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Emily Dickinson's Ethics of Neighborhood

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Note: This essay is much more a preliminary attempt at exposing some of my own intuitions about reading Dickinson in a “new” way than the final outcome of a long process. I am aware that there still are many loopholes in my arguments. They are therefore offered in the spirit of exchange and debate, and in the hopes they will stimulate discussion, perhaps (certainly!) even contradiction.

In a sense, the direction I intend to take in this study of Dickinson's writing, and of the modes of connection with the community surrounding her that such writing entails, is not so much “new” as a path along which to revisit areas of interest that have been already explored. Indeed, the question of neighborhood in Dickinson might seem, on the face of it, an old one— if only because, taken literally, “neighborhood” has obviously been part of the biographical approach to this poet, from McGregor Jenkins' early *Emily Dickinson: Friend and Neighbor* (1930), through Richard Sewall's and Jay Leda's landmark books, and down to more recent biographical studies, such as Lyndall Gordon's *Lives like Loaded Guns* or Aife Murray's *Maid as Muse*¹. For the Dickinson family, whose estate on Main Street in Amherst was, from 1856 onward, comprised of two neighboring houses, the Homestead and The Evergreens, the daily practice of neighborhood was a given.

Such spatial proximity structured the mode of exchange among Dickinson's inner circle of family and friends. Even, perhaps, of lovers, as suggested by Ruth Owen Jones in her article ““Neighbor – and friend – and Bridegroom –”: William Smith Clark as Emily Dickinson's Master Figure”². The line quoted in this title is from the poem “Glee – The great storm is over –” (Fr685), possibly written in response to newspapers reporting in 1862 that Clark's Twenty-first Regiment, and Clark himself, were safe, deploring only four lost men after having been in peril at sea³. It is specifically the word “Neighbor” that allows Jones to identify Clark as the indirect addressee of the poem, since, as she reminds us, “The Clark family lived from 1853 until 1869 on the highest part of the hill just behind the Dickinson

¹ The motif of neighboring plays a crucial role in both books, which depict to what extent Dickinson and her oeuvre belonged to complex communities, often characterized by warring interests. Lyndall Gordon, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* (New York, Viking Penguin, 2010). Aife Murray, *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson's Life and Language* (Lebanon, NH, University of New Hampshire Press, 2009).

² *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. XI, 2, 2002: 48-85.

³ It would have to be a late response, then, since the poem is dated “About the second half of 1863” by Franklin.

houses” (Jones 66). On the evidence of that poem in particular, Jones goes on to identify Clark as a likely candidate for being Dickinson’s “Master.” What interests me more here, however, is the way in which she describes Dickinson’s neighborhood as simultaneously intimate and hostile: in Calvinist Amherst, neighbors were prying and inquisitive, self-appointed judges of one’s behavior. Although providing a necessary community, particularly in times of distress such as the Civil War, they also threatened the secrecy of personal exchange: “When Clark went off to war,” Jones notes, “Dickinson tried to have Sam Bowles forward her letters (L256). She could not send them in her own handwriting from the small town post office as Postmaster Lucius Boltwood, her parents, and neighbors would then know to whom she was writing.” (Jones 60)

The dialectic relationship between distance and proximity—epitomized by the complex mediation offered by letter-writing—appears to be an essential feature of neighborhood, and suggests how the latter was inseparable from deep, and sometimes strong, feelings. This is all the truer, of course, when one considers the religious dimension of the word “neighbor,” and the intimacy it implies, as indicated by the reciprocity of love which provides the most famous context for the use of that word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew, 19:19). In the biblical text, the code of conduct implies that a neighbor be so close to oneself as to be a kind of second self, onto whom to project self-love as love for another⁴. The construction of one’s own self through this projection, and split, needs to be explored in more detail as it undoubtedly constitutes one of the major modes of self-presentation to be found in Dickinson’s poetry.

