, unlike Byatt’s doctoral student, are individuals whose perspectives are often fixated upon everything but that which is materialistically *real*. We live in a cognitive realm of incomplete perceptions and glibly accepted partial-experiences of reality, and, according to Brown, we will continue in such avenues unless we allow ourselves to be open to challenges posed by the everyday objects that surround us:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture . . .), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window.
(Brown, “Thing” 4)

Because we cannot completely interact with and wholly perceive the physical world through our senses, our brains are constantly creating connections, solutions, and fabricating meaning for the sensory inputs we receive. These “codes” allow us to continue in our ever-partial reality, passing over, using mechanically, and numbly accepting the objects of our physical worlds, often without giving them much more

thought than their use value, to put it in Marxist terms. “Can’t we learn from this materialism,” asks Brown, “instead of taking the trouble to trouble it [with theory]? Can’t we remain content with the ‘real, very dirty window’—a ‘thing’—as the answer to what ails us without turning it into an ailment of its own?” (Brown, “Thing” 3). Why must we rely on filters, lenses, and dyes in order to *look* at something that could otherwise be seen without?

By its very nature, Thing theory can be applied to all that humanity tastes, touches, feels, and ultimately senses, and Brown would argue further that such a theory does not simply encompass the commodified object-world. The boundaries between the theoretical and physical are breached through the re-encountering of materiality within literary texts, and this is not simply due to the physical texture of hardback covers on fingertips, the musty smell of aging pages, or the crisp lines of lasered-ink across the page. It is namely regarding the abstraction of thoughts produced; the feelings, the emotions that are triggered when one reads a physical text. The “thing” exists in the mind rather than on the page. However, such affective materialism is not as easily recognized if conventional theory is used as a guide. For this reason, I believe that Thing theory is the most direct means of exploring an alternative approach to literature. Although it is certainly ironic to use *theory* in order to *reject* theory, Brown believes that such preexisting theoretical tools have numbed readers to a truer reading of literature: “What habits have prevented readers . . . from recognizing . . . material complication?” (Brown, “Thing” 7). In a similar way, certain literary works ask to be read—or

experienced—differently according to Brown’s theory of “thingness.” For this to happen, the piece of literature must replicate this “interruption of the object,” forming, through selective language, a liminal space in which the work can assert its own “thingness” and disrupt the habitually accepted readings of the written word.

Accordingly, such a materialist literary experience is best found in the succinctly beautiful and confounding poems of Emily Dickinson. As is to be expected, scholars, students, and enthusiasts alike have, for years, attempted to decipher Dickinson poems by applying layer after layer of literary, feminist, structuralist, and archetypal poetic theory to her works in order to extrapolate what meaning they could from the often confusing collection of words. They have sifted through her weighty adjectives, puzzled over the em-dash, and scrutinized her random-but-not-so-random capitalization patterns. While close-reading requires anything but an “apathetic” mind—in fact, it demands intense thought and focus—this conventional mode of reading and explication still has the ability to numb a reader’s mind to only extrapolate a set spectrum of meaning from a text. Such a method, by its obvious requirement for precision and intensity of (preexisting) theoretical thought, could potentially mask any attempt made by the text to act upon the reader. This focus on the theoretical and semantic construct of the poem is what hinders us from experiencing the “thingness”—the autonomous power—that lies within the poetic work.

One of the most lasting debates in Dickinson scholarship, for instance, is the question of the collation and organization of the poet’s handwritten manuscripts.

When Dickinson's poems were first published by family and friends in the 1890's, the integrity of her forty original fascicles were compromised after being separated and sifted through by the primary editor, Mabel Loomis Todd. It was not until Ralph W. Franklin, in 1981, revised existing attempts at the proper re-collecting of Dickinson's works and published a volume in which he documented his process of matching the "stationery, imperfections, smudge patterns, and puncture marks" of the manuscripts—he claimed to have "returned the fascicles to their original state" (Oberhaus 150). While the preservation of the poet's original work is supremely important in its own historic right, there is a great deal more to experiencing Dickinson's lyric than the debates over whether *this* poem should have been read before *that* poem, or if *that* particular word should have been added to the previous line instead of the current one. It is easy to get caught up in the physical intrigue of her manuscripts or the mystery of her line breaks and word substitutions; however, *what* she wrote and *how* she wrote her poetry is what we should ultimately return to. We should read beyond biography and semantic interpretation, echoing Brown's earlier query about literature: can we not read Dickinson's poems without "taking the trouble to trouble" them too?

