“Sagacity, must go –”:
Theorizing Emily Dickinson’s Hymnic Subject
From an early age, American schoolchildren are taught that “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” that “Forever – is composed of Nows,” that “A word is dead, when it is said, some say – I say it just begins to live that day.” The beautiful, starkly aphoristic qualities of these lines, all of which come from the inimitable pen of Emily Dickinson, are often touted as embodying certain poetic ideals that exemplify lyric poetry. Indeed, such ideals as beauty and brevity form the soul of lyric poetry in general, a unique genre that, in its modern incarnation, is differentiated from other poetic genres in both scale and sound, but also in its inherent contradictions. It is a genre that is predominantly read and written silently, and yet the play of various sounds off of each other within the lyric poem is one of the genre’s defining characteristics.\(^1\) It is a genre whose speaker speaks from a subjective position, from the point of view of the “I,” and yet whose identity is predicated on the reader’s contemplation of this “I.” The lack of a clear subject/object distinction is what colors lyric poetry as uniquely unstable, and attempts to reckon with the subjective positionality of the lyric poem’s speaker, or the lyric subject, are attempted by various poets in various ways.

Emily Dickinson, certainly, is no different from other lyric poets in her desire to understand the powers and constraints placed upon the lyric subject. These constraints can and have been theorized as a sort of body that contains the lyric subject; contained within this body, however, are multitudes.\(^2\) This multitudinous body can be understood in light of the Kristevan concept of the *chora*, or the “dancing body” as described in her *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Within this body exist the psychological drives that order human existence in their unorganized, chaotic state: given that these drives themselves organize human lives, this body is rife with the

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\(^2\) Blasing, 28.
potentiality to organize and interpret itself, and yet it does not do so. It contains the necessary elements for a life predicated on the perpetual interpretation of objects by subjects, and yet this body itself partakes in no such interpretation. While Kristeva asserts that the subject, the figure who interprets and orders the symbolic language running rife in poetry, is created inside the chora, she also asserts that the subject is unraveled by it, “succumb[ing] before the process of charges and stases that produce him,” defying the subject’s impulsion towards order, defying its will.³

Dickinson’s departure from other styles of lyric poetry is in her subject’s cooperation with this freely moving chora: if at least some of the tensions in lyric poetry are the result of the subject’s struggle to assert its subjectivity through the ordering of the unordered drives that exist within the chora, the tensions reflected in Dickinson’s poetry need not be framed as tensions per se, but rather as a reflection of the unorganized drives and stases Kristeva describes as coexisting within the chora. If Dickinson’s subject is feeling and moving alongside these drives instead of trying to order them, its intentions and effects are far different from that of the traditional lyric subject’s, constituting something else entirely, something that devoids easy categorization or interpretation. If Dickinson’s subject is not a subject in the traditional lyric sense, it would follow that Dickinson’s poetry is not poetry in the traditional lyric sense. If Dickinson’s poetry is not the quintessentially lyric poetry it is often assumed to be, what then is it?

The answer to this question may lie in the form Dickinson’s poetry often takes, one that Dickinson herself explicitly acknowledged as a more suitable mode of expression for her than

the lyric poem: that of the classic Protestant hymn. In her book on Emily Dickinson and the hymn culture of her native New England, Victoria Morgan discusses at length the significance of the hymn to Dickinson as both a formal genre and a relational model. The hymn singing Morgan describes would often take place during the many revivals that occurred throughout the region, existing as an established cultural presence long before Dickinson’s birth and continuing to be so into the early part of her life. Many of the hymns sung at these revivals have found their way into Dickinson’s poetry in some way, shape, or form, whether through direct invocation, indirect evocation, or, most commonly, through formal modeling: most of Dickinson’s poetry adopts the common meter of most hymns of the era, with its thumping lines alternating between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, typically with end rhymes on every other line.

The relational aspect of hymnody, however, is of far more importance than form when considering Dickinson’s poetry. As Morgan notes, the space of the hymn privileges a “decentered simultaneity” wherein large swaths of society are given equal participatory weight in a sacred act. In this sacred act, there is little place for subjectivity—the ability to understand what one is singing is of secondary importance when compared to the ability to express and share emotions in consort with others. Hymn singing is a deeply embodied action, but the body in which this singing occurs is a massive, collective one: like the chora, it contains multitudes, but in a far more literal sense. Within these multitudes are subjects and objects who do not realize they are either of these things. They are simply singers, creating sounds and resisting overtly analytical

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4 Victoria N. Morgan, “‘Twas as Space Sat Singing to Herself – and Men –’: Situating Dickinson’s Relation to Hymn Culture,” in *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture: Tradition and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

interpretations of the sounds they are creating. Indeed, when everyone is singing, there is
precious little ability to interpret anything in the midst of all the voices, each of which is singing
slightly out of time and key while still remaining within this common hymnic space. The
difficulty in making out what exactly is being sung is simply a facet of this space, defined by its
proclivity towards pure expression over any hermeneutic impulses.