Next to the referential, biographical, interpretation of “neighborhood” Jones focuses on to read “Glee – The great storm is over –”, one should also take into account the internal dynamics of a poem which, I would like to argue, tries in its discursive patterns to convey the appropriate proximity (rather than distance) a speaker may create between a tragic event and its (re)telling. This, as we shall see, also turns out to be a way for Dickinson to design her poem itself as a problematic speech act, suspended between the report of “true” facts and the invention of a fictional event:

Glee – The great storm is over –
Four – have recovered the Land –

⁴ Etymologically, *neighbor* is akin to *nigh*, meaning “close”; just as the French word *prochain*, used in the Bible in the same sense of “fellow man” as *neighbor*, comes from the Latin *proximus*, meaning *next to*. In French and Latin, however, the two words can also mean “next in time”—in modern French in particular, *prochain* is an adjective used only in this sense. I will come back later on to the correlation between “neighborhood” and “next-to-ness” in Dickinson.

Forty – gone down together –
Into the boiling Sand –

Ring – for the scant Salvation –
Toll – for the bonnie Souls –
Neighbor – and friend – and Bridegroom –
Spinning upon the Shoals –

How they will tell the story –
When Winter shake the Door –
Till the Children urge –
But the Forty –
Did they – Come back no more?

Then a silence – suffuse the story –
And a softness – the Teller’s eye –
And the Children – no further question –
And only the Sea – reply –
(Fr 685)

When examining the part the word “Neighbor” plays in this poem, one can see that it precisely helps to mediate between absence and presence, distance and proximity, the familiar and the unfamiliar, an event and its report. The poem’s first stanza sets up a faraway scene of death at sea—potentially one of these “sceneless” events which, as Robert Weisbuch long ago demonstrated, opens the possibility for an analogical reading of Dickinson’s lines, here reinforced by the use of “Salvation” and “Souls” in the first two lines of stanza two⁵. The proximity of “Four” and “Forty”⁶ in this first stanza further suggests a symbolic dimension to the binary Dickinson emphasizes: “recovered” vs. “gone down,” “Land” vs. “Sand,” “Ring” vs. “Toll,” “scant” vs. “bonnie.” It is actually the third line of stanza two, opening with “Neighbor,” that first breaks this binary pattern by lining up three terms—a strategic move strengthened by the fact that this is the only line in the poem to have three dashes, which reinforces its instability. The mediation between three and two is also palpable in a certain equivocation in the metrical pattern all along the poem, which mostly alternates dactyls (the characteristic meter of elegies in Greek poetry) and trochees, i.e. trisyllabic and dissyllabic feet, as in line 4 for instance: “**Into the boiling Sand –**”, although this might also scan as a dactyl followed by a cretic. In the second half of the poem in particular, some lines introduce

⁵ Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson’s Poetry* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1975). For the critic, Dickinson’s “anti-occasional” poems imply that language itself becomes the scene of action: “[The poems] refuse to compose a mimetic situation. That is, they posit no specific situation which occurs apart from the language and which the language only serves to interpret. [...] Dickinson is parading the extraordinary self-containment of her language. Insofar as Dickinson’s transportations of meaning do not revolve around a situation, they form the situation. An understanding of what the poet is doing with her language constitutes our only recourse for an understanding of the poem’s drama. It is this anti-occasional scenelessness which explains one of Dickinson’s strangest and boldest remarks (L397): ‘Subjects hinder talk.’ ” (Weisbuch 24).

⁶ This inverts the actual toll of lives, since Clark’s regiment appears to have lost only four men, not forty.

a further sense of metrical ambiguity, according to whether one runs them on in reading or not (which is admittedly made problematic by the presence of dashes at the end of every line but one). On the whole, this creates a rather uncomfortable prosodic situation, corresponding to the discursive situation of a poem that raises the question of how to mediate between an event and its telling, once back home. Opening the poem's second half after the high, almost Shakespearean, diction of "Spinning upon the Shoals" (this is where *we* are also left after reading the first two quatrains!), the somewhat more pedestrian "How they will tell the story –" is precisely the pivoting line, and it is a statement rather than a question: *the telling* is what the poem's main speaker is interested in observing, after her own rather cryptic tale. But the question, actually, is to decide who is this "they," doubling (dubbing?) the poetic persona's own voice, as "they" attempt to retell the same story/event?

