Self and Other

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7.

THE SEQUESTERED
SELF OF EMILY DICKINSON

Deprived of other Banquet
I entertained Myself—
At first—a scant nutrition —
An insufficient Loaf—

But grown by slender addings
To so esteemed a size
'Tis sumptuous enough for me—
And almost to suffice

A Robin's famine able—
Red Pilgrim, He and I—
A berry from our table
Reserve—for charity—

(#773)

"Deprived of other Banquet/I entertained Myself—." Emily Dickinson often felt deprived: "God gave a Loaf to every Bird—/But just a Crumb

—to Me—” (#791). Themes of scarcity and deprivation occur again and
again in her poetry, yet in the midst of this scarcity one unfailing source
of abundance is available: her imagination. Like the Spider Artist in two
of her poems (#605 and #1275), she weaves the delicate tapestries of her
poetry out of the abundance of her very self. In a sense, she feeds upon
herself: “I entertained Myself—/At first—a scant nutrition—/An insuffi-
cient Loaf—.” But with time comes accumulation: “. . . [the loaf] grown
by slender addings/ To so esteemed a size/ ’Tis sumptuous enough for me
—.” Here, as usual, her diet is high in irony. By “sumptuous” she means
“almost [able] to suffice/A Robin’s famine”—with a morsel left over for
charity—so that the complaint that God leaves her just a crumb remains
in play.

When Dickinson elects to write the poetry constituting her letter to
the world (“This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me—,”
#441), she chooses to accept the challenge of what she deems a life of
consequence:

One Life of so much Consequence!
Yet I—for it—would pay—
My Soul’s entire income—
In ceaseless—salary—.

(#270).

One reward of such a life of consequence, when the achievement is real,
must be the enhancement of self-esteem in a person who feels insuffi-
ciently loved, attended to, rewarded. What her life of consequence as a
poet provides is nothing less than the attention of monarchs: “But Mon-
archs—are perceptible—/Far down the dustiest Road!” (#270). Images of
exalted status recur in her poems, as in

’Tis little I—could care for Pearls—
Who own the ample sea—
Or Brooches—when the Emperor—
With Rubies—pelteth me—

Or Gold—who am the Prince of Mines—
Or Diamonds—when have I
A Diadem to fit a Dome—
Continual upon me—.

(#466)

These imagined experiences of exalted status and the plaintive objections
about God’s withholding of all but a crumb frequently involve the repre-
sentation of self in the form of metaphorical roles: the “Prince of Mines,” for example, and the Red Pilgrim (the robin)—a famished wayfarer in life.

Commentators on the life and work of Emily Dickinson have followed her lead by highlighting the many roles she attributes to herself. In providing contexts for these roles they tend to stress negative factors in Dickinson’s social environment and psychological makeup—even to the point of assuming the presence of psychotic disturbances. The discussion to follow emphasizes Dickinson’s adaptive maneuvers in the face of adversity. It contends that although her art may be regarded as a showcase full of her yearnings and conflicts, her poetry may more profitably be seen as constituting a privileged, protected realm—a sequestered realm—within which she finds space to establish a superordinate conception of herself, as Bard, sufficient to embrace her multifarious voices and roles, though without necessarily effecting an integration of them. Within this enabling space she can assert the truest, most essential aspects of her being, especially as they depend on her relationships to important others, including God. This same material also provides an occasion for examining certain problems in self theory, especially Winnicott’s contention that even in healthy persons there lies a secret, “sacred,” noncommunicating “core” at the center of the “true self”—a “secret self” within the self (1963).

Brinnin introduces us to “several strong and distinct Emily Dickinsons” (1960, 8–9; subsequent Brinnin quotations from 8–13). A role he associates more with legend than reality is Emily as The Nun in the Cloisters of Her Father’s House, a person who enacts in her poems “the bittersweet resignation of thwarted love” and who accepts marriage “to nothing but the universe.” This is Emily as The Perpetual Bride, forever dressed in white—as was her custom in later years. Closer to reality are Emily as Empress of Calvary (“Title divine is mine/The Wife without/The Sign/Acute degree/Conferred on me—/Empress of Calvary”), and Emily as “The Reclusive Bride of Silence,” a radiant but isolated girl “who tarry in the world like an ethereal visitor and associates on speaking terms with birds, bees, butterflies, lilacs, and gentians as her only equals.” Then there are Emily as Dutiful Daughter, as Affectionate Sister, and as Compassionate Neighbor. Already alluded to is what Brinnin typifies as The Sentimentalist Writer of Flowered Verses, who is closely related, in Brinnin’s view, to The Saucy Rebel in God’s Back Yard “who teases words into the shapes of rococo valentines.” She is a far cry from the Emily who tells
T. W. Higginson that her business is circumference, this being a Dickinson whose mind, for Brinnin, “plays like lightning between the immediate and the ultimate” in her poems about God and eternity. Even though they may often be grossly oversimplified, these rolelike constellations of selfhood do convey, as a group, some sense of the protean variety of Dickinson’s personae.

