

THE SEMIOTIC PULSIONS OF DICKINSON'S POETRY AND THEIR MEDICINAL VIRTUES

LAS PULSIONES SEMIÓTICAS DE LA POESÍA DE DICKINSON Y SUS VIRTUDES MEDICINALES

Charis Charalampous 

Rovira i Virgili University

charis.charalampous@cantab.net

Thalia Trigoni 

Rovira i Virgili University

thalia.trigoni@urv.cat

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Abstract: The central thesis of this essay is that Dickinson's work has significant implications for a critical medical humanities open to the interface between language and embodiment. We show that by employing what Kristeva would refer to as a highly effective and aesthetically potent genotextuality, Dickinson manages to transmit pain and grief. She thereby enables a process of de-insulation and sharing, which can have therapeutic effects on the reader/listener. Here, suffering is not refined into erudition, beauty or even nothingness as a result of denial. Dickinson, we argue, becomes one of Kristeva's poet-surgeons of abjection, a poetess who cultivated not only a loyalty to malaise, but also a loyalty to overcoming the inability to share that malaise. The means by which Dickinson accomplishes this effect, we demonstrate, is via the semiotic pulsions

of her language that have the potential to facilitate the establishment of a democracy of proximity, one that resonates with the deepest levels of human experience.

Keywords: Julia Kristeva; Emily Dickinson; Death; Genotext; Semiotic; Abject; Disability; Democracy of proximity.

Resumen: La tesis central de este ensayo es que la obra de Dickinson tiene implicaciones significativas para unas humanidades médicas críticas abiertas a la interfaz entre el lenguaje y la corporeidad. Demostramos que, al emplear lo que Kristeva denominaría una genotextualidad altamente efectiva y estéticamente potente, Dickinson logra transmitir dolor y pena. De este modo, permite un proceso de des-aislamiento e intercambio que puede tener efectos terapéuticos en el lector/oyente. Aquí, el sufrimiento no se convierte en erudición, en belleza o incluso en la nada como resultado de la negación. Dickinson, argumentamos, se convierte en una de las poetisas-cirujanas de la abyección de Kristeva, en una poetisa que cultivó no solo la lealtad al malestar, sino también para superar la incapacidad de compartir dicho malestar. Evidenciamos que Dickinson logra este efecto a través de las pulsiones semióticas de su lenguaje, que tienen el potencial de facilitar el establecimiento de una democracia de proximidad que resuena en los niveles más profundos de la experiencia humana.

Palabras clave: Julia Kristeva; Emily Dickinson; muerte; genotexto; semiótica; abyecto; discapacidad; democracia de proximidad.

Emily Dickinson's poetry resists systemic analysis. She is a poet whose writings are full of semantic complexities which the reader is provoked to untangle. But more than a riddle to decipher or a cognitive challenge, reading Dickinson's poetry is an experience which conveys, aesthetically and intuitively, what is otherwise impossible to articulate in ordinary language. Her infatuation with death is apparent in many of her poems. Dickinson's obsession with death is as well-known as the complexity of her poetry. In approaching death via her language, we may observe an attempt to approach what Julia Kristeva has referred to as the "semiotic", that which, broadly speaking, lacks structure and (discursive) meaning. Human identity is largely constituted in everyday language aimed at communication. This is the type of language Kristeva calls "phenotext", a term she opposes to "genotext", associated with the transfer of drive energy and the semiotic process (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 86-89). Here we argue that Dickinson's poetry, her language's genotextual and semiotic disposition, allows for the symbolic disposition of the phenotext to collapse, and along with it, the identity that has been constituted in it.