Which brings us back to the role of "Neighbor." Indeed, the three nouns aligned next to one another on line 7 occupy an ambivalent position, as far as both their own interrelations and their syntactic connection with the lines surrounding them are concerned. Within the line itself, because there is no verb clarifying the relation between the three nouns⁷, it is not clear whether these nouns refer to one person only or three different characters. Let us note that Ruth Owen Jones' interpretation relies on identifying the "neighbor" as actually being the "friend" and the "bridegroom," thus adopting the first reading. The second reading, however, seems more likely: indeed, "Neighbor – and friend – and bridegroom –" can easily be seen as three embodiments of the "bonnie Souls" now "Spinning upon the Shoals –" and for whom the bell tolls, just as this poem is being written to honor their passing away. If we accept this interpretation, however, it does not quite fit the logic of what follows: on the one hand, these three appear to be dead; on the other hand, after the "spinning" conclusion of line 8, they seem to be telling the story of their own death—since in good syntax, the three nouns can only be the antecedents of "they" on line 9. Once back home, identified by their social roles and their proximity to the community safely gathered indoors to listen to their story (an antidote to the "Winter" of death which rages outside as it "shake the Door"), they seem to be resurrected from the dead. As a matter of fact, they are both dead and alive—hence the uncertain sentence form of line 9, part exclamation and part question: "How *will they* tell the story –" if they are dead? Just as line 7 floats without any verb to anchor it to a *situation*, these three fictive characters cannot be placed anywhere with certitude; they hover between

⁷ This is the only line in the poem truly without a verb. On line 14, the verb is implicitly "suffuse," whose deletion is easily recoverable. About syntactic deletions in Dickinson, recoverable and nonrecoverable, see of course Cristanne Miller's *Emily Dickinson's Grammar* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1987), in particular p. 24-30.

the roles of participant in and witness to the event, and ultimately between life and death. Their syntactic next-to-ness, and the double take it implies, indicates the extent to which life and death are coextensive, or “suffused” (l. 13) with each other. The last two stanzas neatly voice this ambiguity, when the attempt at retelling the story is cut short by the children’s faux naïf question, reintroducing death at the centre of a story meant to exorcise it: only the inarticulate silence of the sea can “reply,” as the now archetypal and singular “Teller” has become a ghostly presence, defecting from speech altogether. As in so many of her poems evoking a brush with death, Dickinson is here alert to the possibility of creating illusions of postmortem voices, ultimately showing that “The great storm” is never quite “over.”⁸

In this process, it is crucial that the word “Neighbor” should be, in a performative manner, the connecting term allowing the poem to bifurcate into a second narrative, thereby suggesting how complex the adjacency can be between event and story, pretext and text. In other words, I would argue that “neighborhood” is not only a fact of life for Dickinson, but a crucial concept and tool with which she explores the contours and shapes of her poetic situations and discourse, in particular when she is concerned with an experience of limits, such as death or dying. Crucially, one such limit is that which lies between “real” life and its various retellings, in the form of poems and/or narrative situations within these poems. On a micro level, the inversion of “Four” and “Forty”—as noted above, the actual number of casualties in the event alluded to was four⁹—may illustrate how the poetic retelling of a real incident relies upon linguistic proximity. Furthermore, the thin line on which text and context intersect, entertaining a charged relationship, may be felt in how, in these two lines in particular, Dickinson places her dashes so as to interrupt the dactylic foot, either after the first stressed syllable (“**Four** – have recovered”) or between the two unstressed ones (“**Forty** – gone **down**”)¹⁰. This floating visual caesura suggests the instability of the relationship between a

⁸ One such poem would be “Just lost, when I was saved!” (Fr 132), in which the speaker is “Some pale ‘Reporter’ from the awful doors/Before the Seal!” In this poem, life and death are depicted as adjacent to each other, separated by what Dickinson calls “the Line,” of which the speaker has “Odd secrets to tell.” The last two quatrains (in the version of Fascicle 10) are concerned with how to return “next” to this line—i.e., both in temporal (“Next time to stay!”) and spatial terms. This other world is almost literally “next door.”

⁹ As Ruth Owen Jones summarizes the event: “Two men from the Twenty-first Regiment [under Clark’s command] died of typhoid fever [...]. Two Northampton men were drowned trying to reach their ship after being onshore.” (Jones 60). This shows to what extent Dickinson’s “account” in her poem is a radical retelling of the war reports.

