

*The Emily Dickinson Journal, Vol. XII, No. 2*

---



---

MAGDALENA ZAPIEDOWSKA

Citizens of Paradise: Dickinson and Emmanuel Levinas's  
Phenomenology of the Home<sup>1</sup>

**I**n his beautiful essay on the thought of Levinas, whose radical novelty, as he says, “can make us tremble” (82), Jacques Derrida gives a brief overview of its background and main goals:

[It is] A thought for which the entirety of the Greek logos has already erupted, and is now a quiet topsoil deposited not over bedrock, but around a more ancient volcano. A thought which, without philology and solely by remaining faithful to the immediate, but buried nudity of experience itself, seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One ... as if from oppression itself – an oppression certainly comparable to none other in the world, an ontological or transcendental oppression, but also the origin or alibi of all oppression in the world. A thought, finally, which seeks to liberate itself from a philosophy fascinated by the “visage of being that shows itself in war” which “is fixed in the concept of totality which dominates Western philosophy.” (82-83)

Starting from the level of sheer experience, Levinas's metaphysical project is a daring journey into a territory obliterated by classical philosophy and its emphasis on being and phenomenality. In this context, his is a philosophy of protest whose shaft is pointed at the specter of Hegelianism and the totality of the final synthesis which sublates all opposites. Yet, revolutionary though it is, Levinas's project is not without precedent or parallel. About a century earlier Emily Dickinson voiced a similar if wholly private protest

against the oppression of the One, the uniform, and the universal. Indeed, if in the passage quoted “thought” were replaced by “poetry”, and “Greek logos” and “Greek domination of the Same and the One” by “Calvinist logos” and “Romantic domination of the Same and the One” respectively, Derrida’s recapitulation of Levinas might refer to at least some of her attitudes and concerns.

Accordingly, just as Levinas’s thought stems from his conclusion that ontology has lost touch with experience and failed to provide a foundation for meaning (Tischner 179-80), Dickinson’s metaphysical poetry originates from her recognition that the doctrine, morality, and piety of institutional Calvinism have failed to guide her in her religious quest and that she must seek a more immediate relation with God than the morning prayer her family address to an “Eclipse” (L261; Eberwein 68-69). Further, just as Levinas, inspired by the Hebraic Bible, founds his philosophical project on the assertion of an inextinguishable dissymmetry between the Same, or ego, and the absolute alterity of the Other, Dickinson envisions the relations between the self and what it faces as essentially dissymmetric, probing the inadequacy of the I to other people, God, and Nature (“Nature and God – I neither knew” [Fr803B/J835]).<sup>2</sup> Finally, just as the philosophy of Levinas, by “recourse to experience itself” (Derrida 83), explodes the concept of totality fostered by Western ontology, Dickinson’s poetry, also drawing on the ecstasy or pain of sensual and spiritual experience, defies totality to such an extent that David Porter deems it decentered and without a goal (*Modern Idiom*).

In this essay I do not wish to try and translate Dickinson’s poetry into the language of Levinas’s thought. This in itself would be an act of violence, the sacrificing of a unique poetic voice for a certain conceptual totality. Nor do I intend to read Dickinson as a philosopher, which she certainly is not. Rather, I would like to explore what seems to me a fundamental similarity between the nineteenth-century Amherst poet and the Lithuanian-born Jewish-French thinker writing after the two World Wars. This similarity, which can be traced to their radical dependence on stark experience and the consequent rejection of the principle of unity, whether represented by Hegel or by Emerson, might be subsumed under the Levinasian concepts

of separation, desire, and discourse as expounded in his *Totality and Infinity*. The present essay, in its limited scope, focuses on separation, which precedes desire and discourse in the order of experience.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, separation is a fundamental aspect of Emily Dickinson's poetry and life. The soul's sovereignty, its radical self-sufficiency, and the complete severance of bonds with the external universe are among her most distinctive themes. Probing the various experiential facets of interiority, such as enjoyment, withdrawal, and habitation, her poems offer a phenomenology of separation parallel to that of Levinas. The French philosopher conceives of separation as an act of withdrawal from the elements by which the self establishes its individuality and asserts its absolute independence. This notion of selfhood is at odds with the romantic precept that subjectivity originates in self-consciousness, when the I asserts its identity as opposed to the external world – as in the Introduction to *Nature*, which points to the sharp divide between the Me of the Soul and the Not Me of Nature (8). Levinas rejects the primacy of consciousness and argues that subjectivity has its source in enjoyment, which opens up the dimension of interiority by letting the I experience – rather than become aware of – its selfhood: “Enjoyment . . . is the very pulsation of the I” (*Totality and Infinity* 113). The most primordial form of enjoyment immediately relates the I to the elements, shapeless, unbridled, and unfathomable as they are: “the element has no side at all. One does not approach it. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element” (*Totality and Infinity* 131).