Distinctively elliptical and minimal, Dickinson's poetry elicits a powerful call to readers to unpack the densely laden layers of meaning embedded in it. For Harold Bloom, Dickinson, among all nineteenth and twentieth century poets, "serves to present us with the most authentic cognitive difficulties" (1). Since the early reception of Dickinson's poetry, critics have remarked on the density of her poems that often puzzle readers. In the words of one nineteenth century reviewer, the difficulties of comprehension are intensified because "so much is implied, so much left just unsaid" (Schauffler 151). As Shira Wolosky put it, "Dickinson texts say and unsay, claim and disclaim, desire and decline, offer and retract, assert and deny, gain and lose, define and circumvent definition" (129). The interpretive difficulties that surround Dickinson's poetry have led Wolosky to regard her "as a powerful agonistic voice, caught between incompatible visions, assertively critical of each of them, unable to resolve their contradictions nor yet able to reside comfortably in any of their competing claims" (132-133). In Dickinson's poetic world, images are marked by obscurity and dashes create meaningful silences. In her analysis of the various levels of difficulty of Dickinson's poetry, Marcia Falk asks "Why does Dickinson present her reader with so much difficulty, so much to be construed and figured before the poem can be understood?" (151). For Falk, Dickinson composes dense poems because she aims towards "a different kind of union with us, [...] another kind of appreciation" that is intuitive rather than intellectual (151). Janel Mueller notes that the contrast between extreme brevity and powerful content contributes to the large "note of obscurity" in Dickinson's poems (17), while Jep Deppman in his book contends that Dickinson used her poetry as a means of thinking through "difficult projects of thought" (57).

The complexities of Dickinson's language have led a number of scholars to study the intimate connections between Dickinson's uses of language and the Kristevan notions of the semiotic and the *chora*. For Adam Katz, Dickinson's emphasis on the materiality of language helps pave the ground for the "semiotization of the symbolic", a practice characteristic of art through which *jouissance* infiltrates the symbolic order (59). Searching for meaning in Dickinson's splintering narrative, Calvin Bedient asserts that "Dickinson's style is so disrupted as to bring to mind Kristeva's theory of poetry as the *chora's* unsettling of the signifying order —instinct's ruffling, indeed rifling, of meaning" (815). Beth Jensen explores Kristeva's theory of the Symbolic and Semiotic and their role in the creative process. She uses what she describes as the "revolutionary" elements in Dickinson's poetry as a catalyst to explore the creative tension within Dickinson's work, as the poet both undermines traditional poetic form and underscores notions of identity. She concludes that the creative tension is, for Dickinson, the ultimate

tension between life and death (23-42). In *Writing Life: Suffering as a Poetic Strategy of Emily Dickinson*, Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta locate in Dickinson's poems Kristeva's theory on the difficulty women face in their attempt to enter the symbolic order because, to do so, they must negate their maternal attachment. They struggle because this process seems like either matricide or self-abjection to them; so they remain anxiously and depressively suspended around the edges of the symbolic. Smith and Kapusta argue that Dickinson's inability to fully enter the symbolic order underlies the chaotic and broken nature of her writing, which expresses her alienation from the symbolic. They read Dickinson's rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, intonation, and wordplay as signs of her anti-symbolic engagement with the semiotic. They also note other ways that Dickinson's writing evades the impossible pressures of the symbolic: her minimalism, irony, elisions, realism, and emphasis upon solitude. According to the authors, these are all strategies that Kristeva shows to be important means by which a depressive, abjected personality expresses and asserts itself. Sabine Sielke discusses the relationship of Dickinson to Mallarmé's aesthetic of extremes, a discussion cogently mediated through Kristeva's reading of Mallarmé. Sielke appropriates Kristeva's sense of the "subject in process" and her conception of the "dispositif sémiotique du texte" (11) to investigate subjectivity as expressed in Dickinson's aesthetics and to redefine her transgressive poetic design as part of the subject constitution process. Sielke finds that Dickinson's delineation of the subject as multiple and fluent displays what Kristeva has called a "fluctuation du sujet de l'énonciation" (11).

