Dickinson's Senses of Experience

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Abstract
This essay pursues the senses in which Emily Dickinson used the word “experience” as these senses arise in the fifteen poems where the word appears, as a verb, a mass or count noun, or a participle. The essay argues that these senses reveal core meanings in the poet’s vision of existence as rapt and enchanted, perilous and painful, markedly female, set in motion, given to misconstrual, and infused with keen perception. To make this argument, the essay unfolds in four parts. The first part explicates poetic lexicography, the conceptual frame developed. The second part reads “I think I was enchanted” (Fr627), the one Dickinson poem where her speaker says “I […] experience.” Lyric subjectivity in Dickinson’s verse crystallizes in this poem in a striking recollection. This part ends by drawing a continuum along which Dickinson’s senses of experience range and, as in a spectrum of light, shade into one another. The third part reads five other poems that deepen the poet’s senses of what experience is. Finally, the essay argues that as the poet’s senses of experience shade into one another, in single poems and in her oeuvre, they also intertwine in the one braid formed by her ontology and epistemology.

Introduction
If, as Emily Dickinson wrote about 1862, the poet “Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings” (Fr446), what does she distill from the meanings of the word “experience”?! The word is large and elusive, in Dickinson’s moment and in our own, a word that we can neither do without nor easily define, as Emerson’s essay “Experience” (1844) readily attests.2 I pursue Dickinson’s use of the word “experience” for two compelling reasons. One is that scholars often use the word to interpret Dickinson’s verse, without considering how the poet construed it.3 An exception to this rule is Jed Deppman’s “Amherst’s Other Lexicographer,” the fourth chapter of Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson (2008). Studying the poet’s “lyrical lexicon of some 250 poems” that define in arresting

2 Semanticist Anna Wierzbicka refers to “the present confusion surrounding the word experience” and to “the cluster of meanings linked with this highly polysemous English word” (34; emphasis in original). It would not be easy to say just what the meaning of experience is in the essay “Experience,” which Lawrence Buell sees as Emerson’s “most soul-searching” (130). Experience in the essay is in part “this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest […]” (473). In the essay, experience is also fleeting, pulsing, aleatory, inescrutable, and divine.
3 After William Dean Howells opened his 1891 review of Poems by Emily Dickinson (1890), “[t]he strange Poems of Emily Dickinson we think will form something like an intrinsic experience with the understanding reader.
formulations “aesthetic ideas and undefinable concepts and experiences” (122), Deppman focuses briefly on “experience,” “because it has so many definitions and connotations—Romantic, utilitarian, Lockean, evangelical, and Transcendentalist, among others—in Dickinson’s surrounding culture” (145). The second compelling reason to pursue Dickinson’s senses of “experience” is that no study, to my knowledge, has read the fifteen poems where she used the word, as a verb, a mass or count noun, or a participle (“experienced”), and sought to relate these uses to a single vision of existence.

I seek in the present essay to gloss, by means of poetic lexicography, Dickinson’s senses of the word “experience” as they arise in the fifteen poems where the word appears. I argue that these senses reveal core meanings in Dickinson’s vision of existence, a synthesis that sees it as rapt and enchanted, perilous and painful, markedly female, set in motion, given to misconstrual, and infused with keen perception. To make this argument, the essay unfolds in four parts. The first part explicates poetic lexicography, the conceptual frame I adopt, by relating it to prior studies of the poet, by stating its aims, by identifying its principles, and by comparing them to those of modern lexicography. The second part reads Dickinson’s “I think I was enchanted” (Fr627), the one poem in the corpus in which her speaker says “I […] experience.” Lyric subjectivity in Dickinson’s verse crystallizes in this poem in a striking recollection, as the speaker tells of a decisive event in her life. With this poem in view, I draw a continuum along which Dickinson’s senses of experience range and, as in a spectrum of light, shade into one another. Near one pole, her senses of what experience is are glossed in definition. Near the opposite pole, her senses of what experience is of are named in discrete instances. Developing this continuum, the third part of the essay reads five other poems that deepen and extend the senses of what experience is. Finally, the essay argues that as the senses of experience shade into one another, in single poems and in the poet’s oeuvre, they also intertwine in the one braid formed by her ontology—what being is in her poetry—and by her epistemology—what is known of being, and how this is known.

Poetic Lexicography

All poets are keenly aware of words, but Dickinson seems to be a special case. She famously wrote on April 25, 1862, in her second letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that “for several years, my Lexicon – was my only companion” (L261), and a year later her speaker in “Let Us play Yesterday” (Fr754) recalls “Easing my famine / At my Lexicon.” In the undated poem that opens “A word made Flesh is seldom / And tremblingly partook” (Fr899), the speaker aphoristically says, “A word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die,” and the speaker ends with praise of “this consent of Language / This loved Philology.”
The word alternatives in Dickinson’s manuscripts, moreover, along with the variants among multiple versions of single poems, show a poet’s love for the right word choice. In the preface and introduction to her reading edition of *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them* (2016), Cristanne Miller points to the fifteen alternatives in one verse line of “A little madness in the Spring” (Fr1356A), among the alternatives the word “experience,” and also cites the revisional intricacy of “Those fair – fictitious People” (Fr369), the manuscript of which “contains twenty-one alternatives, making for a possible 7,680 distinct ways of resolving the poem” (viii, 5).

This love of words makes poetic lexicography, the conceptual frame I adopt in this essay, well suited to the study of Dickinson’s poetry. As conceived here, poetic lexicography is one among other attempts “to bring linguistics and literary analysis into closer conjunction in understanding Dickinson’s poetry” (Miller, “Dickinson’s Experiments” 251). Prior studies in linguistic criticism, to which I return below, foreshadow poetic lexicography, but no study of Dickinson’s poetry, as far as I know, has articulated this frame and applied it to the set of poems that include the word “experience,” or to any other set formed by a distinctive or deeply significant word. Beyond “experience,” as scholars have known for decades, there are many such words in Dickinson’s poetry, words the poet seems especially drawn to. Some of these words are notorious, like “circumference” and “awe,” while others are more discreet, like “cool,” “brain,” “sound,” “sense,” and “being.”

As I see them, the aims of poetic lexicography are principally two. It seeks to gloss the senses of a distinctive or deeply significant word by attending closely to the context of the word’s use: to the word’s precise collocation, to its placement in the designs of verse, and to the semantic configurations in the poems where the word appears. It is through this fine-grained study of the semantic and formal qualities of the poems where the word appears that poetic lexicography does its work, which is to show how a poet construes a complex word. The other principal aim of poetic lexicography is to relate in a coherent and comprehensive way the senses of the word that is glossed, so as to align them in core meanings that reveal a poet’s vision of existence. This aim explains the continuum drawn in the present essay, where Dickinson’s senses of experience range and, as in a spectrum of light, shade into one another. The aim also explains the one braid discerned in the closing section, where the senses of experience intertwine in Dickinson’s ontology and epistemology.