Emily Dickinson depicts this kind of relation with the elemental in her early poem “Snow flakes,” dated by Franklin to about late 1858:

I counted till they danced so  
Their slippers leaped the town –  
And then I took a pencil  
To note the rebels down –

Magdalena Zapiedowska

And then they grew so jolly  
I did resign the prig –  
And ten of my once stately toes  
Are marshalled for a jig!  
(Fr45/J36)

Simple, light-hearted, and seemingly insignificant, this poem, which reads like a spontaneous response to perhaps the first snowfall in Amherst that winter (Franklin 1: 97), has attracted little critical attention. Admittedly, as a picture of motion it is less compelling than the celebrated “A Route of Evanescence” (Fr1489/J1463; Porter, *Art* 78). What makes it interesting, though, is the change of the speaker’s stance halfway through the poem, when, overwhelmed by the elemental joy of the falling snow, she abandons the attempt to make it intelligible (Porter, *Art* 79) and simply surrenders to the entrancing movement of its dance. The final shift into the present tense reflects the fleeting moment of happiness, which, as Levinas insists, always comes for the first time (*Totality and Infinity* 114). As the description proceeds, its perfectly regular rhythm underscored by the conjunctive parallelism and exact rhymes seems to accelerate with the unchecked motion of the flakes. Here Dickinson is not yet the enchanted observer of, e.g., “An altered look about the hills –” (Fr90/J140) or “She sweeps with many-colored Brooms –” (Fr318/J219), nor does she ponder over the unnameable effect of natural beauty, as in “Flowers – Well – if anybody / Can the extasy define – / Half a transport – half a trouble – / With which flowers humble men” (Fr95B/J137). Her enjoyment is more primordial, non-reflexive, purely sensible; it is a sheer “bathing in the element” (*Totality and Infinity* 131) rather than a contemplation of nature. As Levinas explains, “To-be-in-the-element ... differs from a thought making its way outward. Here on the contrary the movement comes incessantly upon me, as the wave that engulfs and submerges and drowns” (*Totality and Infinity* 135).

It is in the happiness of such enjoyment that the I coils into itself, absolutely alone and independent, by separation establishing its sovereign individuality. This movement of radical withdrawal, the closing over upon oneself (*Totality and Infinity* 148), marks another profound difference between the French phenomenologist and the romantic preachers of Oneness. When

Emerson “goes into solitude” (9), it is to seek communion with the Universal Being which will momentarily free him from the tiresome burden of the personal self. Even “Self-Reliance,” his gospel of nonconformity, argues that individuality means recognizing one’s place in the Whole: society, the design of providence, the spiritual universe. Subjectivity that cannot be transcended and affirmed as part of the One turns into oppressive solipsistic confinement which shatters the Transcendental project in “Experience.” For Dickinson, a spiritual communion with nature of the kind Emerson relishes in his oft-quoted “transparent eyeball” passage is unthinkable, not only because nature will not reveal its spiritual essence, but, just as importantly, because such a revelation annihilates individuality and individuality is the one thing the Amherst poet will never renounce. Less obviously, despite her emphasis on pain and deprivation she joins Levinas in claiming that the fulfillment of happiness, constitutive of individuality, is the original state against which one measures suffering and loss (*Totality and Infinity* 144-45):

Want – is a meagre Art  
Acquired by Reverse –  
The Poverty that was not Wealth –  
Cannot be Indigence –

(Fr870/J771)

Even though the poet most often speaks of happiness in the negative, investigating its absence to the brink of despair, it nonetheless is a theme she never ceases to address. When Higginson visited her at the Homestead on August 16, 1870, and on the evening of that day wrote to his wife, describing his face-to-face interview with the eccentric recluse of Amherst, among the things she said he noted the famous “I find ecstasy in living – the mere sense of living is joy enough” (L342a). This statement, too, has a parallel in Levinas, who argues that “[t]he love of life does not love Being, but loves the happiness of being” (*Totality and Infinity* 145). Thus, in contrast to the romantic elevation of suffering and sorrow, happiness becomes the very essence of the human condition, a source of inexhaustible strength and a powerful impulse for action:

Magdalena Zapiedowska

Such is the Force of Happiness –  
The Least – can lift a ton  
Assisted by it's stimulus –  
(Fr889/J787)

Enamored of life, the separated being fulfills its separation by and through the home, which forms the primary domain of interiority (*Totality and Infinity* 154). The home establishes positive distance between self and world, changing the amorphous element into intelligible forms of nature and providing shelter from what Levinas calls the *there is*, or threatening anonymous being. Any representation or contemplation of natural phenomena is only possible from the vantage point of the home, which provides the beholder with a necessary frame of reference: “the subject contemplating a world presupposes the event of dwelling, the withdrawal from the elements (that is, from immediate enjoyment, already uneasy about the morrow), recollection in the intimacy of the home” (*Totality and Infinity* 153).