¹⁰ One could legitimately argue for a stress on “gone.” This is one of the numerous examples in which the predominant metrical pattern (here, dactylic) possibly contradicts with the rhythmical patterns of language—what Henri Meschonnic in his *Critique du rythme* calls “the rhythm of language itself, which an Anglo-American tradition calls *prose rhythm*” (Lagrasse, Verdier, 1982, 187). There would be more to say about the ways in which, in Dickinson’s lines, *meter* and *rhythm* jostle for attention and create tensions that may suggest dual meanings or intentions. In the case of Fr685, and given the thin line Dickinson draws between telling and

fact and its reconfiguration in and as poetry: a different spacing of experience ensues. From a more general standpoint, therefore, one could enlist Fr685 as illustrating Dickinson's singular relationship with events, showing how the tensions with which she imbues her very indirect reports of the Civil War in this particular case allow her to work on a shifting threshold between text and context.

I can now clarify what my intention is in placing this essay under the heading of "Ethics of Neighborhood." Firstly, I wish to understand "ethics" as a habit of being, an ethos, by which Dickinson tends to systematically place herself in an adjacent position—i.e., next to her own self and next to others. This is what we might call Dickinson's *laterality*, which takes place concomitantly in her life and her writing, as each *neighbors* the other: a laterality which opens onto a problematic literality. What I'm trying to look at is, in other words, how Dickinson's own inclination towards adjacency, or next-to-ness, in her linguistic and poetic choices may express this neighboring (even perhaps, neighborly) attitude, position, relation. In particular, it seems to me there is a close correlation between Dickinson's syntax and prosody and the ways in which she places, or locates, herself with regards to her world—not to mention the so-called "next" one. Her writings act as an *interfacing textual strategy* which allows her to encounter others and simultaneously keep apart from their sphere—creating the possibility of what she memorably calls "meeting apart" in "I cannot live with You –" (Fr706). Here, it should be recalled that in her first letter to Thomas W. Higginson, Dickinson claims she is at a loss to establish the correct distance at which to position herself with regards to her own writing, and even thinking, acts: as she puts it, justifying her appeal to his exterior point of view, "The Mind is so *near* itself – it cannot see, distinctly –" (emphasis added). The tension between proximity and "distinction" is figured by the dash which cleaves this statement in two, replacing the syntactic connection one expected to find between the two halves of the sentence with a graphic incision that creates the conditions for adjacency. The typical Dickinson sentence, therefore, delineates a space made up of neighboring positions, a placement of self and other whose separateness her correspondence—in this case with Higginson—paradoxically does not seek to bridge, but which it structurally reinforces. Although she seems to be asking for Higginson's judgment, she is in fact looking for textual means to establish the correct distance from which to see, and at which to be seen¹¹. To me,

retelling, such a metrical/rhythmical tension could be interpreted as a way to subvert the elegiac tone—a form of *metrical irony* relying on multiple scanning.

¹¹ One remembers her famous reply to Higginson's request of a photograph: "Could you believe me – without?" This exception, or defection—by which she excludes herself from visibility—is here again figured by a dash

the fact that this (self-)positioning should prevail over any critical judgment is a sign that neighboring is essentially ethical. It is indeed important to acknowledge ethics primarily as a *positioning of one's being with regards to others*: this next-to-ness, by which one may “face” the other, comes prior to any “valuing” of this other¹²; the ethical, in this respect, is first and foremost the recognition of a community—or even better, an adjacency—of self and other which, as I shall insist upon presently, is one of the fundamental aspects of democratic expression.

My second, related, reason for which I want to consider neighborhood is because I'm trying to envisage it as a kind of meta-operator to describe and analyze Dickinson's oeuvre, insofar as it allows us to see how apparently incompatible models for interpreting her writing *and* life may be more fruitfully considered from the point of view of their intersection. In particular, as I tried to suggest in the foregoing analysis of Fr685, both the textual and the contextual approaches invite us to alter slightly the determinants of each, as Dickinson's equivocal text—in its syntax, discursive mode and intention of meaning—forces us to reorganize the very interpretative space in which we read it. As I will argue in what follows, this reorganization has important consequences, suggesting as it does that the interpretative horizon we may envisage for reading Dickinson is truly, and perhaps primarily, “political”—not limiting this characterization to its historical circumstances, but considering it rather as a general condition for expression (including self-expression) in a moment when (the advent of democracy in the United States) modes of expression were hotly, and structurally, debated.