Thus, Dickinson’s poetry takes on not only the form of these hymns, but it also takes on
the multitudinous nature of hymnic space in a way that uniquely lends itself to a Kristevan
analysis. These polyphonic hymns provide the music the chora dances to as a “dancing body,”
thus assisting in the creation of spaces in which “the dissolution of the subject as signifying
subject” is able to occur more readily than it would in traditional lyric poetry, whose fixation on
signs and meaning separates it from the essentially rhythmic nature of the chora. The
hymnody of Emily Dickinson encourages the poetic body towards a more external, expressive state than a
more internal, interpretative one, challenging notions of Dickinson not only as a lyric poet, but as
a stereotypically isolated one. Dickinson’s hymnic poems encourage participation from subjects,
objects, and categories in-between in the shaping of a body that gestates a new type of subject
which is perhaps not even a traditional subject at all, but rather a simply a voice like the voices
one would hear while singing a hymn—one could say, a hymnic subject.

Dickinson’s interest in Christian themes is a constant throughout her work, beginning
from her first recorded poem to her last. Constant too is her skepticism towards these themes,
many of which she criticizes by reworking traditional Christian forms and formulas into vehicles
of expression that convey a more expansive sense of the divine. This reworking can be seen as

6 Julia Kristeva, “The Subject in Process,” in The Tel Quel Reader, eds. Patrick ffrench
early as Poem 23, where the traditional Trinitarian formula—“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”—becomes

In the name of the Bee –
And of the Butterfly –
And of the Breeze – Amen!  

Notably, there is no subjective “I” in this poem, and thus the poem jettisons a common feature of both traditional poems and traditional Christian forms, particularly the Nicene Creed with its emphasis on individual belief. Christian forms and poetic forms alike rely on the perceptive powers of individual subjects, and yet in this poem and several other Dickinson poems, there is a sense of something far greater than any individual, far greater than any pretensions to personhood, human or divine. Indeed, the speaker of this poem is as uninterested in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as it is in itself and its own personhood. Had it been interested, it would not only have addressed the persons of the Trinity, but it also would have addressed itself and its own feelings in a more typically subjective way; that is to say, like many lyric subjects, it would not only have described its sense perceptions, but also its interpretation of these perceptions as signs and symbols behind which deeper meanings lie.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the subject’s need to assign meaning to all things stems from an imperative to impose order upon poetic language, which, from a Kristevan perspective, is defined by its impulsiveness. This impulsiveness is more than a casual disregard for signs and symbols, but is instead related to the drives within the chora—in French, its pulsions. These invisible drives, conceptualized earlier by Sigmund Freud as unstable, internal

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psychological forces that move within the body until they are satiated, are the very elements that constitute the Kristevan chora.⁹ It is the task of the subject to order these drives and thus satiate them under the authority of what Jacques Lacan referred to as the *nom du père*, or the symbolic father figure representing the laws that order the drives as well as the sheer force of these laws themselves.¹⁰ The imperative to order the drives or impulses of poetic language thus comes from this father figure who demands that these impulses be fashioned into signs and symbols, objects that must be interpreted by subjects operating in what Lacan terms “the Symbolic Order.” The main task of the subject, then, is to stabilize poetic language and the impulses that operate within it via the regulatory body of the Symbolic Order, which is in opposition to the unregulated body of the chora. This stabilization reduces the chora’s impulses to objects which can then be interpreted, explained away.

The process by which the subject comes into its subjectivity is thus this explanation, constituting what Kristeva refers to as the “thetic phase” of the subject’s development. The subject’s development is itself a process, as Kristeva makes clear in her writings on what she terms the “subject-in-process”—this process, however, is antagonistic to the subject by virtue of its occurrence in the chora, a body whose unmitigated impulses thwart any attempts towards objectification by the subject.¹¹ The speaker in Dickinson’s poetry, however, is not interested in the subject’s own impulse towards objectification and interpretation, but rather critical of the

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instability of an entity whose alleged purpose is to stabilize poetic language. Dickinson’s solution to these tensions is to have her subject do away with this notion of subjectivity entirely, having it focus instead on portraying the impulses that exist within the chora as if there were no subject-in-process attempting to process them. The sense one gets from reading Dickinson’s poetry is that her subject is remarkably uninterested in the thetic, here defined as the explanatory, regulatory impulse of the subject: there is a sense in which Dickinson’s subject is even hyperthetic, beyond the thetic entirely in that it feels no need to prove itself to the Symbolic Order by literally making sense, by creating meaning out of what said order terms as disorder. It is interested in stimulating the senses instead of interpreting what they perceive, in engaging the chora’s impulses instead of fighting against them.