Perhaps more than the work of any other writer, the poetry of Emily Dickinson reinforces Levinas's argument about the privileged role of habitation. The home and the familiar stability it provided were of particular value to the poet who by her late thirties had completely withdrawn to her family house and limited her contact with people other than the members of her household to letters and occasional interviews from behind a door ajar (Sewall 8). “I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town,” she wrote to Higginson in 1869, declining his invitation to come to Boston and inviting him to see her at Amherst instead (L330). Rhythm and rhyme render this fact her proud resolution rather than a limitation she must resign herself to. Whatever its faults and oppressions, the home protected her, ensuring not only privacy but also the predictability of everyday routine she seems to have needed to counterbalance her turbulent inner life and varying emotional states. And with Vinnie seeing to the bulk of household chores, the home also secured her the time and freedom to write poetry. Earlier in her life, in 1855, when her father repurchased the Dickinson Homestead and the family moved back there from the house on Pleasant Street they had occupied for fifteen years, the poet suffered the loss of a

home, an experience she describes as exceedingly traumatic (Mudge 75-80):

I cannot tell you how we moved. I had rather not remember.... Such wits as I reserved, are so badly shattered that repair is useless – and still I can't help laughing at my own catastrophe.... They say that "home is where the heart is." I think it is where the *house* is, and the adjacent buildings. (L182)

Although there are no surviving poems composed in the two years immediately following the relocation from Pleasant to Main Street, it may have been this trauma which provided Emily Dickinson with the decisive stimulus for writing. As Fuss observes, "It was while reacclimating to life in the Homestead that Dickinson began seriously to write poetry, composing an entire sequence of lyrics around images of empty, abandoned, or bereaved houses" (Fr311/J289, Fr547/J389, Fr555/J399). Even as those images, perhaps reminiscent of the trauma and suggestive of attempts to deal with it, appear later, mostly in poems dated to 1862 and 1863, poetry writing as such could have helped Dickinson recover from the sense of loss and estrangement insofar as it created a private, intimate world, a "home" of limitless Possibility (Fr466/J657).

The centrality of the home image in Dickinson has been the subject of two separate studies. Jean McClure Mudge and, more recently, Diana Fuss have examined the way it organizes her poetic space and provides the model for structuring the inner space of her mind, frequently envisioned in architectural terms. According to Rosenbaum's *Concordance*, Dickinson uses the word *house* 74 times, and *home*, 86 times, yet the significance of habitation to her poetry is far greater than these numbers might suggest. Through their use of imagery and spatial form, Dickinson's poems often imply a speaker who is indoors, busy reading, working, dreaming, looking out of the window, receiving guests, admiring the artistry of spiders, or, for that matter, inspecting a rat caught in a trap (Fr1377/J1340).<sup>4</sup> Not only does the poet view the home from an indoor perspective (Miller 107) but also, in the Levinasean vein, she builds her relation to the natural world upon the

contrast of inside and outside as the home determines her perception of what is beyond it.

Another poem about snowfall, probably composed in 1862, at the peak of Dickinson's poetic activity, reflects the shift from the self steeped in immediate enjoyment of the elemental to one sheltered within the home. As the non-reflexive bathing in the element of "I counted till they danced so" here gives way to contemplation at a distance, language struggles against elemental chaos in an attempt to invest it with form and meaning:

It sifts from Leaden Sieves –  
It powders all the Wood.  
It fills with Alabaster Wool  
The Wrinkles of the Road –

It makes an even Face  
Of Mountain, and of Plain –  
Unbroken Forehead from the East  
Unto the East again –  
It reaches to the Fence –  
It wraps it Rail by Rail  
Till it is lost in Fleeces –  
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack – and Stem –  
A Summer's empty Room –  
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,  
Recordless, but for them –

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts  
As Ankles of a Queen –  
Then stills it's Artisans – like Ghosts –  
Denying they have been –

(Fr291A/J311)

The speaker's withdrawal from the scene, marked by the absence of first-person pronouns, makes possible this brilliant and bewildering feat of imagination. The reason why it is so bewildering is its distressingly polyvalent mood which oscillates between the serene and the ominous, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*, enchantment and annihilation. In a typically Dickinsonian fashion, the poem begins with a household image magnified into oppressive



grotesqueness. Removed from the kitchen context, the sieves, normally associated with bread-making and, more broadly, with the life- and love-giving action of preparing food, become instruments of the world's obliteration. The question of agent, a possibly malevolent being that could handle the huge sieves of lead, is left unanswered, yet the "Celestial Vail" of the third stanza might imply a divine giver of this dubious gift. Rapid as it is, the annihilation is not violent but peaceful, almost idyllic in its gentleness. With its soft yet indifferent touch, the snow prepares the body of the world for burial, removing signs of its old age ("It fills with Alabaster Wool / The Wrinkles of the Road"), wrapping it in "Fleeces," adorning it ("It Ruffles Wrists of Posts / As Ankles of a Queen"), and, finally, covering it with a blank sheet of non-identity and non-meaning which cancels all variety and difference. Even the sequence of seasons is canceled out as the "Acres of Joints," the only vestiges of summer, disappear in what Cameron calls the snow's "blanketing sameness." This sameness, Cameron argues, necessitates metaphorical language, since "the old names ... lie buried too deeply to permit identification" (175). The uniformity of the snow-covered landscape is reflected by alliteration: the "Wool" fills the "Wrinkles"; the expressive "Face" of the world is transformed into a perfectly smooth, expressionless "Forehead" which extends over the "Fence" covered in "Fleeces." The last two lines of the poem come almost as a shock, breaking the hypnotizing peacefulness of the scene: "Then stills its Artisans – like Ghosts – / Denying they have been." The world's metamorphosis, whose beauty might so far have disguised death, ends in a void which has swallowed all memory of being. The blankness is yet more poignant for the fact that Dickinson never names the snow or its white color. Colorless and formless, the world seems to have been absorbed by the threatening anonymity of the *there is*. Indeed, in the context of Levinas's analyses of the elemental, the pronoun "it," rather than referring to snow, might be read as the semantically empty subject for impersonal verbs, as in "it snows" or "it rains." The speaker's distanced, contemplative view of the scene phenomenologically implies the shelter of a home, where, if not unaffected by the snowstorm, she is protected from a direct impact of its mesmerizing yet annihilating power.