I have often been guilty of taking gross liberties with Dickinson's works by ascribing meaning and attempting to translate her poetic intent word by word. I find myself trying to read her biographical life into the stanzas, or perhaps even attempt to relate her sentiments to my own as an individual who loves the sound, the feel, and even the taste of some words. I am not arguing against the validity of close

readings of her poems as I believe that many of her works warrant this type of academic explication. Poetry *should* be read. In fact, for the advancement of this argument, I rely predominantly on the close readings of several of Dickinson's poems in order to establish her poetic interaction with materialist ideals. What I do not wish to do is blaspheme the works of editors such as the aforementioned Franklin or critics like Helen Vendler in their dedication to the study of Dickinson's poetic, emotional, and academic purposes. Nevertheless, I cannot help but wonder still how differently could we understand Dickinson's poetic voice if we read, instead, her poems as things—things that wish to exert their own power upon us in lieu of our attempts to extract meaning line by line. What happens when we stop “looking *through* the window” for meaning and begin to look *at* Dickinson's works instead? What is left when we remove the potentially obscuring tints and distorting funhouse mirrors of literary theory?

The answers to such questions may be found within the poetic works themselves, and as such, I would contend that selections of Dickinson's poetry have been habitually misread. When conventional reading habits are challenged, the poems turned “thing” exert their agency *upon us* rather than their words simply being probed for semantic meaning by theory-numbered brains. If Dickinson's poems are treated as *things*, then they are liberated to act upon the reader rather than the reader solely acting upon them—or as explained by Brown in reference to the doctorate student's window, “A *thing* can hardly function as a window” (Brown, “Thing” 4). Consequently, due to their unique material-conscious lyric and

intentionally destabilizing vernacular, Dickinson's poems should be viewed as a collected praxis of object-thingness; an aesthetic pedagogy for their own reading, or experiencing, as the case may be. This materialist literary occurrence will be illuminated through close readings of Dickinson's "Perception of an Object Costs," "You'll Know Her – by Her Foot," and "Death sets a Thing Significant" in congruence with Bill Brown and other Thing theorists within the broader context of materialist principles. In doing so, I will endeavor to refocus our attention on the poetic, affective materialism that Dickinson's poems create for the reader once they are allowed to operate as "things."

CHAPTER TWO

YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG: HEIDEGGER'S ART OF "APPRECIATION"

In order to begin answering the questions above, it is important to establish the relevance of an alternative praxis for reading Dickinson's works as *things* rather than simply poems. It can be assumed that Dickinson, through her extensive readings and preoccupation with the natural world around her, would have been at least familiar with the materialist conversations established by ancient thinkers such as Epicurus and Democritus, in addition to the duality of life and truth contemplated in the writings of Plato. Dickinson was known to have "express[ed] admiration" for Thoreau's works (Hileman 1), and according to Shira Wolosky in her essay, "Dickinson's Emerson," the poet "specifically recall[ed] Emerson's writings . . . [in her] works" (Wolosky 134). Moreover, in 1850, "[Dickinson's] friend Benjamin Newton gave her Emerson's first collection of poems to her delight" (Hileman 1). Although Thoreau and Emerson's works strongly reflect the Transcendentalist movement of the early 19th century, their writings still call for a return to the natural environment, away from the corrupting ilk of a single-minded humanity and an industrial-revolution-choked society. Thoreau especially contemplated the materialist idea of "Wild," a powerful, "not-quite-human force," that he was convinced was intrinsic to all humans, even matter itself (Bennett 2). Alongside this movement was the refocusing on the materiality of the physical world and the added emphasis on the intrinsic value of the individual autonomous of the corrupting and

muddying effects of societal control. Although Dickinson is not to be considered a cog in the Transcendentalist movement, Wolosky would assert that her poetry still illustrates “her treatments of autonomous unity and self-reliance” (Wolosky 134).