When Dickinson’s speaker replaces Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with “Bee,” “Butterfly,” and “Breeze,” it does so as a reaction against the subject that interprets, against the thetic subject. For there is an explicit interpretation of the divine contained within the notion of the Trinity: it is the naming of something impossible to name, and thus is an assumption. Indeed, the Symbolic Order from whence the thetic subject derives its interpretative power is based upon nothing but a series of agreed-upon assumptions: in short, it is based upon the imaginary. Dickinson’s subject recognizes these imaginary assumptions for what they are and negates them, replacing these assumptions with things that can be seen, felt, and heard. It is not interested in the interality, or the “betweenness” of the interpretative process and the symbols this process creates; rather, it is interested in accessing the parts of these symbols that can be detected by the senses without having their imaginary significance stand in between these senses and what is being sensed. The

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existence of bees, butterflies, and breezes is definitive, and the sounds and images these entities conjure are familiar ones, terrestrial and even pedestrian—they are presented in a way that is unladen with symbolic significance, presented just the way they are. The speaker of this poem could have very well elaborated on this reworking of the Trinity, thus expanding upon its pre-existing symbolic significance, but it does not. This speaker, then, is not simply “pre-thetic,” a term used to describe the chora before the signifying process begins, but rather hyperthetic in the sense that it recognizes this process occurring within the chora but is instead more compelled by the unordered impulses the subject is attempting to order through this process. Thus, Dickinson’s subject is not a traditional lyric subject, seeing the world in light of subjects and objects, of interpreters and things to be interpreted. Her subject records and it evokes, but it does not interpret, does not reduce the impulses within the chora to objects. It presents the products of the universe in a way that suggests they simply are, and thus need not be interpreted. All they must do is stimulate the unordered impulses within the chora, the rhythmic propulsion of this “dancing body.”

The chora’s rhythmic impulses can be more directly engaged through the sense of sound, particularly through the rhythmic drive of the hymn. Dickinson’s hymns can be thought of as providing the music to which the chora dances, situating her hymns as titillating tunes instead of tepid exegetical psalms. Dickinson’s hymnody is thus not only a challenge to the thetic subjectivity predominant in lyric poetry, but also to traditional Christian hymnody. Considering the former, think for a moment to the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who was not merely

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one of Dickinson’s contemporaries, but perhaps the one she held in the highest regard.\textsuperscript{14} Despite this affinity, there is a significant divergence in how both poets fashion their subjects. Barrett Browning’s subject often has more of the thetic in it—that is to say, it is more ready to explain itself and, more significantly, to justify its existence by interpreting objects. In one of her classic sonnets, Barrett Browning describes a “Cheerfulness Taught by Reason,” chronicling the heroic journey of a symbolic “Heart” battered by the barrage of woes that threaten to throw it into despair.\textsuperscript{15} Her subject addresses this heart directly, telling it not to worry, that all these elements of flux can be interpreted as blockages which can be surgically excised through reason. Thus, the subject is thetic, not only attempting to explain the world, but also to cure it of its irrationality. Such rational subjects are mainstays of lyric poetry, meaning that the lyric subject is fundamentally a thetic one. Dickinson’s subject dramatically resists this thetic impulse, describing in Poem 340 an experience marked by the absence of reason wherein

\begin{quote}
...all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here –
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down –  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing – then – \textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Poems of Emily Dickinson}, 340.3-4.13-20, 1:366. References are to poem, poem copy (if applicable), stanza, line, then volume and page.
Nothing. There is no final note on which the poem ends, only abject emptiness. Clearly, then, Dickinson’s subject is not interested in curing or explaining, especially when it is handling topics that cannot be explained: indeed, topics that mark the end of reason itself. All it is interested in is engaging the senses, in conveying the movement of the drives or impulses within the chora. It has no thetic, lyric impulse as it would exist in Barrett Browning’s poetry, but rather a desire to convey the sort of motion in the chora that the thetic subject resists, a motion that defies sense in favor of the senses. In this poem, that sense would be sound, the sense that stimulates the chora most, the sense that propels it to dance. Indeed, the poem, despite its grim subject matter, takes its reader on a dance by moving in and out of nonsense. This dance leads the subject and the reader alike into a realm where existence is nothing but hearing and moving to the beat of this dance, no matter where this dance leads.