Feminist critics have been especially concerned in recent years with the multifariousness of Dickinson’s roles. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) look at her writing more as mimesis (enactment) than as poesis (making) because they regard her masks and poses, in life as in the poetry, as part of a concerted, liberating strategy for “a woman poet” in a repressive patriarchy. When they remark that “Emily Dickinson herself became a madwoman,” they see her as both cunning and victimized: she becomes “both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic, trapped in a room in her father’s house)” (pp. 583–86). In addition to The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar speak of a number of “impersonations” involving whiteness: The Little Maid in White, The Fierce Virgin in White, The Nun in White, The Bride in White, The Madwoman in White, The Dead Woman in White, and The Ghost in White, adding, “Dickinson seems to have split herself into a series of incubae haunting not just her father’s house but her own mind, for, as she wrote in one of her most openly confessional poems, ‘One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted’” (621–622). Other roles specified by authors represented in a collection of essays entitled Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson (Juhasz 1983) are The Priestess of Daily Domesticity (Gilbert), The Wayward Nun (Gilbert), Alice of Amherst: The Perpetual Child (Mossberg, alluding to Lewis Carroll’s Alice), and The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty (Keller, picking up on the playful note of self-deprecation sounded in one of Dickinson’s letters).

The editor of this collection insists on the marriage of gender and art: “The central assumption of feminist criticism is that gender informs the nature of art, the nature of biography, and the relation between them. Dickinson is a woman poet, and this fact is integral to her identity” (1). Something disjunctive may lurk in these remarks. Dickinson’s gender cannot be divorced from her social and psychological identities, to be sure. But the phrase “woman poet,” as employed by Juhasz, Gilbert, and Gubar operates in an ideologically exclusionary way. Many readers may prefer to see Dickinson as a poet who happens to be a woman rather than
simply as a *woman poet*. Later Juhasz stands on firmer ground when she observes that “woman” and “poet” are not to be viewed as mutually exclusive terms, which is very different from designating Dickinson as a “woman poet.” “From the feminist perspective,” Juhasz adds, “Dickinson’s life was neither a flight, nor a cop-out, nor a sacrifice, nor a substitution, but a strategy, a creation, for enabling her to become the person she was” (10). She quotes Adrienne Rich as saying that Dickinson’s poetry represents the work of a “mind engaged in a lifetime’s musing on essential problems of language, identity, separation, relationship, the integrity of the self; a mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shakespeare” (Juhasz, 10). The phrasing of this statement is notably free of gender markers. Obviously a great proportion of Dickinson’s poetry may legitimately be characterized as gender oriented insofar as it exhibits female roles and consciousness in various ways. Yet to say so should not obscure the fact that much of her work transcends gender in that it was evidently written for the world—that is, by a person, for people, as distinct from by a woman, for women.

Dickinson informed Higginson in one of her letters, “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person” (*Letters* 2: 412). Wolff writes about Dickinson’s supposed persons in terms of Voice rather than Role, remarking that the presence of many voices has sometimes puzzled readers: “One poem may be delivered in a child’s Voice; another in the Voice of a young woman scrutinizing nature and the society in which she makes her place. Sometimes the Voice is that of a woman self-confidently addressing her lover in the language of passion and sexual desire. At still other times, the Voice of the verse seems so precariously balanced at the edge of hysteria that even its calmest observations grate like the shriek of dementia” (1986, 177). When the speaker is a child, sometimes the child is a boy, not a girl, as in #986, where the voice says, “Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—/I more than once at Noon/Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash/Unbraiding in the Sun.” And in #1201 we have a disobedient boy who “Went to Heaven perhaps at Death/And perhaps he didn’t.” Quite often the voice we hear is an indeterminate one: “Many of Dickinson’s poems, especially the late poems, seem to issue from a speaker whose gender and station in life are indifferent” (239). This voice, which Wolff associates with Ecclesiastes, can be regarded as the voice of the Prophet, or omniscient Poet—a genderless voice issuing from afar, sometimes even from beyond the grave.
Commentaries alleging the presence of pathological elements in Dickinson's personality, such as the psychoanalytic biography by Cody (1971), call for a sharper scrutiny than the foregoing discussions of voices, roles, masks, poses, and personae. Broadly speaking, Cody regards Dickinson as falling within the stereotype of the sick genius. What he specifically claims is that "threatening personality disintegration compelled a frantic Emily Dickinson to create poetry—for her a psychosis-deflecting activity" (391). He further claims, but does not satisfactorily demonstrate, that "the letters, poems, and biographical data all indicate that during her psychotic breakdown [this "breakdown" being more in the nature of an inference than a fact] Emily Dickinson's unconscious life forged into awareness accompanied by the fear that aggressive and libidinal drives would get out of control" (404). Two flaws in Cody's argument need to be mentioned at this point. The first flaw is an inconsistency. He infers that Dickinson probably (he says, must have) experienced "what she interpreted as a cruel rejection by her mother" (2), but then he adds, lamely, "However, there exists no record of any concrete instance in which Mrs. Dickinson took such an attitude toward her daughter." Cody assumes that this "rejection" was experienced early, during the first two years, and he talks about it, along Freudian lines, almost entirely in terms of oral deprivation, citing, as supporting evidence, the presence of oral imagery in the poetry (naturally without entering into any speculations about how poets could possibly manage without using such imagery). A second and more serious flaw occurs when he writes, "And when Emily Dickinson says in a poem (#280, referring to herself): 'And then a Plank in Reason broke' (that is, rational faculties gave way to psychosis), why should we not believe her?" (29). Cody finds it convenient for his purposes to treat a figurative assertion as a literal one. He takes Dickinson's "supposed person" here as her real, whole self rather than as a representation of what was presumably only an image for an aspect of an emotion recollected in tranquility.

