TESTS OF ORIGINAL RELATION:
RE-VISIONING “DEATH” IN THE POETRY OF
EMILY DICKINSON AND EDGAR ALLAN POE

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Triangulating the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe through Emerson’s vision of “an original relation to the universe” allows reconsideration of the ways in which language can be used to confront and consider philosophical truths. Rather than read the presence of death in Dickinson and Poe as morbid curiosity or reflection on the moment of death itself, this project considers how the prevalence of “death” testifies to either unclaimed or rejected belief. As poems become tests of original relation, Dickinson and Poe help readers consider how selves live in relation to thought.

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Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and a philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? … Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*
I. Emerson’s Vision

In *Nature*, Emerson asks why we should not “enjoy an original relation to the universe” as if it sat present before us, and all we need do is embrace it. For Emerson, perhaps this was not so far from the truth. His belief in an “original relation” meant perceiving a universal unity—seeing it, knowing it, and enacting it. In Chapter I of *Nature*, Emerson writes:

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.1

Emerson suggests, in becoming a “transparent eye-ball,” that he can see (“all”) and experience unity with “the Universal Being” whose “currents circulate” through him, as he is “uplifted into infinite space.” In this infinite space, distinctions between individuals become extraneous: “The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.”2 In saying, “I am nothing,” “I see all,” Emerson also smashes his “self” into oblivion while transforming it (by “seeing all” and becoming a “transparent eye-ball”) into a vessel for receiving transcendent knowledge as “part or particle” of a Universal Being. Emerson contends that it is the poet “whose eye can integrate all the parts”3—those disparate threads of being that separate “friend” from “acquaintance” and “I” from “infinite.” It is the poet’s ability to see how these parts unify.

Emerson elaborates in “The Poet” that there is also a difference between “true” poets and poets who are merely “contemporary” and not “eternal.”4 The mark of the true, eternal poet belongs to

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one who “sings” of what one sees, and not to one who is merely the “child of music.”\(^5\) The distinction lies in the poet’s ability to communicate or share transcendent knowledge:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, — a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.\(^6\)

The poet who is a child of music is not, for Emerson, a poet who sees. The child of music—rather than focus on form—places primacy on thought and uses form to capture thoughts that communicate the true nature of being. True nature (that which exists in original relation) reflects Emerson’s notion of a universal unity, which is known through intuitive vision of it. In order to be a true poet, one must apprehend transcendent knowledge and communicate that vision so others might receive it. This is what Emerson means by the “thought is prior to the form”: the thought—the vision—dictates the form, while the form without the thought is not true poetry.

The poet, then, in creating true poetry, must rely on knowledge transmitted through something higher than sense. In Nature, Emerson turns away from a Lockean “Understanding” of existence with the notion of transcendent knowledge, which challenges the position that one can acquire truth only through ordinary (physical/sensory) experiences and reflection on those experiences.\(^7\) Emerson’s image of the transparent eye-ball helps establish a distinction between

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\(^5\) Emerson, “The Poet,” 218.

\(^6\) Emerson, “The Poet,” 218.

\(^7\) Locke describes “the understanding” as the site in the mind where ideas are sensed and perceived via “sensation,” which is “such an impression or motion, made in some part of the body” (120). According to Locke, impressions are “made on our senses by outward objects, that the mind seems first to employ itself in such operations as we call perception, remembering, consideration, reasoning, etc.” (120). The origin of all knowledge is dependent upon sensory perception and the mind’s ability to “reflect on its own operations” (120). Emerson rejected this view, suggesting instead that a person could discover knowledge through vision imparted via intuitive reasoning, which was not dependent upon sensory knowledge alone. In Nature, Emerson distinguishes between Locke’s idea of “Understanding” and “Reason,” or what Emerson terms the ability to gain knowledge through intuitive means. Reason allows the “sensual man” to conform things to thoughts rather than thoughts to things (146). See: Emerson, Nature, 146 and John Locke, An Essay concerning Human Understanding, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 2004), 120.
Transcendent “vision” and Romantic “imagination” with a pivot toward Idealism. Imagination is generative; vision is received, and then translated. As a reaction to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, Idealism linked Romantic and Enlightenment ideas, but could not reconcile the simultaneous objectivity and subjectivity that Emerson’s transparent eye-ball image marries. In becoming a transparent eye-ball, the self is transformed, allowing it to both receive objective vision and communicate that vision subjectively, to the extent that subjectivity is constituted in and by the originality of the poet’s voice. The poet is a “seer,” then, in that s/he derives poetry from a received vision, and is a “sayer” and a “namer” in communicating that vision in a way that “represents beauty.”

In Chapter VI of Nature, Emerson makes a distinction between the poet and the philosopher only to the extent that “the poet delights us by animating nature like a creator, with his own thoughts,” but “differs from the philosopher” in that “the one proposes Beauty as his

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8 Michelle Kohler suggests that Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “willingness to make spiritual leaps within philosophical discourse” “freed Emerson and his coterie to make their own use of German ideas” (33), which Emerson was exposed to, in part, through a survey of German Idealism in Frederic Henry Hedge’s 1833 review of Coleridge in the Christian Examiner (31). Kohler cites Leon Chai in exploring the possibility that Emerson’s unique shift toward Idealism—his “pivot to pure seeing”—resulted in part from a misinterpretation of Fichte that Emerson absorbed through Hedge’s review (31). See: Michelle Kohler, Miles of Stare: Transcendentalism and the Problem of Literary Vision in Nineteenth-Century America (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 31-3.

9 Emerson writes that the “imagination may be defined to be, the use which the Reason makes of the material world,” but Emerson’s use of imagination is not the same as the Romantic use of the term, which conflates it with the expression of feeling. For Emerson, imagination subordinates “nature for the purposes of expression, beyond all poets” (146)—the expression of not merely feeling, but truth. Emerson’s use of “beyond” points to a truth that exists outside of the self; therefore, outside of the individual’s feeling. Vision is what allows communication of that truth. Intuitive reasoning, therefore, is not as emotionally subjective as Romantic intuition, though expression of an intuited vision does become subjective and can elicit emotion. Since Emerson’s “imagination” subordinates and communicates vision, Emerson’s notion of imagination becomes a more empirical process than Romantic imagination, since truths attained through vision are “lifted from the ground and afloat before the eye” (146), and the received vision is communicated as one makes use of “the material world” through imagination. See: Emerson, Nature, 146.

10 Kohler contends that the German idealists “wanted to bring together objective and subjective modes of apprehension,” but could “only claim that any synthesis between these modes was a synthesis the imagination constitutes, rather than one that constitutes the imagination” (30). To assert otherwise, Kohler suggests, “would have required ‘the deliberate renunciation’ of formal philosophy that Chai assigns to Emerson, a move the German idealists were not willing to make” (30).

main end; the other Truth.” Here, when Emerson says the poet “delights by animating nature like a creator,” he bolsters his idea that the poet receives a vision that is not his, per se, but communicates it “with his own thoughts” (though the distinction between creator and created also becomes somewhat difficult to appreciate if we remember that the “I” is “nothing” when it is united with the Universal Being). The distinction only matters in the particular way the poet—in his individual capacity to be a “part or particle”—communicates that which he knows to be true. In this way, Emerson’s poet is also a philosopher:

The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both. Is not the charm of one of Plato’s or Aristotle’s definitions, strictly like that of the Antigone of Sophocles? It is, in both cases, that a spiritual life has been imparted to nature; that the solid seeming block of matter has been pervaded and dissolved by a thought; that this feeble human being has penetrated the vast masses of nature with an informing soul, and recognised itself in their harmony, that is, seized their law.13

Emerson, in claiming that the poet is also a philosopher—in having “an eye that can integrate all parts”—suggests that the poet’s eye can know the law upon which all “phenomena can be predicted” and communicate that knowledge which is, in its truth, beautiful.14 If poetry is philosophy, and captures truth, “vision” also suggests empirical witnessing. This is an important distinction, because truth then becomes empirical and not simply imagined.15 The image of the

12 Emerson, Nature, 147.
13 Emerson, Nature, 147.
14 Emerson, Nature, 147.
15 Kohler suggests that “for all the effort [Emerson] puts into disembodying the eyeball, it is a transparent eyeball; the figure inevitably calls attention to the physicality of sight and the presence of the body” (24). The eye-ball, then, in being a physical entity, itself highlights the empirical nature of Reason and vision. Kohler offers a detailed exploration of the paradoxical eyeball image, noting that “eye,” rather than “eyeball” “would have yielded a more metaphysical tone”; but Emerson’s use of eye-ball is “wholly, even grotesquely, physiological” (24). This leads Kohler to the claim that “Emerson’s epistemology is as much an empiricization of European romanticism as it is a romanticization of New England empiricism” (24), which allows Emerson to articulate “the nonempirical Reason in terms of an empirical metaphor” (24). Kohler suggests it is the “paradoxical epistemology” captured in the image of the transparent eye-ball that “defines Emerson’s pivot from his European forebears” and “forms the crux of a set of new problems with which his American contemporaries and descendants (and, indeed, Emerson himself) repeatedly contend” (25). See: Kohler, 24-5.
eye-ball simultaneously suggests observable truth while leaving the poet’s ability to subjectively communicate it intact (despite the vision itself not being similarly subjective). But why is the poet uniquely (or even best) equipped to communicate these visions? Perhaps because, Emerson suggests, poetic vision needs no mediation by imagination or sense. It is immediately apprehendable; it accesses truth in a way other instruments cannot.\(^\text{16}\) Emerson’s poetic prose rhetorically bypasses conventions of philosophical discourse (namely in its lack of logical stability) and allows for both a conceptually apprehendable and logically confounding rendering of truth.\(^\text{17}\)

Since Emerson himself dexterously maneuvers around the requirements of philosophical discourse through the poetic application of prose, poetry affords opportunities to challenge his vision in ways that philosophical discourse—with its disciplinary restrictions—does not. In the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe, “death” becomes a poetic device for rendering tests, made available to the reader, which explore the enactability of an Emersonian original relation to the universe. Enactability becomes a poetic litmus test of Emerson’s truth; however, since enactability is rooted in self-simultaneity (which I will discuss at length), it becomes problematic for both poets’ speakers to varying degrees.

In using death to test the enactability of Emerson’s “I” (and eye—the transcendent vision), Dickinson and Poe confront thought and language in ways that help us consider how selves might struggle to “see” or express the original relation Emerson says we should readily

\(^\text{16}\) Vision “looks to the self-evident; it instantly obtains its object, which is matter and poetic language at once” (Kohler, 31). Kohler’s words suggest that the simultaneity of empirical and non-empirical witnessing allows poetic language to access truth in a unique way that “needs no mediating tool or discourse” (31), since poetry is both the means of communicating vision and part or particle of the vision itself.

\(^\text{17}\) Kohler suggests it is the visual figures (the eye, primarily) that “provide the rhetorical means to circumvent the requirements of philosophical discourse and to posit the simultaneity of empirical and transcendental apprehension” (31). Poetic language, then, in resulting from the eye-ball’s vision, becomes an effective rhetorical device for expressing and sharing knowledge of original relation, since it captures the paradox of simultaneous objectivity/subjectivity.
enjoy. Rather than default to enjoyment, both poets take their tests into an unsettling territory by encouraging us to consider how sustainable or desirable Emerson’s truth might be. Indeed, what results from attempting original relation is not always rapture; indifference and desperation also follow. Since Emerson worked to establish the poet as a philosopher, I will treat Dickinson and Poe as philosophers here in exploring how each challenges Emerson’s philosophical meditations through the very medium he claimed could witness and communicate truth.
II. The “Thinkers” Dickinson and Poe

In *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*, Jed Deppman turns to philosophy to illuminate Dickinson’s poetry. Claiming that this is something few critics have done, Deppman suggests that Dickinson—as a result of the scarcity with which this approach has been used—has not, perhaps, been given due credit by either the literary or philosophical communities “for her role in the history of ideas or her strength as a thinker.”18 Deppman’s study attempts to remedy this perceived slight by historicizing and close reading Dickinson’s poems in ways that treat her work as philosophically “compelling—not just credible,”19 and works to close some of the distance “between the philosophers and the poet” established by the “problem” of “‘incommensurable discourse.’”20 While Deppman traces philosophical discourse in Dickinson’s poems as a way of advocating for a postmodern, neo-Kantian Dickinson whose work is significant and relevant to contemporary readers, his approach also exposes a new side of Dickinson that is not necessarily dependent upon these labels. In casting her as a thinker (regardless of the brand he imposes on her), Deppman invites us to read Dickinson’s poetry as tests of the ideas—including Emerson’s—that lay before her.