As I conceive it, poetic lexicography shares several principles of modern lexicography, even as it differs from them in other principles of its own. In one shared principle, modern lexicography begins, as Patrick Hanks explains in *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography* (2015), by distinguishing “the *definiendum* (the word or phrase that is to be defined) and the *definiens* (the word or phrase that is used to define it),” and then
admits a principle of substitution “to construct a phrase or select a word that is as nearly as possible synonymous with the *definiendum*” (“Definition” 96; emphasis added). Poetic lexicography similarly aims to gloss, by means of synonym and paraphrase, a poet’s senses of a distinctive or deeply significant word. This shared principle accounts for the use in the present essay, in its title and after, of the phrase “senses of experience.” *Sense*, defined as “[a] meaning of a word, compound, or phrase identified by and recorded in a dictionary” (*OED Online*), is the conventional term for *definiens*.

A second principle shared with modern lexicography is that the senses of a word “are not, and are not intended to be, mutually exclusive” (Hanks, “Definition” 98). On the contrary, the senses of a complex word in a poet’s work coincide and crisscross in the course of its use, in ways that I will make clear in the closing section of this essay, “Intertwining Senses of Experience.” A third shared principle is the use of supporting citations from published texts as evidence of a word’s observed meanings. The supporting citations in the present essay include the use of “experience” in the fifteen Dickinson poems where the word appears. And a fourth shared principle is the attention paid to etymology and to the diachrony of historical change in a word’s meanings, as they articulate shifting visions of existence. Roland Greene’s *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (2013), a study of change in literary word meanings, sees “experience” as among “the richest” (13) of keywords in early modern culture, in view of the rise of experimental science and “the historical emergence of experience as a category for events that were previously named otherwise” (34).

As to the principles of poetic lexicography that are its own, I single out two. “A word out of context allows an indeterminate number of solutions,” notes Roman Jakobson in “Language in Operation” (58). Canonical modern lexicography tends to have little or nothing to say about this larger context. A principle of poetic lexicography is that context of use in the poems where a word appears decisively determines the senses that word has; hence the need for close reading of the semantic and formal qualities of these very poems. Such fine-grained study goes well beyond the poems themselves to include the authorial, intertextual, and socio-historical provenance of their meanings. And modern lexicography aims to identify, as Hanks explains, “prototypical concepts denoted by words” and “only the conventional meanings of conventional words,” as they are understood by large groups of language users (“Definition” 114, 122). A principle of poetic lexicography is that the highly nuanced senses of a word in a poet’s work occur in a narrow domain—here, in post-Romantic lyric poetry—and are to a large extent idiolectal. Poetic lexicography seeks, as the Dickinson lyric quoted at this essay’s outset reads, the sense that a poet distills from ordinary meanings.

In Dickinson scholarship, several studies foreshadow poetic lexicography, but do not develop a conceptual frame similar to the one adopted
Alongside Lindberg-Seyersted, Miller also cites William Howard’s “Emily Dickinson’s Poetic Vocabulary” (1957), which compares the poet’s word selection to that of poets such as Emerson and Keats. Insightfully glossing Dickinson’s senses of “plush” and “purple” (236–37), Howard does not study whole poems closely. Miller’s own focus in her essay is on the “unusual features of Dickinson’s verse” (242) and on the poet’s experimentation. Miller argues that, in the first century of Dickinson’s reception, these unusual features were seen to evidence a primitive, untutored talent and then were taken to anticipate modernist innovation and to enact conscious experiments in what poetic language can say.

In his essay “Astonished Thinking: Dickinson and Heidegger” (2013), Deppman also alludes to poetic lexicography, for instance when he writes of “This was a Poet” (Fr446) that “[g]oing from ‘Meanings’ to ‘sense’ means expanding the semantic strata until they reach the full range of the English word ‘sense’—sensuality, sensitivity, sensation” (240).

“Should I again experience”

The one Dickinson poem where her speaker says “I [...] experience”—and the first poem in the corpus to use the word—is a tale of a first and decisive encounter with poetry. Written about 1863, “I think I was enchanted” (Fr627) is composed in eight common measure stanzas, the first of which rhymes the three syllables of “sombre Girl” with those of “beautiful”: 

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here. Cristanne Miller’s essay “Dickinson’s Experiments in Language” (1998) surveys the first century of linguistic criticism of Dickinson’s poetry and reviews prior studies of the poet’s vocabulary. Miller’s book Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar (1987) is a clear precedent. Seeing the poet understand the relation between language and the world “by the process of cumulative, even contradictory, definition,” Miller finds that Dickinson has a deep “affinity with the lexicographer, the scientist of language seeking to clarify each word’s various meanings” (147–48). The book’s fourth chapter also holds the section “Noah Webster and Lexicography,” where Miller writes: “Temperamentally and philosophically, she [Dickinson] was suited to lexicography. [...] Lexical understanding works from context and always provides alternative shades or directions of meaning” (153). Cynthia L. Hallen’s “Cognitive Circuits: The Circumference of Dickinson’s Lexicon” (1997) addresses the translator’s need “to establish the meaning(s) of a word in one poem by comparing the usage of that word and related words in other poems” (75). Hallen’s essay anticipates her very useful Emily Dickinson Lexicon (2007–2020). And in allusion to Webster and his An American Dictionary of the English Language (1828), a copy of which—an 1844 printing of the 1841 edition—was in the Dickinson family library, Jed Deppman’s chapter “Amherst’s Other Lexicographer” is the most insightful precedent. Deppman explores the poet’s “creative responses to dictionary definitions, aphorisms, and various other ‘strong’ metaphysical forms of language that saturated nineteenth-century America” (18), a volatile period when “the nation was itself in an acute and violent phase of self-definition, and arguments large and small coalesced around such topics as spelling, word meanings, linguistic and literary authority, nationalism, and the creation of a national culture” (109).

The poetic lexicography that I develop differs from the one in Deppman’s magisterial study. Where he sees Dickinson “weaken one of the most powerful examples of strong metaphysics available in nineteenth-century America: Noah Webster’s lexicography” (110) by “writing substitute, experimental definitions” (122) and “redefining her cultural givens” (122), I seek both to gloss Dickinson’s senses of “experience” in light of the word’s contextualized use in the fifteen poems with it and to relate these senses to Dickinson’s vision of existence.
I quote Aurora Leigh by book (lower-case roman numeral) and line number. As to being “Anglo-Florentine,” Aurora later says: “I’m of Italy / By mother’s birth and grave, / By father’s grave / And memory; let it be—a poet’s heart / Can swell to a pair of nationalities, / However ill-lodged in a woman’s breast” (vi. 48-52).

The two other poems are “Her – last Poems” (Fr600) and “I went to thank Her” (Fr637).

In this respect, Lindberg-Seyersted notes that “[t]he girl she [Dickinson] once was is naturally the customary object of Emily Dickinson’s reminiscences of childhood, with the identifying formulas, such as ‘When I was a little girl’ (No. 454 [Fr455]) and ‘While just a Girl at School’ (No. 299 [Fr418]), where she looks at girlhood from the grown-up woman’s standpoint” (38). Citing similar phrases, Lindberg-Seyersted includes “When first a sombre Girl,” noting that an alternative for “sombre” in the manuscript of “I think I was enchanted” is “little,” along with these other phrases: “I prayed, at first, a little Girl” (Fr546), “We talked as Girls do” (Fr392), and “As when a little Girl” (Fr445) (38n2).

