Dickinson's Sound Machine

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Senior Thesis
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English Dept.
2013
The Dust behind I strove to join
Unto the Disk before -
But Sequence raveled out of Sound
Like Balls upon a Floor -

(F867A)

we make a sound even if nobody's around

For the past two decades or so an increasingly large body of critical writing has developed based on the close study of Emily Dickinson's manuscripts as material and textual artifacts. This thread of discourse has seen, in Dickinson's work, a protomodern, if not entirely modernist attention to spatial relationships on, and in some cases with the page—its size, folds, creases, etc.—as a physical object. Within the manuscripts critics from Edith Wylder and Susan Howe, to Sharon Cameron, Martha Nell Smith and Paul Crumbley more recently, have found what they believe to be systematic networks of visual signs—various types of dashes, spacings and variants—left behind by Dickinson as a sort of cipher and subsequently effaced by standard publication practices. Such studies have produced truly fascinating readings of the poems and letters, opening them up with a nuanced sensitivity to their historical materiality while mobilizing the discursive space of scholarship in exciting and often unorthodox ways. But, more often than not, these same manuscript-based studies betray a certain desire for the presence of an authorial and authoritative voice that might make sense of the text as a whole. By attempting to reconstruct, in print, a more faithful representation of the manuscripts' visual dimension on the page these studies strive to grasp some fuller meaning of what Dickinson was trying to say in her enigmatic writing. We might think of this as a desire to join the "Dust" of the material manuscripts "behind" to the ideal "Disk" of an authorial presence spatially and temporally "before" the reader. In another version of the poem alluded to above, the "Dust" and the "Disk" are replaced by thoughts, such that it reads:

I rely predominantly on Ralph Franklin's variorum edition of The Poems of Emily Dickinson, indicated in the citations with an 'F' followed by the poem's number. When citing multiple versions of a poem from the variorum edition I supply the letter of the version after the number, as is the case above. A 'J' followed by a similar alphanumeric code indicates the poem is taken from Johnson's earlier edition of the Poems. Letters, indicated by an 'L', are similarly taken from Johnson's edition of the Letters.
The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before -
But Sequence raveled out of Sound -
Like Balls - opon a Floor -
(F867B)

More overtly then, manuscript-based studies strive to "join" one "thought" to another in the "Dust" of extra-linguistic marks that Dickinson left "behind" in her work in order to reconstitute something like the logical "Sequence" of an encoded message, manifested as an elusive "Disk" "before" the reader's eyes. We may even suggest that in pushing past this textual "Dust," readers are really searching for the well-polished "Disk" of a mirror, where their own thoughts might be sequentially organized and returned to them in an imaginary unity (in the Lacanian sense of that term), guaranteed by the missing presence of an author, whose name, as a signifier, could then unite that image.

But in the text this visual and chronological "Sequence" of "thought" that the reader strives to reconstruct inevitably "ravels out of Sound." Rather than focusing our critical energies on the meaning of the "Dust" and the "Disk" as enigmatic artifacts left behind in the text, I suggest we turn instead to this syntactical knotting of words, which, through their inversion, retain a highly Dickinsonian mobility within the line. Ravel can signify both to ravel (tangle, knot, twist) and to unravel, such that the word itself has a raveled meaning. On the one hand the text is already "raveled out of Sound" insofar as the signifiers out of which it is assembled have been woven and knotted together from an aural thread. On the other hand the fact that the text's "Sequence raveled out of Sound" suggests that this same "Sound" leads to the unraveling of the text's syntactical relationships, so that thought is dispersed and scattered like "Balls" of yarn rolling "opon a Floor." Even the two ends of the "u" have been knotted into an "o," leaving an over-determined ravel of sound tying the "Balls" to the double assonance created in "opon." In this way we hear the line "Sequence raveled out of Sound" persisting as a knot in logic, formed at the point where language...
and sound become entangled and an aural residue begins to accumulate on the text’s linguistic structures.

Taking the organizing coordinates of an aural sensory apparatus as my schema then, I would like to push back against the desire to see a hidden message encoded in the “Dust” of the manuscripts: instead I suggest we listen to the way in which sound unravels the “Sequence” of “thought” that such a reading attempts to establish. The previous figurations of knots and “ravels” gesture to the tactility of sound in Dickinson’s text. “Pianos in the Woods” have the “power to mangle” (F347), “the meanest Tunes” that nature makes become “Titanic Opera -” (F627), and even “a certain Slant of light” takes on “the Heft / of Cathedral Tunes -” (F320). This last synesthetic knotting of the visual, aural, and haptic dimensions raveled into a “Slant of light” echoes Richard Aczel’s notion that “the seeing of reading is always at once a hearing” (Aczel 597), while further pushing us to consider the physical “heft” of what is heard in that reading. The critic and musician Drew Daniel, for instance, hears sound as an “inhuman...material plenum of vibration, an unbroken and continuous surge of turbulent information and noise” that “claims us” in its “process of breaking and building bonds” (Daniel 45). For Daniel sound acts as an “involuntary solvent of self” that “queers” (Daniel 44) the individual by entering and unraveling the organizing operations of conscious thought which position the body in space and assign it a discrete identity. In other words, the “inhuman” and material alterity of sound makes the hearing of reading that Aczel speaks of always at once a touching of the body, an affective contact with the texture of the poem. What we see in the “certain Slant” of a dash or variant, I would argue, is not so much the inscription of an authorial voice encoding its intonations on the page through the use of a supplemental cipher, as various manuscript-based studies suggest. Rather, the slants of these dashes can be heard to constitute the “heft” of a visceral noise which remains stubbornly raveled in the text: which “claims us” at a bodily level despite, and possibly because of our attempts to unravel their meaning.
My goal in adopting such an aural schema is not therefore to restabilize the poems as Dickinson may have originally meant them to be heard “in a nineteenth-century fashion, as part of a culture more attuned to structures of sound than sight” (Miller 205). The crucial function of sound is not necessarily the dimension of orality which it brings to the written word, and which might then regulate our relationship to the text by determining how it is heard and inflected. What matters is the heterogeneous materiality with which sound insists itself in the reading process, the way in which the texture of the words rub up against the reader’s skin. Indeed, Walter Benjamin saw in film a form of apperception that Drew Daniel hears in sound. Benjamin believed that the shifting visual images of film produced a “percussive effect” (Benjamin 267) that destabilized the conscious thoughts of the individual and opened towards “new tasks of apperception” (Benjamin 268), new modes of “reception in distraction” (Benjamin 269). “Distraction” for Benjamin, like sound for Daniel, erodes the category of the individual through the tactility of a visceral exchange between the viewer/listener’s body and the film/sound which “claims” that body. Film as a technology of mechanical reproduction can then be understood as analogous to the “inhuman” technology of sound: both generate a rhythmic “percussive effect” that dehumanizes the viewer/listener through a machine queering of conscious thought. We might think of the mechanical here as any aberrant (motile) rhythm or noise produced by the material processes and repetitions of a heterogeneous—rather than a centrally organized—system; where the category of the human is governed by a unified cogito, the machine operates instead as a series of raveled functionings. In their theories of sound and film as machines of distraction, Benjamin and Daniel allow us to hear how the mechanical “claims” the human through a queer mechanization of the body. My task here is to develop a mode of distracted listening in which the language of the text itself can be heard as a similarly inhuman technology.