As for the already mentioned portrait of Dickinson as the madwoman in the attic, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) rely, in part, on Cody's book, first for the connection he tries to establish between psychosis and agoraphobia and second for the breakdown hypothesis (606, 625). In their view, "As a girl, Dickinson had begged to be kept from 'what they call household,' but ironically, as she grew older, she discovered that the price of her salvation was her agoraphobic imprisonment in her father's household, along with a concomitant exclusion from the passionate drama of
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adult sexuality” (595). What they choose to ignore, here, is that both of these behavioral patterns were essentially voluntary and were based on a more complex set of personal circumstances than their melodramatic metaphor (“agoraphobic imprisonment”) implies. Gilbert and Gubar write plausibly of a Soul/Goblin split in the poems (622–23), but they go on from there to assert that the speaker/adressee dichotomy in a poem alluding to the theme of suicide involves a “murderous madwoman” goblin, assuming, in the process, that anyone who even thinks of suicide, let alone writes a poem about such an impulse, must necessarily be categorically psychotic. The issue at hand can be summed up by suggesting that while no one on earth may be totally free of traces of psychotic experience, the ill-substantiated assertion that Emily Dickinson was virtually committable does not markedly enhance our understanding of the complexities of her personality.

Observations about neurotic features of Dickinson’s behavior have sometimes—but by no means always—been more meaningful. They generally focus on assumptions about repressed sexuality. Cody unsympathetically describes Dickinson in the 1860’s as “loveless [certainly untrue except in a narrow, sexual sense], excluded [it was she who limited her contact with others], almost burned out as a poet [demonstrably untrue], and reduced to the status of a queer, hypochondriacal, and depressed old maid” (1971, 438). He argues that she “avoided heterosexuality out of fear” (261), by which he means—mainly—that she identified with males rather than females (a contestable oversimplification), though he stops short of claiming she was homosexual (103). The primary manifestation of what Cody refers to as her “voracious love-hunger” (101) appears in what he takes to be her “predominantly ‘oral’ personality” (101), orality being, of course, essentially sexual (a “component- instinct”) in traditional psychoanalytic thinking.

Keller takes a much different route. In an audacious, inventive, but sometimes silly essay entitled “Notes on Sleeping with Emily Dickinson,” he openly celebrates the passion he finds in her work, saying, “The poems on sleeping with someone are instructions, I believe, on how to ‘take’ her. When she writes about wild nights, she is not only describing her ecstasy but also instructing us how to react to her, what to expect, what to get. She thus couples with the critic” (1983, 67). Keller suggests that “there may have been men in her mind but, except for God, there are hardly any men to speak of in her poetry. Much of her poetry is poetry in which she wishes there were, or she fantasizes about there being, or she documents
the absence of . . . Yet a man can put himself there as a reader quite easily.” Keller adds, “She created the space for someone to understand her, enclose her, love her. . . . She lets one in lovingly” (70). Keller arrives at a conclusion of sorts when he remarks, “Hard for a man to see, I think, what is erotic about Emily Dickinson’s poetry [all of which he lumps together at this point]. Having slept with her once, I found it more masturbatory than anything else. Her art, I think, became a kind of orgasm withheld, though lusting still after the concealed and tantalizing, after the incomprehensible, after fantasy. She plays, but she does not climax with you” (72). By this point, Keller’s readers may wonder whose fantasies he is examining, Dickinson’s or his own.

The reader of Keller’s earlier commentary on Dickinson (1979) gets a better sense of what he means by describing her art as “masturbatory” when he discusses, together, the two poems quoted side by side on page 144.

Keller argues, “Both phallic creatures are extremely attractive to her, even though she finds her genitals alarmed, feeling what she calls ‘tightly breathing/And Zero at the Bone’ in one case and ‘creeping blood’ in the other” (269). He sees her as both shocked and fascinated by the male erections, “aroused,” and even “penetrated” (“He fathomed me”). And yet, Keller goes on, “as much as she might desire it, she does not connect well, dismissing the encounter with the snake as merely a boy’s brief summertime adventure and the encounter with the worm-snake as merely a housewife’s daydream. There is no significance in the sex; it is fun and games” (269). What he means by “fun and games” emerges more clearly when he remarks, “The sex in her poems forms no program but is made up of individual bold moments, flashes of desire, mainly masturbatory” (270). After quoting “Wild Nights!—Wild Nights!/ Were I with thee/Wild Nights should be/Our luxury!” he adds, “She could play with it on wild nights in her poems without any consequences. It is, I believe, another of her areas of freedom” (271). Another instance of what he means he provides by quoting from #213: “Did the Harebell loose her girdle/To the lover Bee/Would the Bee the Harebell hallow/Much as formerly?” If I understand him, Keller cherishes the erotic playfulness he finds in some of Dickinson’s poems even as he limits his approbation because he feels the eroticism is “without any consequences,” only “fun and games.” His ambivalent epithet, “masturbatory,” expresses in non-technical terms his reservations about his perception of inhibition in Dickinson’s eroticism.
A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met him—did you not
His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn—
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature’s People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality—

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

In Winter in my Room
I came upon a Worm
Pink lank and warm
But as he was a worm
And worms presume
Not quite with him at home
Secured him by a string
To something neighboring
And went along.