“A Vision of Poets,” written in iambic tetrameter tercets with monorhyme, is a long meditation on the pain, inspiration, and consecration of poets, from Homer to Keats. Crucially, it is also an invocation to poets to come. In a letter dated August 18, 1854, to Henry Vaughan Emmons, Dickinson quotes in prose a tercet from the poem: “Then golden morning’s open flowings, shall sway the trees to murmurous bowings, in metric chant of blessed poems” (L171; emphasis in original). Emmons had quoted this tercet a month before at the end of his essay “The

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl –
I read that Foreign Lady –
The Dark – felt beautiful –

Three observations clarify the poem’s tale of rapt, inaugural reading. Scholars agree the “Foreign Lady” is Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to whom Dickinson refers in a contemporary poem as “the Anglo-Florentine” (Fr600C). These two designations—the “Foreign Lady” and the “Anglo-Florentine”—suit the biography of the English poet and her heroine in Aurora Leigh (1857), whose “mother was a Florentine” and “father […] an austere Englishman” (i.29, 65). Barrett Browning died in 1861, and “I think I was enchanted” is one of three Dickinson poems written about 1863 that praise and elegize her. Secondly, scholars give varying credence to Dickinson’s claim, in a July 1862 letter to Higginson, that “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (L268). We infer here that the speaker of the poem is Dickinson. As Miller writes, in another context, of “She staked Her Feathers – Gained an Arc” (Fr853), the poem “is nearly impossible to read without thinking of the poet herself” (Grammar 185). And thirdly, two Barrett Browning poems are the likely sources of the reading that is recalled. One is “A Vision of Poets” (1844), and the other is Aurora Leigh, the inaugural epic in English letters to celebrate the life and development of a female poet-heroine.

Introducing a tale of enchantment, the first stanza above highlights female reading and writing, patent at contiguous verse line ends in “Girl” and “Lady,” standing for Dickinson and for Barrett Browning, and enhanced by the syntactic completion of “a sombre Girl” with “felt beautiful.” This is precisely what the speaker recalls: the moments when as a girl she felt beautiful when first reading the poetry of Barrett Browning. As the tale of enchantment draws to a close, and in the poem’s penultimate stanza, the verb “experience” catches the eye:

’Twas a Divine Insanity
The Danger to be sane
Should I again experience –
’Tis Antidote to turn –

To Tomes of Solid Witchcraft –
Magicians be asleep –
But Magic – hath an element
Like Deity – to keep –

The verb “experience” is striking here for several reasons. “I […] experience” is a one-time occurrence in Dickinson’s poetry, a hapax legomenon. It is reasonable to posit that this one occurrence entails senses of experience that are deeply significant to the lyric subjectivity in Dickinson’s verse. This is the first use of the word “experience” in the corpus of Dickinson’s verse, as it is gathered in R.W. Franklin’s The Poems of Emily

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illy Dickinson: Variorum Edition (1998) and in Miller’s Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them (2016). The hyperbaton in the syntax of the conditional clause “The Danger to be sane / Should I again experience” foregrounds the verb at verse line end. And the adverb “again” in the clause indicates that the experience has already happened and that it may occur in the future. What is experienced in these stanzas? And how do the opening and two last stanzas frame the poem as a whole?

In the penultimate stanza above, the parallel metrical placement of “Twas” and “Tis” at verse line beginning sets the past of one experience in relation to the present of another. The past “Twas a Divine Insanity” of first reading Barrett Browning aligns with the present “Tis Antidote to turn – // To Tomes of Solid Witchcraft.” The renewed reading of Barrett Browning’s verse, the speaker says, will counteract a renewed “Danger to be sane,” the direct object of the verb in “Should I again experience.” The two experiences in the poem, then, are of this very danger to be sane, and of the rapt reading of Barrett Browning, an antidote to the danger. Dickinson’s use here of two words with the same root at contiguous verse line ends—“Insanity” and “sane”—is chilling, for it conveys the grave threat posed to the speaker of accepting the discourse around her. To be mentally fit is to be in danger. Insanity, on the contrary, is divine. We infer the danger owes to accepting the Dickinson family and contemporary New England norms of female life, especially a proscribed desire for public voice or prominence, literary or otherwise, beyond the paths open to school teaching, charity, and evangelism, along with a professed faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. A poem near “I think” of Barrett Browning, an antidote to the danger. Dickinson’s abiding health” (176). For Edward Dickinson, when she was about to return to Amherst after a month away, to restore her desponding spirits, in Boston and Worcester: “I want to have you see the Lunatic Hospital, & other interesting places in Worcester” (qtd. in Habegger 176). As the poet Dickinson, only seventeen years old, wrote to her brother Austin from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1848, the family and New England norms imposed on her life sought “sobriety becoming my station” and between these poems and others without the word. Miller’s edition also makes it much easier than Franklin’s Variorum to see how the poet considered alternative readings. ‘Nine years earlier,’ Alfred Habegger writes, Edward Dickinson had given the same advice to his wife Emily Norcross Dickinson, when she had gone “to Boston and Worcester to recover her health” (176). For Edward Dickinson’s abiding concern and his being “so quick to raise the specter of ‘insanity’ or ‘monomania’” (L21), see also Habegger 288, 297, 505.16 Dickinson used similar diction three years earlier.

Words of Rock Rimmon* (1854). As to Aurora Leigh, Dickinson expressly refers to it in three letters to her Norcross cousins: L234, 372, 696. Several other letters refer or allude to Barrett Browning (L244, 261, 271, 368, 491, 547, 801, 950), among them one in 1862 to Samuel Bowles, who was then traveling in Europe. “Should anybody where you go, talk of Mrs. Browning, you must hear for us – and if you touch her Grave, put one hand on the Head, for me – her unmentioned Mourner” (L266).

14 Not far away in fascicle 28, Dickinson also lavishly praises poetry (and implicitly Barrett Browning) in “I reckon – When I count at all” (Fr533). Dickinson’s fascicles held “the poems Dickinson copied onto folded sheets of stationery, typically embossed and lightly ruled, and bound into booklets” (Miller, Preface viii). I use Miller’s reading edition of Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them to identify, in the diachrony of their inscription, semantic and formal relations both among the fifteen poems that include the word “experience” and between these poems and others without the word. Miller’s edition also makes it much easier than Franklin’s Variorum to see how the poet considered alternative readings.

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earlier when writing to her childhood friend Abiah Root, who had left Amherst Academy for a school in nearby Springfield, Massachusetts: “I expect you have a great many prim, starched up young ladies there, who, I doubt not, are perfect models of propriety & good behavior” (L6).

17 The highlighted lines are: “By the way / The works of women are symbolical. / We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight, / Producing what? / A pair of slippers, sir, / To put on when you’re weary—or a stool / To stumble over and vex you … ‘curse that stool!’ / Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean / And sleep, and dream of something we are not / But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!/ This hurts most, this—that, after all, we are paid / The worth of our work, perhaps” (i.455-65). Dickinson’s copy of *Aurora Leigh* at the Frost Library is from 1859. An earlier 1857 edition, which belonged to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, the poet’s sister-in-law, is in the Emily Dickinson Collection at the Houghton Library (EDR 197).

18 Dickinson highlighted such rapt, inaugural reading in her copy of *Aurora Leigh*: “We get no good / By being ungenerous, even to a book, / And calculating profits—so much help / By so much reading. It is rather when / We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge / Soul-forward, headlong, / Into a book's profound, / Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth— / 'Tis then we get the right good from a book” (i.702-09).