The popularity and biographical strangeness of Edgar Allan Poe has also historically distracted critics from approaching his poems as products of a serious thinker,21 and not just as

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19 Reasons given for overlooking a more philosophical approach include Eurocentrism, sexism, “a general preference for prose writers,” and Dickinson’s popularity as a poet (Deppman, 2-3).
20 Deppman, 9.
21 In a now-infamous obituary, Rufus Griswold comments that “as a critic, [Poe] was more remarkable as a dissector of sentences than as a commentator upon ideas. He was little better than a carping grammarian” (74). Though Griswold lauds Poe for “wonderful ingenuity,” he also remarks, rather derisively, that few would be grieved by his death because “he had few or no friends” (69). Griswold’s obituary stands as a primary example of the ways in which Poe’s eccentric biography has seeped into and polarized much of the criticism surrounding Poe’s work since his death. See: Rufus Wilmot Griswold, “Death of Edgar Allan Poe,” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Critical Assessments*, Vol. I, ed. Graham Clarke (London: Helm Information Ltd, 1991), 69-74.
tortured machinations of a deranged mind or as bloodless, disingenuous jingles. In many ways, Poe has suffered even more from American critics’ and scholars’ dismissal of his poetry. In *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel*, Jerome McGann argues for the importance of taking Poe’s poetry seriously for its masterful (albeit somewhat veiled) critical engagement with the “ethics and politics” of his time. In presenting Poe’s verse as “composed,” McGann illuminates Poe’s exacting control over language and suggests that, while Poe’s poetry is intentionally devoid of the sort of rapture characteristic of Emerson and Whitman, it is no less rigorous in its theoretical practice and “real compositional business.” For McGann, this compositional business is Poe’s methodical and musical composedness, which he presents as an intellectual response to and reaction against those ethics and politics of his time—ethics and politics that would have been impacted by Emerson’s ideas.

McGann approaches Poe’s poetry as performative rather than expository, elevating it to a meaningful status for the “hows” of its composition rather than the “whats.” Poe’s commitment to beauty (*how* poetry is composed) over truth (*what* ideas it expresses) is where McGann draws meaningfulness and stakes his claim for Poe’s value as a poet; however, this also sets Poe at odds with Emerson, who saw poetry’s beauty as inseparable from truth. An important distinction needs to be made here about the use of the word “truth.” In McGann’s text, the truth of beauty

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25 McGann, 4.
26 McGann writes that the “truth about poetry—its meaning—does not answer to the question ‘what?’ but to the question ‘how?’” (95).
and moral truth are not one and the same (and this is the distinction between Poe’s truth in beauty alone and Emerson’s connection of beauty with some higher—what one might call moral—truth). While McGann remarks that Poe’s poetic engagement with the discourses of his time occasionally parallels Dickinson’s, he does not explore the connection in much detail beyond saying that both “died for beauty,”27 which suggests that he might also view Dickinson as one who challenged Emerson’s understanding of what poetry should do. In this sense, McGann’s Poe is a “thinker” to the extent that Poe challenges, through the performative composedness of his poetry, the notion that poetry’s meaningfulness is contingent upon its capture or espousal of truth. Recalling the above discussion, Emerson said poetry should do this if it is the work of a true poet, so in challenging Emerson’s notion of truth, Dickinson and Poe also challenge what poetry is supposed to achieve.

In this sense, both Deppman and McGann present versions of Dickinson and Poe as valuable poets for the ways in which they confront or challenge discourses of their time. In casting them as thinkers, they assign Dickinson and Poe relevance in scholarship for more than reasons that have traditionally been cited for valuing (or devaluing) their work. These reasons tend to cluster around how well Dickinson’s or Poe’s work embodies conventions of certain literary genres, serves as a testament to the nineteenth century American cult of mourning, or pays tribute to the tragedies and strangeness of their respective lives. Rather than see through these lenses, Deppman and McGann invite re-visionings of Dickinson and Poe that prompt further consideration of the ways in which they exercise thought in their poetry and use it confront notions of truth.

27 McGann, 3.
In taking up this invitation, I explore how Dickinson and Poe interact with and test Emerson’s ideas about the nature of poetry and its creation by called and doubled selves.\(^{28}\) While my focus on Dickinson and Poe in relation to Emerson is not meant to suggest that an Emerson-centric reading of their work is the most valuable, triangulating their poetry through him is useful, since Emerson—in presenting his transparent eye-ball as a vessel for envisioning original relation—articulates a vision of existence that has had far-reaching consequences for contemporary art and thought. Moreover, Dickinson and Poe would have been familiar with Emerson’s discourse as one that revised and tested schools of thought that came before it. In this way, Emerson offers a useful bridge to discussions about poetry’s engagement with philosophy. Where philosophy approaches questions of existence—of an “I” in relation to the universe—poetry challenges its claims to answers (and suggests, perhaps, some of its own). Where Emerson questioned and responded to theories on the “true” nature of existence (and how art should capture and respond to “knowledge” of it), Dickinson and Poe, through their poetry, question Emerson’s responses and invite us, in turn, to question theirs.

\(^{28}\) I use “called” here in reference to Emerson’s aforementioned understanding of the poet as the “sayer” and “namer”—one who is capable of communicating a truth to which s/he has been gifted vision and an ability to communicate that vision authentically through poetic language. In Chapter IV, I will discuss how envisioning original relation requires enacting a “doubled” self.
III. Thinking with “Death”

In many ways, death is the ideal device for testing notions of an “I”/eye. At least conceptually, death is an eradication of the “I” as we know it and perhaps the gateway to some afterlife. In consideration of this, we might be tempted to approach the presence of death in poetry as it manifests its concept—what death means (to borrow McGann’s phrasing) rather than how it means. If we approach Dickinson and Poe as thinkers who deliberately engaged philosophical discourse in their work, the prevalence of death in their poetry transforms into something more than meditations on the subject. “Death” becomes more than gothic dressing or fuel for talk of madness and mourning, more than the anticipation or apprehension of death itself. Instead, death becomes a device with which Dickinson and Poe test poetic language as a means of enacting ways of thinking and being. In this sense, death in the poetry of Dickinson and Poe need not be approached as a thinking of—death (i.e. the cessation of life and what happens at or after that moment). Rather, “death”—when it is invoked in or used to frame a poem—can be a tool for thinking of life and considering thinking’s presence in life.

Thinking with death is what helps Dickinson and Poe (and their readers) think of thought, language, and life in terms of how human beings exist and express that existence in reality (as fragmented or unified selves). As a device—as a lens through which to explore a particular thought or function of thought—death tests and exercises philosophical notions of “I” in ways that challenge both poet and reader to either confirm or deny for themselves whatever truth may or may not exist in those thoughts. In considering how death means in the poetry of Dickinson and Poe, I explore how death operates as a poetic tool with which both poets confront Emersonian original relation. Since the very sense of poem as tool departs from Emerson’s notion of poetry as received and translated vision, this is yet another way in which Dickinson and
Poe use poetic language to challenge Emerson’s notion of what poetry is supposed to “do” and what it is supposed to communicate through and about the poet’s “I”/eye. Uncovering how Dickinson and Poe use death begins, then, with an exploration of what Emerson thought about the “I” in terms more specific than just enjoyment of original relation. We must also explore the “I” in terms of its existence in relation to itself and its seeing of other eyes. This will allow for deeper consideration of how Dickinson and Poe test original relation, and to what potential ends.
IV. The “I” of the Eye

In his lectures, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Stanley Cavell critically considers the relationship between literature and philosophy, particularly in terms of how language, in its “perverseness,” can work without and even against “our thought and its autonomy.” In “Being Odd, Getting Even,” Cavell proposes an Emersonian derivation of Descartes’ cogito. Cavell writes: “Emerson goes the whole way with Descartes’ insight—that I exist only if I think—but he thereupon denies that I (mostly) do think, that the ‘I’ mostly gets into my thinking, as it were” (108). Cavell ultimately arrives at what he calls Emerson’s “grammatical answer” to Descartes: “I am a being who to exist must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence—claim it, stake it, enact it” (109). This “answer” to Descartes, writes Cavell, “does not prejudice what the I or self or mind or soul may turn out to be, but only specifies a condition that whatever it is must meet”—a proof that “only works in the moment of its giving, for what I prove is the existence of only a creature who *can* enact its existence, as exemplified in actually giving the proof, not one who at all times does in fact enact it” (109). Here, Cavell suggests that Emerson’s reading of the cogito is, “I am one who to exist enacts his existence” — in other words, “I think,” “I am” (109).

The work Cavell does is in drawing a connection between Emerson and Descartes illustrates how Emerson might be modifying the cogito *just enough* to supply foundation for his perspective on art and what is required of a “self” in order to create art that is genuine, or poetry that is “true.” This also allows Cavell to link Emerson’s reading of Descartes with Heidegger in *Being in Time*, suggesting Emerson’s cogito is “a way of envisioning roughly the view of so-called human existence” that “Daesin’s being is such that its being is an issue for it” (109). This

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offers an entry-point into what I will suggest Dickinson and Poe latch onto in their poetry to varying degrees: the idea that there is something problematic (that there is an “issue”) in enacting one’s existence. In approaching Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” as a reading of Descartes’ cogito, Cavell illuminates what I read Dickinson and Poe to be grappling with through use of death—that “human clay and the human capacity for thought are enough to inspire the authoring of [self]” (111).

Cavell suggests that the importance of self-authoring to Emerson is a response to a state of “fallenness,” in which “the uncreatedness of the individual manifests itself, in which human life appears as the individual’s failure at self-creation, as a continuous loss of individual possibility in the face of some overpowering competitor” (111). In diagnosing a fallenness, Emerson is able to offer treatment. Cavell asserts that if his gloss of Emerson is right, the “cogito’s need arises at particular historical moments in the life of the individual and in the life of the culture,” perhaps when individual existence is threatened by “conformity,” which Emerson calls the “mode of uncreated life” (111). Once Emerson diagnoses a threat (a removal from nature, conformity, what inhibits the soul from becoming), Emerson can “recommend a therapy” (111). This therapy is to become “ashamed of our shame, to find our ashamed posture more shameful than anything it could be reacting to” (111). Cavell suggests that the removal from nature is shameful for Emerson because it encourages conformity and prevents us from daring to say, “I think,” “I am,” and instead, we just quote (112).