A Trifle afterward
A thing occurred
I’d not believe it if I heard
But state with creeping blood
A snake with mottles rare
Surveyed my chamaber floor
In feature as the worm before
But ringed with power
The very string with which
I tied him—too
When he was mean and new
That string was there—

I shrank—“How fair you are”!
Propitiation’s claw—
“Afraid he hissed
Of me”?
“No cordiality”—
He fathomed me—
Then to a Rhythm Slim
Secreted in his Form
As Patterns swim
Projected him.

That time I flew
Both eyes his way
Lest he pursue
Nor ever ceased to run
Till in a distant Town
Towns on from mine
I set me down
This was dream—

Willbern (1989) deals with the same “snake poems” except that he does so mainly within the context of psychoanalytic theory and with considerably more finesse. Although his readings of the imagery coincide with
Keller's for the most part, Willbern is careful not to insist that the meanings of the poem are exclusively sexual in nature. He construes "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" as relating to the experience of "the momentous (re)discovery of genital difference": "A reading after Freud, then, reconstructs Emily Dickinson's famous poem about a snake as a poem about the female discovery of genital difference, perceived as an anxious absence. The traditional psychoanalytic terms here are castration anxiety and penis envy" (167). Willbern remarks that Dickinson "is not a barefoot boy, with an easily secured appendage of mastery; in fact she possesses (or feels she possesses) an absence, a lack [in the Lacanian sense]: 'Zero [no/thing] at the [pubic] Bone.'" He further suggests, following Wolff's interpretation, that the poem registers anxiety concerning "male sexuality or even phallic brutality" in addition to concern about the attributes of her own body. Willbern employs these psychobiographical interpretations as illustrations of his assumption that Freud's depiction of a dynamically repressed unconscious whose "deepest roots" emerge from "sexual life" still constitutes the "bedrock" of psychoanalytic theory (160). That is an assumption I have repeatedly called into question in this book. The issue immediately at hand is not the presence of sexual imagery in the poems mentioned but rather the potential distortion of the larger psychobiographical picture that results when only two poems, in Willbern's paper, or just a few, in Keller's discussion, are treated as substantially representative of the mind of the author. Of the nearly two thousand poems she composed, only a small percentage can be considered "love poems" by any ordinary measure, and of this limited group only a very small fraction can legitimately be characterized as erotic to any significant degree. The poetry of Emily Dickinson simply does not transact much of what Freud called "the sexual business." What it does transact, pervasively, is that commerce of the mind known in psychoanalysis as object relations.

Bollas observes that what we call self "is the history of many internal relations" and that each individual experiences innumerable "parts" of the self "articulated through the interplay of internal and external reality" (1987, 9). We know enough about Dickinson's childhood to begin to understand how the multifarious aspects of her self exhibited in her poetry constitute permutations of early interpersonal relationships. We know enough to begin to appreciate what she was driving at when she told Higginson, "Could you tell me what home is?" "I never had a mother. I
suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled” (Letters 2: 475).

Cody, who intuitively appreciates the gravity of these remarks, tries to force their implications into his traditional explanatory framework by arguing that the most powerful undercurrent in Dickinson’s personality was “a ravenous search for affection,” that she “craved love,” and that “her insatiable love needs and their frustration saturate the poetry and the letters” (1971, 39)—which is partly correct, of course, except for the negatively toned phrasing and Cody’s tendency to set up equivalencies between love and nourishment, and love and sexuality. As was mentioned earlier, he hypothecates that Dickinson probably experienced “what she interpreted as a cruel rejection by her mother,” yet he asserts that “there exists no record of any concrete instance in which Mrs. Dickinson took such an attitude” (2). Although there may be no record of any negative attitude of the mother toward her daughter, there was in fact a situation that Emily almost certainly did construe as implying a cruel rejection by her mother.