I will be listening to three sounds over the course of this essay: the sound of the voice, the sound of the breath, and finally to the sound of Dickinson’s emblematic dash, a mark that has
notably generated quite a deal of critical discourse regarding the aurality versus the visuality of the poet's work. My discussion of the voice touches not only on figurations of voice and speech in Dickinson, but also addresses the question of how we hear Dickinson's voice in print, and how we hear the other voices that surround and inhabit that voice in its publication and dissemination. Together, Julia Kristeva's theory of the signifying process and Benjamin's theory of technological reproducibility help us understand the voice as a mechanism of signification that remains irreducible to the linguistic meaning which it articulates. The voice, as a mechanism, deposits the excess of an aural residue on the phonemic structures it reproduces specifically because those structures are materialized in the voice as reproducible objects to begin with. In other words, the reproducibility of the phoneme—which structural linguistics wants to define as nothing more than a knotting of differences—materializes in the voice as a necessarily positive (aural) repetition. In the second section I listen to the breath in Dickinson's texts, hearing in its rhythm a similarly asignifying dimension, analogous to the machinery of a semiotic chora, as discussed by Kristeva. Finally, in the last section the sound of the voice and the breath in their asignifying dimensions are heard to echo the persistent dash, as a ubiquitous and mechanical noise inhabiting Dickinson's body of work.

I am not so much interested here in trying to unravel the meanings of these sounds, but rather to revel in their materiality. I want to listen with the sensitivity of a surface like the skin, the eardrum, the transducer of a cellphone, to the percussive way in which language, as a technology, works at and becomes raveled up with(in) the body. In an essay addressed to psychoanalysts in training, Freud describes the analytic process as a mode of listening in which the analyst turns her unconscious "like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient," such that the two adjust themselves to each other "as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone" (Freud, quoted in Highmore 69). The double figuration of this analytic relationship, as both a form of electronic tuning between devices, and an alignment of "organs" in an integrated
system, suggests a certain confluence of the mechanical and the bodily: it invites us to think of
distraction as a similarly automated mode of textual apperception in which the listening body is
adjusted to the text in such a way that a signal may be received and registered by the organs of that
body—the ear, the skin, the unconscious, etc.—without necessarily constituting a fully decipherable
message. In a Das Racist song, whose lyrics are assembled by an amalgamation of aural
associations just as much as they are by any conscious organizing logic, someone says, "we make a
sound even if nobody's around" (Vazquez 2010). Applied to Dickinson's work, such an utterance
suggests a certain autonomy in which a series of mechanical processes operating in the text detach
themselves from the human, producing "a sound" like that of the "transmitting microphone," which
does not necessarily require the presence of a conscious listener, but which, through analysis, might
be recorded by an equally inhuman listening mechanism. I would like to be only the mechanical ear
in which the sounds of the text resonate, but, in responding to their percussive insistence with this
analytic writing I have necessarily produced an organizing "Sequence" of "thought," which cannot
help but unravel my project of a fully distracted apperception of the text. Though I may want to act
as the analyst with the organ of my unconscious turned towards Dickinson's body of work, it is
really the text that analyzes me, insofar as my speech, like the analysand's, is generated in response
to the audible, even tangible proximity of this other body.

Voice

Silence is all we dread.
There's Ransom in a Voice -
(F1300)

What matter who's speaking?

There is a familiar way of thinking about the voice as a vehicle of meaning, a tool that we use to
communicate with others. Or else it functions as the marker of the individual: so when we speak of
"Dickinson's poetic voice" we mean the total collection of stylistic elements in her text which identify a singular author. In both cases this is the voice that signifies, that carries a specific meaning and gestures back to a stable enunciating position which would be the author as speaker.

But if we stop listening to what the voice says, and instead listen to its material articulation, then we begin to hear another dimension raveled into this communicative modality, which troubles the content and stability of its meaning. There's some "Ransom" in the "Voice," Dickinson tells us, which is not silent, singular, or final, like the period after "dread," but audible and excessive—the dash that hangs in the white space and extends that "Voice" across the page. The opposition between "Silence" and "Voice," accompanied by the rhetoric of the first line, would suggest that whereas we "dread" "Silence," we find comfort, confidence, stability, in the material sound of the "Voice." But instead the "Ransom" in the line only doubles the "dread" of "Silence," operating as an ominous presence which the reader cannot quite comprehend. Unlike that "dread," the "Ransom" in the "Voice" forms a stubborn knot of alterity that cannot be logically reduced to the communication of any particular meaning. Suggesting the forceful intrusion of a price or demand that must be met, the word's linguistic connotations amplify its function in the line as an invasive sound raveled into a sequence where it does not quite belong. What's more, the reader's attempt to unravel the word's possible meaning only leads to a further entanglement, since the aural knot which this "Ransom" forms in the "Voice" can only be spoken around, as we ourselves have just done. In this way the reader's analytic voice becomes entwined with the "Ransom" that we hear in the text at the point where the two rub against each other. Indeed, the line itself may mark a dialogic convergence of two voices within the text, since we could hear the utterance, "There's Ransom in a Voice - " as a response or interruption of the first line, rather than its logical continuation. But if the second line responds to the first, then it does so without the meaningful content of a response: it carries the audible demand of a ransom note without any substantive demand. The "Ransom" is then precisely that aspect in the "Voice" that demands to be heard
outside of anything which it may have to say. To ravel Benjamin and Daniel back into our reading, we could say that this "Ransom" is the aural functioning of the voice that insists itself with a "percussive" force and thereby "claims" the reader's attention without necessarily communicating a specific meaning.

We may understand these two modalities operating within the voice—the one communicative, the other percussive—as the symbolic and semiotic modalities that Julia Kristeva identifies in the signifying process. The former (communicative) functions as a form of "split unification" that characterizes the relationship between signifier and signified and allows for the positing of signification, while the latter (percussive) relates to "a heterogeneous functioning in the position of [that] signifier" (Kristeva 102). Within the voice the symbolic modality is that aspect that brings together a signifier and its signified, joining a phoneme expressed by an arbitrary combination of letters to an object that is not yet differentiated as such in the act communicating some meaning. This is the dimension of the voice that links "the thought behind" to the "thought before" in the assemblage of a logical sentence, and, at a more basic level, binds the sound of a "Ransom" to its signified term. The semiotic modality, on the other hand, is the percussive dimension of that "Ransom" raveled into the signifying process which remains irreducible to symbolic signification. This dimension operates in the voice as the material "rupture," insistence, and "articulation" (Kristeva 94) of a sound as it extends and pulls away from the body, like an extra limb. The semiotic can be understood in this way as a sonic "motility" (Kristeva 94) of the body, which, while remaining in process, always already contains the genetic code of a sign. Notably such a diachronic differentiation is theoretically possible only because these two modalities, semiotic and symbolic, "function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject" (Kristeva 96), the former only emerging within the latter as its transgression. The semiotic then congeals in the mechanism of the voice as an aural residue, raveled into the sign's articulation but irreducible to what it symbolically articulates. Thus, while Cristanne Miller argues that Dickinson's poetic voice is
built on an “aural foundation,” we must consider the inherent instability of a sound like the voice, which, in functioning as a material “foundation” for the communication of meaning, necessarily relies on the semiotic motility of a signifier that remains mobile, amorphous and profoundly unstable.