The difference between saying and quoting is one of posture; the ability to say requires what Emerson describes in “Self-Reliance” as “good posture,” which has two principal names or modes: standing and sitting (113). What is “good” in these postures for Emerson is:

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Cavell recalls Emerson: “This one fact the world hates; that the soul becomes” (111).
Whatever makes them necessary to the acknowledgment, or the assumption, of individual existence, to the capacity to say “I.” That this takes daring is what standing (up) pictures; that it takes claiming what belongs to you and disclaiming what does not belong to you is what sitting pictures. Sitting is thus the posture of being at home in the world (not peeping, stealing, skulking, or, as he also says, leaning), of owning or taking possession. (113)

While Cavell (a philosopher himself) works to unpack Emerson’s argument in measured discourse, he points to a moment in Emerson’s rhetoric that, based on all he has outlined, seems contradictory:

There is a gag here that especially appeals to contemporary sensibilities. Emerson writes, “Man dares not say … but quotes.” But since at that moment, he quotes Descartes, isn’t he confessing that he too cannot say but can only quote? Then should we conclude that he is taking back or dismantling (or something) the entire guiding idea of “Self-Reliance”? Or is he rather suggesting that we are to overcome the binary opposition between saying and quoting, recognizing that each is always both, or that the difference is undecidable? (113)

This is an example of what I earlier termed “confounding” in Emerson’s writing: he manages to present his ideas while contradicting himself. Perhaps this is why Cavell calls Emerson’s posture “a poor one” (113), or perhaps, it is the potential for undecidability itself that strikes Cavell as “poor posture.” For a philosopher, rhetorical “undecidability” might indeed be a poor posture. But for a poet? How might a poet confront the inability to overcome the binary of saying/quotting?

In The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne, Evan Carton works toward a revised understanding of Romanticism that foregrounds the linguistic and philosophical challenges of attempting to describe the human experience. This attempt, Carton suggests, often painfully recognizes the impossibility grasping and expressing that existence in full. While it is not my aim to support or contradict Carton’s revisioning of American Romance, his discussion of Dickinson and Poe in relation to Emerson—
and the ability of language and thought to contact or access Emerson’s version of reality—
becomes useful here. In drawing out an antithetical rhetorical framework in Emerson’s Nature, Carton helps establish the foundation upon which Dickinson and Poe’s speakers seem to struggle with self-simultaneity. This self-simultaneity is, for Carton, rooted in Emerson’s notion of superior reality, which Carton explores in reading Nature through concepts of integration and detachment. Carton writes that for Emerson, access to a “supreme reality”—Emerson’s therapy for conformity—“involves art.” For Carton, reading Emerson, art requires both integration and detachment, which are “twin risks.” Adapting Carton’s understanding of detachment/integration deepens Cavell’s reading of Emerson’s saying/quotting problem in that the continual “self-recovery” (through saying) required to cure “conformity” (a consequence of quoting) might also require simultaneous detachment from the very self that one attempts to recover through integration with other selves.

This certainly complicates our understanding of how true poetry gets made if genuine art requires both detachment of the self (from other selves) and integration of the self with other selves (detaching self from self). If we align “saying” with “detachment” (non-conformity) and “quoting” with “integration” (conformity), then it appears that the creation of genuine art (for Emerson) would require both detachment and integration simultaneously. Carton suggests Emerson’s rhetorical “reversals” and antithetical framing in Nature communicate “ambivalence about the nature and the possibility of the individual’s possession of ‘the fact’ of meaning,” which for Carton, like Cavell, raises (sometimes disturbing) questions about “the relationship

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32 Carton, 46.
33 By “genuine” I mean “true” in the Emersonian sense that it is receptive to visions of original relation.
between meaning and its representation in language."[^34] It would appear, from reading Cavell and Carton, that Emerson presents a conundrum:

The “reality” or “fact” that [Emerson] claims to witness must be generated from without; otherwise it is a fiction or a delusion. But when the issue is the communication of this reality to others, authority and authenticity—or at least their appearance—depend upon the self’s claim to speak from within and from experience. Conventions of usage and ingrained social assumptions equate speaking from within and from experience with sincerity and reliability; besides, to believe that the source of one’s own speech is external is to deny oneself altogether.[^35]

If “art is man’s means of demonstrating his integration with nature and of realizing his elusive thoughts and visions” but is “also the process of delimiting and detaching himself and his envisioned possibility, and, perhaps, ofpossessing his object at the cost of its distortion or falsification,” then art—in its simultaneous integrative and detaching capacity does indeed offer both value and danger.[^36] If, for Emerson, the value of art is found in its potential to “facilitate” the “self’s achievement of a dynamic wholeness” through embracing the duality and doubleness of detachment/integration, then its danger is also realized when, in pursuing originality, one denies “genuine” identity and instead creates—ironically, through a quest to find it—a self that is irreconcilably divided and perhaps, even, insane. Indeed, Carton notes that Emerson called the divided individual “half-insane.”[^37]

Just as Cavell takes Emerson’s perceived undecidability as poor posture, Carton seems unconvinced that full realization of the doubled duality of self-simultaneity (what he refers to as, quoting Emerson, “all-excluding fulness”) can be achieved in a way that would be anything but

[^34]: Carton, 33.
[^35]: Carton, 33.
[^36]: Carton, 35.
[^37]: Carton, 33 (“facilitate”; “wholeness”); 36 (“genuine”; “half-insane”).
incomplete or illusory.\textsuperscript{38} By suggesting that neither state of integration or detachment can ever fully or authentically be realized due to the inherently contradictory requirements of simultaneously being and not-being a self,” Carton also calls into question the poet’s ability to be true. Taking up Cavell’s and Carton’s readings of Emerson, the true poet would have to be able to realize the self-simultaneity that both critics approach with suspicion. Death, as it functions in the poetry of Dickinson and Poe, frames speakers, also, as suspicious, testing for themselves the feasibility, sustainability, or even desirability of perceiving or enacting such a precarious (and potentially dangerous) relation. This is, I argue, what Dickinson and Poe confront in moments when death presents itself or haunts their poetry.

Where Dickinson and Poe confront the problematic nature of a doubled self, we might be tempted to register dividedness in their poetry as “madness” or even “insanity.”\textsuperscript{39} However, these tests of self-simultaneity not only challenge important notions about what language can do with thought and how it can perceive and communicate ideas, they also invite readers to test “self” for themselves when encountering death (or its spectre) in Dickinson and Poe. Death is not, in their poetry, simply there to pique morbid curiosity or titillate mortal fears. Thinking with death makes it into a device of self-discovery. By eradicating self, death discovers self. It calls into question the boundaries and parameters of how a self exists in and encounters reality (thereby questioning the feasibility of original relation). What this produces in Dickinson’s and Poe’s poetry is both negative and euphoric moments of intensity (if only in their disorienting and disquieting

\textsuperscript{38} Carton, 46.
\textsuperscript{39} What others have read as madness, I read as philosophical questioning. Deppman notes that Thomas Wentworth Higginson referred to Dickinson as “my partially cracked poetess from Amherst” (94). Deppman also notes that in several letters, Dickinson humorously problematizes her own “insanity,” writing in a letter to Catherine Scott Turner in 1859, “Insanity to the sane seems so unnecessary—but I am only one, and they are four and forty” (221). Winters remarks that most of Poe’s “heroes are mad or on the verge of madness” (114), quoting Poe’s Eleanora: “Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence—whether much that is glorious—whether all that is profound—does not spring from disease of thought—from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect” (115). See: Deppman, 94, 221 and Winters, 114-5.
capacities). It is the testing of original relation—perhaps the reaching for it, even—that contributes experiential value to reading their poems.\textsuperscript{40} For while their strengths as thinkers and their technical prowess remain important parts of their legacies, what draws contemporary readers to Dickinson and Poe might also have to do with the ways in which they take up Emerson’s question, \textit{Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?}

\textsuperscript{40}“Experiential value” here refers to the intellectual and emotional value a reader might extract from embarking on tests of his or her own through the experience of reading the poems.
V. Dickinson’s (In)Decisiveness

In Dickinson’s poetry, speakers swing between the poles of integration and detachment, as death illustrates what appears to be indecisiveness over what consequences an original relation to the universe bears, or how one might respond to an encounter with a fractured or divided self. In his chapter “Dickinson Thinking of Death,” Deppman suggests that “death’s process of non-presencing” helps to “create a desirable attitude toward it”—an attitude that helps Dickinson “deal with the way [death] does not present itself”—to assist his argument for reading Dickinson as a “pragmatic and post-metaphysical” poet.\(^{41}\) Without applying a philosophical label to Dickinson, her poetry does seem to “closely [study] mental movement” as Deppman suggests,\(^ {42}\) but her use of death does not require us to interpret intent in conceiving “of death” at all.\(^ {43}\)

Rather, we can look at how death functions as a device for opening poems into a space of “undecidability” (recalling Cavell) where her speakers are able to encounter “unbounded” selves while maintaining awareness of their fragmented parts. This renders a different sort of undecidability than the one Cavell and Carton perceive in Emerson—an undecidability that is not indecisive at all. Rather, Dickinson’s undecidability operates as a means of exploring the ways in which selves and spaces are (un)bounded and opened, and suggests—perhaps in a counter to Emerson—that boundaries can be maintained and opened rather than dissolved and doubled to the point where “part or particle” becomes indistinguishable from the whole in some way that bears a consequence (or none).

\(^{41}\) Deppman, 188-9.
\(^{42}\) Deppman, 192.
\(^{43}\) Deppman contends Dickinson’s lyric “conceives of death as a sublime offering, a presentation without anything presented, a thought that is always impending and proposing itself to thought” (204). However, Deppman also assigns a what to death—an “always-impending, never-present state to be apprehended through responsible, introspective, and imaginative thought” (188)—and I am only interested in how, through its presence, we might read it as doing something more than standing in for a try at thought about the state of death (the moment of dying) itself.
In *Choosing Not Choosing*, Sharon Cameron suggests, “the single most prominent feature of Dickinson’s poetry” is “the opening up of spaces.” Michael Moon contends in *Disseminating Whitman* that Whitman’s poetry espouses fluidity between spaces where “fluidity” means a “mode of consciousness poised at the ‘washed-out’ boundaries between mind and body.” Whitman answers Emerson’s call for a particular kind of artist or poet—one who effectively enacts self-simultaneity for the purposes of elevating himself and his reader to that space where the transcendent vision is received and the air is music. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* contains letters exchanged between himself and Emerson in which he refers to Emerson as “Master,” and Emerson praises him for “meeting the demand” he “was always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament” of “western wits.” Cavell suggests that for Emerson, the “countenance of the wise” is one that can “raise and cheer us.” It seems—from these epistolary exchanges—that Whitman’s verse captures such a countenance for Emerson. With this in mind, Whitman’s employment of death as a device sets up a practical foil to how Dickinson (and eventually Poe) uses death. But why discuss Whitman’s use of death and not Emerson’s? The answer is simply that Emerson does not appear to use death as a device; rather, when he invokes death (which is rare), he treats it primarily as subject matter. He does not use it as a device to test his own ideas.

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44 Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 188.
46 The “air is music” is a phrase from Emerson: “For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem.” See: Emerson, “The Poet,” 217.
48 Cavell, 23-4.
49 Kohler writes, “Whitman follows Emerson’s lead in deriving poetry form a vision that ‘simply perceives,’” and suggests, “Whitman’s poet not only sees well, but, in seeing, he instantly surpasses the knowledge acquired by systems that aim to mediate the gap between self and other” (30).
Whitman, then, becomes a useful proxy as a poet whose work in *Leaves of Grass* made Emerson “happy” to have found a “benefactor.”

Noting Cameron’s and Moon’s respective discussions of boundaries prompts consideration of how Dickinson and Whitman render space differently. What do these different spatial renderings (“open” in Dickinson versus “fluid” in Whitman) allow each poet to do? In Dickinson’s poetry, the “opening of spaces” serves to “unbound” a poem (Cameron), which urges reconsideration of totality. When spaces are opened in Dickinson’s poems, a distinction no longer needs to be made between indeterminacy of and indifference to the boundaries that define spaces. Conversely, in Whitman’s poetry, “fluidity” serves to “dissolve” boundaries (Moon) rather than urge indifference to them, which results in a very different relationship to space (and, consequently, a different rendering of totality and interiority) than Dickinson’s poetry presents.