Emily Dickinson suffered a separation from her mother for a period of three or four months beginning at the age of two years and two months, that is, precisely during that phase of development when, according to Bowlby, the pain of separation is most likely to be acute and the effects most lasting. The occasion for this separation was the difficult birth of Emily’s baby sister, Lavinia, and its aftermath. Because Emily’s aunt, Lavinia Norcross, could not come to Amherst to aid her sister during the postpartum period, Emily was sent to stay with her Aunt Lavinia, who would probably have seemed a virtual stranger to Emily at the beginning of her stay. What complicates the emotional picture presented by this situation is that Emily behaved well under the circumstances, as one would not have expected from a securely attached child. Emily did not appear to miss her mother but only her brother, Austin. That Emily soon became attached to her aunt seems apparent from what Aunt Lavinia writes to her sister: “She thought everything of me—when any thing went wrong she would come to me” (in Cody 1971, 51). In contrast to the devoted attentiveness of Aunt Lavinia, here is a portrait of Emily’s mother: “A talented housewife whose custards and baked goods would be remembered with pleasure, Mrs. Dickinson was nonetheless isolated by her tearful withdrawals and obscure maladies. Although she was undoubtedly loving and well intentioned, she did not have an intimate relationship
with any of her three children. Despite her constant presence, there was an abiding sense of emotional separation” (Wolff 1986, 64).

Matching all of these circumstances with Emily Dickinson’s adult behavior suggests certain inferences about her emotional history. Emily probably did experience pain on being separated from her mother, hating her for the rupture without showing it. It seems likely that she had already put some emotional distance between herself and a mother who, though devoted, was not likely, judging from what we know about her phlegmatic personality, to have been a sufficiently sensitive, responsive one in terms of what Stern calls “affect attunement” (especially in view of the mother’s tendency to be depressed and the extraordinary sensitivity of her daughter’s constitutional endowment). If Emily did form a strong attachment to her Aunt Lavinia, she must have re-experienced the pangs of separation once again on being parted from her affectionate aunt. Emily undoubtedly relied heavily for support throughout her life on her siblings: “The children had learned early to band together fiercely because Mother and Father were generally so unavailable to them. . . . Emily Dickinson could feel she was securely herself only when Austin and Vinnie were there to listen and respond to her meditations or to share the complex sense of humor that never [for them] required explanation” (Wolff 1986, 109–10). The fervor of Emily’s quest for attention and affection from various people in her youth, so evident in her early correspondence, probably represents an attempt, well within the bounds of normal social behavior, to seek compensation for her sense of being “deprived” of sufficient emotional contact in her childhood. That Emily repeatedly wove the threads of her attachments, to males and females, real and imaginary, into the warp of her poetry appears to be beyond question.

It is not true that Emily never had a mother to hurry home to when she was troubled. Her father was her mother in this regard, as she reveals in another letter to Higginson, for whom—transferentially—she reserves so many intimate disclosures: “I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none” (Letters 2: 517–18). The outrageous pun in “awful” bears witness to her ambivalence: her worship and her pain. She idealizes her father, yet resents his emotional distance. She also rebels against his authority in unobtrusive ways, just as she does against the God of her religious upbringing. One hint of her rebelliousness emerges in a letter to
Austin: “We do not have many jokes tho’ now [that you are away]; it is pretty much all sobriety, and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it’s pretty much all real life [that matters]. Father’s real life and mine sometimes come into collision, but as yet [we] escape unhurt!” (Letters 1: 161). To Higginson she wrote, “My father was not severe I should think but remote” (Letters 2: 404). He was emotionally remote even when he was around, apparently, but mostly he was away: at the office, or in Boston, or in the legislature. “My Mother does not care for thought—and Father [is] too busy with his Briefs—to notice what we do” (Letters 2: 404). The only member of the family Edward Dickinson noticed much was his son, Austin. He doted on him. As Emily writes to her brother, “Father says your letters are altogether before Shakespeare, and he will have them published to put in our library (Letters 1: 122). But there is no evidence that Edward Dickinson ever gave any heed to his daughter’s literary efforts. The day after he died she wrote, “His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists” (Letters 2: 528).

The act of writing, especially letters and poetry, constitutes a special feature of Emily’s relationship to her beloved brother. When Austin sends her a poem he composed, she responds (at the age of twenty-one) with rivalry masked by affectionate playfulness: “And Austin is a Poet. . . . Out of the way, Pegasus, Olympus enough ‘to him,’ and just say to those ‘nine muses’ that we have done with them!” She continues: “Now Brother Pegasus, I’ll tell you what it is—I’ve been in the habit myself of writing some few things, and it rather appears to me that you’re getting away [with] my patent, so you’d better be somewhat careful, or I’ll call the police!” (Letters 1: 235).

Wolff helps us to understand the depth of the emotional issues underlying Emily’s badinage. She was an ambitious young woman disenfranchised by a patriarchal family and culture. “How, then, could Emily Dickinson assert an empowered, autonomous ‘self’ while continuing to live in Father’s house?” Wolff answers, “Having forfeited society’s cooperation in defining self when she rejected the roles usually available to women, she discovered that this ‘I,’ the ‘poet,’ was in some ways better than the roles offered by Amherst to anyone (man or woman), a secret, privileged inner self that could observe life to analyze and criticize with complete safety” (1986, 128). Emily also understood that, although Austin was the indisputable heir to the public offices and material prizes
constituting the patriarchal House of Dickinson, "her writing was a profound act of rebellion against Father and an unbeatable form of competition with Austin: in the matter of authorship, she intended to win unquestioned ascendancy" (130).