Indeed, the mechanical reproduction of Dickinson’s poetic voice in print actually leads to the amplification of this destabilizing semiotic dimension. Benjamin describes the effects of the technology of reproduction as follows:

[It] detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And, in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. (Benjamin 254)

Thus, critical “print translations” (Smith 4) which attempt to better render the symbolic meaning communicated by Dickinson’s poetic voice through more faithful reproductions of the manuscripts only “detach” that voice as a “reproduced object” from its original authorial body. What’s more, in their desire to render the author’s voice audible through the spatial configurations of a linguistic and/or extra-linguistic matrix of signs on the page, such attempts implicitly understand the voice as a reproducible object to begin with. The “unique existence” of Dickinson’s poetic voice is then substituted for a “mass existence,” as the numerous voicings of her text “actualize that which is reproduced” in the form of a “translation,” however dissonant or dissimilar those reproductions might be. We can hear the semiotic “Ransom” then, raveled into the operations of the linguistic and print technologies facilitating the voice’s reproduction; and furthermore perhaps in the percussive insistence with which critics feel compelled, even driven, to participate in that process.

Critical engagements with the manuscripts tend to listen for the symbolic dimension in the voice, eager to decipher what Dickinson was trying to communicate. Edith Wylder, for instance, emphatically states that the dashes in Dickinson’s manuscripts constitute a “notational system” of visual signs which the poet uses to reproduce “the precision of meaning inherent in the tone of the human voice” (Wylder 4). Paul Crumbley’s reading of the dashes as enigmatic indicators of “voice
shifts" and "voice tonalities" (Crumbley 11, 13), and Ellen Louise Hart and Sandra Chung's interpretation of idiosyncratic spacings in the manuscripts as "expressive" elements that communicate the "rhythms of Dickinson's thought and [the] rhythms of her hand" (Hart and Chung 363, 353), similarly betray a certain desire to get at Dickinson's original meaning, her "thoughts," even the movement of "her hand," through the technologies of various notational systems that allow for their reproduction. Thus, for Crumbley, a dialogic attempt to hear the dashes as signaling an "amalgamation of discourses" (Crumbley 19) is undercut by his insistence on identifying specific categories of speakers, whose "voice shifts," he asserts, Dickinson masterfully manipulated through the use of the "notational system" which Wylder originally suggests. So too for Hart and Chung, the description of a semiotic "rhythm" to Dickinson's "thought" allows us to momentarily hear the potential "Ransom" in the spacings, until a desire for an "expressive" dimension in those elements marks a return to the symbolic.

But rather than approaching a truly faithful representation of Dickinson's manuscripts in print, the "translations" produced by these critics only seem to breed more translations, each more fragmented and erratic than the last. In their attempt to get at a "human" meaning, as Wylder calls it, the sheer quantity of these translations instead produce a discursive and "inhuman" noise. Like the cinematographer, who Benjamin understood as a surgeon "penetrat[ing] deeply into [the] tissue" of "reality" and moving her hand cautiously "among the organs" (Benjamin 263), scholars of the manuscripts push into the very "tissue" of Dickinson's voice in order to reproduce it in print, thereby giving it new life by operating on it at the level of its textual body. But the voice that this surgical operation vivifies is not, as they might have hoped, a "human voice." Instead, the myriad print translations of Dickinson's work produce and vivify a machine voice raveled into endless permutations through an "amalgamation of discourses" (Crumbley 19). Wylder, Crumbley, Hart and Chung are all responding in a sense to the percussive insistence of this machine voice, attempting to graft something "human" onto it like a symbolic "precision of meaning," as a way of
disentangling themselves from the semiotic "Ransom" which that voice tells us is there. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely in their role as translators that these critics' voices become raveled into the same noise which they are struggling to make sense of.

"Dickinson" then signifies not so much an authorial voice as it does a catalyzing agent or continual point of return for a critical machinery of discourse, ceaselessly assembling, dissembling and disassembling itself in the process of reproducing that voice in print. It is a machinery as heterogeneous as "Dickinson's" own texts, the critical machinery and the poetic texts always already raveled up in a symbiotic and inseparable system, since "Dickinson" relies entirely on the work of editors, publishers and translators to reproduce her voice in its all heterogeneous iterations. The poems too were originally identified by specific names, assigned to them by their early editors, but they are now differentiated only by their discrete serial numbers: F867A, F867B, F347, F627, F320, F1300. "What matter who's speaking?" (Foucault 138) we might say, to echo a voice in Foucault's "What is an Author?" Should we not instead turn our ears toward the voice's functioning as a mechanism, rather than inquiring after the source of its enunciation? It is in the process of its mechanical reproduction and circulation—and "Dickinson's" voice may remain endlessly in process specifically because of this compulsion we feel to translate and reproduce it—that the voice attains a mechanical form of life beyond that of any one of its speakers.

We might hear this machine life in the voice when it says:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.
(J1212)

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say -
I say it just begins to live
That day
(F278)
It is in the percussive repetition and permutation of these two iterations, the first from Johnson's edition, the second from Franklin's, that I would say we hear "Dickinson's" poetic voice come alive. The word "begins to live" at the moment "when it is said," such that what is symbolically communicated—the importance of saying the word, of giving voice to it—echoes and amplifies the semiotic dimension raveled into that act of speaking. And, just as the semiotic repetition of a word erodes its symbolic meaning and allows us to hear its percussive and asignifying dimension as a signifier, so too the doubling of the text through its reiteration draws our attention to its polymorphous incoherency as a particular raveling of sounds. The life of a word, or at least the point at which it "begins to live," is not, then, a function of some meaning that precedes that word, but rather the result of the voice's operation as a mechanism of speech. In this way it is actually the arbitrariness of the voicing itself that gives the word life, detached from symbolic meaning and instantiating it, as the signifier is detached from and yet raveled into its signified at the moment of its articulation. Johnson and Franklin then give life to the text through a similar process of reiteration rather than clarification, where the difference between the two utterances is rhythmic rather than tonal, percussive rather than communicative.

In another poem a voice says:

We actually Hear
When We inspect - that's audible -
(F718)

Thus, while a methodology of critical reading based on close textual "inspection" may be able to detect an "audible" difference in the way we hear the two iterations above (as, for example, Edith Wylder's examination of the manuscripts leads to the discovery of a "human voice" recorded with all its layers of intonation), the various tones that are heard should be understood as artifacts generated by that specific mechanism of reading rather than emergent and meaningful inflections communicated by the original document. The practice of "inspection" which characterizes manuscript-based studies in general provides the lens of a certain visual apparatus which stabilizes
the relationship between the reader and the text through their distanation. The reader inspects
the text as the surgeon inspects the patient's body (to return to Benjamin's figuration of film): the
process both provides the opening for a visceral and tactile exchange with that text, while
simultaneously separating the reader from the textual body by the smallest margin through the use
of certain critical instruments. These instruments of close reading organize the text into an
intricate network of signs which they can then decrypt, thereby preventing a distracted
apperception of the text's mechanical and semiotic structures. While alternate lineation and
punctuation demand alternate voicings to account for the text's mobility of life, this is not the same
as accounting for the discrete meanings that we often desire such voicings to communicate. The
mechanical repetition and permutation between utterances, the differing line breaks, and the
placement of periods, commas and dashes, rhythmically segment the voice in such a way that the
reader is then forced, through an apparatus of inspection, to graft a more definite intonation onto
that basic rupture in order to make sense of it. In other words, the intonation that inspection
discovers in this segmentation of the voice in the text is as arbitrary as the relationship between the
semiotic signifier and its symbolic meaning. Rather than listening for an identifiable moment of
signification in the "saying of a word" within the poem then, or attuning our ears to the degree of
faithfulness with which a print translation represents the meanings of the words in Dickinson's
original "human voice," could we not instead hear, in these two utterances, and between them, the
function of a mechanical vivification that the voice performs upon the words it speaks? Shouldn't
the semiotic dimension built into the mechanical repetition of these two utterances alert us to the
entirely inhuman rhythm raveled into Dickinson's poetic voice?
Breath