It is no coincidence that the form these dances so often take is that of the hymn. Even though Dickinson’s hymnic poems are written in common meter, a traditional hymnic form, this does not mean that they are traditional hymns in terms of their content. In fact, in many of her poems Dickinson lifts quotations from the popular hymns of her day precisely to parody traditional hymnic content. In Poem 231, it is possible that Dickinson is parodying the immensely popular hymn “In the Sweet By and By,” written by J. P. Webster and S. F. Bennett around the year 1868. This hymn has been parodied by many artists, not the least of whom was the witty, eccentric modernist composer Charles Ives, also from New England and raised in an environment where hymns were sung loud and proud, oftentimes by those with poor

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voices—thus it is only fitting that Emily Dickinson take her rightful place in such an illustrious line of play.¹⁸

While not all of Dickinson’s poems strike the miserable tone of Poem 340, all maintain this playful interest in subverting traditional lyric sense. This subversion can be detected through the mocking manner of Poem 231, in which the subject and its imaginary friend named Tim pretend they are participants in a church service. The subject, almost in deadpan, says in the first two lines that

We dont cry – Tim and I –
We are far too grand – ¹⁹

The latter line, repeated in the second stanza, humorously evokes the characteristic stiff upper-lip of Protestant hymn singers while also mocking the traditional hymnic refrain, which typically serves to explicate the point of the hymn through continual repetition. Compare this to the refrain of “The Sweet By and By”:

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore. ²⁰

In Dickinson’s poem, however, this refrain is tossed aside the moment another connection to the topic at hand becomes apparent, especially if this connection has something to do with the senses. The eyes that were in the first stanza disposed towards a more conventional sort of

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¹⁹ Poems, 231.1-2, 1:255.

²⁰ “By and By,” Song of America.
piety—that is, towards crying and the outward expression of grief—are unclouded in the third, aligning themselves more with their power to see:

Nor to dream – he and me –
Do we condescend –
We just shut our brown eye –
To see to the end – 21

Paradoxically, this power to see only comes once the eye is not able to sense anything, not able to perceive in the manner of a traditional subject. Dickinson’s poem thus becomes a more pointed critique of both the ability to “see” anything from the mystical plane and, pertinently, the self-assured attitude of believers who believe they are not merely “dreaming,” but really seeing that which cannot be seen. This mocking attitude is made more clear when this stanza is read in light of the first verse of “In the Sweet By and By”:

There’s a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there. 22

It is just as impossible to see something by faith as it is to see something by closing the eyes, and yet the subject asserts that it can and it does. There seems to be an inconsistency between this subject’s attitude and the attitude of the subject in Poem 23, who affirms a firm belief in what can be sensed in the here-and-now rather than in the hereafter. This inconsistency can be characterized as merely mockery, but there is indeed more than meets the eye here. As this clairvoyant “eye” becomes in the third stanza bound to the “I” of the poem, or the subject, Dickinson’s hyperthetic subject takes on a new dimension: it releases its grasp on traditional lyric sense by not explaining what it is it sees when it reaches “the end,” thus concerning itself in part

21 Poems, 231.3.9-12, 1:255.

22 “By and By,” Song of America.
with the metaphysical, even if it does so with a mocking air. The most significant departure from traditional lyric sense in this poem, however, is how its subject resists its own subjectivity altogether, not only by giving up its hold on sense as it closes its “eye,” but also by opening up its “I.”

The mechanism for this opening-up is the bringing of the object into the body of the subject, thus negating the defining attribute of subjects—to perceive that which is unthinking, those things which exist outside the body of the subject. If the objectivity of objects, here defined as the qualities that allow objects to be perceived by thinking subjects, is negated, so too is the subjectivity of subjects, which can likewise be defined as the qualities that allow subjects to perceive unthinking objects. Certainly subjectivity and objectivity are bound to each other, but they are not typically thought of as being together in the same body. And yet Dickinson’s subject does so casually—the objective imaginary friend, who is not endowed with thinking qualities of its own, is perceived by the subject’s imagination as belonging to the subject itself, sharing in its seeing powers. This conflation is signaled in the third stanza, where “the brown eye” belongs collectively to both subject and object, allowing both “to see to the end” from the same body, from the same “eye”/“I.”