When Wolff employs the term "self" in discussing Dickinson's life, she uses the term in a general-purpose, non-technical sense. A couple of noteworthy exceptions occur in the passage quoted above when Wolff writes about Dickinson's discovery of "a secret, privileged inner self that could observe life to analyze and criticize with complete safety," and when, more particularly, she mentions a sequestered self shortly thereafter: "Dickinson's poetry apotheosizes this central human paradox: the poignant, inevitable isolation of each human being—the loneliness and the yearning to be seen, acknowledged, and known—on the one hand; on the other, the gleeful satisfaction in keeping one part of the self sequestered, sacred, uniquely powerful, and utterly inviolate—the incomparable safety in retaining a secret part of the 'self' that is available to no one save self" (130). At this point in her book Wolff draws directly on the psychoanalytic model of selfhood presented by Winnicott in a paper about communication. The most essential passage reads,

I suggest that in health there is a core to the personality that corresponds to the true self of the split personality; I suggest that this core never communicates with the world of perceived objects, and that the individual person knows that it must never be communicated with or be influenced by external reality. . . . Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, that [at the core of] each individual is an isolate [entity], permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound. . . . At the centre of each person is an incommunicado element, and this is sacred and most worthy of preservation. . . . Traumatic experiences that lead to the organization of primitive defences belong to the threat to the isolated core, the threat of its being found, altered, communicated with. The defence consists in a further hiding of the secret self. . . . Rape and being eaten by cannibals, these are mere bagatelles as compared with the violation of the self's core, the alteration of the self's central elements by communication seeping through the defences. (1963, 187)

Readers familiar with Winnicott's other work (as Wolff gives no sign of being; she cites only this one paper, only at this point in her book) will realize at once that the ideas mentioned derive in part from the rather special conception of selfhood, presented three years earlier by Winnicott
(1960), in the form of the dichotomous model he calls the True and False Self. These readers may also notice that the self-with-a-hidden-core is predicated on what is understood to be an unintegrated, pathological personality structure (the hidden core, as he says, corresponding to the true self "of the split personality"). There are certain difficulties and inconsistencies here. To begin with, Winnicott generalizes a model derived from a primitive defense (splitting) in a way that makes its key feature representative for all individuals, that is, these noncommunicating cores lurk at the center of even healthy persons. Is this a universal paradox, as he implies, or simply a contradiction in his conceptualization? A related contradiction crops up on the next page of his paper when Winnicott reminds his readers that normal ego development, including a sense of reality, depends on "communicating with subjective phenomena," meaning subjective objects, including interpersonal communication (1960, 188); this position implies that the absence of communication and interaction is unhealthy, so why should a healthy self possess a secretive, noncommunicating core?

The term "core" presents two obstacles to creating an acceptable model of selfhood: mythical centeredness and misplaced concreteness. When Winnicott speaks of the danger of "the violation of the self's core," for example, this reifying statement differs radically from speaking, more abstractly, of an experience that violates an individual's senses of security, self-esteem, and identity (assuming "identity" to be an operational term implying systemic integrity). The most serious deficiency of Winnicott's assumptions about a precious, sacred, secret "core" of selfhood that "must never be communicated with or be influenced by external reality" can be understood in the light of the more dyadic model of self-development exemplified by Stern's discussion (1985, 101-11) of what he calls "we-experiences," which are essentially shared, joyful, and authentic experiences. The problem is that when Wolff buys into Winnicott's assumptions about a secret-self core, she purchases more than she bargains for.

The valuable elements of Wolff's application of Winnicott's model are not represented by her references to a secret, inner self, or to what she calls the "central human paradox" of the "inevitable isolation of each human being—the loneliness" of a self that is "utterly inviolate... available to no one" save the self itself. The valuable elements of Wolff's application of the model lie in her emphasis on a privileged self that can observe self and society "with complete safety." This is a sequestered self but not a totally
disengaged, isolated one. It is a self “yearning to be seen, acknowledged, and known” — and succeeding! When I say “succeeding” I mean succeeding artistically in communicating with the world of her imagined audience. Dickinson’s self is not a secret one “available to no one save herself.” On the contrary, she enjoys access to all aspects of her personality and she manages, magnificently, to share these aspects of herself with her audience. We need to understand that sequestration is a means to the end of enabling her to compose poetry (essentially an individual task as distinguished from an emotionally isolated one). It provides her with a tranquil “potential space” where she can make contacts with those aspects of her self and her relationships with important others by no means readily negotiated, at least by her, in ordinary social space. The prototype for this kind of playful, creative activity, as Winnicott, Mahler, and others tell us, is the sequestered playspace children find when they feel secure by virtue of the presence or nearness of their mothers — a secure space mature artists may be said to have internalized. As Winnicott well knew, emotional isolation does not engender creativity. The way that children learn to tolerate being alone — alone enough to play creatively — is in the presence of their mothers: “Thus the basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present” (1958, 30).

This is not to say that Dickinson never feels degrees of loneliness and emotional deprivation as a result, in part, of her chosen path, but only that “Deprived of other Banquet,” she entertains herself. As poem #777 reveals, she fears loneliness, as we all do:

The Loneliness One dare not sound—
And would as soon surmise
As in its Grave go plumbing
To ascertain the size—.