* * *

In a 1983 article, Robert A. Gross traces an early critical interest for the question of community with regards to Dickinson back to studies by Perry Miller and Allen Tate¹³. Examining Dickinson and Thoreau's parallel decisions to isolate themselves from their respective communities in Amherst and Concord, Gross writes from a social historian's point of view. After surveying the differences between the two Massachusetts towns in order to

suggesting the distance the textual Dickinson (by contrast with the immediacy of a visible Emily) has to cover, between the assertion of presence (“me”) and the confirmation of absence (“without”). In the process, the word “photograph” has of course been erased, or more accurately replaced by a question mark.

¹² I am here taking up a term used by Theo Davis in her essay also published on the “New Directions in Dickinson Studies” website, “Dickinson, and Lighting Things,” in which she broaches the question of ethics, in particular in the context of the lyric, whose ethical work as a meeting of self and other she criticizes.

¹³ Robert A. Gross, “Lonesome in Eden: Dickinson, Thoreau, and the Problem of Community in Nineteenth-Century New England,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 14, Number 1, Spring 1986: 1-17. This essay is based on a paper first delivered at the International Emily Dickinson Symposium held in Amherst in October 1980.

contradict Miller's thesis¹⁴, he notes that the rise of commercial middle-class capitalism, in traditional Amherst—largely supported by Austin Dickinson himself at mid-century—as in the apparently more forward-looking community of Concord, led to the rapid emergence of an individualistic society. Dickinson, Thoreau and Emerson were particularly sensitive seismographs registering these changes:

It was, then, within a world of differentiated institutions and separate selves that Emerson, Dickinson and Thoreau wrote, a world whose fundamental principle of individualism they incarnated even as they condemned its characteristic institutions. The special value of these writers for a student of social and cultural history is that they let us just see how exceptionally sensitive minds experienced the fragmentation of nineteenth-century life. (Gross, 10)

In this view, “neighborhood” is nothing but a byword to describe social conformity according to one's own private universe—mental and spiritual, as well as spatial—having replaced the more extensive sociability characterizing earlier stages of American society, which was founded on an unchallenged reference to religion and the church as its standard for public behavior. In the new “specialized, fragmented world” (Gross, 9) of the nineteenth century, “a reputation for character proved so crucial to social standing that people took their cues from the neighbors, even when nobody was watching. They had incorporated society's standards within the self.” (Gross, 8) From these premises—which are somewhat similar to Jones'—Gross draws the conclusion that both Dickinson and Thoreau rejected this new form of sociality wholesale, going as far as to make Dickinson “a person without a social role” (Gross, 11).

Yet, anyone who has read *Walden* will remember Thoreau's epigraph to his “Life in the Woods”: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only *to wake my neighbors up.*”¹⁵ Far from being a study in retirement only—or from defining its author's retreat from society in univocal terms—*Walden* appears indeed to be a remarkably thoughtful contribution to the central role neighborhood may play in the definition and conceptualization of democracy. In his chapter deceptively entitled “Solitude,” Thoreau meditates upon manners of neighboring which lead him to reconsider what the appropriate relationships should be between oneself and others, but also between oneself and one's self. The space required for neighborhood to “take place”—in the literal, concrete sense of that phrase—is rather complex, or “involved” (to

¹⁴ For Miller, there must have been a close correlation between the rise of commercial capitalism and the advent of a more progressive religion in Concord, while the same link could be observed between the conservative Trinitarian Calvinism of Amherst and its stagnating economy. As Gross easily demonstrates, the economic premise of this argument is wrong.

¹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, New York, Norton Critical Edition, 1966, 1 (emphasis added).

repeat one of Thoreau's moral injunctions¹⁶), as illustrated by the heavily negative syntax with which Thoreau attempts to describe his prevailing mood in the woods of Walden, vacillating between solitude and company:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, *I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life*. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. (*Walden*, 88-9, emphasis added)

Even though this sounds like an unequivocal plea for the bounty of Nature surpassing any advantage and comfort man may derive from the proximity of other men, one cannot miss Thoreau's ambivalence when confronted with his piercing moment of doubt: the dramatic exception of "once" and "for an hour" sounds slightly suspicious, and the denial of solitude too forceful ("never... but once," "doubted if... was not," "I have never thought of them since") to be anything but a denegation. One suspects this "but once," this solitary instance of solitude, to conceal a recurrent mood. As for the soothing rain, whose "pattering of drops" restore Thoreau to a "friendliness" so willfully disembodied it risks losing its essence—"infinite and unaccountable," as he writes—it smacks of the *deus ex machina*, a providential, but rather empty sign which makes the "advantages" of a now positive and joyful solitude no less "fancied" than those of "human neighborhood." In fact, while he is willing to forsake his "neighbors," Thoreau does not so easily surrender the *concept* of neighborhood; he rather wishes to reconsider the act of neighboring by creating another kind of spatial arrangement than the one currently known as "Society," in which it might take place¹⁷.