19 In Amos 8.9, the oracle foretells this eclipse as a sign of judgment: “And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the
trove of blank verse that points to the divine, inaugural, liberating touch of poetry—“my soul, / At poetry’s divine first finger-touch, / Let go conventions and sprang up surprised” (i.850-52)—as it voices the genius and aspirations of its poet-heroine. In Dickinson’s copy of *Aurora Leigh* at the Frost Library, the first lines highlighted, by means of enclosing parentheses in light pencil, are spoken to a male interlocutor and bristle at Victorian norms for female life.7 And the last stanza of Dickinson’s “I think I was enchanted” has recourse to aphorism, the lexis of magic, and full rhyme to say that Barrett Browning’s verse is alive. Though the poet has died and “Magicians be asleep,” what she wrote endures, for “Magic – hath an element / Like Deity – to keep.”

Within the frame of its first and two last stanzas, “I think I was enchanted” develops the tale of rapt, inaugural reading and adds to it a decisive “Conversion of the Mind / Like Sanctifying in the Soul.” The conversion is to poetry and to the vocation for writing it, as the poem’s intervening stanzas reveal:

And whether it was noon at night—
Or only Heaven—at noon—
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell—

The Bees—became as Butterflies—
The Butterflies—as Swans—
Approach—and spurned the narrow Grass—
And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer—
I took for Giants—practising
Titanic Opera—

The Days—to Mighty Metres stept—
The Homeliest—adorned
As if unto a Jubilee
'Twere suddenly confirmed—

I could not have defined the change—
Conversion of the Mind
Like Sanctifying in the Soul—
Is witnessed—not explained—

The speaker’s decisive conversion here—to poetry and to the vocation for writing it—is what “I think I was enchanted” bears witness to. The conversion explains the metapoetic lexis in the poem, which includes the etymology of “enchanted,” whose Latin root is *cantāre*, “to sing,” the allusions to Barrett Browning, “The Days— to Mighty Metres stept,” and “Tomes of Solid Witchcraft.”

Several other patterns amplify the speaker’s conversion. The poem’s lexis of religious belief weaves through its tales of enchantment and
conversion, thus drawing the two together. The sudden light in “noon at night,” enhanced by its rhyme with “Lunacy of Light,” inverts the eclipse of day or noon in Amos 8.9 and Mark 13.24, 15-33-34 (The English Bible), thus adapting Scripture to the poetic conversion.19 “Heaven – at noon” and “Magic […] / Like Deity,” moreover, align with “Divine Insanity,” while “Sacrament” (the alternative in manuscript for “Jubilee”), “ordained” (the alternative for “confirmed”), and “Conversion of the Mind / Like Sanctifying in the Soul” also set the conversion in a devotional frame. The speaker thus sees her conversion to poetry and to the vocation for writing it precisely in these religious terms.20 Another pattern, the spectacle of several other transformations, serves to illustrate the speaker’s revelation, and three of these transformations are great. They start with “The Bees – became as Butterflies – / The Butterflies – as Swans” and continue when “just the meanest Tunes // […] I took for Giants – practising / Titanic Opera.” And in a third pattern, the superlative “meanest,” whose alternative in manuscript is “faintest,” underscores the vast transformation of “meanest Tunes” into “Titanic Opera” and anticipates the superlative “Homeliest”: “The Homeliest [of days] – adorned / As if unto a Jubilee.” As illustrative examples, these vast transformations confer magic and magnitude on the speaker’s conversion to poetry.

Because it is the one poem where a Dickinson speaker says “I […] experience,” and given its crucial tales of inaugural reading and conversion, “I think I was enchanted” lets us begin to gather Dickinson’s senses of experience. We set these senses along a continuum whose opposing poles—what experience is, when glossed in definition, as distinguished from what experience is of, when named in discrete instances—shade into one another. As to the latter, the experience in the poem is of rapt enchantment, of the “Divine Insanity” of first reading Barrett Browning, and of beauty (“The Dark – felt beautiful”). The experience is also of a chilling “Danger to be sane,” of being female in mid-nineteenth-century New England, and of conversion to poetry and to the vocation for writing it. Dickinson’s embrace of poetry, which echoes Aurora Leigh’s “I too have my vocation—work to do” (ii.455), sees it as discourse that resists the stifling, imposed norms that tie the female subject down.21 In their place, poetry articulates visions of existence that set the subject free, at least to say in unfettered terms what is thought and felt within.

As to Dickinson’s senses of what experience is, “I think I was enchanted” reveals five. Experience is encounter with others and their discourse, with writers and with contemporaries.22 Secondly, experience is a subject’s store of lived knowledge, as the tales of enchantment and conversion readily attest.23 Thirdly, experience is, in the end, ineffable, beyond the reach of complete naming, and “in excess,” as Martin Jay writes, “of the concepts that articulate it” (204). This explains the poem’s three instances of negative polarity: “I had not power to tell,” “I could clear day.” This image is prefurred by Amos 5.8 and 5.18-20. In Mark 13.24, Jesus foretells the Apocalypse: “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.” And Mark 15.33-34 relates Jesus’s death to the divine sign of eclipse: “And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Elo, Elo, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (The English Bible).20 It is important to note here the evangelical sense of “experience” in nineteenth-century New England culture, where “to experience religion” was “to be converted.” The OED Online includes the collocation “to experience religion” and this definition in sense 2.d of its entry for the verb “experience.” The Dickinson family dictionary, an 1844 printing of Noah Webster’s An American Dictionary of the English Language, in turn ties the adjective “experimental” to religious conversion. Sense 5 of the adjective is: “Known by experience; derived from experience; as, experimental religion” (qtd. in Hallen, Emily Dickinson Lexicon). Buell observes in this regard that “experience’ and ‘experiment’ were often synonymous in the evangelical Protestant culture that predominated in New England religious literature of the day,” and that “these terms were used in a technical theological sense to refer to possible influx of grace” (193). A Dickinson poem bears this out when it concludes, “Faith – The Experiment of Our Lord” (FrisiB).
and Feminist Poetics” (2010) points to the ways in which the literary “text, in incorporating gender, necessarily incorporates material, historical, and social locations, cultural paradigms, as well as ethical and political norms and configurations” (572). Thus viewed as “a constitutive element in textual formation” (572) and set in relation to other textual elements, both formal and historical, gender becomes “an ineradicable category of analysis” (573).

From this it follows, the historian Joan W. Scott argues in “The Evidence of Experience” (1991), that “we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences” (779). This need leads Scott to impugn the “appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation” (777), to foreground “the constructed nature of experience” (777), and to posit a concept of experience that explains “the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced” (792).

As to deep emotion, in Art as Experience (1934) John Dewey ties it not have defined the change,” and “Is witnessed – not explained.” All three negations apply to verbs of speech in predications that declare they may draw near, but cannot fully name, the speaker’s transformation. It is a sign of Dickinson’s genius that so telling a poem thrice points to its inability to say. Fourth, experience is infused with deep emotion. In “I think I was enchanted,” emotive tones imbue “a sombre Girl,” “felt beautiful,” “Nature murmured to herself / To keep herself in Cheer,” “Jubilee,” and “Danger,” the alternative for which in manuscript is “Sorrow.” And fifth, experience is infused with keen sense perception. Sight and hearing guide the poem’s spectacle of natural transformations. Sight is especially striking in “noon at night,” “Lunacy of Light,” and the other imagery of light and darkness, while hearing stands out when “just the meaniest Tunes” become “Titanic Opera.” Kinesthesia, in addition, arises in “The Days – to Mighty Metres stept,” whose trope of giving feet to days sets them in the swaying motions of verse. When taken together, these sorts of perception point to Dickinson’s vivid lyric sensorium. When taken together and set on a continuum, the senses of experience—both what it is and what it is of—in “I think I was enchanted,” a poem of the first order, begin to reveal core meanings in the poet’s vision of existence as rapt and enchanted, perilous and painful, markedly female, set in motion, given to misconstrual, and infused with keen perception.