The contrast between the safety of the home and the threatening fury of the elemental is most acute in the storm poems. Interestingly enough, in “The Wind begun to knead the Grass –” (Fr796A/J824) it is again the image of bread-making, this time accentuated by a simile, “As Women do a Dough,” that develops into an apocalyptic vision of the world’s disintegration. The fact that Dickinson, herself the breadmaker in the Homestead, persistently subverts the domestic connotations of household activities certainly implies that she too has a potential of violence and may explode (Eberwein 153-54). Just as importantly, however, it suggests the fragility of the order of the world in which the familiar can unexpectedly turn strange and destructive. Thus, the wind-housewife starts tearing out the grass and throwing it at the plain and the sky, leaves “unhoo[k] themselves from Trees,” dust “scoop[s] itself like Hands – / And throw[s] away the Road,” thunders “gossi[p] low” as if they plotted to destroy the universe, and a moment later the lightning splits the sky. Only the dwelling is spared from the cosmic catastrophe (Anderson 139):

And then, as if the Hands  
That held the Dams – had parted hold  
The Waters Wrecked the Sky –  
But overlooked my Father’s House –  
Just Quartering a Tree –

The image of hands letting loose the dammed waters, reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards’s vision of divine vengeance in his celebrated “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,”<sup>5</sup> suggests that the paternal house not only protects the speaker from the storm but also shields her from the wrath of the Maker, of which, according to Puritan typology, the storm is a symbol. Similarly, in “There came a Wind like a Bugle –” (Fr1618/J1593), “Doom’s Electric Moccasin,” awe-inspiring but powerless to harm, appears after the family have “barred the Windows and the Doors” and thus transformed the raging nature into a distant spectacle of horror.

While doors and windows may keep elemental chaos at bay or protect the speaker from the overwhelming abundance of nature (“The Flowers –

appealed – a timid Throng – / I reinforced the Door –” [Fr780/J743]), they are essentially openings upon the world and ways of access to its splendor:

Not knowing when the Dawn will come,  
I open every Door,  
Or has it Feathers, like a Bird,  
Or Billows, like a Shore –  
(Fr1647B/J1619)

The dweller’s freedom to close or open them at will is part of her independence accomplished in the home: “The feat of having limited a part of this world and having closed it off, having access to the elements I enjoy by way of the door and the window, realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought” (*Totality and Infinity* 169-70). Since a large number of Dickinson’s poems are written from the vantage point of one at repose inside the home (Miller 107), the prominence in her poetry of those removable barriers is only natural. The *Concordance* lists 84 references to the word *door* or *doors* and 33 to *window* or *windows*. While both make possible withdrawal from and contact with the outside world, the door and the window do serve different purposes in the home and thus take on varying connotations. Apart from giving access to the elements, the door is often associated with the poet’s relation to other people, to society at large, or to God (as in, e.g., “Again – his voice is at the door –” [Fr274/J663], “Elysium is as far as to” [Fr1590/J1760], “The Soul selects her own Society –” [Fr409A/J303], “I never lost as much but twice –” [Fr39/J49], “My period had come for Prayer –” [Fr525/J564]). It may also signify passage, e.g., from winter to spring, from life to death, or from maidenhood to wifehood (“Dear March – Come in –” [Fr1320/J1320], “The Soul should always stand ajar” [Fr1017/J1055], “A wife – at Daybreak I shall be –” [Fr185/J461]). The door ajar, as Fuss has observed, is one of Dickinson’s most positive images, connoting a promise of insight or of intimacy, invitation, happy expectation, or comfortable at-homeness. The window, for its part, is of crucial importance to her perception of the natural world: the poems in which nature is the object of imaginative contemplation, such as “It sifts from Leaden Sieves –,” clearly imply the perspective of a viewer looking

out a window; one who is withdrawn, sheltered, and intellectually in control of what she sees. As Levinas asserts, “The ambiguity of distance, both removal and connection, is lifted by the window that makes possible a look that dominates, a look of him who escapes looks, the look that contemplates” (*Totality and Infinity* 156). Because of its transparency the window forms a special kind of barrier which allows seeing without being seen or compromising the safety of separation. Framed and mediated by the window, the world yields to representation and thus acquires significance. Otherwise nature is either threatening or unintelligible; it invades the self’s sovereignty, as in “I started Early – Took my Dog –” (Fr656/J520), or wholly refuses to mean, as in “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre –” (Fr778/J742).