Should you think it breathed -

The lung, a stupid organ

And now, removed from Air -
I simulate the Breath, so well -

Up to this point we have been talking about the semiotic dimension of Dickinson’s voice and the “Ransom” raveled into its reproduction, but let us now shift our discussion towards a more basic and perhaps less human sound: the breath. We noted in the previous section how the voice, in the act of signifying, pulls away from its speaker and takes on a life of its own. So too a word or a text might be vivified when we give voice to it, that is, when a voice is injected into the textual body through its aural and mechanical reproduction. In a letter to Thomas Higginson, Dickinson similarly separates herself from her text to the degree that it actually comes to constitute an autonomous and strangely ungendered body of its own. But what Dickinson asks Higginson about, regarding this body, is not whether or not it speaks to him, or has something to say. Instead what she wants to know is whether or not he can hear it breathe:

Mr Higginson,
Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?
The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask –
Should you think it breathed – and had you the leisure to tell me,
I should feel quick gratitude – (L260)

Though we often talk about the “speaker’s voice” in a poem, it is the breath, and not the voice, that Dickinson identifies as a sign that her “Verse” might be “alive” here. Yet this relationship between the breath and the living body remains ambivalent, if only because the sound of the breath, unlike the voice, says very little about the life or the body that it sustains.

Such ambivalence toward this form of life is addressed in F605 when a voice says:
I am alive - I guess -
[...]
And if I hold a Glass
Across my Mouth - it blurs it -
Physician’s - proof of Breath –
(F605)

Whereas the voice is capable of producing a nearly limitless combination of semiotic sounds—and
is therefore capable of symbolically communicating an equally limitless complexity of meanings—
the breath, besides supplying the organism with the flow of oxygen it needs to live, would seem at
best to serve as an indexical sign, a form of “proof,” for the life that it supports. The “Breath” is
barely audible here, requiring a “Glass” held up to the mouth to catch this sign of life on an exterior
surface. What’s more, the breath, both as a sound and a bodily process, remains mobile within the
letter to Higginson. First, it is already in question, since Dickinson is asking Higginson if he hears
the sound himself. Second, the source is ambiguous, since the deictic “it” that refers to the
breathing body in the letter could indicate either Dickinson’s “Verse” or her own “Mind.” Within the
structure of the sentence these two bodies are interpenetrated as potential subjects of the verb
“breathed,” such that, in a highly Derridean moment, the “Mind,” which we would think of as the
origin of the “Verse,” instead gets confused with the object of its (re)production. Lastly, the use of
the neuter “it” to refer to this breathing body would suggest that whatever “it” is, it is not fully
human. Notably, “it” is the same pronoun we find in the strangely mirrored and ambiguous line in
F605 “it blurs it,” where “it” (either the “Mouth” or the “Breath”) “blurs” both the “Glass” of the
mirror, and the symbolic differentiation and identification of objects such a mirror supposedly
facilitates. If this body Dickinson refers to in her letter is not inanimate then at least it is something
closer to an infant, as the pronoun was frequently used for children at the time, a body that is not
yet fully formed or coherent, but instead indefinitely in process; we have already heard this aspect
materialized in the heterogeneity of Dickinson’s voice in print. What we are asked to listen for then,
when “a word...is said,” is not what the voice or the word says, but rather the breath inhabiting and
vivifying that body.
But strangely enough, critics seem to hear, in this breath that Dickinson asks about, a transcendence or purity of meaning beyond what language can express. To draw again on a (somewhat dated) quote of Edith Wylder's:

[Dickinson] was concerned that her written lines were "alive," that they "breathed," that they communicated her meaning as fully and precisely and with the same sense of immediacy as if [Wylder's emphasis] she had spoken them. (Wylder 4)

For Wylder the breath signifies an “immediacy” of presence, such that the "Verse" "communicates" Dickinson’s voice as if she were right there speaking to us. In this way the breath is inflated to the level of a transcendent signifier for a certain plenitude of precise authorial meaning. We can understand this hyperinflated breath of presence that Wylder hears in Dickinson’s “written lines” as the aura (Latin, < Greek ἀίρα breath, breeze (OED)) of the work of art, which Benjamin defines as “the unique apparition of a distance” (Benjamin 255) surrounding that work. The introduction of this “distance” is analogous to the break that Kristeva identifies as the instantiating moment of the symbolic modality itself, as it produces a space between reading subject and art object that “connects the two separated positions, recording or redistributing them in an open combinatorial system” (Kristeva 98), thereby allowing for the signification that posits both a subject and an object in language. The auratic breath of presence that Wylder hears through her critical apparatus of “inspection,” which we discussed above, therefore inscribes a symbolic “distance” between the reader and Dickinson’s work, “recording” those two positions as such and transforming the latter into something like a sacred body, the segmentation or dissection of which would be unthinkable.

Similarly, manuscript studies, like Wylder’s, tend to elevate Dickinson’s handwritten word to the status of a “uniquely presented icon” (Miller 2008, pp. 403), such that the text becomes a visual artifact, occulted within institutional archives and thus permanently separated from the reader, who can look, and only touch with permission. But if Wylder hears the breath as auratic, and therefore meaningful, it is because she is already listening for the meaning it might contain: she is listening to it “as if” it were a voice that were speaking to her, “as if” it already had something to say.
At the most basic level this "as if" inserts the necessary distance of an equals symbol that allows the breath to operate as a sign for presence, thereby ensuring that everything in the voice adds up to a "precise meaning."

In his essay on classical singers, Barthes notably figures the breath as a communicative vessel of the soul, in opposition to the eponymous and bodily "grain" in the voice. The breath for Barthes is the "inordinately expressive" (Barthes 183) dimension in the singer's voice that carries "a known coded emotion" (Barthes 185) to the listener's ear, whereas the grain is that "manifest and stubborn" element ("one hears only that" Barthes says) which "expresses nothing of the [singer]" or of her "soul," but which instead allows us to hear a body without any "civil identity" or "personality" (Barthes 182). Barthes goes on to develop an anatomy of singing in which "the lung, a stupid organ," produces the symbolic expressivity of the breath, whereas the throat provides the mechanism where "the phonic metal hardens and is segmented" (Barthes 183), thereby generating the semiotic grain that rubs against the ear and the surface of the skin. Barthes hears the breath as Wylder does then, as an auratic object, desired by the latter and derided by the former. But the stubborn asignifying "grain of the voice" actually seems closer to the bodily process of the breath, as a sound without any "personality" or "civil identity," while the breath as figured by Barthes and Wylder would seem to function, in its expressive modality, more like a human voice. If "the lung" is "a stupid organ," it is really no more or less stupid than any other! And after all if we think it is "stupid" isn't this precisely because it is not communicative? Unlike the mechanisms of the throat, which "harden" and "segment" the "phonic metal," the lung as an organ—and not as the expressive vehicle that Wylder would like it to function as—has its own stubborn rhythm, which the voice cannot use, though it needs the material support of the lungs as the signifying process in turn needs the material support of the voice. Thus, although it is "in the throat that the phonic metal hardens and is segmented," it is still in the lungs where the voice is first shaped, as an aural projectile ejected from the agitated body.
When I listen to the figuration of the breath in the letter that Dickinson sent to Higginson, I cannot help but hear a certain resonance with the scene in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* where the creature gives its first signs of life:

> With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet...I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (Shelley 60)

There is a fascinating way in which a living body is reproduced here, not through growth and gestation, but rather from its "lifeless" component parts, as the signifier is assembled in structural linguistics from reproducible but meaningless phonemes. The breath of Victor's creation is mechanical from the outset, "hard," like "the phonic metal" Barthes hears in the throat, and marked by a spasm in the musculature and the "limbs" which thoroughly embeds this breath in the body. And it is does not express a human plenitude of meaning, but is instead infused in the body by external "instruments," again like those of Benjamin's surgical cinematographer. The language calls to mind Robert Hooke's experiments from the early 17th century, in which the lungs of a dog, still in the body, were driven by an external bellows. To think of the breath as a sign of life, or as a transcendent expressivity, is to implicate it in a signifying process, if which "life" becomes the signified product of a repetitive, mechanical and reproducible functioning: the expansion and contraction of the lungs. So, whereas Wylder hears in the breath an immediacy of human presence naturally communicating its meaning to the reader, there is a second figuration of the breath, perhaps nearer to what Dickinson suggests, which is mechanical, not an emotional expressivity, but an alterior functioning in or of the textual body.

Understood in this way, there is nothing intrinsically human about the breath. It is, like the voice—and much less complexly—a mechanically reproducible sound inhabiting the body. Notably however, the breath is only differentiable through an anatomical division of that body at the point where an operation of signification "redistributes" the organs in the symbolic space of a "combinatorial system," such that the signifying process becomes raveled up with their various
bodily processes. That is to say, the breath is audible as a mechanical function—just as the semiotic
in Kristeva’s theory is audible as a linguistic function—only from within the symbolic system of
signification which that function supports. To listen to the breath is to listen to a sound or rhythm
that language cannot use to signify, yet which its segmenting operations nevertheless render
audible. What’s more, it is a rhythm that we can replicate, as Victor animates this sign of life in
what should be an amalgamation of inanimate bodies.

We can hear a sensitivity to this mechanicity in the breath in F308, where a voice says:

I breathed enough to take the Trick -
And now, removed from Air -
I simulate the Breath, so well -
That One, to be quite sure -

The Lungs are stirless - must descend
Among the cunning cells -
And touch the Pantomime - Himself,
How numb, the Bellows feels!
(F308)

As with Victor’s creation, the “Breath” in the text is “simulate[d],” induced in the body by the
operation of a mechanical “Bellows” which comes to replace the “Lungs.” And, like the creature in
Shelley’s novel, this breath supports a “Pantomime” of life, embedded or encoded “among the
cunning cells” of the body, which reproduces the human in its signifying gestures and speech such
that the reproduction is only detectable at the cellular level. We might understand this “Pantomime”
inhabiting the body more specifically as the semiotic _chora_ that Kristeva identifies in her theory of
the signifying process: “a non-expressive totality” or “rhythmic space,” like the grain in the voice,
which “precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal
or kinetic rhythm” (Kristeva 93, 94). Kristeva’s symbolic figuration of the _chora_ as an organ that
supposedly “precedes and underlies figuration” would seem paradoxical, unless we consider it as a
“Pantomime” in itself, actualizing the semiotic as a reproduction or copy of a bodily motility within
a symbolic space. Both the “Pantomime” in the text and the _chora_ in Kristeva’s theory then function
as inhuman mechanisms inhabiting the body, generating a kind of semiotic life through the “non-
expressive” reproduction of a “kinetic rhythm” imitating that of the lungs. We might similarly hear F308 as a “Pantomime” of a human voice, which addresses the reader in the first person and opens itself like a body to a form of “inspection,” such that we are invited to “descend / among the cunning cells” of the text as a surgeon’s hand might move among the organs. While the voice we hear actively encourages this kind of inspection—advertising the “Breath” it simulates as a “Trick” to draw the reader in—the inspecting apparatus is primarily tactile in this case, rather than visual. We “feel” the “Bellows” driving the “Breath” and “touch the Pantomime” without necessarily knowing or being able to fully visualize what exactly we are touching. The exclamation at the end of the poem, “how numb, the Bellows feels!” rings with a bodily excitation generated by this contact with the semiotic “Pantomime,” as if we were perceiving, even participating, in some bizarre scientific experiment.