She fears

The Horror not to be surveyed—
But skirted in the Dark—
With Consciousness suspended—
And Being under Lock—.

But she recognizes that this loneliness has different potentials, one being ultimate isolation, perhaps that of madness, and the other that of illumination, or soul-making:
I fear me this—is Loneliness—
The Maker of the soul
Its Caverns and its Corridors
Illuminate—or seal—.

By staying at home—in deliberate, measured isolation from others but not from family—she creates a privileged abode characterized by imagination, beauty, and voluntary access to the outer world; at the same time, this world is sheltered and secure:

I dwell in Possibility—
A Fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—.

As for Dickinson’s so-called agoraphobia, it should be remembered that in her youth she was nothing if not sociable and outgoing; that she was never, at any time in her life, intellectually isolated from the world of culture; that the onset of her reclusiveness was gradual, as Lavinia stresses; that her eye trouble may have been a contributing factor in causing her to avoid people; that she did not isolate herself from members of her immediate family; that even in her forties she was attractive enough as a woman to receive a proposal of marriage from the eminent Judge Otis Lord; and that even in her late years she maintained significant emotional contact, mainly through correspondence, with people who continued to be important to her.

The contact was important but so was the distance. In the same letter in which she wrote to Higginson, in her humble yet queenly way, “Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House in town,” she also wrote, “A letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend” (Letters 2: 460). Distanced relationships maintained through written communication allow her the security of her chamber and at the same time enable her to be more at liberty, more spontaneous, more herself than she could manage face to face. An early hint of this preference appears in a chatty letter to her brother.
written when she is twenty: "We miss you more and more, we do not become accustomed to separation from you. . . . and then again I think that it is pleasant to miss you if you must go away, and I would not have it otherwise, not even if I could" (Letters 1: 160–61). What appears to be a simple contradiction or a masochistic desire, superficially considered, may in fact reveal a form of object-relational behavior evolving from the early emotional distancing from her mother, the connection-at-a-distance with Aunt Lavinia, the distanced intimacy of her experience of living with an emotionally remote father, and the experience of many other situations, known and unknown, such as the frequent experience of losing friends and relatives by death (with astonishing frequency), the “loss” of people she felt close to in her youth who moved away from Amherst, sometimes because of matrimony, and the sense of losing suitors, whether because of their apathy or her ambivalence. Separation and loss become major themes in her poetry, as in "My life closed twice before its close—" (#1732), which ends grimly:

Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

Yet closeness could be suffocating, as this note to Susan Gilbert Dickinson implies: “I must wait a few Days before seeing you—You are too momentous. But remember it is idolatry, not indifference” (Letters 2: 631).

Wolff helps us to understand some of the biographical coordinates of the theme of distance in Dickinson’s life and art. Instead of matrimony “she embraced the vocation of poet and took up battle with the Lord. . . . She chose words rather than people as her ultimate source of comfort, and she valued the creation of a permanent, unchanging Voice over the shifting, unpredictable relationships that make up a varied ordinary life. Instead of descendants, she would have readers” (1986, 386). Wolff points out that Dickinson’s love poetry builds on separation: “The same poetry that postulates marriage as the ideal also accepts as a given that this ‘marriage’ can never take place. It is not that the lovers are joined only to discover that they are unhappy together; rather, two lovers, perfectly matched and deeply in love, are not permitted to remain together” (387). Absence, or distance, appears to be an “enabling virtue” in her relationships (390). “Deep affection for anyone outside the immediate family and passionate love both”—even for Judge Lord—“necessarily entail separation” (404).
Dickinson remarks that as a child she was “always attached to Mud, because of what it typifies—also, perhaps, a Child’s tie to primeval Pies” (Letters 2: 576). When she graduated from making mud pies to creating poems, she continued to make an investment of self in her creations. To be sound, the investments had to possess psychological integrity:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend—
Or the most agonizing Spy—
An Enemy—could send—

Secure against its own—
No treason it can fear—
Itself—its Sovereign—of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe—.

(#683)

One mark of the consistency of the psychological integrity of self exhibited in these poems is that she holds nothing back—not in any of the poems that matter. There is nothing essentially hidden or secret in her poetic representations of self and other.

Of the handful of poems especially illuminating with regard to Dickinson’s use of her self as an object that remain to be discussed, the two “Dollie poems” possess psychological interest as illustrations of transitional phenomena. Emily, at the age of twenty, alludes to a doll in the context of separation when she writes to Austin about how much she misses him. After concocting a playful fantasy about waiting for him at the gate, she writes, “If I hadn’t been afraid that you would ‘poke fun’ at my feelings, I had written a sincere letter, but since the ‘world is hollow, and Dollie is stuffed with sawdust,’ I really do not think we had better expose our feelings” (Letters 1: 112). The first Dollie poem raises the question of the fidelity of the subjective object’s attachment to the articulating self:

You love me—you are sure—
I shall not fear mistake—
I shall not cheated wake—
Some grinning morn—
To find the Sunrise left—
An Orchards—unbereft—
And Dollie—gone!
I need not start—you’re sure—
That night will never be—
When frightened—home to Thee I run—
To find the windows dark—
And no more Dollie—mark—
Quite none?