Arguably, the dramatic difference in tone and mood between two poems depicting trees: the harsh, disjunctive “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre –” (Miller 71) and the elated “By my Window have I for Scenery” (Fr849/J797) may partly be accounted for by the speaker’s vantage point. In the former poem, when confronted with the starkness of being in an unmediated view of the desolate “Acre,” she is unable to fathom the “Plan” the trees may be part of or even to perceive them as a coherent whole. Standing there “Without Design or Order,” they become emblems of nature’s impenetrability or, in an almost Melvillean fashion, of its possible meaninglessness. Like Melville, Dickinson refutes Emerson’s question, “to what end is nature?” (7), which to her would sound naïve in its hope for a conclusive, or any, answer.

What Deed is Their’s unto the General Nature –  
What Plan  
They severally – retard – or further –  
Unknown –  
(Fr778/J742)

By contrast, the look out a window invests nature with meaning, transforming an ordinary pine into “Just a Sea – with a Stem –.” The act of opening the window, suggested by a reference to the tree’s “Odors” and “Voice,” lifts the barrier between self and world without removing the frame

and thus affords the speaker, still safe and comfortable inside the home, both the distance of contemplation and the immediacy of enjoyment. Viewed from this perspective, the pine-sea almost opens up to infinity. Whether it is nature that withholds the revelation or Dickinson herself who escapes full insight by questioning the spiritual meaning of the tree, the experience is no less profound for that:

Was the Pine at my Window a “Fellow  
Of the Royal” Infinity?  
Apprehensions – are God’s introductions –  
To be hallowed – accordingly –  
(Fr849/J797)

Whereas the broken rhythm and elliptical, ambiguous syntax of “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre” reflect the trees’ unshakeable resistance to signification (Miller 70-71), the metrical smoothness of “By my Window have I for Scenery” corresponds to the ease with which the viewer turns the pine into an enthralling spectacle of nature and imagination. The squirrel – in the former poem, one of the accidental visitors whose “attention” fails to impart “design” to the four trees – now partakes in the harmony of this spectacle, having made its home on the “giddy Peninsula” of a branch.

Dickinson clearly preferred to remain indoors, sheltered behind a window pane, even at the most magical and captivating moment of the day. As her younger neighbor MacGregor Jenkins reported, “We children often saw her at sunset, standing at the kitchen window, peering through a vista in the trees to the western sky, – her proud little head thrown back, her eyes raised and one hand held characteristically before her” (St. Armand 264). From this perspective, she could domesticate the sunset sublime, drawing it into her realm of interiority with the centripetal movement of “reduc[ing] to the same what at first presented itself as other” (*Totality and Infinity* 175). Dressed in aprons and equipped with brooms, the sunset is envisioned as a careless housewife whose cleaning leaves the world in a delightful mess:

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms –  
And leaves the shreds behind –

*Magdalena Zapiedowska*

Oh Housewife in the Evening West –  
Come back – and – dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling in –  
You dropped an Amber thread –  
And now you've littered all the East  
With Duds of Emerald!

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms –  
And still the Aprons fly,  
Till Brooms fade softly into stars –  
And then I come away –  
(Fr318A/J219)

Such domestication of nature occurs in a number of poems where both Dickinson and nature are at their most peaceful and undisturbed. In the poem quoted above, the evening sky becomes itself a dwelling with the feminine sunset (St. Armand 266) as its main dweller. The latter contrasts sharply with the wind-housewife gone mad in “The Wind begun to knead the Grass –” (Fr796A/J824), where the initial suggestion of domesticity only highlights the ensuing violence. Likewise, the “many-colored Brooms” – another magnified household image – have none of the uncanniness of, e.g., the “Leaden Sieves” in the snow poem discussed above or the “Brooms of Steel” in the less well-known “Like Brooms of Steel / The Snow and Wind / Had swept the Winter Street –” (Fr1241/J1252) because this time they are handled by a benign, graceful, and familiar agent.

Nature is not the only entity that the Amherst poet can transform into a domestic interior or at least endow with domestic attributes. Just as significantly, she often conceives of the mind or soul in architectural terms. Such poems as “One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –” (Fr407B/J670), “The Props assist the House –” (Fr729A/J1142), “On a Columnar Self –/ How ample to rely” (Fr740/J789), “Remembrance has a rear and front / 'Tis something like a House” (Fr1234A/J1182), or “That sacred Closet when you sweep – / Entitled ‘Memory’ –” (Fr1385/J1273) clearly draw on the symbolic identification of the house with the psyche, which was so relentlessly explored by Poe. Apart from that, however, they seem

to illustrate Levinas's perception that separation is accomplished through the dwelling and that the separated self enjoys absolute independence.