Thoreau's question here—a central one from the point of view of democracy—is how to invent a space in which solitude and company, public and private, individual and collective, can be *adjacent* to one another: "What do we most want to dwell near to?" Thoreau asks (89), quick to perceive that what has dramatically changed in democratic society, by contrast with other social organizations, is the very nature of proximity itself, certainly as much as man's proximity to Nature. In his chapter devoted to solitude, such a spatial arrangement is depicted as a double movement, out towards Nature and in towards the self. In each case, the space cleared for solitude is paradoxically based upon the commonality of neighboring. In the first

¹⁶ "We are not wholly involved in Nature." (90)

¹⁷ One meaning of the Latin *socius*, from which "society" is derived, is precisely *neighbor*.

case, Thoreau asserts that “There is *commonly* sufficient space about us” (87, emphasis added), thus designating a common ground for man which is also an intermediary ground lying between wild Nature and inhabited places: “Our horizon is never quite at our elbows. The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature.” (87) For this space not to become “commonly too cheap,” as Thoreau deems society to be—“Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value *for each other*” (91, emphasis added)¹⁸—one has to inhabit it as one’s own neighbor. In other words, every man’s *socius* must be internalized so as to reconcile solitude with sociability. Only in this interiorized space, with which we come into contact by accepting to be “wholly involved in Nature”, may one act truly democratically, i.e., as the artisan of one’s own perpetual “awakening”:

Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses. For the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. *Next* to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. *Next* to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are. (90, author’s emphases)

Such next-to-ness is what Thoreau wants to “wake his neighbors up” to taking into account—i.e., that neighboring should not simply be defined as an antagonistic mode of existence and relationship, or even as a passive cohabitation based on conformity, but rather as a dynamic relationship with one’s self that will allow human beings to be true associates, or *socii*. Democracy means first to awaken one’s self to its collaborative condition and capacity, of which neighborhood is one possible name.

Such an internalization of democratic processes is neatly captured by Stanley Cavell in his seminal book on Thoreau, *The Senses of Walden*. For Cavell, Thoreau’s intention is

¹⁸ This need for *spacing out* contact and interaction is elaborated upon by Thoreau in the next chapter of *Walden*, “Visitors.” There, he calls “intimate society” a human mode of exchange which implies that “we must not only be silent, but *commonly* so far apart bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other’s voice in any case.” (95, emphasis added). At first sight, there might appear to be a measure of contradiction in Thoreau’s conception here, since to “hear each other’s voice” sounds very much like a metaphor for the very principle of democracy, in which each man’s voice is “as loud as” his neighbor’s. On the other hand, we may say that, in order to prepare the ground for democratic voices to be heard, one first has to clear a space for internal debate: if one does not have access to one’s own true, freely contradictory, *democratic* voice, then the supposedly “equal” voices cast in the ballot are worthless, an illusion of free expression and choice. The implication of democracy is that what all voices have in common is their separateness and independence. The ways in which they are arranged *next to* one another therefore becomes crucial. As Thoreau writes, pointedly comparing men with nations in this description fraught with political implications: “Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral ground, between them.” (94) This “neutral ground” allows the act of neighboring.

to alarm his culture by refusing it his voice, i.e., by withholding his consent both from society so called and from what I call “conspiracies” of despairing silence which prevent that society from being his, or anyone’s. This refusal is not in fact, though it is in depiction, a withdrawal; it is a confrontation, a return, a constant turning upon his neighbors. This means, first, that *he has to establish himself as a neighbor*; which next means, to establish himself as a stranger; which in turn means to establish the concept and the recognition of neighbors and strangers; this will mean establishing his reader as his stranger.¹⁹