But despite, or perhaps because of, this sense of excitement, an encounter with the mechanical alterity of the breath can become a highly destabilizing experience, as in F477, where the various sounds and semiotic rhythms in the text lead to a semiotization of the reader’s own body:

```
He Fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys -
Before they drop full Music on -
He stuns you by Degrees -

Prepares your brittle nature
For the ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers - further heard -
Then nearer - Then so - slow -

Your Breath - has time to straighten -
Your Brain - to bubble cool -
Deals One - imperial Thunderbolt -
That scalps your naked soul -

When Winds hold Forests in their Paws -
The Universe - is still -
(F477)
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Dominic Luxford has noted how the use of sound in this poem reproduces the same aural experience between the reader and the text which the poems itself articulates. In this way the
reader’s “naked soul” is “prepared” by the “Hammers” of the dashes and finally scalped by the “Thunderbolt” of the last line just as the voice in the poem describes a nearly identical encounter. This recursive mode of listening allows us to hear, in the text, an echo of our own breath as it “straightens.” We are, therefore, far from the expressive or auratic breath and the soul it supposedly communicates, since both the “Breath” and the “Soul” in this text, rather than signifying some transcendent meaning, are instead rendered physically vulnerable to the materiality of a rawer sound.

Indeed, what is so fascinating in the text is the physicality of both the breath and the soul, “prepared” as they are by the “percussive effect” (Benjamin 267) of so many “Hammers” and the fumbling movements of “fingers” over “Keys.” The sound that we initially hear, of anonymous fingers fumbling at the Soul “as Player’s at the Keys,” figures the “Soul” as a physical instrument (perhaps an organ driven by its own “bellows”?) played on by a visceral contact with sound. In this fumbling motion of fingers, the notes, the tone, the melody of the “full Music,” are indistinct, drowned out by the percussive contact between the two physical bodies. Instead of the strictly meaningful progression that we might find in a typical piece of music, which would establish a stable structure and signify some transcendent emotion (a spontaneous movement of the “Soul” for Barthes), we hear a sound that fumbles over itself, resisting even the coherence of a time signature and the homogeneous linearity it produces. This sound is atonal. And it is not necessarily a voice that speaks to us insofar as it might have something to say. Yet it still works at the “Soul” with a percussive insistence, and rubs against it with a certain “grain” of its own.

When the sound of these keys drops away we are then left with the percussion of the “Hammers,” “further” off, then growing “nearer,” as space seems to expand and contract from this rhythmic modulation like a pair of lungs in the chest. These hammers harden and segment the breath, as Barthes hears the phonic metal similarly shaped in the throat. “Straighten” imprints the breath with a certain materiality, both by figuring it as a substance that hardens and extends from
the body, and further by producing a phonological segmentation in the reader’s own voice in the act of reading. The sound of the word with its two rigid t’s hardly evokes the human expressivity we’ve described. Rather it suggests a certain physicality of structure which seems alien to the ephemeral breath of the aura. This “breath” that “has time to straighten” is like a limb newly articulating itself, feeling itself in its musculature, as Victor Frankenstein’s creature is first animated by “a convulsive motion” that “straightens” and “agitates” its body. The “breath” is then thoroughly enmeshed in the materiality of a bodily process, while the “Soul” is similarly prepared by the work of this semiotic hammering which gives it a physical structure. What’s more, it is the dash, functioning as a percussive hammer, which “prepares” our own breath, repeatedly breaking and segmenting it, and thereby semiotizing our voice in the act of reading. The disruptive potency of sound within the text—both the initial fumbling over keys, and the even more percussive impact of the hammers—then echoes the discordant noise of the technologies of mechanical reproduction that we heard inhabiting Dickinson’s voice. The hammers resonate with the rhythms of a printing press, hardening and segmenting the voice into typeface, while the combined heterogeneous print translations, reiterations and exegetical discourses on Dickinson’s text produce an atonal cacophony like the pounding of so many disparate fingers upon an organ.

Luxford reads the poem as an experience of Dickinson’s own “poetic inspiration” (Luxford 59), which simultaneously reproduces, in the reader, the “psycho-emotional structure”—the “tenor”—of that original experience” (Luxford 52). In this way the text drops the last couplet on the reader with the weight of the same “full Music” that it articulates, and, in so doing, “scalps [the reader’s] naked soul” with the physical impact of the final lines. For Luxford, such a “psycho-emotional structure” communicates to the reader Dickinson’s own “original” psychological experience, “as if” that experience of inspiration—Latin inspírāre to blow or breathe into, < in- in + spírāre to breathe (OED)—could pass like the auratic breath, naturally from one mind to another. But the very possibility that such a “structure” could be reproduced by an aural operation, and
mechanically, through the work of "Hammers" repeatedly striking the "Soul," signals that this "experience" has no "tenor" at all, in terms of a transcendent meaning, just as we can hear no tonal center in the fumbling of fingers across keys. Instead, the reproducibility of any given "psycho-emotional structure," like the reproducibility of the poetic voice that supposedly expresses that structure, indicates its mechanical and almost "brittle" nature.

The structure that we are then describing is not a "psycho-emotional" experience, but rather an automatism of emotional apperception more like what Lauren Berlant (drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) describes as "the structure of an affect;" a structure which has "no inevitable relation to the emotions that may cluster in the wake of its activity" (Berlant 230). The Soul and the breath as material surfaces merely record the percussivity of sounds that strike them, as a gramophone records any and all sonic vibrations, musical, tonal, vocal, or otherwise. In this way, the reader too registers the insistence of the dashes alongside the "Keys" and "Hammers," experiencing an affect worked into the body at the surface of the eardrum and the skin, without necessarily comprehending any specific meaning in the sounds that are heard or the affect that is felt. For Berlant, an affective relationship may be experienced "simply as a pressure in my body that I need to discharge" (Berlant 230). In this case what the reader feels is a pressurization of the body as a spatial volume produced by the physical impact of the sounds materialized in the text. If the poem "inspires" then, it is not because an original psycho-emotional experience passes from the author to the reader like a breath of air, but rather because the text itself works at the reader's body, at the voice, and more basically at the breath and the lungs, with the mechanical and semiotic rhythm of a hammer, compacting and compressing the organs as if they were a set of bellows.

Martha Nell Smith makes a compelling argument that:

When Emily Dickinson asks Thomas Higginson, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" she inquires whether or not the material records she sent him of four poems make tasty enough recipes or pleasing enough scores to play upon. (Smith 7)
We could push this hearing of Dickinson's letter further to say that the poet is asking not only whether these texts provide substantial material for the reader to "play upon," but also whether they are alive and breathing to the extent that they might actually "play upon" the reader. As we have heard above, neither the breath nor the soul is necessarily expressive in Dickinson's text: though the breath signifies a kind of life in the form of a "Pantomime," it is not constituted as a transcendent truth or a signified term, but is instead just as heterogeneous and bodily as the various organs—lungs, teeth, throat ("Soul"?)—which support it. Various critics have tried to muffle this sound by grafting some higher meaning onto it, thereby attempting to use the breath as a vehicle in which to carry the soul, or some coded emotion, to the listener. But as a bodily process and rhythm the breath remains irreducible to these auratic figurations, functioning, in a way, more like the semiotic grain in the voice. The breath then forms the machinery of a rhythmic *chora* that inhabits the body, and insists itself in Dickinson's voice, with the force a living yet inhuman "Ransom".

- Numerous as space -
  (F504)

Positive, as Sound -
(F373)

Having listened to the percussive dimensions in both the voice and the breath that supports it, I would like to turn my ear now toward the distinctive dash as a mark that seems to be as "numerous as space" in the text. Not only does it fill the space of Dickinson's text, it forms the very texture of that space.

Perhaps we could open this section with the echo of an earlier voice:

We actually Hear
When We inspect - that's audible -