The Props assist the House –  
Until the House is Built –  
And then the Props withdraw –  
And adequate – Erect –

The House support itself –  
And cease to recollect  
The Scaffold, and the Carpenter –  
Just such a Retrospect  
Hath the Perfected Life –  
A Past of Plank – and Nail –  
And Slowness – then the Stagings drop –  
Affirming it – A Soul –

(Fr729A/J1142)

This poem was composed about the second half of 1863, when Emily Dickinson was thirty-three and at the height of her creative power. Increasingly reluctant to leave home, she had gone through the excruciating experience which prompted the three "Master" letters and, seeking appraisal and encouragement more than advice, had begun the correspondence with Higginson which was to last until her death. Possibly alluding to these and other experiences which played a crucial role in her development as poet and woman ("A Past of Plank – and Nail –"), Dickinson speaks as one who has reached maturity and gained a firm sense of selfhood. The process of the soul's growth, described in terms of construction and labor, has been completed. The poem is centered round an image of utter self-sufficiency: "adequate – Erect – / The House support itself –," a condition that gives the speaker strength and confidence. The solemn atmosphere of this and other poems envisioning the mind as an interior contrasts with the light-hearted tone of those poems which domesticate nature. The soul's sovereignty is for Dickinson a matter of too great importance to admit of any playfulness.

Whereas the role of home and household imagery in Dickinson's poetry cannot be overestimated – and whereas, in accordance with Levinas's

analyses of interiority, it corresponds to the poet's emphasis on the private space of her mind – her treatment of the home as such involves severe ambiguities. An unmarried woman living in her family house throughout her life and for many years enduring the emotional strain of the “war” between the Homestead and the Evergreens (Sewall), a woman who continued to perceive her austere father as the dominant figure even after his death in 1874 and who seems very much to have missed motherly affection (Sewall 67-75), Dickinson does not really conceive of her dwelling as the extraterritorial domain of intimacy described by Levinas (*Totality and Infinity* 150). Apparently, such associations were reserved for the Pleasant Street house, which in her letters is often described as the scene of domestic idyll. “You may laugh at the idea, that I cannot be happy when away from home,” seventeen-year-old Emily explained to Abiah Root, “but you must remember that I have a very dear home & that this is my first trial in the way of absence for any length of time in my life” (L18). To Austin she wrote, “[I] have such a snug, warm home that I had as lief suffer some [for your sake]” (L66). This was the house she loved and regarded as her own, whereas the one on Main Street forever remained “her Father’s house,” his possession rather than hers. Therefore, even as “in her poems she often holds up a domestic ideal of human peace” (Eberwein 114), Dickinson rarely depicts her own home along these lines, and if she does, it is always from a distance, from the viewpoint of someone who is either away or outside and unable to get in.

Tho' I get home how late – how late –  
So I get home – 'twill compensate –  
.....

To think just how the fire will burn –  
Just how long-cheated eyes will turn –  
To wonder what myself will say,  
And what itself, will say to me –  
Beguiles the Centuries of way!  
(Fr199/J207)

The distance in time and space separating the speaker from the home turns the latter into a sanctuary of family warmth, an image at least partially



created by her impatience to get back and awareness of the long way to go. In the poems written from the viewpoint of one staying inside the home, Dickinson does not speak of her dwelling with such tender affection; indeed, she does not even refer to it as “home” in any positive sense. “I never felt at Home – Below –,” she states matter-of-factly, and proceeds to unfold a vision of similar estrangement in the afterlife (Fr437B/J413). The bitterly unreal love idyll of “I learned – at least – what Home could be –” also reminds her that “This seems a Home – And Home is not –” (Fr891/J944). Arguably, she could define home as she did heaven – as “what I cannot reach” (Fr310/J239).

The unavailability of a home as the space of happy intimacy is expressed most forcefully in such poems as “A Door just opened on a street –” (Fr914/J953), where the speaker glimpses the inside “Warmth,” “Wealth,” and “Company” of family life but is not invited to join in, or the nightmarish “I Years had been from Home” (Fr440B/J609), where her fear of a stranger possibly hiding behind the door makes her run away in utter panic. Levinas points out that “[t]he home .... is possessed because it already and henceforth is hospitable for its proprietor” (*Totality and Infinity* 157). The Dickinsonian home, when it is not opposed to elemental chaos or the lavishness of nature, lacks this essential hospitality, and therefore cannot be experienced as hers. In accordance with what Eberwein terms her principal “strategy of limitation,” Dickinson’s primary domain of interiority – what might be dubbed her space of homeness – is smaller and more condensed, limited to her chamber rather than comprising the entire house. Of course, there is a natural connection between the poet’s withdrawal into her chamber on the upper floor of the Homestead and the fact that most poems of the interior either mention or metonymically imply a room as their setting, e.g., “Conscious am I in my Chamber –” (Fr773B/J679), “The Way I read a Letter’s – this –” (Fr700/J636), “The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –” (Fr621/J436), or “By my Window have I for Scenery” (Fr849/J797). The room is the extraterritorial space of her own which cannot be violated from without, a space within which she can enclose herself as within solitude (Derrida 91). By the same token, it is also a space which makes possible hospitality and a metaphysical relationship with the infinite

Other as well as, in “The Way I read a Letter’s – this –,” the discovery of her own infinity as someone else’s Other, the absent addressee of the written word.