To explore what this means for Dickinson’s use of death, we can look first to how Dickinson conflates death with sleep. In unbounding and opening space through framing death as sleep, Dickinson challenges notions of interiority in order to suggest indifference to the boundaries that separate interiority from exteriority and, consequently, detachment from integration. Indifference is what allows Dickinson’s undecidability to be registered as *calculated*. It is not, perhaps, that her speakers become unable to determine where the boundaries are; doing so simply does not matter when they have no need to decide what consequences opening (versus dissolving) might have.

For Cameron, the opening up of Dickinson’s poetry into unboundedness results in a non-divisive space where interiority and exteriority become open to each other (though still not

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50 Use of this word is not meant to suggest that Whitman and Emerson are interchangeable. Rather, I use it to suggest that looking at how Whitman uses death can help us better understand how Dickinson (and eventually Poe) uses death. I read Emerson and Whitman as sharing a similar “countenance” in that Whitman is more aligned with Emerson’s vision of poetry and what its philosophical and aesthetic goals are.

indistinguishable from one another). Dickinson’s “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” allows us to occupy a strange, all-encompassing space where we are made indifferent to difference without exactly knowing how to define the space we are left in. What opening does, then, is not make boundaries indistinguishable from each other; it renders them irrelevant. This is one feature that makes the use of death compelling in Dickinson’s work: the way it tests notions of interiority and self as related to totality does not require the reader to arrive at a verdict or feel called to any action. Conversely, when Whitman conflates death with sleep in “The Sleepers,” totality is presented as existing only once the boundaries between spaces are dissolved. For Whitman, as for Emerson, dissolving calls the poet to action.

In Whitman, dissolving implies indistinguishability and indeterminacy in the fluid space that results, as what exists within each previously defined space becomes mingled, thus rendering the boundaries relevant since they need to be dissolved in the first place. This contrasts with the notion of indifference since indifference still allows the boundaries to exist; they are simply opened to each other without actually being dissolved into each other. This matters for Whitman (and for Emerson) where it does not for Dickinson because it adds an element of community (the social) through encouraging unification of selves. This unification requires simultaneity of detachment and integration through the act of dissolving. Recalling Emerson’s problematizing of distinctions between individuals in Nature: in the “infinite space,” to be “named” or identified as “master or servant,” “friend or acquaintance,” becomes a “trifle and a disturbance.”52 In “The Sleepers,” the attempt to dissolve boundaries (between sleepers) comes with intent to dissolve distinctions and elevate into that space of Emersonian original relation

52 Emerson, Nature, 128.
where “all mean egotism vanishes.” In contrast, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers”—as the poem through which I will demonstrate Dickinson’s opening of space—is a poem that simply allows us to be in that open space without asking for a similar kind of relation.

In “Alabaster Chambers,” spaces are first defined within the poem by calling attention to materiality and regarding the way the poem’s two stanzas are separated and framed in relation to each other. The first word “Safe” immediately implies enclosure and protection, and the remainder of the line delineates a very specific location: “in their Alabaster Chambers -” (l.1). We can therefore read death as enclosure, since it is in this space of the chambers that the “meek members of the Resurrection” “Sleep” (l.4), as they are shielded from temporal elements, namely “Morning” and “noon” (ll.2-3). The “Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone” (l.5) add descriptive physical details that further define the space within the chambers. While the first stanza seems wholly dedicated to this space that houses the “sleeping” dead, the second stanza deals contrastingly with the space outside of the chambers, where material emblems lose meaning: “Diadems – drop - / And Doges – surrender” (ll.10-11). In this way, the first stanza initially places primacy on a quite artificial, crafted materiality, whereas the second takes this materiality and positions it against temporality and the throes of the elements (nature). By this division, the different interior and exterior spaces become perceivable between the stanzas (rendered through death as sleep). Then, the poem creates what feels like a boundary—one determinable in the sense that it can be identified as it is above. But the determinacy of the boundary is not what matters if we read with Cameron’s words in mind.

“Morning” and “noon” position the speaker and reader to simultaneously inhabit spaces both inside and outside the chambers as these spaces open to each other; the chambers exist within nature but are not necessarily a part of it. The word “Safe” includes the outside temporal space by making it something the dead are protected from, which verifies and validates both spaces, but does not require that they dissolve into each other. It also suggests that the spaces interact with each other while not being dependent upon (or integrated with) one another. In this poem, then, the locations of inside and outside the chambers need not be considered wholly separate, even though they remain distinguishable. If we reframe the reading to apply Cameron’s notion of “plural locations,” we observe that “two sites are inhabited simultaneously”—inside the alabaster chambers (material/corporeal) and outside the chambers (elemental/temporal). In this way, the poem reads as a “superimposition of multiple scenes,” since the delineation of the chamber space and the space outside offers the requisite “coordinate points by which these scenes may be demarcated.” By reading the scenes as “superimposed,” the first stanza actually assumes the existence of the second, and both effectively open.”

In stating that the dead are “Untouched by Morning - / And untouched by noon -” (ll.2-3), the speaker recognizes the existence of external elements (suggesting their presence through the act of acknowledgement). This suggests indifference, however, because Dickinson renders the speaker unaffected. The speaker observes the “Untouched” dead from an omniscient location; it is unclear whether the speaker is inside or outside of the chambers. This creates an unstable position of the reader in relation to the speaker and the speaker in relation to the subject. Despite being “Untouched,” there exists the possibility that, perhaps, they could be touched, since they need protection through “Safe” placement in the chambers. If we read Dickinson’s use of death

55 Cameron, 180.
56 Cameron, 188.
as a calculated undecidability over the characterization of space (how it is experienced by the speaker or shared with the sleeping dead), the possibility of being touched, in not being realized, bears no consequence. Where the speaker exists in relation to the sleeping dead, and where the dead exist in relation to the chambers and the elements, is, to borrow Cameron’s phrasing, “beyond, inhuman, indifferent.” \(^{57}\) In the open space of death-sleep, the boundaries between interiority and exteriority, then, also become irrelevant for the reader. The space that is created is neither within nor outside of the chambers—neither within nor outside of the poem (the speaker or the reader’s apprehension); it is simultaneously both and neither. The point is: defining that space does not matter since the space is, to use Cameron’s phrasing, “allowed to remain open.” \(^{58}\)

Once the space is open, we no longer need to attempt to locate a self/non-self within it or outside of it, for the self resists location and sometimes even comprehension, since what is open can be thought of as illustrating multiple (not in-) determinacy. \(^{59}\) This is where Dickinson’s poem seems to break down, and yet, there is a sense it has not failed. And it has not, since in resisting and assaulting the initial commitment the speaker makes to the dead being “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” the speaker undoes and opens that space to the possibility of a multiple determinacy which is not contingent upon undecidability or the overcoming of a binary. Binaries are allowed to remain intact through opening as opposed to dissolving. As a result, the poem transports the reader to an ineffable, non-divisive, all-inclusive space—one that operates outside of a pinpointable intention. The space rendered in this poem is divorced from the sort of intention Whitman and Emerson attach to their poetic spaces.

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\(^{57}\) Cameron, 182.  
\(^{58}\) Cameron, 188.  
\(^{59}\) Cameron, 188.
Because it is difficult to locate the intention of the speaker (what the speaker is trying to do by bringing us into this new, opened space), reading death in the poem also resists discernible meaning. But this resistance does not render the poem meaningless, because it does not beg for clarity of intent; rather, it encourages reconsideration of what it means to occupy (in an opened but not dissolved way) both an interior and exterior space—a space that is unbounded. When control of the poem’s bounded space is sacrificed, it is no longer the reader’s goal to identify what that space means; the meaningfulness of the poem exists beyond its space. The notion of safety in meaning no longer exists, just as safety for the dead no longer exists, since the dead are indifferent to this life-bound concept. This is one way Dickinson uses death to create a space of testing—we encounter the speaker’s interiority “as if it were our own,” but we have difficulty locating the speaker or ourselves in the poem’s space and where we, as readers, exist in relation to the speaker. Reading Dickinson’s poem becomes, as Cameron puts it, like being “lodged within a spaciousness so unfamiliar that it is experienced as disorienting. Put in different terms, what these poems make available is interiority itself—interiority without either origin or outside.” This encountering disrupts the perception of the difference between the interior space of the poem and the interior space of the reader’s mind, and with Cameron’s very specific reading of Heidegger, the created space becomes one of “pure existence”—“that objectless place where innerness is discovered, is ‘found’ in and for itself. Hence its designation as ‘pure existence.’ It is objectless because it has no goal except simply to be.”

The space the poem moves us into is also, therefore, an objectless space where “Diadems drop” and the alabaster chambers cease to be “Safe,” as “inwardness has no goal or point except
that of manifestation.” Perhaps this is why the “Dots” are “Soundless” (ll. 12-13)—they are meant to simply be on that “Disc of Snow” without “sounding” a truth or meaning. Arguably, this is also why the obscurity that is often read in Dickinson’s poetry (this poem being no exception) is not decidedly vague to be confusing; rather, the obscurity she renders becomes necessary for opening interior/exterior spaces and allowing them simply to be, rather than to mean. This poem “refuses to recognize a difference between inner and outer, so equivalent has the poetry discovered the two to be,” but this refusal to recognize does not mean that the difference is not there or does not exist; recognizing it simply bears no consequence. Death joins us to this indifference by “radical connection—as poems are not divided, as the dead and the living are not divided, as the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ are not divided,” so there is no need to choose what is true about the resulting relation. Dickinson’s unbounded interiority is beyond definition in a way that is not contingent upon indeterminacy or indecisiveness; rather, it is a calculated indifference to the boundaries themselves that are framed between spaces and then opened to each other.

Perhaps the difficulty of this poem (as with much of Dickinson’s writing) lies in our inability as readers to fully grasp and experience an unbounded space in a world defined by contrasted binaries (awake/asleep, living/dead). In the unbounded openness of Dickinson’s poem, however, interiority does not need to define an “I” at all, because presentation of interiority does not require her speaker to interact with a community or a crowd. It does not attempt to locate her speaker or subjects within a fluid space; her space is one of indifference to whatever boundaries or categories Whitman’s seeks to dissolve by receiving Emerson’s

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63 Cameron, 191.
64 Cameron, 187.
65 Cameron, 187.
transcendental vision. In this sense, Dickinson’s poem helps us grasp at what interiority might mean, or what reconsidering its space might be capable of illustrating, without having to assert or claim a vision of simultaneously detached/integrated (dissolved) truth. Dickinson’s poem allows us to remain indifferent to difference—we can choose not to choose, decide not to decide—and still experience the poem’s effects.

Indifference—rather than frame undecidability as indecisiveness—suggests that undecidability in Dickinson is decisive and intentional. Undecidability becomes a condition upon which Dickinson conducts her tests; her indifference is calculated. Because the effects of indifference are disorienting, however, our experience of open interior space might not impart a sense of Emersonian enjoyment, since the only discernible truth one might register in such a space aligns more closely with Socrates’ *I only know that I know nothing*—which can, for some, induce anxiety instead of satisfaction. Following Dickinson’s use of death to open interior spaces, I now turn to other instances where death is used to test and exercise an Emersonian self-simultaneity (which Whitman shows is also a form of dissolving). Sometimes, Dickinson’s speakers seem satisfied or even optimistic in their questioning and testing of boundaries; at others, they become frightened or disturbed at what they encounter in the events of their tests. Occasionally, both happen in the span of the same poem. This, perhaps more than anything, suggests Dickinson found it difficult to claim a particular relation to original relation, but this

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66 Recalling Emerson’s question as to why we should not “enjoy” original relation.
67 This is not a direct quotation, but one that has been absorbed into general knowledge as a permutation of Plato’s account of Socrates in the “The Apology.” Plato recounts Socrates: “I thought that [a man] appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: ‘I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know’” (21). See: Plato, “The Apology,” in *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 21. In keeping with my approach of dealing with Dickinson and Poe as philosophers, this raises a potential motivation for Dickinson’s undecidability; perhaps she accepted the notion that she might not ever know, but continued to test regardless.
was not a failure. Dickinson’s testing led only to more testing. Exploration of truth itself might be the beauty she died for—captured through inconclusive tests of original relation that resisted defining what self is or should be—a “tint” best, perhaps, when not taken.