There is a certain choric motion to the conflation of subjectivity and objectivity in Poem 231 in the sense that there is a rhythmic instability to this conflation. There is a fundamental instability inherent in giving up on the traditional sense that governs poetry, the sense and logic of the thetic subject who organizes the world into interpretable phenomena, things, objects. The world Dickinson’s subject conveys in this poem does not attempt to interpret these objects or even acknowledge their existence, regardless of if these objects are what Timothy Morton refers to as “hyperobjects,” defined as large-scale, impersonal phenomena, or more everyday objects,
like unthinking imaginary friends. This hyperthetic aspect of Dickinson’s subject thus characterizes it as unstable, not as unsure of the gaps between subject and object as it is uncaring—as something that moves to the beat of its own drum. But, if we take that phrase literally in light of the fact that the instability of the chora is rhythmic, what is this beat, where does it come from, and how can the chora be called rhythmic to begin with? The chora is rhythmic because it is made up of loose, unorganized drives, or pulsions. If these pulsions are translated alternately as “impulses,” their connection to beats becomes pronounced. These impulses must constantly be stimulated in order to keep moving, to keep playing with the subject, and they are stimulated by beats in order to dance—this is why the chora is called the “dancing body.” When understood in light of this dance, Dickinson’s play is far more than mockery; rather, it is a play whose semantic motion evokes the same kind of play the chora engages in when it tangoes, if you will, with a thetic subject who would attempt to rein in this play in favor of a steady world of signs and symbols, a world in which the Symbolic Order and the nom du père reign.

The playfulness inherent in the blithe dissolution of the subject/object separation in Poem 231, then, is an articulation of the chora’s dancing movement, a dance around meaning. But something has to provide the beat for this dance, and the hymn is able to do so nicely: not only does it have its own metrical beat, but it has its own impulse towards inclusion, towards polyphony. Thus, the melding of subject and object in this poem is a reflection of a hymnic space wherein a multiplicity of voices contribute not to the production of meaning, but to the production of sounds and beats that the chora can dance to, that stimulate the unordered impulses

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within the chora. A firm grasp of signs, symbols, and meaning is not necessary in this space, and in fact is even undesirable from the poem’s perspective as reflected in stanza 5:

Tim – reads a little Hymn –
And we both pray,
Please, Sir, I and Tim –
Always lost the way! 24

The subject is not lamenting the fact that it and Tim, two voices speaking from the same body, have “lost the way,” but is rather praising this loss of control through prayer and hymn singing, alternative modes of expression which do not necessarily require the same kind of subjective poetic sense found in lyric. Even as “In the Sweet By and By” affirms it has a claim to a subjective sight of the hereafter, Dickinson’s subject counters that by emphasizing the qualities of the hymn that disavow subjective sense, the qualities of praise, dancing, letting loose: the ecstatic kind of praise found at camp meetings, for example, or the modern Pentecostalist church. This loss of control is expressed further in the final two stanzas of the poem, which gains a vocalized vicerality as it edges nearer to its conclusion:

We must die – by and by –
Clergymen say –
Tim – shall – if I – do –
I – too – if he –

How shall we arrange it –
Tim – was – so – shy?
Take us simultaneous – Lord –
I – “Tim” – and – me! 25

It is important to note that an affirmation of the inseparability of subject and object is the note the poem ends on, thus affirming the kind of ecstatic hymnic space the poem is interested in

24 Poems, 231.5.17-20, 1:255.

conveying. Important too to note is the subject’s own insecurity regarding what will happen “In the sweet by and by,” an insecurity not present in the original hymn that perhaps betrays the true nature of this poem’s subject: losing both its parodic nature and its use of parody to provide sense to the poem, the subject is revealed to be unsure, unstable, perhaps just as imaginary as its imaginary friend.

Of critical importance is why the subject of Poem 231, with its powerless “eye” and “I,” relinquishes its power. It deliberately chooses not to strike the same self-assured tone of not only the hymn it parodies, but also the tenuous self-assurance of the thetic subject, tenuous in the sense that this self-assurance is based upon its success in organizing impulses that, if we are to believe Kristeva, are not completely organizable. Because Dickinson’s subject realizes that this lyric self-assurance is tenuous, conditional upon an impossibility, it does not choose to follow in these footsteps, instead paying attention to the dancing footwork of the chora and choosing not only move in time with it, but to also provide the music that the chora’s beats depend upon for its dancing.