Arguably, Transcendentalism is most often used to discuss human and societal pressures; however, its encouragement of an unadulterated existence in the physical world can be brought into discussion with more modern theorists as well. While not specifically addressing Dickinson’s poetry, F. David Martin, in his essay, “Heidegger’s Being of Things and Aesthetic Education,” argues for the validity of teaching students to encounter works of art in their essence rather than rely on an established spectrum of art theories and grade school curriculum of identification and symbol-soul-searching. Martin explains that:

Aesthetic education has long been suffering from an inferiority complex. In elementary and secondary schools, courses in art instruction and appreciation are usually looked upon as frills. In colleges and universities, the study of the arts . . . rarely includes any theoretical justification. . . . [and] Most courses in aesthetics study what critics say about art, not art. . . . Aesthetic education, in following Heidegger, should understand its fundamental objective as training *in thinking from things*. (Martin 98-99, my italics)

Such a shift in pedagogy allows room for organic and original thought through the careful limitation and purposeful disruption of predetermined theories and expectations. Students are encouraged to push back against the norms that they so

often have accepted without contention. Martin goes on to include a quote made by D. H. Lawrence that explains the cognitive reasoning—or lack thereof—behind this old way of thinking: “The eye sees only fronts, and the mind, on the whole, is satisfied with fronts. . . . The true imagination is forever curving around to the other side, to the back of the presented appearance” (Martin 93). In so establishing an art-focused pedagogy that implements Heidegger’s “training in thinking from things,” Martin explains that students would better learn how to break the mold and step outside of their passive positions as constant “spectator[s]” and become, instead, active “participator[s]” who gain “an explicit awareness that is lacking in everyday experience” (Martin 99, 98).

To do this, Martin believes that the current “art appreciation courses” should be eradicated from school systems and, in their stead, a curriculum be implemented that is more focused on the “concreteness” of art (Martin 99). Unhampered by the set principles of archetypal art studies, “[the] teacher should identify himself with his students as [also] being led by the work of art itself” as they relinquish the stale comfort of traditional strictures (Martin 99). Because Martin considers poetry to be a part of the art realm as well, he demonstrates the capacity of the written word to teach students in this proposed hyper-material-sensitive manner. Using as an example the structurally unorthodox poem, “l(a),” by E. E. Cummings, Martin explains that some poetic works, by their very nature, ask to be read differently than others:

The poem as Cummings wrote it . . . lets the words and even their letters shine forth, for if we are to understand these words we must attend to their every feature. As we do, the words open up a far wider and luminous world. The language is translucent, like stained rather than transparent glass. We see the poem's world only *in and through*—not just through—the words. (Martin 101-02)

I cannot help but be reminded again of Byatt's exasperated doctoral student's "filthy" window that is looked upon and not through (Brown, "Thing" 4). Perhaps it is the "filth" that helps us to recognize the window's status as "thing," for is it not a window's human-infused purpose to be as see-through and unobtrusive as possible? In an infomercial-laden world where *Windex* boasts a "streak free shine" and home improvement shows hand out tips on how to prevent blown seals on windows, it is not acceptable if we are unable to see through the panes without interruption. Such sentiments bring us back to my original argument for experiential, affective readings of Dickinson's poetry. While a Dickinson poem is unable to accrue the same physical "filth" as the doctoral student's window does to call attention to itself, I believe that the poem's language is capable of intentionally manipulating the reader to having a similar experience. This ultimately arrests the attention of the reader in a similar way as Brown would describe an object's "thingness."

CHAPTER THREE

PAYING THE PRICE: THE OBJECT THAT IS “NOUGHT”

In her article, “Dickinson’s Lyric Materiality,” Gillian Osborne argues that Dickinson’s poems in particular “teach us how they should be read . . . [and this] instruction, awkward and startling, is thrilling” (Osborne 73). Predominately dealing with Dickinson’s fascination with the natural world, Osborne studies closely the poet’s decision to periodically include specimens of pressed flowers and plants along with her works as well as the peculiar mediums on which she often wrote her poetry—scraps of paper, the backs of envelopes, and inconveniently small sheaves of notepaper. Nevertheless, due to the intrinsic materiality of Dickinson’s poetic works, Osborne is left with the same question that intrigues me as well: “*What* [then] are we reading when we read Dickinson if we are not reading poems . . . what fraught material-textual objects has Dickinson produced?” (Osborne 57-58). Osborne goes on to affirm that Dickinson’s poetry “may be less a practice of reading or mode of writing than an experience” (Osborne 73). Dickinson invites us to approach her poems as *they are* rather than what we *think* they are. And if these poems are allowed to interrupt us, then they have the potential to help us to recover the concrete and often haptic nature of Dickinson’s material-poetic world.