This essay complements these studies in varied ways. Firstly, it shows how Dickinson's poetry becomes a laboratory, a Platonic-Kristevan *chora* (from the Greek word for enclosed space, womb), in which the reader enters to forge a renewed (intuitive) understanding of human identity, death and the powers of language.¹ And secondly, it contends that Dickinson's renewed understanding of identity and death has tantalizing implications for a critical medical humanities open to the interface between language and embodiment in a manner that challenges the biopolitics at work in institutional health practices and policies. In ripping off the Band-Aid of the denial of ill-being that sustains beautiful style, to paraphrase Kristeva (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 32), Dickinson's poetics allows her to de-insulate herself, to share her "homely anguish" in a highly effective

1 It should be noted here that Kristeva takes the Platonic *chora* beyond the ontological framework within which Plato uses it in the *Timaeus*. In the *Timaeus*, *chora* indicates the "place" that is no place in the literal, geometrical sense of the term. It is an atopic space that allows for the possibility of logical space to become intelligible. To account for the relation between the body to the preexisting world of linguistic signs, Kristeva adapted this Platonic concept, which serves as the nonlocation of what she names "the semiotic." For a concise account of the sense in which Plato understood the *chora* in the *Timaeus* and its relation to Kristeva's use of the term, see Miller 2016, 112-163. For more information on the reasons that underpin Kristeva's choice to use this ontologized term, see Kristeva 1984, 239-240.

and aesthetically potent genotextuality, and to feel, along with her readers, “dauntless in the House of Death”, the building blocks of which are her poetic words, and its architectural blueprint the form of her poems (339, 1769)². Suffering, in Dickinson's poetry, is not refined into nothingness, erudition, beauty. On the contrary, as a poet-surgeon of abjection and a subject of borderline states herself³, Dickinson cultivated a loyalty to malaise, but also to overcoming the inability to share that malaise via a genotextuality that facilitates, to use another Kristevan term, a “democracy of proximity”, one that resonates with the deepest levels of human experience, not with the atomic individualism of the capitalist model of human transaction (Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness* 30).

Finding death emotionally attractive allows Dickinson to tap into questions about death from a visceral point of view that implicates her readers in their humanity. In “A Dimple in the Tomb”, Dickinson's physical approximation takes on a very tantalizing hue. This brief poem was originally included in a letter to T. W. Higginson on the pain-ridden occasion of the death of his infant daughter:

A Dimple in the Tomb
 Makes that ferocious Room
 A Home — (1522)

As Angela Sorby has noted, given the letter's context, the poem is supposed to be consoling. A dimple is “that quintessentially cute baby feature”, which depends on the emotional warmth triggered by a baby's chubby limbs or smiling face (320). For Sorby, “if adults melt at the thought of a dimple, they cannot follow through with a pinch to this dead baby's leg or cheek. ‘A Dimple in the Tomb’ thus consoles, not by implying that the baby is in an abstract, *better place*, but by empathetically reproducing the grieving parent's intense physical longing for the infant's body” (320). Ultimately, what Dickinson gives in one breath, she takes in the other, as the poem generates “feelings of pleasure, proximity, and kinship, but readers cannot take the natural next steps: vocalizing, feeding, cuddling, engaging in two-way play” (320). While the dimple does evoke the physical presence of the infant in a potently visceral manner, we should not overlook the fact that the dimple is also a feature of the tomb itself. Tomb and baby are identified, rendering the infant itself the tomb. The tomb becomes thus as attractive and inviting as the baby itself, whilst that ferocious room becomes a home. Readers reach an emotional and intellectual fork where antitheses converge to signal that the will to approach

² References to Dickinson's poems are to R.W. Franklin's edition (2005) and are cited within the text by poem number.

³ For Dickinson's struggles with mental issues, see, for example, Garbowsky; Cody; Sewall; and Habegger.

the infant (tomb) is a will to return home, a home that is associated with death. The incapacity to touch and feel the baby again remains, of course, ferocious; a savagely fierce and cruel separation, but it also bears a generative advantage: once the reader's sensual desire is aroused, the poet can redirect that desire into the poem's demands and complexities. Once the reader's attention has been captured, emotionally, physically and intellectually, the image has done its work and the poem can begin to engage with questions that are too remote to fully grasp: what does the baby-tomb analogy tell us about the nature of death itself? How can it be both repulsive and attractive, a cruel space and a home?