A more specific understanding of these beats, these impulses, these drives, is necessary, thus going beyond their general attribute as rhythmic entities that set the chora in motion. A better understanding of these impulses is arrived at after considering the imperative of the imagined clergymen at the end of Poem 231: that is, to “die – by and by,” evoking the refrain of “In the Sweet By and By.” This refrain is a more authoritative form of a memento mori, differing from the Latin in the sense that the original phrase is not in the imperative—there is no “must,” there is no obligation. This obligation to die can thus be seen as an interpolation by these paternalistic clergymen, who are not so much historical figures as they are reflections of the Lacanian nom du père. In the context of these final stanzas, then, the drive being ordered by
these religious Fathers is specifically the death drive, explained by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as that fundamental human impulse to return to the inert, inorganic state all living things emerge from.\(^{26}\) However, such drives are not yet ordered in the space of the chora, since the chora, of course, categorically defies all attempts at order. The question, then, of “how shall we arrange it” in Poem 231’s last stanza becomes a marker of the subject’s affinity with the chora in its inability to arrange the drives, its inability to fit into the Symbolic Order as represented by the clergymen/Fathers/\textit{nom du père}. And yet, a different sort of arrangement is attained by the poem—a musical one. Its arrangement of scattered thoughts, prayers, and devotions on the subject of mortality into metrical music is a successful one. From a symbolic viewpoint, the subject does indeed get lost in the meanings of the words that nonsensically leap out of it, but in the end, it is the desire to overcome a certain “shy[ness],” a certain trepidation towards expressing what is hard to express through means of signs and symbols, that wins out, even at the expense of traditional poetic sense. To echo the words of Dickinson herself, her subject’s “business is to \textit{sing} [sic]” more than it is to convey meaning.\(^{27}\)

Thus, the spontaneous impulse of the subject to sing is an alternative way of making sense, albeit a sense that is rooted more in sound than in symbology—a hyperthetic sense, a sense that goes beyond mere explanation. Dickinson’s subject collapses the already tenuous relationship between subject and object existing in lyric poetry by seeing the space of the poem as what Victoria Morgan refers to as a hymnic space, a space where all singers are but only singers. There is no room for exclusivity: all voices must work in tandem with each other in


order to produce a harmonic output, and as such their individual statuses as “subjects” or “objects” are inconsequential. The subject must lose itself, or at least the image of the subjective self as conceived in traditional lyric, in order to gain access to a freer soundworld, a world governed by the beat that drives the dancing body, the chora. Through the negation of these exclusive claims, there are traces of a new subject being born in Dickinson’s early poems, which over time develops more of a sense of the hymnic spaces it occupies, in the process becoming a hymnic subject.

Given Dickinson’s dissolution of the tenuously hierarchical subject/object relationship expressed in traditional lyric poetry, and indeed the tenuous nature of the thetic subject itself, it is necessary to think through the implications of this dissolution, particularly those involving space. The spaces explored by this new subject, unencumbered by symbolic awareness and the thetic imperative to order the impulses, or drives, can be thought of as sonorous ones, insofar as they are related to the music of the chora’s dance, the music that gives the chora its rhythmic propulsion. These sonorous spaces are distinguished from symbolic spaces, which are governed by the Lacanian Symbolic Order, focused as it is on giving arbitrary meaning to the world. Traditional lyric, while always attentive to issues of sound, occupies more of this symbolic space, ordering sounds around to further solidify the bond between sign and signifier, between the subject and the Symbolic Order. The “revolution in poetic language” that Kristeva describes the chora as taking part in is then a revolution against this unholy alliance between subject and symbol.²⁸

This alliance is a particularly problematic one for Dickinson’s subject because of its distinct feeling of being excluded from this symbolic realm as governed by the overtly patriarchal *nom de père*. Such a sentiment is directly expressed in Poem 268:

> Why – do they shut me out of Heaven?  
> Did I sing – too loud?  
> But – I can say a little “minor”  
> Timid as a bird!  \(^{29}\)

Of special interest is the subject’s equation of “shut[ting]...out” with singing, being denied access to the Symbolic Order because of its impulse towards musical expression. This impulse carries with it a kind of play or even attack on symbolic meaning, a sense that is conveyed more explicitly in Poem 231. Such an equation seems to suggest that there are limits to the subject’s lyricality, limits to the musical expression of the lyric subject insofar as this subject is thetic, thus having to concern itself more with shaping meaning into explainable symbols. Even though the subject in Poem 268 suggests that it is able and willing to suppress its musicality to fit into the Symbolic Order represented by Heaven, it fails at acquiring the timid, prayerful posture required to fully belong in such a space: it lacks the kind of silent, steady composure necessary for thetic organization. Only a couple poems later in Dickinson’s fascicles from 1861, however, the subject realizes this and gives up on this assimilationist position, affirming its songfulness:

> I shall keep singing!  
> Birds will pass me  
> On their way to Yellower Climes –  
> Each – with a Robin’s expectation –  
> I – with my Redbreast –  
> And my Rhymes –  \(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\) *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 268.1.1-4, 1:287.  