Developing What Experience Is

Several other Dickinson poems with “experience” deepen the senses of the word in “I think I was enchanted.” The keen perception in the first poem, for example, reappears in “A little madness in the Spring” (Fr1366A), one of the last poems where Dickinson used the word. Drafted in about 1875, Dickinson’s intricate worksheet for the poem shows “a determined attempt to find a reading for two words” in line five, “This sudden legacy of Green” (Fr1176). In her list of alternatives for “legacy,” Dickinson considers a dazzling “Experience of Green,” as if she were to gaze astonished at the tones of spring, before settling on “This whole Experiment of Green.” Keen perception arises in “His Feet are shod with Gauze” (Fr979), written in about 1865. Here the speaker closely inspects a bee and, seeing it as a tiny Achilles lacking a shield but in a suit of armor, then hears its “Chant” and “Tune.” Marked by a resonant rhyme with “Tune,” the poem ends with the desire, “Oh, for a Bee’s experience / Of Clovers, and of Noon!” And the keen perception in “To pile like Thunder to its close” (Fr1353B), also written in about 1875, bears the awesome sound of a thunderbolt, whose slow drumroll crescendoes and cracks, after which its sounds “crumble grand away.” This sound stands for the experience of “Poetry // Or Love,” and the speaker of the poem eerily says, in reference to poetry and to love, “Experience either and consummation.”
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Among the remaining poems with the word “experience,” five significantly develop the senses of what experience is, thus extending the core meanings in Dickinson’s vision of existence. Two of the five poems are strikingly alike. Both are definition poems, and both were inscribed on unbound sheets about early 1865. One names what “Experience is,” the other what “Some call Experience,” and the two are the work, in Deppman’s phrase, of “Amherst’s Other Lexicographer.” The two poems use “experience” as a mass noun and hence as an abstraction, not as a count noun in a discrete instance. The nouns thus signal what experience is, rather than specific examples of it. The two poems are formally alike; both unfold in just two quatrains. And in the rhetorical enclosure of epanalepsis, the two form, like bookends, a pair. One begins with “Experience,” and the other ends with it.

Written in common measure, the first poem, “Experience is the Angled Road” (Fr899), starts with “Experience” and ends with “Pain”:

Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By – Paradox – the Mind itself –
Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite – How complicate
The Discipline of Man –
Compelling Him to choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain –

Enhanced by consonance, the experience described in this poem is of “Preappointed Pain.” The speaker muses wryly that we are destined to choose this pain ourselves, implying that whatever we choose, pain will ensue. The exclamative syntax in the second of the two sentences, which begins “How complicate / The Discipline of Man,” shows resignation to the pain, while “The Discipline of Man”—taken to be the subject’s instruction, study, and subordination to authority—stems from this very predestined pain.

As to what experience is in the poem, we see three senses. Through the figure of “the Angled Road,” the opening phrase “Experience is the Angled Road” says that it is motion, here in a direction that is not foreseen. This sense of experience as angled, veering motion helps to explain Dickinson’s copious use of slant rhyme, which is oblique and not foreseen, and in the present poem pairs “Man” with “Pain.” Deppman finds that in its closing rhyme with “Man,” “Pain” takes the place of the expected “Plan” (147–48), and if this is so, the rhyme enacts the very oblique motion that the poem names. Given this motion, slanted and veering, the mind tries to anticipate what is to come, but not yet available to the sense perception of experience. In the speaker’s dual contemplation, she thus sets “Experience,” at the poem’s beginning, over against “the Mind,” responsible for this foresight, at contiguous verse line end. Which one leads the other?

to sense perception—”[t]here is […] no such thing in perception as seeing or hearing plus emotion. The perceived object or scene is emotionally pervaded throughout” (55; emphasis in original)—and sees emotion imbue all experience: “Experience is emotional but there are no separate things called emotions in it. […] Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience” (43–44).

25 The close inspection of the bee adopts the imagery of Dickinson’s “Gem chapter” (L536), Revelation, where the New Jerusalem, of “pure gold, like unto clear glass,” has foundations “garnished with all manner of precious stones” (21.10, 19), among them sardonyx and chrysoprasus. In Dickinson’s poem, this imagery explains why “His Helmet, is of Gold, / His Breast, a single Onyx / With Chrysophras, inlaid.” These allusions turn the bee into a bearer of the millennium.

26 This verse line is disquieting. Is it an ellipted aphorism, as in “If you experience either, you will consume,” or does it encode twin imperative address? And what does “consume” mean? The intransitive sense of the verb recalls “the mysterious wasting disease known as consumption (tuberculosis)” (Habegger 31), rife in Dickinson’s lifetime. The deaths by consumption of, among others, Susan Dickinson’s mother, Harriet Arms Gilbert, in 1837, and of Benjamin Franklin Newton in 1853, who had taught Dickinson “what to read, what authors to admire, what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and the sublimer lesson, a faith in things unseen” (L153),
cast an eerie light on the word. Habegger lists these two deaths in Dickinson’s world, along with twenty-eight others (640-41).

27 The first, “Experience is the Angled Road” (Fr899), is on unbound sheet seven. The second, “I stepped from Plank to Plank” (Fr926), is on unbound sheet thirteen, just nine pages away in Miller’s reading edition, along with another poem with “experience,” “On that dear Frame the Years had worn” (Fr924). This cluster of three poems, together with the four others that include this word also inscribed about 1865 (Fr817, 944, 979, 1092) and the fact that only three of the fifteen poems with “experience” were written after that year (Fr1115, 1353, 1356), suggest that by this time Dickinson had drawn firm, though not immovable, conclusions about her senses of experience.

28 Explaining “the semantically relevant property of countability,” one that Dickinson scholars have noted, John Lyons writes that a mass noun in English “normally denotes not an individual entity or set of entities, but an unbounded mass or aggregate of stuff or substance” (83; emphasis in original). In the present discussion, the two poems thus refer to what Wierzbicka calls “experience in a cumulative sense” (40). For Dickinson scholars who refer to mass and count nouns, see Lindberg-Seyersted 117; Miller, Grammar 62-63, 66; and Loeffelholz, Value 92.

29 I borrow the phrase “radical enjambment” from Cristanne Miller, who developed the notion in her paper “Dickinson’s Radical Enjambments,” presented in Paris at the 2016 Conference of the Emily Dickinson International Society.