In “I’ve dropped my Brain - My Soul is numb -” death is both directly named and used as a framing device for the poem. Death conflates and confuses the “Mind/Soul/Brain” in relation to the physical body. In the poem’s first line, the speaker links “Brain” to “Soul” through a dash, which connects the dropping of the brain to the numbing of the soul by making the latter seem contingent upon the former. Why would the “Soul” go numb when the “Brain is “dropped” (l.1)? Conversely, if the “Brain” were not “dropped” by the speaker, would the “Soul” continue to be “numb”? Already, these questions suggest that the boundary between brain and soul is opened (this opening is also facilitated by the dash). Line three is structured similarly; a dash is positioned between two similar words that express the same sentiment (“palsied”/”Paralysis”) and mirrors the pairing of entities (“Brain”/”Soul”). This suggests a merely semantic difference, and yet, this difference seems scrupulously insisted upon. Distinctions remain intact, yet their functional purposes are unclear. This points to the speaker’s difficulty in managing a simultaneous integration/detachment; parts are neither fully integrated nor detached, as the differences are not dissolved enough to blend or blended enough to dissolve.

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68 Carton focuses on the intentional “failure” of Dickinson’s speakers’ senses and on Dickinson’s (perhaps conscious) perpetuation of a “struggle” to resist “what is easily seen or possessed” (47). This makes sense since Carton’s study works in part to explore Romanticism as capturing a struggle for what cannot ever be fully attained through the human condition. However, I do not read Dickinson’s speakers as imagining they cannot attain it or that they will perpetually fail. Testing and questioning is not the same thing as resisting answers; perhaps Dickinson’s undecidability hinges less on failure and more on lack of knowledge that convincingly presents itself. This also speaks to Dickinson’s continuous “testing.” Her speakers—while occasionally optimistic and/or fearful—repeat their tests over and over again. If she were so committed to failure, her poetry would, perhaps, read more like Poe’s.

69 See: Dickinson, “I died for Beauty - but was scarce” (448), in The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 207.


71 Dickinson, “I’ve dropped my Brain - My Soul is numb -” (1088), in The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 441. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.
Dickinson pushes on the boundaries of integration and detachment in the poem by practicing both. The “Breathing Woman” is “endowed” with “Paradise,” suggesting integration, but is detached from that breath by placement of the “nerve in marble,” as “Vitality” becomes “Carved and cool”—adjectives not normally associated with “breathing” or “Vitality” (ll.5-8). The speaker understands “Paradise” but is no longer endowed with it, as suggested by “Yesterday -” (l.8), which does not remove the speaker’s knowledge of it, despite having supposedly “dropped” her brain. The speaker registers at this point as a self that knows only superficially what it was/is/might be—suggested by the constant shifting of tenses: “I’ve dropped, “Soul is,” “used to run,” “done perfecter,” “lies,” “endowed,” “I had,” “I’ve still,” “I’ll shiver”—and also what it is was not/is not/might not be. “Smote” and “stirred” (l.10) are antithetical verbs, and yet the speaker says her “Sense” does both as she connects this to “Instincts” (l.11). The “Instincts for a Dance” are what she calls a “caper part,” and “caper” suggests both a playful movement and a foolish escapade. It is the “caper” element that suggests knowledge of what one might not be in addition to what one might be, which further confuses the reader’s sense of how the speaker’s “self” is working; is it being “moved” (l.9) upon by “Sense,” or is “Sense” acting through “smoting” or “stirring” “Instincts?”

“An Aptitude for Bird -” suggests flight and freedom without granting it. “Aptitude” only indicates potential or possibility that has perhaps not been fulfilled (recalling the “Untouched” dead in “Alabaster Chambers” who could still possibly be touched). Here, too, the speaker registers a “beyondness” that “Aptitude” motions to, yet there is no consequence for having an aptitude only. The speaker simply “had a sort that moved” (l.9), but it is unclear what the “Sense” moved to, or what the “sort” was—what smote or stirred it—since there were only “Instincts for Dance” and “An Aptitude for Bird.” Neither of these words—instincts nor
aptitude—suggest fulfillment. The speaker then asks, as if seeking to place blame: “Who wrought Carrara in me / And chiselled all my tune” (ll.13-14). The “chiselling” of a “tune” might question whether or not a certain music exists beyond the speaker, and death, here, suddenly allows us to recall Cavell’s reading of Emerson’s cogito as Dickinson’s speaker enacts an “I”: “me”/“my tune.” But in asking “who wrought” and “chiselled,” the speaker is also, while saying, quoting an unknown entity, or at least, suggesting quotation in that the tune was “chiselled” and the “Cararra” was “wrought.”72 Again, this leaves the potential for acceptance or embrace of original relation without actually enacting it. The speaker is not, perhaps, reluctant; rather, the opening of spaces has rendered the speaker unable to answer confidently from a place of “good posture.”

The speaker has no answers, but “still a chance to strain” (l.16) over this question, and she names “Death” as a potential answer for her straining (not dying, but Death). In straining, the speaker moves “To Being, somewhere - Motion - Breath -” (l.17), where there is a sense of hope restored to the dropped brain and the benumbed soul that have stopped. In this, if “Breath” is taken to mean words produced “Though Centuries beyond”, the speaker’s only limit becomes time (“every limit a Decade”).73 Dickinson’s speaker will “shiver, satisfied” (l.20) if her straining results in “Being, somewhere” beyond—perhaps being quoted—but the “I’ll” is conditional, and depends on favorable results of the “strain.” In realizing that each decade is a “limit,” the speaker also suggests the potential for becoming situated farther away from the “Motion” or “Breath” (centuries away, in fact), which—though it feels optimistic—might also suggest the same

72 Recalling Emerson’s description of the air as “music” in “The Poet” (217), this speaks to Dickinson’s testing of original relation as a simultaneous act of saying/quot ing.

73 Cavell discusses the idea of “communicating as emitting a breath every moment” and riffs on Emerson’s idea that “you cannot smell your own breath” (116). Cavell suggests that this “means in part that you do not know in the moment the extent to which your saying is quoting” (116). See: Cavell, 116. This speaks to the undecidability of Dickinson’s speaker here, as she fails to discern between saying and quoting, despite acknowledging the potential effects that “emitting a breath” might have.
potential danger that the duality of saying/quotting does (that the speaker’s saying will not be valued or that it will be quoted incorrectly). This is what the “shiver” of satisfaction (“I’ll shiver, satisfied.”) captures: both value and danger, and the dividedness that combination evokes.

While Dickinson’s speaker seems slightly invested in the outcome of the test this poem conducts, there is no real sense that she understands or has captured the relationship between “Sense” and “Instinct” or saying and quoting. She keeps the terms separate, yet conflates them similarly to the way she conflates “Brain” and “Soul” in the first line. “I’ve still a chance to strain,” above all, suggests that the connection has not ultimately been made. If it has, the speaker seems committed to her current state of not knowing (the conditional “I’ll”) and the poem ends with a full stop. This might indicate a speaker reaching for self-simultaneity; the reader enters the poem mid-vision as the speaker attempts to perceive her own detachment/integration happening simultaneously; and yet, because such perception is difficult, the speaker “strains,” not knowing how far boundaries might open before they are dissolved. While on the one hand, Dickinson seems curious about just how far boundaries can be opened before they are dissolved, on the other, her speakers occasionally seem fearful of that dissolving when they anticipate boundaries opening, perhaps, too far.

The tone of “One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -”74 is considerably more fearful, as the unknown aspects of the speaker’s self are guarded against, through the closing and bolting of a door. The speaker suggests, without enacting an “I,” that “One” need not be a “Chamber” or a “House” (l.1). This suggests that the self need not be a vessel (or a room, or a building) to be entered into or filled with presence (perhaps neither vision nor music) to be “Haunted” (l.1). Death enters the poem as a perceived, abstract threat (the body “borrows a

74 Dickinson, “One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -” (407), in The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 188. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.
revolver”, l.17) and through images that carry the countenance of death (“ghost” “stones” “spectre”). The “External Ghost”—perhaps the presence of some other “self” outside of the speaker’s self—is less a threat to the speaker than the “interior confronting” of “That cooler Host” (ll.7-8). Indeed, the “unarmed encounter” with “one’s a’self” in a “lonesome Place” is more dangerous to the speaker than a midnight walk through a cemetery (ll.9-12). The speaker’s multiple selves are dangerous to each other in the Brain’s “Corridors” (which “surpass material place”), as the speaker considers, “Ourself behind ourself, concealed - / Should startle most” (ll.13-14). Just how fearsome this spectre is—in its unknown quality—is captured in the final stanza:

The Body - borrows a Revolver -
He bolts the Door -
O’erlooking a superior spectre -
Or More -
(ll.17-20)

“Or More -” indicates that the speaker cannot comprehend, or perhaps even see what that “superior spectre” is. The speaker does not, perhaps, even want to know it, as the “Body” “bolts the Door.” The optimistic “chance to strain” in “I’ve dropped my Brain” has disappeared here with a violent bolting of the door and a dismissal of any desire to “see” what might exist on the other side. In relation to previous readings, this poem presents an element of Dickinson’s testing that could be responsible for much of her speakers’ undecidability; perceiving an original relation might not be desirable if there are fearsome consequences for the quest itself going awry. Indeed, the speaker of this poem anticipates a potentially catastrophic consequence that is explored in other poems: loss of sanity.
“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,”\textsuperscript{75} registers a confusion of past and present, as the poem opens in the past tense, “I felt,” (l.1) and yet proceeds as though the speaker is telling it as it is happening. This suggests a broken down ability to be clear about what is happening in the present versus what has already happened, and the poem fails in its last moment, as the speaker cannot articulate what is known. The poem uses repetition to move the speaker and reader toward sensation without ultimately offering knowledge (much as “Alabaster Chambers” allows the reader to experience the opening of boundaries without understanding what that opening does). Death in this poem, invoked by the “Funeral,” (l.1) presents a speaker whose mind seems to have been corrupted; a funeral has been felt in the brain and “Sense” (l.4) has been felt as though it were breaking through, but the speaker struggles regardless to stop the mind from benumbing. This suggests, perhaps, that the speaker’s quest to know has derailed the brain’s capacity for functioning, and yet the speaker still feels that functioning as it slips away. The “Mourners” (l.2) tread in such a way that the speaker anticipates “Sense” while “thinking” (l.7) the mind is going numb (which are antithetical statements, to anticipate sense while the mind thinks of its own benumbing), so the reader again becomes unclear as to what is actually occurring as both a generative and degenerative self-awareness are experienced.

When “Space” begins to “toll” (l.12), Dickinson casts her speaker as a (dis)embodied ear: “As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear,” (ll.13-14). This creates an interesting counter-image to Emerson’s (dis)embodied eye-ball. Rather than cast her speaker as an Emersonian transparent eye-ball that receives vision, Dickinson’s speaker is “but an Ear” that cannot hear the “Heavens” that “were a Bell”; the speaker, as an ear, is “Wrecked, solitary” (l.16) where even “Silence” is “some strange Race” (l.15). Not even as an ear can the speaker

\textsuperscript{75} Dickinson, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (340), in \textit{The Poems of Emily Dickinson}, 153. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.
hear the tolling heavens, so what chance does she have as an eye? When the speaker’s “Plank in Reason” breaks, she “drops” “down, and down -” hitting “a World, at every plunge,” (l.19), but despite this happening, the speaker knows only what the reader (and the speaker) is uncertain of (“I Finished knowing - then -”, l.20). Despite this seeming failure, the indecisiveness regarding the final knowledge (or lack thereof) is a theme Dickinson repeatedly returns to when death informs her poems. This indecisiveness appears when death is either named or threatens some parts of the speakers—“Mind/Brain/Soul”—that are frequently difficult to distinguish in relation to the physical body, each other, or the spaces they create and occupy.