Which is to say, when we "inspect - [the dash]" "We actually Hear" it. We can similarly hear in "that’s audible," a deictic referral to the - that precedes the statement. This audibility agrees with Edith Wylder and Paul Crumbley’s hearing of the mark as constituting a supplementary notational system which communicates the meaning (or in Crumbley's case the manipulated dialogism) of Dickinson’s voice more precisely than standard print practices can. In addition to this notational reading of the dash there is also a strand of critical discourse that interprets the mark as some form of lack, as a "silence" (Weiner 490), a "hesitation" (Wardrop 15), a "pervasive and inevitable absence" (MacKenzie 56), an "unutterable word" (Fagan 73): in all these interpretations the dash manifests a certain negativity of one kind or another. In a more general way these two strains of criticism share an assumption that the dash as a mark in the text expresses a certain symbolic meaning, however enigmatic, or that it reproduces some movement of conscious thought and/or its arrest. Thus, both Crumbley’s notational understanding of the dash as performing an authorial manipulation of dialogical "voice shifts" and "voice tonalities" (Crumbley 11, 13), and Joshua Weiner’s interpretation of the mark as "a gesture towards silence that indicates spiritual doubt" and "epistemological uncertainty" (Weiner 490, 492) share a basic assumption that the dash is expressive of an individual (authorial) experience (of dialogism, of doubt, of uncertainty) which it then communicates to the reader. Whether heard as an inflection or a silence, the dash is understood as a primarily symbolic inscription.

But far from signifying a negativity, or any specifically meaningful aural inflection, the dash seems to me to function within the text as the one mark that remains stubbornly irreducible to the operations of signification. I would suggest instead that what we hear in this multitude of differing interpretations is not a spectrum of more or less accurate readings that approach or diverge from an originating conscious intention posthumously organizing the textual field. Rather it would seem that all of these critical decryptions of this enigmatic mark can be understood as reactions to that inscriptions functioning, analogous to "the emotions that may cluster in the wake of [an affect’s]
activity.” In the previous section we heard how Dominic Luxford reacted to the percussivity of the dash in F477 by attempting to graft a “tenor” onto it in the form of a “psycho-emotional structure,” originally experienced by Dickinson and subsequently communicated to the reader through the symbolic use of the mark. I would like to suggest an alternate theory of the dash as on the one hand materially audible in its percussive repetition and insistence, and on the other hand entirely alterior to what we might consider a conscious or human expressivity. The dash as a sound in this respect functions as a stubborn grain in the text raveled into the process of signification, just as an affect forms the grain in an emotion which remains irreducible to what that emotion signifies. The dash then sounds to me something like Lacan’s psychoanalytic figuration of drive as “a function without a functionary” (Lacan 676). Hearing it in this way means widening the physical spectrum of what we consider audible sound, while simultaneously straining the ear in listening for something which of course I cannot know is actually there. What follows is at once an attempt to hear the semiotic dimension in the dash (as I have heard it in Dickinson’s voice and breath), and a performance that responds to that semiotic dimension by once more attempting to graft what will inevitably be a certain form of meaning onto it.

In saying that the dash is irreducible to signification, I am in no way suggesting that the mark is somehow nonlinguistic, or prelinguistic: nor is it, as some would claim, a purer expression of conscious thought than language can fully manage. Instead, more than the voice or the breath, the dash would seem to reproduce the most basic parameters of the linguistic signifier itself. We have heard how both the voice and the breath act as mechanisms of the signifying process that remain irreducible to the symbolic meaning whose production they facilitate. In this way I have likened their functioning to the semiotic functioning of the signifier. Yet obviously as bodily processes, and further as symbolic modalities in themselves, these mechanisms can be understood as simultaneously operating in a multiplicity of different ways as complex organs of a signifying body. The dash, on the other hand, would seem to present a more basic form of life, similar to the
cell of a larger organ; or, perhaps slightly more complexly, to a singled celled organism of its own.

The dash then lacks the internal intricacy of the other sound-organs we have been discussing, and is closer therefore to the signifier, at least in its genetic structure.

Mladen Dolar, drawing on Saussure's structural theory of linguistics, describes the signifier as follows:

> [It] is a creature that can exist only insofar as it can be cloned, but its genome cannot be fixed by any positive units, it can be fixed only by a web of differences, through differential oppositions, which enable it to produce meaning...it is merely a bundle, a crossing of differences in relation to other signifiers, and nothing else [Dolar's emphasis in both quotes]. (Dolar 17)

Within the aural realm this "bundle of differences" then becomes a phoneme, a raveled structure in the voice defined only by the logic of a differential matrix of sound:

> Beyond the voice "with flesh and bones" (as Jakobson will say some decades later) lies the fleshless and boneless entity defined purely by its function—the silent sound, the soundless voice...Phonemes lack substance, they are completely reducible to form, and they lack any signification of their own. They are just senseless quasi-algebraic elements in a formal matrix of combinations. (Dolar 17-18)

We similarly hear the dash as a difference from any pronounceable sound. It has no aural denotation as a letter does and further functions as a mark that takes the place of periods, commas, and whole words in the text, such that we hear it "in relation to [the] other signifiers" that it displaces. This would seem to make the dash a simple negativity, as one vein of the critical discourse I outlined above hears it, a "lack" of "substance," as Dolar in fact describes the phoneme. But in his figuration of the phoneme as a "fleshless," "boneless" and "soundless voice" we find not a lack but an excess: there is an extra phonemic -less that makes the voice unhearable, and yet for that very reason we hear it. It is there, "flesh" and "bone" and "sound," but with an extra sound grafted onto it in the process of its figuration. What's more, since the signifier (and its aural cousin the phoneme) "can exist only insofar as [they] can be cloned," we should recognize in these "creatures" a form of life not based necessarily on the negativity of "differential oppositions," but rather on the positive insistence of a repetition. So too the dash operates as "the silent sound, the soundless voice" in Dickinson's text: an asignifying signifier (a signifier onto which an excess a has been grafted)
which, in its stubborn repetition, is rendered as a positive materiality precisely because it cannot be immediately converted through signification into any one stable meaning. The dash, in other words, is “positive as sound”: though suspended in a web of differences it cannot be reduced by that web, and so remains stubbornly incoherent. It is perhaps the “cunning cell” of Dickinson’s “Pantomime,” the space in which the text breathes with a “simulated” and mechanical breath like a bellows, where the signifier itself is vivified as a positive repetition pantomiming life.

This analogy of the bellows further pushes us to consider the dash, in its uniformity and ubiquity, as the most obvious residue of the text’s own mechanical reproduction. It renders material the automated processes of repetition that characterize print technologies by replacing the unique testimony of a human hand with a mechanical mark, as Benjamin sees photosensitive silver-halide crystals on a strip of film replacing the painter’s brushstrokes. But, unlike any other letter or punctuation mark, the dash has no inherent content to be reproduced. As Deirdre Fagan puts it, “[the dash] matters because it exists” (Fagan 75), that is, because it is there as a continuing recurrence. Such a reading echoes Dolar’s discussion of the function of phonemes in the signifying process when he says, “they are isolated by their ability to distinguish the units of signification, but in such a way that the specific signifying distinctions are irrelevant, their only importance being that they take place, not what they might be” (Dolar 18). Like the phoneme, the “only importance” of the dash is that it “exists” or “takes place” at all. The ambivalence of this “taking place” signals both the solidification of some state into an event in time, and the motility of a displacement that disrupts (takes the place of) the eventilization which is “taking place.” In this way it wonderfully characterizes the dash’s own instability, as it functions both as a punctuation (a moment of signification like the period in which meaning finally solidifies), and as a motile repetition or slippage that extends this moment of signification into a space in which meaning remains indefinitely in process. Put quite simply, the dash is a repetition that has nothing to repeat: which is positive and material insofar as it “takes (something else’s) place.” Again to echo Dolar, who is now
speaking of the voice rather than the phoneme: “its positivity is extremely elusive—just the vibrations of air which vanish as soon as they are produced, a pure passing, not something that could be fixed or something that one could hold on to” (Dolar 36). The dash, like the voice, is a repetition that “takes place” as a “passing;” as a process of “detaching,” to use Benjamin’s language of technological reproducibility. The mark is then a residue of the processes of mechanical reproduction not only because it has been reproduced in print, like every other letter, but because it actively reproduces the rhythmic “taking place” of that process through the operation of linguistic technologies. To return to the figuration of the dash as a mechanical breath, we could hear the recurrence of the mark as analogous to the repetitive expansion and contraction of the bellows, sustaining a form of life that is decidedly alterior to human consciousness. It is above all the dash as a living technology that detaches the text from the domain of any authorial meaning, as print translations of Dickinson's voice similarly detach it from an original manuscript.