In attempting to define Dickinson’s personal theory of object-thingness, I used a concordance of her poetry to isolate and carefully read the works that included the specific usage of “object” and “thing” in order to remain as close to

Brown's theories of materiality as possible. Because Dickinson uses the word "thing ... 115 different times and with seven distinguishable meanings" throughout her poetry, I felt at first that it was a more focused argument to predominantly use the handful of poems that included the word "object" rather than try to encompass such a large collection of her "thing" poems (Vendler 118). What I immediately stumbled upon was a blatant description of the perception of objects—a praxis, so to speak, of object-thingness—as well as the struggle to adequately interact with a material-constructed world:

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 – (Fr1103)

In the first stanza, Dickinson describes the various steps that an implied perceiver must execute when perceiving an object. First, the perceiver must "Gain" the "Object's loss," with this "loss" being the inevitable "price" that an object must pay: the loss, or complete removal, of itself (Fr1103.1-4).

Before going any further into poetic explication, it is pertinent to include more specific definitions of Dickinson's vernacular. While this may seem a particularly elementary exercise—to look up words in a dictionary—one must understand the gravity of Dickinson's word choice within her poetry before going on to make any form of conclusion about her intent or purpose. The linguistic inclusions within the poems are so evidently and meticulously chosen that Cuihua Xu, an academic dedicated to the translations of Dickinson's poetry into traditional Chinese characters, admits that “the difficulty of disclosing the essence from what [Dickinson] has already distilled is tremendous” (Xu 111). Xu believes, too, that Dickinson, through her poetry, encourages the reader to strive for understanding from even the most simplistic of sources: “Distill[] amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings” (Fr772). Therein lies Xu's passion for extrapolating the truest translation of Dickinson's works and acts as a reminder to us to spare no efforts in seeking the truest understanding of—or experience from—her works. Similar to Brown's rejection of an apathetic mind to the material world, so too does Dickinson demand an active and engaged consciousness while reading her poems.

The most pertinent definition of the word “object” to my intended discourse is “something placed before or presented to the eyes or other senses” (OED 1a). Interestingly, in a rarer usage, “object,” can also mean “an interruption or obstruction; an obstacle, a hindrance” (OED 9). The implied perceiver, in Dickinson's poem, recognizes the need to act upon the obstructing presence of the original Object in order to apprehend and receive what is being concealed or

obscured; there is a “cost” that needs to be dealt with (Fr1 103.1). In the second stanza, Dickinson explains that the remainder, what is left behind, is “The Object absolute is nought” (Fr1 103.5). The word “absolute,” in congruence with its etymology, means “complete, perfect, pure” (OED 1). “Nought,” on the other hand, simply means “nothing, not anything” (OED 1a). Such a juxtaposition of terms creates a void, and the original Object no longer remains; it has been removed due to its perfect yet utter nothingness. Once this Object-displacement has occurred, the “Perfectness” that remains is apparently “then . . . upbraid[ed]” by perception itself (Fr1 103.6-7). “Upbraid” quite simply denotes a reproach or reprimand; however, in rarer cases, it can also mean “to give utterance to” (OED 5). With the initial Object removed, the “perfectness” that is left behind is reproached for allowing the Object to obscure its truer self, until now causing the acknowledgment and discovery of this “perfectness” to be “so far” from the grasp of the perceiver (Fr1 103.8). However, in light of the latter definition of “upbraid,” perception, once it has finished its scolding, may actually grant the “perfectness” a chance, perhaps for the first time, to utter for itself.