Even when Dickinson’s speaker does enact an “I” or arguably attempts to dissolve it, the self is rendered irrelevant. Thus, dissolving again loses the meaning of vision that, for Emerson, is so fundamental. In “Of Bronze - and Blaze -” Dickinson’s speaker suggests that the “Competeless Show” of her “Splendors” might “entertain the Centuries” (ll.15-16). In being “competeless,” the speaker takes a “good posture” in “daring” to enact an “I” that positions itself in relation to the “shows” and “splendors” of others. However, the universe and nature is rather unconcerned with that self—or at least, the self’s perception of the self. Dickinson writes:

Of Bronze - and Blaze -
The North - tonight -
So adequate - it forms -
So preconcerted with itself -
So distant - to alarms -
An Unconcern so soveign
To Universe, or me -
Infests my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty -
(ll.1-9)

\footnote{\textsuperscript{76} Dickinson, “Of Bronze - and Blaze -” (319), in \textit{The Poems of Emily Dickinson}, 142. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.}
In suggesting that nature is unconcerned with the speaker or even the universe, the poem questions the interconnectedness of all things and the ability to experience the sort of original relation in transcendence that Emerson suggests is possible. In fact, it is the unconcern and the “sovreignty” of nature—not the speaker’s communion with it—that “Infests” the “simple spirit / With Taints of Majesty.” The word “Taints” suggests not complete, but fractured vision—a perception of only a few shades or specks of color, perhaps, rather than the whole hue.

The “Arrogance” of “Men” and “Oxygen” is to be “disdained” by the speaker who has not yet taken “attitudes vast” enough to “strut” upon her “stem” (ll.10-13). While this suggests the anticipation of higher knowledge, it only comes with eradication; the unity with nature only comes through leaving the “I” “long ago” (l.17). When the speaker describes this “I” as becoming “An Island in dishonored Grass - / Whom none but Daisies, know” (ll.18-19), the speaker suggests that the “I” will be divorced from the “Splendors”—that though literary immortality might help the speaker survive, the “self” will have been detached from the work. Only the “Daisies” and “dishonored Grass” will know the former “self” the speaker had, as the “I” will be “long ago.” What is left of the speaker in her “Competeless Show” of “Splendors” is not an “I”; it is only the false perception or the entertainment of one (the quoting, not the saying). This contradicts the original good posturing the reader perceives upon encountering the speaker’s boast of a “Competeless Show,” suggesting that even if one were to achieve original relation, it might not matter or have any bearing upon what is quoted or said of that “Show” in the future. In calling the grass “dishonored,” the speaker also challenges what rapture should be found in the beauty of unity, were it possible. The decaying body dishonors the world it breathed—or spoke—in arrogantly. This makes it difficult for the reader to know what should or should not be carried off from the poem. Much like Dickinson’s other poems, we can read this as a struggle to
comprehend the self’s relation in such a way that, at moments, the speaker fancies an “Aptitude,” and at others, closes to (or even hides from) the possibility.

Death does not have to be invoked by name (though it often is) to be present in Dickinson’s poetry. Death haunts many of her poems and as its presence opens up or frames their spaces. Sometimes, death is present through imagery associated with it, sometimes through the spectres it creates. It is not always a device of terror, just as it is not always one of optimism. It simply is, and the speaker is not required to decide what it means to mean by being there, just as the speaker does not need to know what she knows or does not know regarding the nature of the self’s relation to itself or something higher. Sometimes, death points to the speaker’s desire to transcend; at other times, it registers a palpable desire not to or a suggests that original relation does not happen in the way Emerson suggests it does (that seeking original relation is not enjoyable and that it instead brings disturbing and disorienting vision). In this way, death in Dickinson’s poems serves to test ideas of self and the space that a self exists in or navigates through, without entirely denying or embracing the possibility of original relation.

But what if the undecidability comes not out of calculation but rather an inability to decide? Deppman traces a philosophical genealogy for Dickinson that ultimately suggests she might have held “strong but opposed” philosophical viewpoints. This could account for some of the indecision that registers as an inability to distinguish between her terms or between the simultaneously fragmented and conflated parts of the self. In this way, Dickinson’s poems often succeed at failing to provide answers without actually failing as exercises in themselves, as she did not have to decide where/how/when the elements of being or thought intertwined (integrated)

77 Deppman suggests that Dickinson would have been well-positioned “geographically, intellectually, and temperamentally to register the liberating speculative energies gathered and released” by Transcendentalism, and that “her outlook might have been affected by the more German-inspired metaphysics,” while the “discipline of mental and moral philosophy” would have been important during her time, since it was seen as providing “rational support to Christianity” (79-80).
or separated (detached). 78 Perhaps she could not. Perhaps that she “could not see to see” was
t entirely the point. 79 Dickinson repeatedly shows decisiveness only in not deciding, as “death”
captures the struggle to understand what it might mean to apprehend or to have an original
relation. It also captures a struggle over whether such relation is desired or even significant.

78 Deppman connects Dickinson to Locke through modern associational analysis, which he says begins with Locke. He writes: “In the fourth edition of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” Locke “added the chapter ‘Of the Association of Ideas’ in order to explain why most reasonable people exhibit some ‘madness’ or strange beliefs; his answer was that the hazards of their experience had caused them to form strong but irrational associations among certain ideas” (92). In referencing this, Deppman suggests that for Dickinson, the “associationist vocabulary and logic” (which would have been “widely accepted” for “mental experience”) was also a “contested philosophical site with unresolved questions” (93). Rather than exhibit an inability to decide, the prospect of indecision might have been exciting for Dickinson, since “if one could not testify to ‘harmony’ among the moving powers of one’s mind, then the textbook doctrines all but requires a (dangerous but exciting) self-diagnosis of ‘unregulated’” (93). It might have been stimulating for Dickinson to engage in these sorts of mental tests for their own sake, since Deppman also suggests that Dickinson was “dissatisfied” with the “associationist and mechanistic philosophies of mind” (94).

VI. Poe’s Perverseness

For Poe, poetic testing leads less to undecidability and more to repeated refusal, as his speakers actively resist visions they do not want to receive. Poe rejects poetry’s search for truth and disengages with Emersonian original relation—or so McGann suggests in detaching Poe’s concept of beauty from an Emersonian concept of truth. This detachment comes as a consequence of being disillusioned with the notion that poems are supposed to serve as vehicles for expressing moral truths. McGann writes:

Affect is summoned into and then driven from the poems and, like an exorcised demon, set free to enter and take possession of the reader. That poetic moment locates Poe’s catastrophe of beauty. It is the moment when a reader understands what Poe is saying: that a thing of beauty—this thing of beauty—is not and never can be ‘a joy forever.’ That is the ultimate meaning of Poe’s mortally immortal word “Nevermore” as well as the sign of the word’s pitiless benevolence. Poe makes this move—his characteristic move—because he sees his enterprising American world emptied of true affect, as if its people were living inside a factitious Romantic poem. … His poetry does not propose a compensation for the loss of loved and cherished things, it tells a double truth about those losses: first, that they lie beyond redemption; and second, that they need not—indeed must not—lie beyond a “mournful and never-ending remembrance.” For memory is called to cherish even the factitious world.80

Here, meaning is only found in a thing of beauty, into which affect is “summoned” and “then driven from.” While I agree that Poe’s rejection is decisive, I read it less as the product of intellectual disillusionment with the “enterprising American world,” and more as the consequence of desperation due to an inability to sustain or re-enter a state of the self’s relation to itself or to selves once “loved and cherished.”81 This state remains beautiful despite being unsustainable. If disillusionment with—and not desperation over an inability to sustain—that

80 McGann, 94.
81 This statement is not meant to suggest that Poe’s work responds solely to Emerson’s ideas of self and original relation of that self to the Universal Being; it simply suggests that these ideas are ones that get tested in moments when death’s presence is felt.
state is the primary fuel for Poe’s “mournful and never-ending” remembrances, why do his poems carry such suspense? For flourish? If Poe’s poetry suggests that these losses do lie beyond redemption, why do his speakers not present themselves with a greater degree of certainty over this? If Poe is so certain that “this thing of beauty—is not and never can be ‘a joy forever,’” what accounts for the suspense that gets laced with the sorrow? If Poe’s poetry is performative only, it is worth questioning more closely what it performs beyond a pure rejection of truth-seeking. Poe’s speakers seem to desire a sustainable original relation, despite claiming to be disillusioned. Perhaps the sense of rejection from Poe’s speakers comes more out of desperation than disillusionment, and their suspense points to a perpetual return to a test which the speaker continues to retake while waiting for the answer to be different.

McGann might find it difficult to entertain this, since he reads Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” and Eureka as parodic (yet he reads Poe’s heresy of the didactic as authentic). McGann’s readings of these works as parodies accompany his commitment to assigning Poe’s work value for its composedness and not for its truth-seeking. However, in denying Poe’s texts a search for a philosophical truth, McGann also somewhat veils our ability to appreciate Poe’s poetry for its compositional performance of philosophical questioning beyond just disillusioned rejection of Romantic poetic notions. Poe’s work can be appreciated for its compositional beauty and musicality while it seeks and tests meaning-based truth. Stripping Poe’s poetry of meaning would make us victims of the tradition McGann suggests he works against; it would deny Poe the philosopher component of his thinker label, and instead confine him to a realm where beauty loses truth and becomes art for art’s sake. This might be what McGann wants to do, but it also

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82 In pointing out Poe’s “severe aesthetic formalism,” McGann takes “the heresy of the didactic” from Poe’s “The Poetic Principle” to mean (as others have) that poetry “should not be approached as a repository of ideas or an expression of feeling but as an event of language” (2). But why this is the document McGann takes seriously escapes me. It is unclear to me why these are any more parodic than “The Poetic Principle” might be.
works against his invitation to take Poe seriously as a thinker whose work moves us toward meaning-making beyond the pleasure of melodic gothic spectacles. In searching for a philosophical component to Poe’s poetry, I hope to capture the seriousness of it from another angle. McGann suggests that the intellectual component of Poe’s poems can be captured through exploring its exacting composedness, but this does not require Poe to actually be thinking about anything other than how he’s going to craft his jingles to sound the most hauntingly beautiful (if truth is only in beauty).

McGann writes that “Emerson recoiled from what seemed to him like Poe’s refusal of the serious moral vocation of art,” but perhaps this is where they (Emerson and Poe) and we (myself and McGann) miss one another. I read Poe’s speakers as striving for original relation and refusing it only when they cannot sustain it. This would mean that Poe and Dickinson “died for beauty” in a similar way—though not one located in rejection of poetic truths for the sake of beauty alone. Rather, the beauty they died for might be found in the struggle for a transcendent connection or truth that escaped and evaded them, one that they could sometimes “hear” but not always “see.”

Emerson saw the poet and the philosopher as one, and yet, “philosophy for philosophy’s sake” is not a phrase that has caught on. While I appreciate readings of Dickinson or Poe as resisting location of poetry’s truth in favor of beauty, I move to explore what we might see in Poe if we imagine him as also testing truth through exploring the concept of original relation. Since any philosophical struggle is a struggle for truth, what happens when we read death in Poe

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83 McGann, 3.
as testing poetry’s potential for capturing original relation (self-simultaneity) and enacting a moral vocation?\textsuperscript{84}

The Poe that then emerges is a desperate Poe—obsessed with the struggle for what he cannot sustain—one who would rather watch a beautiful woman die (so as to preserve that beauty) than watch her decay. Similarly, death in Poe’s poetry captures the struggle, perhaps, of being called or drawn toward some sort of vision and losing or rejecting it repeatedly. In Dickinson, a curiosity over undecidability registers in her struggle to better understand the nature of thought through poetic language, as we see her confront the potential dangers of that quest and return to it again. In Poe, a dedicated denial registers in his attempts to convince himself and his readers that the loss of that relation is beautiful when, perhaps, the possibility of it persistently taunts him despite this denial. Death is the appropriate device with which Poe conducts his tests (and enacts resistance) through his speakers, not only because it is the “most melancholic”\textsuperscript{85} device, but that, in being melancholic, it also provides the basis upon which Poe subverts the countenance that Emerson aligns most closely with truth—rapture, uplift, unity. Poe perverts Emerson’s vision as a challenge to it, by employing a vision that sees with inverted colors.