Following Cavell’s identification of “neighborhood” as one of the central concepts permeating Thoreau’s project and writing in *Walden*, I wish to offer that Dickinson, too, attempts to set up her own writing ethics—its practice and its political imperative—as a mode of neighboring that “approximates a relation without a relation,”²⁰ creating structures of interpellation—poems and letters, and their circulation—which allow a contact to be established between the intimate self and the democratic space which surrounds this self, a paradoxical *common space* of which *individual life* is the ultimate substratum. In following this line of interpretation, I am building here, too, upon Paul Crumbley’s invaluable recent book, in which he analyzes how questions of “character,” “personality,” and “individualism” shaped Dickinson’s poetic discourse insofar as they were resonating through a democratic space in the making²¹. Crumbley sees Dickinson’s contradictions about democracy, “deny[ing] or affirm[ing] communal selfhood,” as “part of a pervasive political aesthetic that traces the female citizen’s struggle to embrace experience that defies containment within the binary logic of public and private.” (Crumbley 64) He further adds that “The many poems that register details of struggle may be approached as charting *a middle ground between self and other*, where the impossibility of binary distinction is most forcibly asserted” (*ibid.*, emphasis added). My contribution to this line of thought is to suggest that “neighborhood,” as Dickinson provocatively reconceptualizes it, is a name for this middle ground, this “neutral ground” of which Thoreau’s *Walden* also gives ample evidence.

* * *

In reading Dickinson, one may indeed easily perceive how such a “neutral ground”—far from being an ideal, ideally balanced, or even *idealized*, space, as one feels is sometimes the case in

¹⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, expanded edition), xv (emphasis added). Cavell’s own use of the adverb “next,” in order to “establish” the word and concept of “neighbor” *next to* the word and concept of “stranger” in his own sentence, is a crucial move to suggest that such next-to-ness actually occurs within, and as, language.

²⁰ The phrase is Andrew Zawacki’s, in a forthcoming article on Dickinson, “Meeting Apart: Dickinson and Invisibility.”

²¹ *Winds of Will: Emily Dickinson and the Sovereignty of Democratic Thought* (Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama Press, 2010).

reading Thoreau or, even more so, Emerson—bears the traces of a fierce “struggle” to reach at a conception of the self that can accommodate the presence of an other. In other words, the neighboring presences that haunt Dickinson’s poems at almost every turn bear witness to the perils and difficulties of what might be called the self’s co-construction.

Just to give one example, I wish to conclude this preliminary exploration of the ethics of neighborhood in Dickinson by looking at “I tried to think a lonelier Thing” (Fr570), one of her most radically experimental poems, which Jed Deppman in particular sees, in a stimulating reading, as characteristic of her “difficult projects of thinking” (Deppman 53)²². Other poems which I believe would be especially worth looking at from the same perspective are, among many others, “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre –” (Fr778), “So the Eyes accost – and sunder” (Fr792, with its “Neighboring Horizon”), and “A nearness to Tremendousness –” (Fr824). Fr570, however, is particularly useful in helping to discern the kind of poetics that Dickinson invents in order to reconfigure individual space—a reconfiguration which, as I suggested earlier, also takes place in Thoreau’s *Walden*—as she attempts to expand the self with adjacency and thereby create the conditions for its democratic potential to emerge. Rather than suggest the possibility for the advent of an *actual* democracy, however, Dickinson’s poem bears witness to a spectral presence haunting the self, in a kind of preliminary opening of this self to the other. Typically, this opening is described in terms that evoke dying and death—a characteristic which is also particularly palpable in Fr685, as we saw earlier²³. It is the power of this spectral presence which, to take up Thoreau’s words, is “Nearest to all things” and “fashions their being.”

Here is Dickinson’s text:

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
Than any I had seen –
Some Polar Expiation – An Omen in the Bone
Of Death’s tremendous nearness –

I probed Retrieveless things
My Duplicate – to borrow –
A Haggard Comfort springs

²² Deppman offers an extensive analysis of Fr570 in his book, and makes it a centerpiece in his reconsideration of Dickinson as a thinker whose choice of the lyric for a consistent mode of expression stimulated unusual and particularly provocative forms of thinking, which he summarizes in his titular phrase, “trying to think.” Jed Deppman, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 63-70.

²³ In calling death “democratic,” Dickinson provides a key to understand how, for her, the reconfiguration of individual space to accommodate incipient forms of community cannot be achieved without opening the self to the proximity of death. A poem like “Of nearness to her sundered / Things” (J607), which is concerned with photography, and more largely with the image of oneself one projects, illustrates the way in which Dickinson tries to think through the relationship between proximity and distance in terms of life and death, as well as self and other.