According to Dickinson, the “reply,” or “cost,” of removing the “Object” is ultimately worth whatever “Gain” it is that “Perception” achieves: discovering the “absolute . . . perfectness” of the object. As such, this occurrence of loss and gain can be seen as an early poetic illustration of the moment of Brown’s confrontation with the “thingness” of an object as well as the recognition that we do not know as much as we thought that we did—we must literally dig deeper. The very necessity

of Dickinson's poetic object-removal illustrates the perceiver's need for action; "cost" denoting the necessity of a form of payment, an action, or effort, while "upbraiding" is an act of confrontation and interaction. Dickinson's perceptive exercise is anything but a passive task as it endeavors to separate that which is being perceived in two: the object and the absolute perfectness.

Returning to the discussion within Thing theory, I would argue that an "object," for Dickinson, is similar to that of Brown's definition, being that which is conceived in the reader's mind: the everyday, assimilated image or assumed understanding of ingested outward perceptions. The "thing," the "nought" object, or "other," for Dickinson, on the other hand, is the actual entity itself—physical, emotional, or otherwise—that exists outside of our agency and can only be confronted through the disruption of the object. Moreover, the poem "Perception of an Object costs," I believe, can be viewed as a praxis of reading other of her works—the aforementioned shift in pedagogy for reading Dickinson as thing rather than simply a skillfully crafted sequence of words. In the same way that the implied perceiver gains an interaction with the "Perfectness" left over from the dismissed "Object" in the poem above, so can we experience selections of Dickinson's poetry in a similar way by leaving behind our biased, cultural readings of her works and instead "upbraid" the "perfectness," allowing its poetic materiality to utter for itself. Such an interaction with and acknowledgement of this "Object [that] is [made] nought" is what materialist Jane Bennett would potentially call the object's "thing-power," or the "irreducibly strange dimension of matter" (Bennett 2-3).

In her book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett discusses the intrinsic vibrancy, or “thing-power,” of all matter, both dead and alive (Bennett 2). Bennett focuses on the duality of the physical world due to human subjectivity and our incomplete perception of matter in general. From the start, Bennett explains that the purpose of her book is to “impossibly . . . name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power” (Bennett 3). She goes on to compare her research to the phenomenon of saying a familiar word over and over in such a way as to cause the word to “become a foreign, nonsense sound”—the word is effectively split in two (Bennett vii). For instance, “bowl” as the container in which you may pour your cereal in the mornings, and then “bowl,” after exhaustive repetition, as simply a defamiliarized string of letters—the word “bowl” as thing. By “turn[ing] the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange” for her readers (Bennett vii), Bennett calls attention to Brown’s proclaimed “problematic . . . [and] phantasmatic . . . externality of th[e] world” (Brown, “Thing” 2). The fabricated duality of object-thingness is revealed through the juxtaposition of incomplete human perception and material identity and agency.

Most important to my discussion with Dickinson’s poetry is Bennett’s section addressing Theodor Adorno’s theory of the “nonidentity” of matter—the supposed “gap between concept and reality, object and thing” (Bennett 13). Adorno attests that “there is always a ‘nonidentity’ between [the thing] and any

representation [of it] . . . [and the thing] eludes capture” with the same force of Bennett’s “thing-power” (Bennett 13). In his book, *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno further delineates this concept of casting off imperfect human subjectivity:

. . . nonidentity is experienced as negativity. From the negative, the subject withdraws to itself, and to the abundance of its ways to react. Critical self-reflection alone will keep it from a constriction of this abundance, from building walls between itself and the object, from the supposition that its being-for-itself is an in-and-for-itself. . . . because [in] our traditional way of thinking . . . The nonidentity . . . is covered up like a skeleton in the family closet. (Adorno 31, 104)

Although Adorno published his book in 1966, eighty years after Dickinson’s death, the poem “Perception of an Object costs” prophetically details a similar occurrence of the simultaneous confrontation and revelation of materiality—we must not rest at an initial, glancing perception of an object. There is more to gain by “replying,” or attempting to interact with its materiality in order to extrapolate all that it has to give. In this way, Adorno theoretically defines that which Dickinson is asking us to recognize, not only in her poetry, but in the physical world as well: “Objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” (Bennett 14). Something is always lost in translation between our perception and the actual identity or “vibrancy” of that which we encounter.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLOVEN IN TWO: DICKINSON'S SUSTAINED "OTHER"