\textsuperscript{84} Whatever one might read as moral in the notion of original relation or the transcendent comes with the suggestion of its social consequences. A self-simultaneous existence (or what we might call interconnectedness) bears social consequence for Emerson because it requires the enactment of one’s existence in a way that recognizes its existence as self-simultaneous. What social consequence this bears is captured to a rapturous degree in Whitman, where boundaries between selves are blended and results in some sort of perceived social oneness that is framed as “moral.” The social good that might come from claiming an original relation is a consequence of seeking it \textit{in the first place} and arriving at a place where one can receive such a vision. When I talk about the degree to which Dickinson or Poe capture Emersonian truth, I do \textit{not} mean the degree to which they espouse morality; rather, I am trying to locate their perception of an ability to capture that truth in the first place. The moral consequences would depend on first being able to locate and embrace that vision, hence the need for testing.

Carton’s reading of Poe’s short story “William Wilson” is useful for introducing the pervasive identity crisis of the speakers in much of Poe’s poetry: 86

Wilson’s essential desire is to be able to claim, and to have others recognize, his originality and singular dominion over himself and his environment. To this purpose he directs “the energy of his thought and will,” much as the early paragraphs of Nature advise. The irony of Wilson’s enterprise is that, in claiming and pursuing originality, he denies and flees from genuine identity rather than affirming it. For Poe, this irony strikes at the heart of the issue of identity itself: appropriately, he emblematizes it here in Wilson’s name and in his tale’s portrayal of the act of naming. The Emersonian poet is above all “the sayer, the namer” (iii, 7). … His act of naming names himself, and this self-construction is the fullest expression of his originality. Wilson would be this self-created namer but for one impediment: his name. The fact of his name evidences his identity’s dependence upon, and external imposition by, others, and the name’s character emphasizes Wilson’s lack of distinction and inherent alienation from originality. … He is not self-authored. … Wilson is the sayer, but his speech is outward show, and he sees only enough to recognize intermittently in his double the essential selfhood that his own displays counterfeit. … The double arouses in Wilson the terrible suspicion that he is a pretender to his own identity. … Wilson’s self-discovery is his self-loss. 87

The double dies (because he must), and Carton arrives here: “originality has seemed something that the active, speaking self can only destroy.” 88 Poe captures the danger in conceiving of self-simultaneity in this tale and suggests what social consequence misinterpreting Emerson’s vision might have. 89 Death similarly becomes a device in Poe’s poetry through which Poe’s speakers and the reader can explore and question potential downsides of original relation and its pursuit.

86 In an 1839 letter to Poe, Philip Pendleton Cooke captures how Poe makes this crisis available to the reader. Cooke writes: “Of ‘William Wilson’ I am not sure that I perceive the true idea. From the ‘whispering voice’ I would apprehend that you meant the second William Wilson as an embodying of the conscience of the first; but I am inclined to the notion that your intention was to convey the wilder idea that every mortal of us is attended with a shadow of himself—a duplicate of his own peculiar organization—differing from himself only in a certain angelic taint of the compound, derived from heaven, as our own wild humours are derived from Hell (figuratively);—I cannot make myself understood, as I am not used to the expression of a wild half thought. But, although I do not clearly comprehend, I certainly admire the story.” See: Philip Pendleton Cooke, “Letter to Poe,” in Edgar Allan Poe: Critical Assessments, Vol. II, ed. Graham Clarke (London: Helm Information Ltd, 1991), 95-6.
87 Carton, 37-40.
88 Carton, 41.
89 The musicality and composedness McGann cites adds to the challenge of encountering selves—a challenge that, while perceptible in prose, become more accessible through experiencing (one might say, hearing) the rhythmic quality of poetic language.
In reading “William Wilson,” Carton recognizes a danger that is sobering for many of the speakers in Poe’s poems: that self-discovery means self-destruction.

In “The Conqueror Worm,” Poe invokes death through the image of the worm that consumes the dead body. This worm is the “hero” of the poem and of the play the poem describes, which is a thinly veiled metaphor for life. The players are “mimes, in the form of God on high,” who “mutter and mumble low,” as they “fly” (flight here is, similar to the way it is used in Dickinson, suggestive of moments that point toward transcendence), at “bidding of vast formless things” (ll.9-13). The drama, which the speaker calls “motley,” “shall not be forgot,” as the speaker describes a “phantom” that the crowd will “chase for evermore,” though the crowd “seize it not” (ll.17-20). This line, “By a crowd that seize it not,” when read aloud, confuses “seize” with “sees,” an apt choice if we consider this poem in terms of a challenge to Emersonian vision. The use of circle imagery that “returneth in / To the self-same spot” also recalls imagery Emerson was fond of using (the circle), though the plot is of “Madness, and more of Sin / And Horror” (ll.23-4) than Emerson’s visioning of vision would suggest. Though the speaker critiques the crowd as not “seizing” the “chased Phantom,” we must remember that the speaker, too, is watching the play of “hopes and fears” as it unfolds. That the orchestra “breathes fitfully / The music of the spheres” recalls Emerson and suggests that what the crowd (speaker included) “chases” but cannot “seize” is complete knowledge.91 If it can, apprehension might only bring “Invisible Wo!” as it “comes and goes”—a coming and going the speaker attributes to “vast formless things” that puppeteer the crowd at their “bidding” (ll.12-16). This suggests that the speaker is critical of the chase and sets him in opposition to it.

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91 Not only in the “breath,” which describes simultaneous saying and quoting (Cavell, 116) but also in the “music,” which echoes simultaneous detachment and integration (Emerson, “The Poet,” 217).
This is supported by the speaker’s dismissive—perhaps even disgusted—tone, and there is a sense that the speaker considers himself not part of the crowd of “mere puppets.” He is integrated into the crowd by being present at the play, but detached in his superior perception of himself. Death enters as the worm feasts on the “mimes” (the silent puppets who can neither say nor quote), and suggests that the speaker perceives an understanding beyond that which the oblivious puppets do: that “the play is the tragedy, ‘Man’” (l.39). The tragedy can only be escaped through a rejection or a detachment that comes with lauding the worm as a “hero”—one that puts the mimes out of their misery and relieves them of their quest to chase that “Phantom” which only returns them to the “self-same spot.” The aforementioned disillusionment is palpable for the speaker, who vehemently denies participation in the chase while sitting and watching it nonetheless, vowing, “it shall not be forgot.”

The poem is often read (and was first published) on its own, but Poe eventually added it to his short story, “Ligeia.” The poem appears in the context of the story’s subject, Ligeia (a young woman), reading the poem to the narrator while she dies. This is, perhaps, a form of quotation.92 Indeed, the death of beautiful young women is a favorite device of Poe’s:

Now, never losing sight of the object supremeness, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself — “Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?” Death — was the obvious reply. “And when,” I said, “is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?” From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious — “When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world — and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.”93

92 Matthew Taylor suggests that “Ligeia” “portends our ontological dis/integration by making Ligeia a lodestar of cosmic process” (47). Taylor reads Ligeia’s death as an “exemplification of the forces obliterating” the “durability of individuality,” even if her “return” from death “apparently overthrows the Conqueror Worm’s reign” (47). While Taylor relates this to his own particular notions of Poe’s “meta/physics,” this reading also supports my understanding of death as a device of testing self-simultaneity. See: Matthew A. Taylor, Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 27-56.
93 Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” 19. Note here that Poe is also quoting—thus doubling—himself.
As I have already suggested, Poe’s frequent return to the death of beautiful women might speak to more than the trauma of or anxiety over death itself. His speakers’ obsession with a beauty they cannot permanently or completely enjoy speaks to Poe’s detachment of beauty from truth. What is beautiful about the dead women is disconnected from the women’s selves, since their bodies lose the ability in death to relate to the bereaved lover’s self. Poe’s speakers preserve the dead women in memory. While these speakers occasionally take strange comfort in the memory’s preservation of these women in their most beautiful physical states, memory is also torturous in its suggestion of what truth might once have existed. Perhaps the speaker could perceive or strive toward original relation through blending his self (or imagining the blending of his self) with the selves of his lovers. Now, however, once the lovers are dead, the potential they had to connect the speakers to truth dissipates in a way that is utterly painful, despite whatever comfort memory’s preservation provides.

“Ulalume—A Ballad”94 captures the torture of a mournful remembrance; it also captures the same struggle present in “The Conqueror Worm” (and involves a dead woman, no less). The speaker recalls, “Here once, through an alley Titanic, / Of cypress, I roamed with my Soul—” and “These were days when my heart was volcanic / As the scoriac rivers that roll— / As the lavas that restlessly roll” (ll.10-15). Here, Poe invokes nature to call attention to the state in which his speaker’s self “once” existed. The speaker’s thoughts were “palsied” (l.21), as talk had been “serious and sober,” (l.20) and the speaker “remembered not” the “dark tarn of Auber / Nor the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir” (ll.28-9). This suggests that the speaker, when his “heart was volcanic” did not see the “darker” aspects of self; the transcendent, rapturous state made the speaker’s thoughts “palsied” (as they did Dickinson’s) and were “treacherous” (l.22), as time

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disappeared (“we knew not the month was October”). But “now,” as the describes night as
“senescent,” a “duplicate horn” arises (l.36), and the speaker makes contact with another entity—
a “She” who “rolls through an ether of sighs” and “revels” in that “region” beyond (ll.40-1).

This feminine presence sees that the “tears are not dry on / These cheeks where the worm
never dies” (ll.42-3). Recalling “The Conqueror Worm,” this image suggests something eternal
or transcendent that the speaker has not lost (“the tears are not dry”). And yet, the next stanza
begins with “But Psyche” as the poem negates the sentiment expressed in the previous stanza.
“Psyche” “mistrusts” the “star”—her “pallor” (perhaps her countenance), and suggests that the
speaker “fly!—for we must” (l.55). Why? For fear of that countenance. “In terror she spoke;
letting sink her / Wings till they trailed in the dust—/ In agony sobbed; letting her sink her /
Plumes till they trailed in the dust—/ Till they sorrowfully trailed in the dust” (ll.56-60).

“Plumes” can be read as the feathers of a bird or the plume of the pen. This draws a connection
between the self’s original relation and the poet’s ability to capture or communicate it.

The speaker continues, begging Psyche to “bathe in this crystalline light!” (l.63) in which
the speaker perceives not only “Beauty” but “Hope,” imploring Psyche to “See!” (l.64). The
speaker wants to “trust” its “gleaming / And be sure it will lead us aright—” “Since it flickers up
to Heaven through the night” (ll.67-71)—since it transcends the “self” that Psyche represents.
The speaker is able to “pacify” Psyche and “kiss her,” “tempting” her “out of her gloom” (ll.72-
3). The natural imagery of this stanza continues until death stops the vision at the “door of a
tomb” (l.76). The speaker’s Psyche then reminds him that the beauty was lost before and could
be lost again (a reminder invoked by the image of the beautiful dead woman, the speaker’s love):
“‘T is the vault of thy lost Ulalume!” (l.81). The speaker’s heart then grows again as “ashen and
sober” as it began at the start of the poem, recalling the cyclical nature of the process (returning
to that “self-same spot” that eluded the crowd in “The Conqueror Worm”). In this way, the poem captures a cyclical struggle to tap transcendent vision and overcome the pessimism that accompanies potential loss of that vision.