(#156)

The final stanza admonishes Dollie to “Be sure you’re sure” and, if not, to tell her now. The other Dollie poem, written from the perspective of a child dying in a state of great anxiety, stresses the sense of security Dollie’s presence will insure:

Dying? Dying in the night!
Won’t somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow?

And “Jesus”? Where is Jesus gone?
They said that Jesus—always came—
Perhaps he doesn’t know the House—
This way, Jesus, Let him pass!

Somebody run to the great gate
And see if Dollie’s coming! Wait!
I hear her feet upon the stair!
Death won’t hurt—now Dollie’s here!

(#158)

The psychological interest of the next poem lies in Dickinson’s imaginative identification with the caretaking role of Mother Nature:

Nature—the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child—
The feeblest—or the waywardest—
Her Admonition mild—.

(#790)

This idealized portrait of a maternalized nature concludes, after two intervening stanzas:

Her Voice among the Aisles
Incite the timid prayer
Of the minutest Cricket—
To most unworthy Flower—
When all the Children sleep—
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps—
Then bending from the Sky—

With infinite Affection—
And infiniter Care—
Her Golden finger on Her lip—
Wills Silence—Everywhere—.

If the psychological relationship of self to environment does possess the object-relational valency attributed to it in the previous chapter, then Dickinson's attachment to, and identification with, a natural environment perceived as responsive and protecting, as in the poem above, contradicts the absoluteness of her claim to Higginson, "I never had a mother" (*Letters* 2: 475). While her easy, tonic identifications with emblematic creatures, such as robins and hummingbirds, exhibit a range of emotional states, they are generally positive and sometimes even ecstatic in their representation of the creatures' experience of their natural environment, as in,

I taste a liquor never brewed—
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air—am I—
And Debauchee of Dew—
Reeling—thro endless summer days—
From inns of Molten blue—.

(#214)

The more austere vision of selfhood exhibited in the following poem shows another, probably more representative, side of Dickinson:

I think the Hemlock likes to stand
Upon a Marge of Snow—
It suits his own Austerity—
And satisfies an awe

That men, must slake in Wilderness—
And in the Desert—cloy—
An instinct for the Hoar, the Bald—
Lapland's—necessity—
The Hemlock's nature thrives—on cold—
The Gnash of Northern winds
Is sweetest nutriment—to—him—
His best Norwegian Wines—.

This and the previously quoted poems feature identifications by the poet with plants and creatures of the natural environment. The poetic renderings of these identifications can be understood, object-relationally, as handlings of aspects of self that reflect earlier relational experiences in the sense articulated by Bollas: “Our handling of our self as an object partly inherits and expresses the history of our experience as the parental object [as the parent’s object], so that in each adult it is appropriate to say that certain forms of self perception, self facilitation, self handling, and self refusal express the internalized parental process still engaged in the activity of handling the self as an object” (1987, 51).

In Dickinson’s poetry these “handlings” are various in tone: sometimes peaceful, sometimes ecstatic, sometimes triumphant, often austere. And often agonized, as in “I like a look of Agony,/Because I know it’s true—” (#241). And often numb, as in “Pain—has an Element of Blank” (#650). These poems may also be regarded as exemplifying manifestations of what Bollas calls “the aesthetic moment,” which he thinks of as involving “an evocative resurrection of an early ego condition often brought on by a sudden and uncanny rapport with an object, a moment when the subject is captured in an intense illusion of being selected by the environment for some deeply reverential experience. . . . It is a pre-verbal, essentially pre-representational registration of the mother’s presence” (1987, 39). The term “aesthetic moment” presumably applies both to the poet’s exercise of the creative process and the reader’s experience of literary work.

Richard Chase remarks that what interests Dickinson most is “the achievement of status through crucial experiences” (1951, 121), the achievement, by undergoing pain, of the exalted status of Queen of Calvary, for instance. Perhaps the most remarkable group of her poems exhibiting the theme of exalted status revolves around the achievement of some form of immortality by the process of dying, as in “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (#280), “I died for Beauty” (#449), “I heard a Fly buzz— when I died—” (#465), and “Because I could not stop for Death” (#712). References to eternity and immortality often remain ambiguous in such poems in that they presumably refer to artistic as well as spiritual immortality. In any case, the transformation from the precarious state of
life into the more stable state involving a permanent relation to God may be understood to represent, in terms of psychobiography, Emily's achievement of recognition by her father, certainly, and perhaps by her mother as well—the achievement of immortality as a poet being a permutation of this need to be recognized by important others.

Dickinson discovered that the path to her complex experience of recognition ran through the woods of sequestration. Freud would have thought that path a highly overdetermined one. In terms of a contemporary paradigm, it was not so much overdetermined as highly probable that an individual in Dickinson's circumstances would learn to make a virtue of emotional distance and psychological autonomy. Deprived of other banquet, she entertained herself. She did so by writing poems. She persisted until her initially "insufficient Loaf" had "grown by slender addings" to "so esteemed a size" that it became "sumptuous" enough for her—and a feast for posterity.