Most likely realizing that all "object matter" had a life outside of human perception, Dickinson also seemed to know that the focus of her discourse, or simply of her attention, was in some way supremely different from the entity that she had formed in her head. Dickinson further pushes this idea of object-thingness in other selections of her poetry, especially in the works, "You'll know Her – by Her Foot" and "Death Sets a Thing Significant" (Fr604, 640). In order to arrest her reader's attention and fabricate Brown's confrontation of the thing, Dickinson must construct her language to simultaneously act as obstructions to the reader's carefree or habitual perceiving of the poetic world as well as establish a self-awareness of the disjunction that this partial-perception creates between object and thing. Dickinson first creates this arrestment of the object by forcibly treating her poetic focuses in their raw thingness; she establishes them within a duality of existence while amplifying the presence of the thing itself.

In "You'll know Her – by Her Foot," Dickinson's poetic voice lists the various ways that one could "know" a "Robin" through the senses of sight, touch, and sound:

You'll know Her – by Her Foot –

The smallest Gamboge Hand

With Fingers – where the Toes should be – . . .

You'll know Her – by Her Vest –

Tight fitting – Orange – Brown –

Inside a Jacket duller –

She wore when she was born – . . .

So finer 'tis than Wool –

You cannot feel the seam – . . .

You'll know Her – by Her voice –

At first – a doubtful Tone – . . . (Fr604.1-3, 9-12, 17-
18, 21-22)

Although it may seem to be a form of anthropomorphism, Dickinson's decision to describe the bird with human characteristics—using, throughout the entirety of the poem, terms such as “Hand,” “Fingers,” “Boot,” “Vest,” and “Cap”—actually does very little to help the reader identify the animal (Fr604.2-13). In the process of minutely describing aspects of the Robin, Dickinson implies that the recognizing of the creature will be difficult, effectively defamiliarizing an otherwise well-known species:

. . . all the qualities that are necessary to produce an image of a bird, qualities that are in a sense meant to be cumulatively synonymous with the creature they amount to, are presented as dispensable, articles of

clothing that could be taken on and off [at will] . . . The “bird” appears over the course of the poem [to be merely] dressed in her identity.

(Osborne 64-64)

The characteristics that the reader “will” take in are simply a cover or mask that obscures the “other” truer bird underneath. By attesting in the first line that “you’ll know” the Robin by her physical characteristics, Dickinson asks the reader to initially contemplate the poetic focus as they perhaps normally would in reality; as in this case, discussing a potentially everyday visitor to many people’s window sills and bird feeders, or, at the very least, an easy enough entry to find in a field guide or encyclopedia.

The process by which Dickinson then attempts to make the request of the reader—to both know and not know—is by subsequently imbuing a sustained *thingness* onto even the most familiar of her poetic focuses: “For Dickinson, there may be more power in misidentification than in . . . recognition” (Osborne 66). Dickinson effectively recreates the sensation of Brown’s claim that thingness is that which “hovers over the threshold between the nameable and unnamable” (Brown, “Thing” 5). Even as we see the Robin “closer stand [to us]” in line sixteen, the reader is continually denied full identification of the bird: “You cannot feel . . . / Nor . . . clasp . . . / Nor h[o]ld” it (Fr604.18-20). Because all perceptive “Arguments” experienced through your senses about the Robin have ultimately been “squander[ed] on your Head,” you, for want of this “knowing” promised earlier, “beg the Robin in your Brain / To keep the other – still” (Fr604.24-27). Within this

squandered perception, the Robin becomes two: the actual Robin and the conjured Robin. Such a representation reveals the distinct line between the understanding formed in our brains and the *thing* itself (by Brown's definition), or "other," as Dickinson cleaves the bird into its poetic duality—the "Robin in your brain" and the "other" Robin (Fr604.26-27).