\(^{30}\) *Poems*, 270.1.1-6, 1:288.
Clearly, this subject is grounded by song, and is remarkably unaffected by the attitudes of the other “birds” around it—perhaps we could call these birds thetic subjects in their own right, eager to fly off in new directions and discover uncharted poetic worlds, new signs and symbols in which to find temporary refuge, and then flit off again. Even though Dickinson’s subject is playful in regards to meaning, always leaving the questions it poses unanswered, it is not so flitting: it delights in its timeless attitude towards its topics without regard for where it is going, for it is already in the playful space in which it wishes to be.

Such solid defiance from Dickinson’s subject can be read as a rejection of and revolution against the Symbolic Order, thus aligning this subject in mission with Kristeva’s chora, albeit in a strange and seemingly contradictory way. Given that Dickinson’s poems often take the form of hymns, particularly in regards to rhythm and rhyme, it would appear as if Dickinson’s poetry, and thus Dickinson’s subject, is merely trying to fit into the Symbolic Order with its rules and prescriptions, which would include metrical constraints insofar as these are construed as conventions meant to fashion poetry and the world it belongs to as exclusive, as impenetrable. What is more, the subject clearly has a sense of space: a songful space, a hymnic space, fitting its sounds and perceptions into the spatial and temporal confines of common meter. This subject, while not thetic in the sense that it tries to organize meaning into symbols, is still seemingly trying to organize these sounds into music, and is thus seemingly in violation of both the chora’s general nature as a body which evades organization and also Kristeva’s more distinct articulation of the chora as something that “precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.”

And yet, Kristeva also says that “although the chora [sic] can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the chora and, if necessary, lend it a

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topology,” thus leaving open the possibility for spaces in the chora as long as they fulfill the
spirit of the chora as a body “that is as full of movement as it is regulated.”\textsuperscript{32} Insofar as
Dickinson’s subject conveys a very definite sense of motion and rhythmic propulsion, thus
giving this rhythm pride of place in poetry over symbolic sense, it can be called choric. Insofar
as Dickinson’s subject dances along with the chora, organizing the sounds of its poetry only so as
to provide a musical arrangement that the chora is able to dance to, it can be called choric. Thus,
we can proceed in describing the hymnic space evoked by and situated within the chora.

To detect this hymnic space in Dickinson’s poetry, one may look to Poem 373, where the
subject not only disavows a quintessentially lyric sense of sense, but also turns to music and
sound as a space in which this disavowal may take place:

This world is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy, dont know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go – \textsuperscript{33}

Using the hereafter as a means through which to explore a leaving of sense, though not a leaving
of the \textit{senses}, the subject accesses a choric space: by letting go of “Philosophy” and
“Sagacity”—indeed, by going “beyond” them, beyond the thetic—the subject seeks to solve the
riddle of life outside the confines of reason, embracing instead the rhythmic logic of sound and
music. This logic is accessible to far more in the universe than thinking subjects; indeed, even
the birds that feature prominently in Dickinson’s poetry can understand this logic. This logic is

\textsuperscript{32} Kristeva, “Semiotic \textit{Chora},” 26; 25.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Poems of Emily Dickinson}, 373.1.1-8, 1:397.
more sensual than sensical, especially when understood in light of Kristeva’s reframing of the word *semiotic* as not related as much to the signs of the Symbolic Order commonly connoted through the Greek *σημεῖον*, but rather to what Calvin Bedient describes as “imprint[s].” These marks that mark Kristeva’s semiotics are no mere markers of meaning, but grooves through which *jouissance* is able to “flow...into language.” This process is distinctly sensual, laden as it is with the orgasmic and even mystical undertones of that word, another loaner from Lacan meaning anything from “enjoyment” to “bliss” to “coming.”

It is perhaps helpful to think of these grooves as channels for the *jouissance* that emanates from the chora, cutting through the hard rock of the Symbolic landscape to form textual canyons—in other words, gaps or holes cut out of the impenetrable, phallic Symbolic Order. Kristeva’s “semiotization of the symbolic,” which she sees as the defining attribute of art, is fundamentally an act of penetration, even infiltration: the unorganized, rushing forces of the chora break into the Symbolic Order by means of excess *jouissance* produced in this body, effectively castrating the Symbolic and replacing its phallocentric power with holes that hold *jouissance*. One of the effects of this flow of *jouissance* into language is what Roland Barthes conceptualizes as the creation of texts wherein the subject/object relationship is dissolved, allowing readers, writers, and anyone in-between to partake in the playful bliss of the chora’s dance. The ability for anyone to participate in this dance marks a radical shift in poetic space,

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35 Kristeva, “Poetry…Murder,” 79.