The poem’s wry “Paradox” is that “the Mind itself – / Presuming it [experience] to lead // Quite Opposite” prefers in the end experience to its own conjecture. Or as Deppman puts it, “the mind trusts lived experience more than it trusts itself” (147), whence the paradox that “the mind leads experience but chooses experience to lead it” (148). In a second sense, then, experience is a corrective for the mind’s errors in conjecture, and existence is given to misconstrual. These errors include the fond but illusory hopes we nurse—“the prank of the Heart at play on the Heart” (L233)—when desire obscures reality, the hopes leading straight to pain. Intonation in the poem twice spotlights this wry irony of the mind’s preferring experience to itself. Interrupting the agitative phrase in “Preferred against the Mind / By – Paradox – the Mind itself,” the noun “Paradox” disrupts the verse line’s syntax, and thus stands intonationally alone. And in the poem’s most striking formal move, its radical enjambment between stanzas—“the Mind itself – / Presuming it to lead // Quite Opposite”—produces the intonational surprise of finding that what we thought complete is not so. This surprise of mistaken conjecture and the complexity it entails are marked by the phonic echoes in “Opposite – How complicate.” In a third sense, then, and in a correlate to existence as given to misconstrual, experience is “complicate”—a manifold of elements, a complex whose varying sets of facets, irreducible to a single paradigm, are beyond the mind’s ability to grasp, just as in “I think I was enchanted” experience is ineffable, beyond the reach of complete naming.

The companion poem in the pair, “I stepped from Plank to Plank” (Fr926), received the title “Experience” in Poems by Emily Dickinson (1896), edited by Mabel Loomis Todd. Written in short meter, the poem illustrates “the ‘peril’ embedded in the etymology of experience” (292), the danger, as Jay notes, “that must be encountered in the perilous journey that is experience (which, it bears repeating, has the Latin experīrī in its root, giving us as well the English word ‘peril’)” (351).

The poem ends with ostensive definitional pointing to what “Some call Experience”:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea –

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch –
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience –

This tale of peril draws on a crucial scene in Aurora Leigh, one marked by female solidarity. Aurora relates, having restlessly sought and suddenly found Marian Erle in Paris, that Marian “Turned round and followed closely where I went, / As if I led her by a narrow plank / Across devouring waters, step by step,” and that Aurora in turn, “as by a narrow plank /
Across devouring waters, followed her, / Stepping by her footsteps [...] (vi.481–83, 501–03).31 The two women, in effect, follow each other. That the two, on suddenly meeting, walk in the same way, and that Dickinson’s speaker adopts the same way of stepping (“I stepped from Plank to Plank”) and a similar motion over perilous waters (“The Stars about my Head I felt / About my Feet the Sea”) shows the rapt reading of Barrett Browning recalled in “I think I was enchanted.”

Dickinson’s tale of peril shares the sense of experience as motion, but unlike “Experience is the Angled Road,” the motion here is foreseen. In her thumbnail sketch, the speaker says that she stepped from one plank to another, teeteringly aloft in mid-air, and “knew not but the next [step] / Would be my final inch.” The speaker’s motion thus goes in two foreseen directions: laterally from plank to plank, and vertically in the intuition of a looming fall. Of the two, the fall into the sea is by far the more harrowing. Given the speaker’s last inch and fall to follow, the tale draws on the poet’s “lost-at-sea image” (Habegger 422–24, 429, 480), and it is told by one of her several posthumous voices, which speak to the living from the other side of death.32

The speaker’s sole commentary on her tale of peril—“This gave me that precarious Gait / Some call Experience”—reveals more about her sense of motion: she moves with a precarious gait, a faltering step.33 The closing, ostensive phrase “Some call Experience” gives the motion a name. Along with motion, then, experience is perilous, for no amount of foresight, whether a slow and cautious way or knowing that the next step will be the last, cancels the peril. The sense of lateral motion leading to a vertiginous fall through the air bears this sense of experience out. Several observations in this regard are germane. The speaker’s motion comes to a halt at verse line end in “my final inch,” leaving the reader to infer the fall to follow. This inference is enhanced by the mosaic rhyme of “my final inch” with “Experience,” which echoes in the silence after the poem. The poem’s emotive tone, marked by the phrase “I felt,” is harrowing, and quite distinct from the wry irony of “Experience is the Angled Road.” The speaker’s steps and looming fall are acutely disquieting. And the sense perception of kinesthesia evokes the speaker’s motion and vertigo, in “I stepped from Plank to Plank,” “The Stars about my Head,” “About my Feet the Sea,” and “that precarious Gait.” Dickinson’s sense of kinesthesia is elsewhere tied to teetering motion and to vertiginous falling, as in “I can wade Grief” (Fr312), where “the least push of Joy / Breaks up my feet – / And I tip – drunken,” or in “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Fr340), where the motif of the plank reappears when “a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down – / And hit a World, at every plunge, / And Finished knowing – then.”34

Three other poems develop the senses of what experience is, thus deepening the core meanings in Dickinson’s vision of existence. These senses also point to the poet’s ontology and epistemology, discussed in this essay’s closing section. Like the companion poems above, “None

30 The Oxford Latin Dictionary (1982) defines experior, the Latin etymon of “experience,” as “To make trial of, to put to the test, try out” and “To have experience of, undergo,” and perīculum, the Latin etymon of “peril,” as “Test, trial, proof” and “Liability to harm, danger” (s.vv.).

31 This scene is crucial to Aurora Leigh because it makes possible, in the epic’s lines of plot development, the reencounter of Aurora, her cousin Romney Leigh, and Marian Erle in Florence. The reader will recall that Romney early declares his unrequited love to Aurora, that Romney and Marian’s wedding, which would have crossed the rigidly drawn lines of English social class, is torpedoed by the scheming aristocrat Lady Waldemar, and that Romney’s rival in Italy, in principle to restore the love derailed in England, leads ultimately to Aurora’s love of the now blind Romney.

32 “I stepped from Plank to Plank,” on unbound sheet thirteen, is near “Each Second is the last” (Fr927), on unbound sheet fourteen. The latter poem is similarly set “The Sea and Spar between.” Leffeholt lists a “great string of Dickinson poems of the early 1860s with posthumous speakers” (136)—“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Fr340); “‘Twas just this time, last year, I died” (Fr344); “Because I could not stop for Death” (Fr479); “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died” (Fr591)—and cites the work of John Cody and others to say that “Dickinson’s strategy of writing poems from the perspective of a posthumous speaker may owe to her reading of Harriet Prescott Spofford’s The Amber Gods” (1863) (“U.S. Literary Contemporaries” 135).
can experience stint” (Fr870) unfolds in just two quatrains, and it sets the verb “experience” prominently in its first verse line. Written about 1864, the poem makes an aphoristic argument that typifies both what Cristanne Miller sees as the poet’s “terse philosophizing and great syntactic compression” (Reading 22) and what Jonathan Culler sees as the epideixis of lyric:35

None can experience stint
Who Bounty – have not known –
The fact of Famine – could not be
Except for Fact of Corn –

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

Experience here is inverse, reciprocal knowing. To experience $A$, Dickinson says, one must previously have known $\neg A$. Or as Aurora Leigh says, “There’s nothing high which has not first been low” (ix.856). In the dual contemplation of Dickinson’s poem, this rule guides its four assertions, each neatly placed in two lines of short meter verse. Three assertions are illustrative examples marked by negative polarity: “stint,” the direct object of “experience,” cannot be known without a prior “Bounty”; “The fact of Famine” cannot be without a prior “Fact of Corn”; and “Poverty” known before “Wealth” cannot be “Indigence.” The poem’s sole positive assertion is a version of the rule, and the conclusion to be drawn: “Want – is a meagre Art / Acquired by Reverse.” “Acquired by Reverse” names the inverse, reciprocal knowing, and the words “Want” and “Art” here are also worth pursuing. “Want” is the direction in which the poem’s four assertions go: toward the experience of stint, famine, meagre art, and indigence. And “Art” relates the rule to poetry, suggesting that it too springs from indigence that once was wealth. Elsewhere in Dickinson’s poetry, the rule of inverse, reciprocal knowing applies, as in “Success is counted sweetest” (Fr112), “Delight – becomes pictorial” (Fr539), and “To One denied to drink” (Fr1058).