We see this selfsame splitting of the poetic subject in Dickinson's "The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized," where the poetic voice describes two bees flying around and away from a "School Boy": the "June Bee" that "Invites the Race" and the bee that "flies not" (Fr304.3). Osborne notes that the bee that "flies not" has no reason to fly at all; it is the "bee [that is] in the brain"—the human cognitive formulation of the thing itself, like the "Robin in [the] brain." We remain unable to "keep the other [thing] – still" and it once again "eludes capture" (Bennett 13). In a later poem, Dickinson continues to explain the sensation of this juxtaposed depiction of perception, yet she does so here in more humanly physical terms:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
As if my Brain had split –
I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –
But could not make them fit – (Fr867.1-4)

The speaker continues by saying that they are unable to "join ... The thought behind" with the "thought before," promoting the incomplete perceptive ability of the human brain (Fr867.5-6). However, I believe that this duality that Dickinson

describes is not limited to being found in the incompleteness of human perception alone.

The decisive poetic agency of stripping objects of their “objectness” and pressing their “thingness” upon the reader demands a newfound self-awareness of materiality, and, as previously discussed in with “Perception of an Object costs,” an Object can be removed by the perceiver’s effective perception of it. I would argue further that the thingness of an object, according to Dickinson, can be experienced due to external forces as well, outside of the control of the subject. In her poem, “Death sets a Thing significant,” Dickinson describes how the material mementos of a deceased friend change in the light of that friend’s absence. “Significant” is defined as “expressive or suggestive;” though, more importantly to this poem, can also mean “loaded with meaning” (OED 1a). What once “The Eye had hurried by” suddenly “Entreats us” to “ponder” its existence differently than before (Fr640.1-5). Knitted or embroidered pieces previously made by the deceased friend are placed “Upon the Closet shelves –” in memoriam rather than used as they normally would have before (Fr640.11-12). Even the implements of the craft—“Crayon[s]” and “Thimble[s]”—are allowed to be placed in “the Dust,” “stopped” from their work by “Death” (Fr640.6-11). Most poignant, for myself, are the stanzas where Dickinson describes the book that had been gifted her by a friend before his death:

A Book I have – a friend gave –

Whose Pencil – here and there –

Had notched the place that pleased Him –

At Rest – His fingers are –

Now – when I read – I read not –

For interrupting Tears –

Obliterate the Etchings

Too costly for Repairs – (Fr640.13-20)

With his marks remaining even after his “Fingers” have stopped moving in death, Dickinson admits that “Now – when I read – I read not - / For interrupting Tears -” (Fr640.17-18). Because of the physical and metaphysical death of the friend, Dickinson is able to recognize the book for what it once was and for what it represents to her now. She documents its transformation from object to thing as well as recognizes the impossibility of its return to that which it was before; the “cost” is too great to “Repair” it. It is no longer a book to be read—it has been obliterated—but remains a thing to encounter for its intrinsic “significan[ce];” a way to engage with more than just the words and pencil marks on the page. With the death of the friend comes the death of the original “Book,” and Dickinson’s tears further help the thing to assert its material power upon her. “Death” of the object, to put it in Barthesian terms, and as shown here and in “Perception of an Object costs,” allows for more meaningful and “significant” discourse with the physical world. Much as Dickinson treats the book, not as a book to be read, but as a way to experience the friendship that is now gone from her, so too can her poems be experienced as similarly different entities rather than simply poems to be read; as affective

materialist entities. Echoing Dickinson's proclamation that "True Poems flee –", (Fr1491.3) Xu also claims in her essay that true poems "lie beyond expressions of language" (Xu 107). It goes without saying that there is often a great deal more to a poem than syntactical understanding, especially in the case of Dickinson's lyric.

Consequently, Dickinson's poems possess the same cloven nature as did her "book," the "bee," and the "Mind," allowing for a linguistic attempt at understanding as well as an opportunity for the reader to finally recognize and pursue the "Robin" that flits away from them. However, in the case of a Dickinson poem read as "thing," the physical copy of the work on the page is that which becomes the "object;" what materializes as the "thing" is the cognitive manifestation of the poem in the reader's brain—therein coalesces Brown's thingness, Bennett's vibrancy, Adorno's "something else." No longer just a tactile stream of inky letters on paper or Webster dictionary definitions, the poem instead manifests as an affective materialism that acts upon the reader from *within* the reader. Ultimately, a different kind of materialism takes the place of conventional readership practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Such a poetic endeavor leads us back to the conversation with “Heidegger’s Being of Things and Aesthetic Education.” Martin includes a selection from William James’, *The Principles of Philosophy*, where James explains the merits of an upside down viewing of an already-familiar painting to the viewer. When we change the circumstances of our perspective by looking from an unorthodox angle, “the colors [of the painting] grow richer and more varied, we don’t [immediately] understand the meaning of the painting, but to compensate for the loss, we feel more freshly the value of the mere tints and shadings” (James 81). The theoretical, academically acceptable lens has been removed and we see the painting as a painting, the poem as a poem, the window as a window—not transparent panes through which we vacantly stare for meaning. Brown, too, says that “we might materialize the world around us through habit, but only the interruption of habit will call our attention to the brute physicality” of our world (Brown, *A Sense* 76). Martin would claim that by relinquishing the tired procedures and curricula of tradition, we can change apathetic absorption of the dusty artifacts of academia into an active:

. . . participative experience . . . [where] the concrete suchness of the object penetrates and permeates the participator’s consciousness to the point that consciousness is no longer self-conscious. . . . The participator ceases to be his ordinary self in his fascinated self-

surrender to the unfolding of the thing unto its fullness. . . . Thus the participator is able to commune with the thingliness of things. The space between the thing and the participator is eliminated. (Martin 93)

This “space” that Martin mentions can also be eliminated between the reader and Dickinson’s poetry by the refusal to settle only for an interpretation of her words for their semantic meaning. By embracing the complex and almost alien nature of her vernacular as it continues to “flee” from full understanding, the reader can begin to experience the power that the poems hold, as entities—pulsating things—all of their own.

For the reader, this attempted embrace of misunderstanding is made easier by Dickinson’s intrinsic distrust of language as she penned her works, which does nothing but further lend her poetry the thing power necessary to call her reader’s attentions to itself in a different nature than is normally sought after. Enik Bollobás, in "Troping the Unthought: Catachresis in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," explains that Dickinson is seen to hold:

. . . two somewhat incongruous or incompatible opinions about language . . . [as she] both feared that words could not adequately express our thoughts and that words are beyond the control of the speaker. . . . [Yet] The love of words is also connected to Dickinson’s poetic skill: she admires words in and of themselves, and she particularly admires the glow of her own writing. (Bollobás 27)

Despite such misgivings, Dickinson was able to harness the ambiguous nature of language in order to create this crisis of communication from the page to the brain, further fabricating this uncanny feeling of “something else,” this “glow” all of its own. When words failed to communicate, Dickinson relied on her works to cause the reader to *experience* rather than read her poems for simply a literary understanding. She deftly wove together words—that are traditionally meant as vehicles of understanding—in order to also fabricate a *response*, a direct experiencing of the power that words can conjure as entities in and of themselves. Dickinson penned her poems to no longer be poems but to become, by Brown’s standards, *things* with the autonomous power to arrest, assert, and act upon the reader without the aid of outside theory or criticism. It is our job as readers to not stop once we have been thwarted by language but to push past the dross of convention and seek out the confrontation of Dickinson’s affective materiality.

With all of this talk about the inadequacy and removal of the humanly-perceived object, what good is it, then, to distrust our natural inclination of perceptive thought? What do we gain through the removal of the object and the confrontation of the thingness of matter? One answer can be found in my proposed pedagogy for the reading of Dickinson poetry as *thing*. I too, like Heidegger and Martin, call for an unadulterated interpretation of art in order to allow for original thoughts and reactions to be formed, independent of social constructs and theoretical establishments. I would challenge readers to cast off, if only for a moment, their expectations and predetermined, critical poetic theories of linguistic understanding in order to experience Dickinson’s poetry,

perhaps, as they were always meant to be. Through her unique material-conscious vernacular and intentional lyrical defamiliarization, Dickinson establishes her own praxis for inviting this interruption of object-thingness, and her poems can be read as agents of this perceptive confrontation—as the catalyst that allows the object to rebel against its assumed passivity. Brown claims that objects are capable of protesting the constant numbed-acceptance of their existence through interruption of the subject’s habits of perception. Consequently, all that is required of the reader of Dickinson is this: to allow this affective material interruption to occur and experience the poem’s claim to having a life of its own with the power to invite us to join it in its intrinsic power of being.

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