37 Kristeva, “Poetry…Murder,” 79.
marked by the yielding of the Symbolic Order to a semiotic, dancing disordering of traditional poetic sense, using Kristeva’s definition of that word. This yielding, as Barthes contests in *The Pleasure of the Text*, creates texts which “succeed…in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear,” thus creating bliss, or *jouissance*.

In this new space, subjects, objects, and the Order that governs their movements are defeated and negated, and thus everyone encountering a poetic text is not only thrown into the dance space of the chora, but is able to inhabit and speak in the position of the voice that produces what Barthes would call the text, but what we shall refer to as the music to which this chora dances.

In the context of Dickinson, it would indeed be more productive to replace Barthes’ conceptualization of a voice speaking through the “body of the actor” with a voice singing through the body of the singer, particularly the hymn singer. The space the body of this singer occupies, this hymnic space, is described by Victoria Morgan as containing the types of “gaps” and holes created through the flow of *jouissance* into language, which had previously been created and maintained by the Symbolic Order.

The importance of the equation of hymnic space to choric space in this regard is primarily through the hymn’s ability to elucidate the deep feeling of this bliss of the dance, for surely something so physical must have a feeling. *Jouissance* in and of itself has no expressive power, but the hymn does. Indeed, the hymn’s music is what allows the chora to dance and thus produce this bliss, and it is the hymn’s music which does so specifically because of the hymn’s ability to fit itself into this open landscape produced by the chora. The space of the hymn is as full of the expressive grooves, gaps, and holes as the chora’s is, allowing all its many participants to sing, to create, in much the same way.

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that the chora does. Thus, a subject in alignment with this goal of collective expression, regardless of the ability of those encountering poetic texts to explain, interpret, or make sense of these texts, moves in time with the chora—a subject that allows this collective expression through music is hymnic. Hymn singing and, significantly, the playful, expressive dancing that goes along with it, give jouissance and the chora from which it derives a more perceptibly sensual quality while not forsaking the fundamental ineffability of both jouissance and the chora: both hymnic and choric space are “Invisible, as Music – / But positive, as Sound.” It is impossible to see this hybrid space or the voices occupying this space—they must be heard, and most importantly, they must be felt.

This feeling is what Dickinson’s subject attempts to convey through its hymns, which break into the stark, static landscape of symbolic sense by forming a topology consisting of rushing rivers, grooves, gaps, and holes wherein jouissance can be experienced by all who participate in the singing of these hymns. Every actor, or singer, in this landscape is involved in creating the music to which the chora dances, in shaping this very landscape that gives the chora the necessary room to dance, to flow, to move. The flow of jouissance into language is the flow of a musical ethos into language, a hymnic ethos, the chora’s dance set in motion through the collective effort of the voices of any persons that would encounter this musical poetry. For at the end of the day, all poetry, but especially lyric, is meant to be lyrical, to be song-like: as such, it should encapsulate not only the ideals of beauty and brevity it is so commonly regarded as having, but also its inherently musical qualities. Dickinson is able to capture these musical qualities so well that she goes beyond the lyric genre altogether, despite the frequency with which she is associated with this genre. Her poetry is so transgressive against traditional lyric that it establishes not only a new typology of hyperthetic, singing subjects, but also a new
topology for poetry, a new conceptualization of poetic space that is fundamentally hymnic, choric, musical, dance-like. Dickinson’s business truly is “to sing” more than anything else, insisting that “Sagacity, must go” in order to arrive at the sense she is trying to convey via her hymnic poetry: a sense of the senses, a sense of the visceral beats that move the chora, that move the hymn, that move everyone who wishes to share in her poetry’s sense of freedom from exclusive symbols and strict interpretations. It is a radically inclusive poetic space that requires a radically inclusive subject, one far different from thetic, lyric subjects: it is a space that requires a subject who is not simply “laying down the law,” as it were, but one who is ready to share its voice, to harmonize, to move in time with others who are committed to the chora’s revolution against poetic language. This subject must not only have faith in the power of an inclusive choric space to challenge the Symbolic Order, but it must sing this faith into being. Dickinson’s subject does exactly this, singing its faith in a more inclusive poetry with the determined demeanor of a hymn singer, becoming with each articulation of the chora’s beats and pulses a thoroughly hymnic subject.
Bibliography