The image of the beautiful dead woman is often tied up in this cycle, as it represents, for Poe’s speakers, an embodiment of the beauty of the connection, but also the tragic outcome of its loss, which the speakers of both poems seem to insist is inevitable. For Poe, perhaps the beautiful dead woman stands in for the unattainability (or unsustainability) of Emerson’s vision. Poe’s speaker cannot live in that “crystalline light”; he will always continue to walk and encounter the tomb, even if he momentarily forgets while basking in the light’s glow. We see this in Poe over and over again; and yet, the heart-beat continues, the “secret that lies in these wolds,” the “thing that lies hidden in these wolds—” (ll. 99-100) taunts, “sinfully scintillant” (l. 103) “From the Hell of the planetary souls” (l. 104). The poem also ends with a question mark after “souls.” This taunts Poe’s speakers with the spectre of an answer while suggesting the cyclical nature of the self-same question. Despite the question’s cyclical nature, Poe nonetheless attempts to provide answers in prose. Poe’s use of prose to articulate his views on poetry suggests that Poe’s speakers might not have been able to escape the cyclical nature of the tortuous question through poetry itself, despite seeming to recognize—as indicated by repeated return to this theme—that poetry offered its answer.

For example, Poe uses his “Philosophy of Composition” to suggest that poetry requires more than “ecstatic intuition.” Cavell expresses annoyance, however, at “having to stand the repeated, conforming description of Emerson as a philosopher of intuition,” and says that this

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95 Poe’s narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” cannot rid himself of the incessant beating of a heart trapped beneath the floorboards. This is an appropriate metaphor for the issue I see Poe grappling with in most of his poetry: his speakers cannot rid themselves of the heartbeat. They can hear it, but attempt to ignore it or pretend it does not exist once they have sealed it away, yet they continue to obsess over it.

96 Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” 14.
description “uniformly fails to add that he is simultaneously the teacher of tuition, as though his speaking of all later teachings as tuitions were a devaluing of the teacher rather than a direction for deriving their necessary value.” Cavell posits:

Marking Whim on [Emerson’s] doorpost was intuition’s tuition; an enactment of the obligation to remark the calling, or access, of genius; to run the risk (or, as Thoreau puts it, to sit the risk) of noting what happens to you, of making this happenstance notable, remarkable, thinkable—of subjecting yourself, as said, to intelligibility.

Perhaps this speaks to Poe’s resistance to subjecting of himself (or his speakers) to that particular intelligibility. Rather than extract joy out of self-simultaneity—rather than view it as a vessel of hope for “returning man to his nature”—Poe’s speakers find it torturous in its unsustainability and reject it. They refuse to participate while recalling it fondly. There might be something of a believer left in these speakers (as “Ulalume” suggests), despite the fact that Poe continuously smothers it… stifles it… *tries* to kill it with death as a murder weapon. Indeed, Cavell suggests that where Emerson says, “I think,” “I am,” Poe says, “I think, therefore I am destroyed.” Poe cannot, it seems, reverse this destruction—just as death cannot be revoked.

It is not until *Eureka* that Poe seems to make more sustained contact with what he presents as truth. If we read Poe as grappling with self-simultaneity and the potential consequences of original relation in his poetry, it makes sense that his *Eureka*—aptly titled to mirror an exclamation of discovery—comes through a strange hybrid of prose (which Poe often employed in attempts to articulate his compositional philosophy) and poetic language (Poe subtitles *Eureka* “A Prose Poem”). This text—while it has been dismiss as nonsensical or

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97 Cavell, 115.
98 Cavell, 115.
99 Cavell, 124.
parodic—is peculiarly transcendental.  

Eureka’s transcendental moments become less out of place than they might seem otherwise if we read Poe—as I have done here—as using poetic language to test thought and transcendental notions of truth.

“The Raven,” Poe’s best-known poem, is also among the strongest examples of testing and rejecting original relation, as captured by the speaker’s repeated questioning of the raven, which incessantly squawks “Nevermore.” Rather than unfold a new reading of “The Raven,” I turn to Poe’s own reading of it:

I had now to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word “Nevermore”—I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying, at every turn, the application of the word repeated; but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imagining the Raven employing the word in answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the

100 Poe expresses a “sentiment of awe” in the opening of Eureka that prefaces his proposition that “the mind may be able really to receive and to perceive an individual impression” (1261). The language Poe uses here mirrors some of the language Emerson uses in Nature. Poe suggests a “ruling idea” that becomes the focal point of his text: he proposes an “Original Unity” (1261). Poe references the “Cosmos” of Alexander Von Humboldt in his description of “each portion of the merely physical Universe” as related to “every other portion of this merely physical Universe” in order to discuss the “universality of material relation,” disclosing to “the eye of Philosophy whatever inferences have hitherto lain hidden behind this universality” (1262). Poe’s discussion of eyes, vision, and universality remind of Emerson as well. Poe pauses before proceeding to describe a “remarkable letter” which, he writes, “appears to have been found … but little frequented in modern days unless by the Transcendentalists and some other divers for crotchets” (1263). The writer of this letter proceeds to discuss multiple philosophers and philosophies, and comes to a discussion of (presumably John Stuart Mill) (1267). Reference to Mill brings Poe to “the acme of the unquestionable—as the quintessence of axiomatic undeniability” (1267). Poe writes: Here it is:—‘Contradictions cannot both be true—that is, cannot coexist in nature.’ Here Mr. Mill means, for instance,—and I give the most forcible instance conceivable—that a tree must be either a tree or not a tree—that it cannot be at the same time a tree and not a tree:—all which is quite reasonable of itself … until we test it by the logic of its own propounder” (1267-8). Here, Poe indicates a desire to test the very principle I have worked to suggest he tests: that original relation—in requiring self-simultaneity of saying/quoting, integration/detachment, self/non-self—is possible, sustainable, or desirable. As Poe ends his quoting of the “epistle,” he proceeds to “our legitimate thesis, The Universe,” which “admits a choice between two modes of discussion:—We may ascend or descend” (1271). In Emersonian terms, one can liken this to taking a good or poor posture. There are multiple moments in Eureka that draw such similarities, though these are a few moments of particular significance. See: Poe, Eureka, in Poems and Tales, 1261-1359.

101 Perhaps what is most striking in Eureka comes with Poe’s final declaration: “In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life—Life—Life within Life—the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine” (1358-9). Following this, there is footnote that states: “the pain of the consideration that we shall lose our individual identity, ceases at once when we further reflect that the process, as above described, is, neither more nor less than that of absorption, by each individual intelligence, of all other intelligences (that is, of the Universe) into its own. That God may be all in all, each must become God” (1359). Poe’s own “pain of consideration” is observable in his poetry as he struggles with difficulty in embracing this notion. Perhaps Eureka (one of Poe’s final works before his death) offered Poe some relief. See: Poe, Eureka, 1261-1359.
opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending—that is to say, the effect of the variation of application. I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover—the first query to which the Raven should reply “Nevermore”—that I could make this first query a commonplace one—the second less so—the third still less, and so on—until at length the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition—and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it—is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—queries whose solution he has passionately at heart—propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture—propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the expected “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me—or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction—I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query—that to which “Nevermore” should be in the last place an answer—that in reply to which this word “Nevermore” should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

If we do not read this strictly as parody, we see his tests thinly veiled in the presentation of his choice to use “Nevermore” as a “reply.” The query is “commonplace” until “at length,” the speaker (“the lover”), “startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself — by its frequent repetition” (testing) begins to question the bird out of “delight” in “self-torture,” despite having the “solution” to his “queries” “passionately at heart.” The speaker, Poe says, perhaps not unlike himself (whose “reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote”) still takes “phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the expected ‘Nevermore’”—he can anticipate the answer because he will not allow another to exist. He knows what his own answer will be, since he rejects the possibility of another truth.

102 Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” 19.
103 We might also read it as quoting, if the raven is taken to symbolize original relation. The speaker tests the bird, as Poe tests original relation, and receives the same answer repeatedly. Recall that in Dickinson’s poetry, an “Aptitude for Bird” suggested flight toward integration or original relation, and in Poe’s “Ulalume,” plumes can be read as both the feathers of birds and the plume of the poet’s pen.
But this is, perhaps, why we do not ever fully get a sense that Poe has found an answer or that the suspense that permeates much of his work is alleviated. Poe repeatedly withholds something from us. Though we read moments where Poe’s speakers attempt contact, connection, or integration, the repeated return to the theme of the self’s annihilation and detachment suggests each prior attempt is, to some degree, unsuccessful. Like Dickinson’s speakers, Poe’s—while not so steeped in undecidability—are bothered, always, to the point where they must convince themselves that whatever lurks beyond their own immediate knowledge is not to be trusted. Though the worm might be the conqueror, the play goes on, and the speaker continues to watch. If we are actors and imposters like William Wilson, then there might yet be a true self somewhere, a self (recalling Dickinson) “behind ourself, concealed”—but this is a threat and not a hope. Poe’s testing becomes repeated rejection. On the one hand, Poe takes a stance against Emersonian original relation in casting it as a relentless threat; on the other, Poe’s repeated return to the same tests suggests desire for a different response—even if the only obstacle to that response is the speaker himself.

Beneath the shock value of Poe’s “perverseness” lives a sympathetic character. Whereas other writers transport themselves into that space where the air is music, we read Poe over and over again for his speakers who live in purgatory. They maintain an undying sense that everything is available to them—and yet they never invite themselves into that space. More tragic than Dickinson’s in their refusal to bathe in the “crystalline light,” the only hurdles are their own spectres. They are consumed by them, repeating only nevermore. In a macabre sense, this is beautiful. But no one stays on a doorstep so long without the inkling of something not yet seen or known. When the tell-tale heart beats no more, it is not about death, it is about that point in time where the speaker says, “I will no longer have hope that I might invite myself in. This
thing that drives me mad—this thing I can’t explain by other means—I will say that it does not exist.”
VII. Final Reflections

Speakers in Dickinson and Poe struggle with thought, language, and conceptions of truth while testing the self’s potential for an idealized vision of original relation that Emerson presents to us in *Nature*. Their poetry captures potential outcomes of attempts to experience existence through language. While Dickinson’s poetry lives somewhere in between (on a spectrum of which Poe and Whitman might cap the ends), her poetry, too, moves us in its undecidability and appeals to us, perhaps, for our own. In this way, poetry is language to explore relations that are otherwise unexplainable or uncapturable. Death becomes a springboard for thought. What reads sometimes as a morbid curiosity or even as an obsession becomes a testament either to unclaimed or rejected belief. Dickinson and Poe get as close to their *event horizons* as possible, but leave us only with more questions, more fragments with which to conduct our own tests.

Beliefs are present in the work of Dickinson and Poe, but are somehow disavowed, producing discomfort in readers who register a split between beliefs and the person who claims or appears to hold them. Dickinson’s undecidability does not suggest that beliefs are undecidable in the sense that they can never be decided, or that an answer might never be found; rather, it suggests an effort to survive the difficulty of what is believed—particularly when simultaneously opposed viewpoints are held in cognitive dissonance. Poe transmutes what would otherwise be abysmal for some (the rejection of Emerson’s promise of an enjoyable original relation) into what others call beautiful. In these ways, Dickinson and Poe test beliefs not only to see if they are true; they also test what it means to hold or *live with* belief. In doing so, they invite us to question how a personality might cope with a particular belief or system of beliefs. Their poetry asks us: *How does one live in relation to thought?*
Death in these poets’ work is not about death. It is not about loving someone lost. It is not about the speakers’ own mortality. It is a relation of person to thought—a test of the unknown that sometimes results in a loss of hope or submission to undecidability that itself rejects an imperative. For Dickinson and Poe, testing was, above all, a practice—a way to continue experiencing and grappling with philosophical beliefs that challenge our understandings of ourselves and our being in reality.
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