A fourth poem, “The Snow that never drifts” (Fr1155), alludes to inverse, reciprocal knowing—“We buy with contrast”—and adds to it the reciprocity of sense perception and cognition, also proper to Dickinson’s epistemology. Written about 1869, the poem is the only one of the fifteen with “experience” to personify it, giving the noun speech in “Experience would swear”:

The Snow that never drifts –
The transient, fragrant snow
That comes a single time a Year
Is softly driving now –

So thorough in the Tree
At night beneath the star
This poem is divided neatly into two halves, each of two short meter stanzas. Guided by its present contemplation, the poem’s first half tells of perceiving a snowstorm “That comes a single time a Year,” “Is softly driving now,” and leaves the mark of “February’s Foot” on the Amherst landscape. The depiction of the “transient, fragrant snow,” along with the eye rhyme of “snow” with “now,” underscore the present contemplation, as do the sense faculties of smell, sight, touch, and hearing. Over the course of the poem, smell arises in “fragrant snow” and “Were every Storm so spice,” an alternative for “spice” in manuscript being “sweet.” Sight is evoked by “Is softly driving now;” “the Tree / At night beneath the star,” and the simile “Like Winter as a Face.” Touch and hearing, in turn, underlie “softly driving.” The snow’s diagonal motion is soft and silent.

As in “I think I was enchanted,” Dickinson infuses experience here with keen perception, and here, too, experience is a subject’s store of lived knowledge. The speaker’s acute perception lets her recognize, as if “a Face / We stern and former knew,” the once-a-year storm that she has known before. The speaker is absolutely sure of what she perceives: “That it was February’s Foot / Experience would swear.” An instance of prosopopoeia, the sole personification of “experience” in the poems that include the word vows that this is so. We thus add another sense of experience: it is the reciprocity of sense perception and cognition. The poem’s second half attests precisely to this, as it reflects on the storm that is perceived in the first half. In stanza three, the simile “Like Winter as a Face / We stern and former knew” draws on recognition, when “Nature’s Alibi,” its being elsewhere in time, taught the speaker to know what is perceived in the present. “Like […] a Face,” the most readily known part of the human body, the storm is perceived as it was known before. In stanza four, the poem’s one full rhyme of “be” with “memory” also foregrounds cognition: the memory of past perception enables cognition in the present. Memory calls up the storm’s once-a-year singularity—it stands out against all others, none being “so spice.” As to the emotive tones of “Repaired of all but Loneliness” and “Pang is good / As near as memory,” they are the beholder’s share projected onto the storm.

The last poem to develop what experience is, “This Consciousness that is aware” (Fr817B), is also the last to use “experience” as a mass noun.
Reflection on the adventure, Deppman writes, “produced by sustained thinking of death,” stems from “caring passionately and wanting to know but not (not) knowing what happens when we die” (236), with “one’s end” known to be “a nothingness” (“Astonished Thinking” 244). In the same essay, Deppman reads “This Consciousness that is aware” insightfully (246).

“Experiment” in Dickinson’s poetry is always used as a noun. Two other poems that include the word also imply that an experiment is future experience whose outcome is unknown: “The first Day that I was a Life” (Fr823) and “Experiment to Me” (Fr1081B). The poems with “Experiment” not discussed elsewhere in this essay adopt the sense that Webster’s Dictionary gives to the noun: “A trial; an act or operation designed to discover some unknown truth, principle or effect, or to establish it when discovered” (qtd. in Hallen, Emily Dickinson Lexicon). These poems are “Split the Lark – and you’ll find the Music” (Fr905), “When they come back – if Blossoms do” (Fr1042), and “At Half past Three, a single Bird” (Fr1099B).

Written about 1865, the poem sets “Experience” against “experiment” by placing the two nouns at contiguous verse line beginning and end:

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –

How adequate unto itself
It’s properties shall be
Itsself unto itself and None
Shall make discovery –

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.

This poem is divided neatly into two unequal parts, brought together by its seamless common measure verse. Companioned and bright, “This Consciousness that is aware / Of Neighbors and the Sun” is a two-line point of departure for the future awareness in the fourteen verse lines to follow. This future consciousness, “the one aware of Death,” is of the soul alone in motion, on its way through the “most profound experiment / Appointed unto Men.” The poem’s “Adventure most unto itself” is thus “the Adventure of Death” (L555), as Dickinson wrote in an 1878 letter to Elizabeth Holland.

The most striking move in the poem is the hyperbaton that alters syntax to place “Experience” at verse line beginning, in radical enjambment, and to set it against “experiment,” placed at contiguous verse line end. In its motion, the consciousness of death will cross “the interval / Experience between / And most profound experiment.” By opposing the two nouns metrically, Dickinson sets them off semantically, implying that experiment is future experience whose outcome is unknown, or as Martin Jay puts it, experience “grows out of experimentation, which moves us into the future rather than tying us down to the past” (290). This very sense of “experiment” appears in two other poems that reflect on death and include the noun. “I cross till I am weary” (Fr666) ends with the question, “Do we die – / Or is this Death’s experiment – / Reversed in Victory?” And “Experiment escorts us last” (Fr1181), a single common measure stanza also on the motion of dying, rules out any known end, saying instead that our last “Experiment” of death “Will not allow an Axiom / An Opportunity.”

Distinguished from the experiment of death, experience in “This Consciousness that is aware” is what we know, in the present and the
The latter phrase gives the title to *The Single Hound* (1914), edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the fourth volume of Dickinson’s poetry in the diachrony of its transmission.  

“Thus, essential to an experience,” Hans-Georg Gadamer asserts, “is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning. […] The mode of being of experience is precisely to be so determinative that one is never finished with it. What we call an *Erlebnis* [experience] in this emphatic sense thus means something unforgettable and irreplaceable, something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination” (§8).

Past. As in “I think I was enchanted” and “The Snow that never drifts,” it is the subject’s store of lived knowledge, and it is thus proper to Dickinson’s epistemology. What, then, is known in the poem under study? Motion is known, akin to the motion in “Experience is the Angled Road” and “I stepped from Plank to Plank.” Motion is evident in the pattern formed by “traversing the interval,” “Shall make discovery,” “Adventure,” and “The Soul […] / Attended by a single Hound.”* Solitude is known. The consciousness of death “will be the one […] itself alone” to cross the interval to the other side of death. The exclamative syntax and other pronouns in “How adequate unto itself / It’s properties shall be / Its own identity.” Enhanced by its mosaic rhyme with “condemned to be,” “identity” bears the marks of the experience that has shaped it. At crucial moments in life, experience may be so ecstatic, as in “I think I was enchanted,” or so devastating, as in “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (Fr372), that it leaves its indelible marks on the subject.  