From the belief that Somewhere –
Within the Clutch of Thought –
There dwells one other Creature
Of Heavenly Love – forgot –

I plucked at our Partition
As One should pry the Walls –
Between Himself – and Horror's Twin –
Within Opposing Cells –

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,
Such Luxury – it grew –
That as Myself – could pity Him –
Perhaps he – pitied me –

In this poem, Dickinson “probes” the confines of solitude, investigating the thin line along which it mutates into a form of neighboring, not quite differentiating between self and other but imparting the former with a sense of the latter. This poem is about thinking taken to the painful limits of what may, or can, be thought; it does not describe the act of thinking *about* something (reflecting upon it), or the act of thinking *of* something (letting it come up in one’s mind), but it tries to chart an attempt to make thought adjacent to thing, bringing out the nearness of *think* to *thing*, twinned together by “loneliness.” The poem offers, therefore, an abstract inner space familiar to readers of Dickinson, who frequently chose to confront the mind with itself—quite the kind of space in which she implicitly places her writing when confessing to Higginson that “The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly –”. This leaves the mind alone with itself, but also literally *beside itself*, as soon as it starts performing what it is designed to perform—thinking; and particularly so if “thinking” is itself the thing the mind tries to “see, distinctly,” i.e., every time it tries to contemplate its own connections, to distinguish its own distinctions. Thinking, by Dickinson’s reckoning, is the essence of loneliness itself, so that “to think a lonelier Thing/Than any I had seen” can only lead the mind into regions of loneliness that turn out to be, paradoxically, both unthinkable and the very stuff of thinking itself. But this radical solitude is a preliminary to the possibility for a dialogue with one’s self: going that deep (or far) into isolation is indeed the only manner in which to create the conditions for a “Duplicate” to arise, thus allowing the self to go beyond the solipsistic act of self-creation and enter a space of co-creation. In a sense, we might say that Dickinson’s persona is *beside itself with thinking*, a paradoxical state of mind approximating death as a condition for a sense of community to emerge, and which the last line of stanza one captures, in appropriately neighboring terms: “Death’s tremendous nearness.”

Written on the uneasy frontier where life and death neighbor each other, a frontier which Dickinson aptly calls “trying to think,” such a poem redraws the boundaries (“Partition”, “Walls”) between self and other thanks to many syntactic equivocations and bifurcations. In this respect, Dickinson’s writing is a striking example of the disruptive power Jacques Rancière assigns to literature as soon as it plunges language in a condition of thinking, as soon as it gives us much to think—showing us the structure of thinking in such a way that it redefines our manner of relating to thought. Not surprisingly in this context, Dickinson’s poem is concerned, in its central stanza, about joining the “I” to “one other Creature/Of Heavenly Love forgot”—a creature who precisely embodies the exclusion from the belief allowing Dickinson’s own community to hold together. Another kind of community is summoned here, less exclusionary than the former sociability upon which communities of belief are based. We should understand, however, that the desperate embrace of “I” and “one other” on such an abstract scene as the poem’s is not autobiographical in the strict sense: rather, it precedes and annuls any autobiographical gesture by dislocating the first person from a position of authority. Next to this autobiographical dimension, therefore—and since the poem’s topic is the definition of thinking *as* loneliness—Fr570 is about seeing and performing dis/connections between a first person and a larger community, reconfiguring thinking as a communal *and* solitary act simultaneously. And indeed, what thought could be more unique and common at the same time than to think about one’s own death? What could better articulate this democratic aspiration to establish society upon the sharing of differences? Thus, we might say that Fr570 is a “political” poem insofar as it partakes of what Rancière calls a “distribution of the sensible,” which for him is the very stuff of the political:

I call distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. Aristotle states that a citizen is someone who *has a part* in the act of governing and being governed²⁴.

Dickinson dares to write on the limit where communities of thought can emerge out of the lonely and bold act of thinking, or might even more radically fail to emerge and in this failure remain *in emergence*, thus showing communities to be forever emerging processes. It is this uncommon common ground of shared margins that I have tried to characterize as “neighborhood.”

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, transl. Gabriel Rockhill (London, Continuum, 2004), p.12.