But it is paradoxically the dash’s asignifying repetition throughout the body of the text that invariably signifies it as “Dickinson’s.” Her poems are almost immediately identifiable on the basis of the dash’s proliferation, which would suggest that the sound of Dickinson’s poetic voice, the unique breath of her living text, is defined by the mechanical imprint of a non-voice, a non-sound reproduced in the form of the dash. It is this mark in particular which has sparked so much dissonant critical discourse regarding the representation of Dickinson’s voice in print. As I said above, we should interpret the many debates surrounding the meaning of the dash not as different readings varying in their degree of accuracy, but instead as emotional responses to an affective pressure that the dash exerts on the reader. Its simple existence and repetition as an asignifying signifier “insist[s] on an audience” (Fagan 74) with the force of a demand, which amounts to Listen! or Read me! As a body in process that we previously likened to a child, the text’s demand for an audience can then be heard through a Lacanian formula as the baby’s cri pur, which slips into a cri pour at the point where the reader recognizes an audible message in the dash, with herself as its
recipient. Such a demand functions as the real "Ransom" in Dickinson's voice, mechanically reproduced and made audible on the one hand by the technologies of print and publication, and on the other hand reproduced at the textual level by the sheer noise of its assignifying numerousness. In recognizing ourselves as recipients of a symbolic meaning that the dash conveys—and my own reading cannot help but do just that—we are necessarily interpellated as interpreting subjects, such that the dash can lastly be understood as that semiotic dimension in the voice that mechanically reproduces a listener.

As we listened in F477 to the way in which the language and sounds articulate our own aural and affective relation to the text, I would similarly like to turn now towards F340 in which a voice describes the experience of feeling a “Funeral” in the “Brain.” One way to hear this poem may be as an articulation of a certain affective “pressure”—produced in the body and the “Brain” by the percusivity of the dashes in the text—which then needs to be “discharged.” In this way the text provides us with a mechanism for its own interpretation: it listens to itself.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And When they all were seated,
A Service, Like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then - (F340)
The sound that is “felt” here as a “Funeral, in my Brain” has no particular source, since it is only ever heard as a figuration, "like a Drum" or "as...a Bell." In a way this speaks to a certain inability to fix the sound itself as anything but a repetitive insistence. Like the “Hammers” in F477, “further heard” then “nearer,” this “Funeral” sound remains mobile and amorphous, figured first as a mass of bodies moving “to and fro,” then breaking down into even more disparate units as disembodied “Boots of Lead” shuffling across the floor of the “Soul.” Such a repetition is mechanically unthinking, “numb[ing]” the “mind” through the mindless rhythm of numerous “Boots of Lead.” Yet it is alive insofar as those “Boots” possess their own motile rhythm. Like a migraine we feel this “Funeral” as a steady amplification, from “treading” to “beating” to “tolling,” which exerts a pressure on the “Brain” in which “that Sense”—perhaps directly speaking of the aural sense—presses against the body, threatening to force its way “through.” Finally, “a plank in Reason” breaks, and the voice plunges into what is seemingly an infinite yet heterogeneous space of “Worlds” that it hits like successive floors. Throughout the text, therefore, we find an intense vulnerability of the body, the “Brain,” the “Soul,” to the raw tactility of sound. But a figurative sound, and a figurative “Soul” and “Brain,” since the “Brain” as a biological organ doesn’t have the nerve endings to feel, and so is “numb” like the “bellows” to begin with. Indeed, the “Soul” materializes here in a figuration, as it did in F477 as a physical organ, at the point where the body encounters the “pressure” of an affect similarly figured as an aural assault. One way to understand such figurations, which render the “Soul” as a physical object liable to the impact of equally figurative “Boots of Lead,” is as response mechanisms which allow a signifying body to discharge the pressures induced by various affects. Figuration disperses the pressure of an affect—a zero-point grain—across the surface of a newly articulated and symbolic space in which sound and the “Soul” are “recorded” and “redistributed” in an “open combinatorial system,” to again use Kristeva’s own theoretical figuration. But, within the figuration of an affect, the pressure is semiotically reproduced in the process of its articulation; the affect positioned and repositioned as a structure in relation to an equally articulated body.
If we hear this pressure, figured as a “Funeral,” as the sound of the dash (this aural figuration may be only one mechanism for releasing the pressure), then it is no wonder we cannot pin it down. The dash is everywhere within the voice that speaks in the poem as a dimension of its own articulation, analogous to the semiotic dimension of the signifier operating within the symbolic process of signification. It embodies the necessary repetition of the signifier that must “take place” in order for signification to occur, and, as such, it lines the voice with a mechanical and asignifying grain. We hear this repetition more directly in the doubling of “treading - treading -” and “beating - beating -” as if, in speaking, the text is listening to its own voice returned as an echo. In the act of reading we then hear our own voice similarly doubled, while the dash that sticks in that voice, that rubs it against its grain, mechanically reproduces a dimension within the reader’s speech that cannot necessarily be spoken. In the repetition of the dash, the voice is then confronted with that semiotic process which facilitates its articulation, while remaining irreducible to what is articulated as content. If the dash as a semiotic repetition “breaks through” in this text, into the audible spectrum, such that we hear it in the voice that is speaking, then it breaks through only as an irruption from within that voice’s own speech: an irruption which is then echoed and reproduced by the reader in the act of reading. What’s more, this sound of the dash not only fills the acoustic space of the text, it lines that space like a skin, forming its very texture at the point where we hear “Space” begin “to toll.” The dash is there in that figuration, “Space - began to toll,” segmenting “Space” and thereby introducing a basic semiotic rupture into what would otherwise be an undifferentiated expanse. At the cellular level then, and certainly at the quantum level, there is a constitutive noise that is stubbornly there—“one hears only that” Barthes says of the grain of the voice—which makes it impossible to speak of any empty or static space in the text. This “Funeral” is not, therefore, a sound that one could get away from, or indeed speak over, since any attempt to speak over the noise only reproduces that noise in the process of articulating it, just as, at a more general level, the aural figuration of an affect reproduces that affect in a symbolic space organized.
by the sensory coordinates of the ear as a figurative intrusion, that is, as the semiotic rupture of a synesthetic knot.

We can hear the desire to speak over the dash materialized in all those strands of critical discourse that attempt to graft some meaningful dimension of speech onto it. Failing to do this, critics attribute a form of lack or silence to the mark. But to interpret the sound of the dash as a silence is merely to hear another type of meaning in it. This may be a loss of meaning, a loss of authorial human presence, or alternately, a transcendence of meaning that goes beyond language, as Fagan suggests with the concept of an “unutterable word.” Within the text we do hear a “Silence,” but it manifests its own presence, accompanying the speaking voice such that together they form a “strange race / Wrecked, solitary, here -.” The voice we hear, along with “Silence,” are then marooned together in the text, “here - ” where the dash arrests us, at the zero-point where speech is articulated: where the voice speaks from a position that is not yet positioned as such until the semiotic articulation of that speech.

This pairing of the “Voice” and “Silence” is notably the same one we began with. Here is the second half of that poem:

Silence is all we dread.
There’s Ransom in a Voice –
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.
(F1300)

The figuration of “Silence” as an “Infinity” of space without “a face” is segmented by the insertion of “a Voice” which, as we began by noting, is not necessarily coherent in terms of what it says. The poem itself as a statement does not quite make sense specifically because the rhetorical opposition between the “Voice” and “Silence” is troubled by this “Ransom” raveled up in the articulation. It is not that the “Voice” is inhabited by “Silence,” that there is a structural lack inhering in the positivity of the voice’s articulation, but rather that “Silence” is lined with voices at the cellular or quantum level of the dash. Though it has no “face,” the infinite space that we drop into after “a plank in
"Reason" breaks cannot be considered silent, since with "every plunge" the body "hits" another "World" with some percussive impact. What's more, when this "plank" breaks, the speaking voice falls out of the company of "Silence," rather than into a silent and empty abyss. One might similarly hear, in the "Funeral," a form of existential death in which the subject comes to understand the lack upon which its position is founded. But I would instead suggest we hear this break in "Reason" as an affective discharge of accumulated pressure that ruptures the space within the text, while plunging us, along with the voice, back into language rather than transcending it. Funerals, by marking a death, in fact provide the language by which life extends itself across a rupture and fills what should be a lack with a community of voices.
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