These marks, as defining as the human face, stay with the subject as long as memory does, or until the experiment of death takes the soul away.

**Intertwining Senses of Experience**

If the poet, as Dickinson wrote in “This was a Poet” (Fr446), “Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings,” I have glossed in this essay many of the senses she distilled from the word “experience.” When set on a continuum, these senses of experience reveal core meanings in Dickinson’s vision of existence, a synthesis that sees it as rapt and enchanted, perilous and painful, markedly female, set in motion, given to misconstrual, and infused with keen perception.

Poetic lexicography posits that the senses of a distinctive or deeply significant word in a poet’s work do not compose a finite, mutually exclusive set of meanings. On the contrary, these senses shade into one another, as in a spectrum of light, or in a parallel analogy that is more properly textual, they coincide and crisscross, in single poems and in the poet’s oeuvre, thus forming discernible semantic configurations. As I noted before in “Experience is the Angled Road,” however, experience is also “complicate”—a manifold of elements, a complex whose varying sets of facets, irreducible to a single paradigm, are beyond the mind’s
Jeffrey Simons

41 Jay observes in this regard that experience "is inevitably acquired through an encounter with otherness, whether human or not," and that experience may involve "encounters with the texts of countless others who have pondered the same issues before." Jay also writes, when explicating the aesthetic thought of Theodor Adorno, that "[e]xperience, despite its often being understood in subjective terms alone, comes only with an encounter with otherness in which the self no longer remains the same" (356).

42 The first poem conceives a path to eternity along a series of "Nows," as these coalesce in a single, flowing moment. Adopting the geometric sense of a line as a moving point, the poem’s speaker sees eternity as a series of "Nows in motion, each setting out from "this [moment] – experienced Here." And "Bloom opon the Mountain stated" ties the transience of a flower’s bloom to the glow of a fading sunset, as the two unfold on the face of an inert mountain. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker personifies the mountain, giving it a face that is aware of time in motion: "And the Mountain to the Evening / Fit His Countenance – / Indicating by no Muscle / His Experience.”

43 The first of these poems opens, "There is a finished feeling / Experienced at Graves," and stands under the sign of the American Civil War. A breezy emotive tone in Dickinson’s thought on death imbues "A Moth the hue of this," an epigram implying its moth flies straight into a candle’s flame. Emotive tone turns solemn in the third poem, "On that dear Frame the Years had worn," which relates the elation of "We first experienced Light" to the pain of losing loved ones to death.

ability to grasp. No one sense alone, nor any one set of senses, suffices to explain experience, but rather varying combinations of them do.

If Dickinson’s senses of the word “experience” reveal core meanings in her vision of existence, this is so because “experience” and “existence” bear a close semantic relation. The tie is one of hyponymy, “the relation which holds between a more specific, or subordinate, lexeme and a more general, or superordinate lexeme” (Lyons, Semantics 291). The conceptually larger “existence” subsumes the conceptually smaller “experience.” If we seek still larger conceptual terms, we see that Dickinson’s senses of experience intertwine in the single braid formed by her ontology—what being is in her poetry—and by her epistemology—what is known of being, and how this is known, in her poetry. These two intertwining strands encoding experience as existence cannot be properly separated, except in the sense that epistemology presupposes being, or something to be known.

As to her ontology, being is, for Dickinson, many things. From the start, it is encounter with others and their discourse, with writers and with contemporaries. In “I think I was enchanted,” the rapt encounter with the poetry of Barrett Browning leads to the speaker’s decisive conversion to poetry and to her vocation for writing it. Being is rapt and enchanted. In addition to “I think I was enchanted,” the speaker in a poem not detailed above, “On that dear Frame the Years had worn” (Fr924; c.1865), recalls the moment when “We first experienced Light.” Being is perilous and painful. These attributes reappear, in a series of poems with “experience,” as “The Danger to be sane,” “Experience either and consume,” “Preappointed Pain,” “that precarious Gait,” and “Want – is a meagre Art.” Being is markedly female. This accounts for the “sombre Girl” who read “that Foreign Lady,” Barrett Browning, and for the allusions to Aurora Leigh in “I stepped from Plank to Plank.” Being is infused with deep emotion, as in “The Dark – felt beautiful” and “Pang is good / As near as Memory.” Being is motion, both unforeseen and known, not only in “Experience is the Angled Road” and “I stepped from Plank to Plank,” but in two other poems with “experience” not read above. Both written about 1863, “Forever – is composed of Nows” (Fr690) and “Bloom opon the Mountain stated” (Fr787C) conceive time as the fleeting experience of motion. And being, for Dickinson, ends with the solitary motion of death. “This Consciousness that is aware” foresees the soul alone on its way to death, and three poems with “experience” not discussed above, all written about 1865, also reflect on death: “There is a finished feeling” (Fr1092), “A Moth the hue of this” (Fr944), and “On that dear Frame the Years had worn” (Fr924). As to Dickinson’s epistemology, experience from the start is what we know, in the present and the past. In “I think I was enchanted,” it is the subject’s store of lived knowledge, and this sense reappears in “The Snow that never drifts” and “This Consciousness that is aware.” From the start, experience is ineffable, beyond the reach of complete naming,
and hence outstrips the bounds of all knowledge. Experience is a corrective for the mind’s errors in conjecture, and existence is thus given to misconstrual, to acts of misunderstanding that, more often than not, are the point of hermeneutic departure. This is evident in “Experience is the Angled Road,” where the mind prefers experience to its own speculation, and in another poem that includes the word “experience.” Written about 1863, “Triumph – may be of several kinds” (Fr680) adopts a typology to reflect on the divine, ultimately leaving the possibility of divine encounter open. And three senses of experience in Dickinson’s poems focus on how we know. “None can experience stint / Who Bounty – have not known” reveals inverse, reciprocal knowing. “The Snow that never drifts” shows the reciprocity of perception and cognition. And Dickinson’s epistemology prizes keen sense perception, as a way to embody knowledge of the world and of ourselves. Keen perception arose at the start in “I think I was enchanted,” where sight guides the spectacle of nature’s transformations, and “the meanest Tunes” turn into “Titanic Opera.” In the poet’s vivid lyric sensorium, and in her poems with the word “experience,” sense perception spans acute sight, the distinct smell of “fragrant snow” in a “Storm so spice,” kinesthesia in “The Days – to Mighty Metres stept” and “that precarious Gait,” and renewed hearing in the “Chant” and “Tune” of a bee and in “To pile like Thunder to its close.” Lyric perception is the subject’s projection, a part of what the lyric subject knows, in the manifold of experience that makes the life of being known.

When brought to bear on Dickinson’s senses of experience, poetic lexicography thus yields not only core meanings in the poet’s vision of existence, but also insight into her ontology and epistemology. This insight illuminates the thought and feeling of many other poems in the Dickinson corpus as a whole. Future readings in poetic lexicography, devoted to other distinctive or deeply significant words in the poet’s work, would yield similar or better results. Consider, for instance, “sound,” which leads us to such striking phrases as “Till I was out of sight, in sound” (Fr381B), where a voice would be heard, or “beings,” which reveals Dickinson’s hearing of existence. In “Being, but an Ear” (Fr340), we find an elegant, spellbinding figure of aural perception, one that points to Dickinson’s vocation for being a poet, as it arose in the “Titanic Opera” of “I think I was enchanted.”
Works Cited