Yet although it is the bedroom which forms her paradigmatic space of separation, Dickinson’s realm of interiority can be far more sumptuous than that. She describes it in a poem which, as a joyous celebration of her being at home, has no equivalent in the entire body of her poetry:

I dwell in Possibility  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –  
  
Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –  
  
Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

(Fr466/J657)

Because of the unusual absence of emotional tension, underlined by the smooth iambic movement and exact or near-exact rhymes in the first and second stanzas, Anderson sees in this poem a lapse into an all too easy enthusiasm about the seemingly unlimited potential of Dickinson’s art, subtly questioned in the last two lines by the epithet “narrow Hands” and the prospective infinitive form “to gather” as well as by the poem’s ultimate failure to transcend the horizontal dimension: “the hands reach out, not up, for Paradise” (37). In the context of Levinas’s phenomenology, however, such an idyllic vision reflects the perfect happiness of the self’s withdrawal into the home and the original gratification of “living from” the external world: “[T]he independence of happiness always depends on a content: it is the joy or the pain of breathing, looking, eating, working, handling the hammer and the machine, etc.” (*Totality and Infinity* 110) For Dickinson, this joy is the joy of working in language, handling words to convert vision

into verse. Through her typical play on syllabic, etymological, and/or semantic vocabulary contrast (*Possibility, numerous, superior, impregnable, everlasting* vs. *House, Windows, Doors, Chambers, Roof*) (Miller 40-41), she transforms the elevated realm of Possibility into domestic interior space without reducing its magnificence. The house of poetry thus becomes the frontier between self and world, its many doors and windows mediating between inner and outer, while the “Chambers . . . Impregnable of eye” provide both the cherished privacy and the freedom of hospitality.

Even as she mentions “Visitors,” in this poem Dickinson is not concerned with transcendence, or the Other, but celebrates interiority alone, content to remain within the domestic/poetic sphere of the same where she is hostess and mistress and where all things brought in from without lose their otherness to serve as nourishment to the self. “Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other . . . becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (*Totality and Infinity* 111). Accordingly, when she brings Paradise into the midst of her dwelling, Dickinson seems to do so by transmuting it into poetry. That the “narrow Hands” reach out rather than up for it by no means diminishes her accomplishment: the Paradise she wants to gather – and one that will yield to interiorization – is not Heaven but the earthly Garden of Eden, the gorgeous plenitude of the world which exalts, nourishes, and invigorates the I (*Totality and Infinity* 111), and which feeds the poetry. It is not surprising that Levinas should use the same metaphor to describe the original perfect fulfillment of separation: “At the origin there is a being gratified, a citizen of paradise” (*Totality and Infinity* 144-5). In this context, the infinitive form “to gather,” which signifies a goal rather than a completed action, might be referred to the Levinasean instability of happiness inherent in enjoyment: “Nourishment comes as a happy chance. . . [it] offers itself and contents, but . . . already withdraws, losing itself in the *nowhere*” (*Totality and Infinity* 141). Paradise cannot be possessed once and for all; the poet must always gather it anew.

Strikingly enough, the Levinasean phrase “a citizen of paradise” [*un citoyen du paradis*<sup>6</sup>] has an exact counterpart in another Dickinson poem:

*Magdalena Zapiedowska*

A Coffin – is a small Domain,  
Yet able to contain  
A Citizen of Paradise  
In it's diminished Plane –  
(Fr890/J943)

Whereas both writers use the same language, Levinas describes a sensuous being in the prelapsarian state of bliss, as transient as it is wonderful, while Dickinson's phrase is typically ambiguous. From the eschatological perspective, "Paradise" denotes the Kingdom of God, and the whole expression refers to the afterlife, dramatizing the Christian dichotomy of body and soul which will only be resolved at resurrection. The analogy with Levinas, however, brings into relief the meaning of "Paradise" as the ecstatic joy of worldly existence, glorified in "I dwell in Possibility." Thus, the "Citizen of Paradise" is not only the body of the person whose soul dwells in heaven but also the dweller on earth gratified by the exuberance of nature in the course of his/her lifetime. Dickinson's equivocal phrase suggests that citizenship of paradise, if not continuous, is intrinsic to the human being; that we naturally pass from happiness on earth to happiness in heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Such poems as "I dwell in Possibility," "A Coffin – is a small Domain," or "Such is the Force of Happiness –" (Fr889/J787) effectively undermine the frequent opinion that Dickinson is predominantly a poet of longing, anguish, and despair. Just as Levinas, who celebrates sensuality, the encounter, and love but never forgets about the looming *there is* and devotes some poignant pages to the horror of death (*Totality and Infinity* 56-57), the Amherst poet is sensitive to each and every aspect of human experience. It is not by accident that the rapturous phrase "Citizen of Paradise" occurs in a poem which begins as a definition of the coffin, with its obvious connotations of death, grief, and mourning. Dickinson explores the interweaving of light and darkness, the interdependence of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, "Heavenly moments" (Fr560/J393) and "Hour[s] of Lead" (Fr372/J341). Far from being compensatory, her poetry affirms life and draws on its richness. She too is a citizen of paradise.

## Notes

1. A preliminary version of this essay was presented at the 4th Emily Dickinson International Society Conference “‘Zero at the Bone’: New Climates for Dickinson Study,” Trondheim, Norway, August 3-5, 2001. I am grateful to Cindy Dickinson, curator of the Dickinson Homestead, for her help in obtaining a copy of Diana Fuss’s article.
2. As Hagenbüchle observes, the dissymmetry of Dickinson’s vision is reflected in her poetic language, which shows a marked preference not only for asymmetry in rhythm and rhyme, but also for semantically asymmetric structures rather than antithetical pairs, such as *Duke/dwarf*, *black/gay*, *whitel/sombre* (40). Other juxtapositions of this kind are, e.g., *Giant/Gnat* (Fr580/J534, Fr707/J641, Fr848/J796), *gay/stark* (Fr922/J878), *Patriarch/Pussy* (Fr1110A/J814).
3. To the best of my knowledge, the only study of Dickinson in Levinasian terms has been Hyesook Son’s 2002 dissertation, “Alterity and the Lyric: Heidegger, Levinas, and Emily Dickinson.” Son draws on the two phenomenologists to discuss the relationship between self and Other in Dickinson’s poetry.
4. E.g., “Unto my Books – so good to turn –” (Fr512/J604), “The missing all – prevented me” (Fr995A/J985), “Dont put up my Thread & Needle –” (Fr681/J617), “I could die – to know –” (Fr537/J570), “By my Window have I for Scenery” (Fr849/J797), “Dear March – Come in –” (Fr1320/J1320), “The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –” (Fr621/J436), “The Spider holds a Silver Ball” (Fr513/J605).
5. “The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given, and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose.... there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward; if God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury...” (Edwards 114).

In chapter three of his *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty*, Karl Keller offers the first comprehensive discussion of Dickinson's affinities to Edwards. Keller presupposes, however, that the poet did not know Edwards's writing, which most probably was not the case. Lowenberg lists *A History of the Work of Redemption* among the textbooks used at Mount Holyoke in 1847/must have heard about it. Edwards was Mary Lyon's favorite theologian; Conforti describes how students at her seminary were inculcated with his thought and rhetoric: readings from Edwards were assigned as part of the celebration of the Sabbath, his works had an important place in the seminary library, and Lyon modeled her fiery addresses to unconverted students on "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (Conforti 94-96, 102). In chapter three of his study Conforti discusses the impact of *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd* (1749), which in the first half of the nineteenth century was Edwards's most widely read and most often reprinted text. It is another Edwards book Dickinson is likely to have encountered.

6. The whole sentence reads, "*A l'origine, il y a un être comblé, un citoyen du paradis*" (*Totalité et Infini* 118).
7. Other poems, however, construe heaven as a place the speaker is afraid of, e.g., "What is – 'Paradise' –" (Fr241/J215), "I felt my life with both my hands" (Fr357/J351), or the above-mentioned "I never felt at Home – Below –" (Fr437B/J413). The problematic nature of Dickinsonian heaven is the subject of Robin Riley Fast's essay.

### Works Cited

Unless otherwise indicated the following abbreviations are used for reference to the writings of Emily Dickinson

- Fr *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. ed. R.W. Franklin. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Citation by poem number.
- J *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1955. Citation by poem number.
- L *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958. Citation by letter number.

Anderson, Charles R. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*. London: Heinemann, 1963.

Cameron, Sharon. *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979.

Conforti, Joseph A. *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, & American Culture*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995.

Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978. 79-153.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1985.

Edwards, Jonathan. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." *The American Tradition in Literature*. Ed. Sculley Bradley et al. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 1956. 107-21.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983.

Fast, Robin Riley. "'The One Thing Needful': Dickinson's Dilemma of Home and Heaven." *ESQ* 27.3 (1981): 157-69.

Fuss, Diana. "Interior Chambers: The Emily Dickinson Homestead." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10.3 (1998). Online. Galegroup.

Hagenbüchle, Roland. "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson." *ESQ* 20.1 (1974): 33-56.

Keller, Karl. *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye/The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961.

—. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.

*Magdalena Zapiedowska*

- Lowenberg, Carlton. *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks*. Ed. Territa A. Lowenberg and Carla L. Brown. Lafayette, CA: n.p., 1986.
- Miller, Cristanne. *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.
- Mudge, Jean McClure. *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1975.
- Porter, David. *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966.
- . *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Rosenbaum, S. P. *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1964.
- Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Son, Hyesook. "Alterity and the Lyric: Heidegger, Levinas, and Emily Dickinson." Dissertation. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2002. *Dissertation Abstracts International* 63.6 (December 2002): 2245-A.



century New England culture, and that indeterminacy of reference worked against the class's efforts to find stable definitions for her words. Dickinson's lines "Not unto nomination / The Cherabim reveal" (Fr1243) have to be taken as their own warning against being too far understood.

MAGDALENA ZAPEDOWKA

Citizens of Paradise: Dickinson and Emmanuel Levinas's  
Phenomenology of the Home

There is a similarity between ED's poetry and Levinas's philosophy in that both depend on experience and reject the principle of unity – the main tenet of romantic thought. The paper discusses interiority, which is a key aspect of ED's work. The I discovers itself in enjoyment of the elemental and realizes its selfhood by withdrawal in the home, which is a realm of absolute, happy independence, provides shelter, and mediates between the I and nature. The home is conceived in different ways in ED's poems but always remains a primary frame of reference.