The inevitability and ever presence of death shaped Dickinson's thinking. It becomes, in the words of Henry Wells, "her closest and dearest friend", a respected coachman, a kindly gentleman caller, an elusive lover, a suitor, a victimiser, a democrat or a despot (94). Conrad Aiken asserts that "she seems to have thought of it constantly—she died all her life, she probed death daily [...] Ultimately her obsession became morbid" (14-15). For Chitra Sreedharan, "Dickinson's death poetry provided her with an outlet for satisfying her eternal curiosity regarding death, helping her to cope with the morbid obsession in a better way" (224). On the other end of the spectrum, Wells finds that "there is remarkably little morbidity" in Dickinson's death poetry. Death, he notes, "became for Emily the supreme touchstone for life" (93). Several scholars agree with Wells. For instance, Richard Wilbur understands Dickinson's death poems as an attempt to look at life "from the vantage of the grave" (136). Dickinson's biographer Genevieve Taggard writes that "she saw Death's value. He should be her focus; not her woe" (323). In Dickinson, the reader engages in a long and painstaking attempt to read life insofar as it can be understood from the grave. As Wells explains, "Death becomes a gateway to vitality, lifelessness to life. [...] Emily outstares death: she looks so intently and piercingly upon it that its terrors vanish, as fog before the sun. [...] To Emily, death ceases to be a mere theme or problem and becomes the key to art, to beauty, and to life" (95). It is through death that she understands how to be alive. In a similar vein, Marianne Noble concludes that "Looking at life through the lens of death reveals beauty and freedom. Dickinson's romance with death turns out to be a romance with life" (171).

On our reading, Dickinson's poetic conjunctions evoke what Kristeva refers to in *The Powers of Horror* as "abjection", the human reaction to the threat of the breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example for what causes such a reaction in Kristeva's thought is the corpse. In Dickinson's poem, where the corpse is an infant, abjection reaches soaring heights. Whereas Lacan's *objet petit a* allows a subject to coordinate

their desires, thereby allowing the symbolic order of meaning and intersubjective community to persist, Kristeva's abject "is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 1-2). This locus where the abject resides, and which signals the collapse of meaning, is neither object nor subject. It belongs to the pre-symbolic order. Dickinson's infant, immortalised in its pre-linguistic stage at the time of its passing, stands as the paragon of the pre-symbolic domain, with which death is associated via the dimple. For Kristeva, the abject marks the moment when we dissociate ourselves from the mother as a result of recognizing a boundary between "me" and other. The abject is "a precondition of narcissism", a precondition for the narcissism of the mirror stage, which occurs after we establish this primal distinction between an objectified, idealised, complete me and the mother as other (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 13). The abject at once represents the threat of the breakdown of symbolic meaning and constitutes our reaction to such a breakdown. The abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4). More specifically, Kristeva associates the abject with the eruption of the Real. Our reaction to such eruption recharges what is essentially a pre-lingual response. Kristeva is therefore quite careful to differentiate *knowledge* of death or the *meaning* of death (both of which can exist within the symbolic order) from the traumatic experience of being actually confronted with the sort of materiality that traumatically *shows you* your own death. In associating the dead infant with the tomb itself and, by extension, rendering that ferocious room a home towards which the parental visceral and emotional pain is gravitated, Dickinson confronts the reader with a process that literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between subject (parent-reader) and object (infant-tomb-death) that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into the symbolic order. What we are confronted with when we experience the trauma of seeing a human corpse, particularly the corpse of a family member (and of a baby at that), is "death infecting life. Abject" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4).

As indicated above, because desire is embedded in the meaning-structures of the symbolic order, the abject must be distinguished from it. Instead, the abject is associated with *jouissance*: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 9). Just as we are drawn to trauma in Freud's paradigm of repetition compulsion (*fort/da*) as a means to compensate for the missing parent and/or to re-establish emotional equilibrium in an attempt to simulate death⁴, we are continually and repetitively drawn to the abject. It is

4 See, for example, Sharpe and Faulkner 84.

thus no surprise to find that Kristeva associates the aesthetic experience of the abject with poetic catharsis, “an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it” (*Powers of Horror* 29). The abject for Kristeva is, therefore, closely tied both to religion and to art, which she sees as two ways of purifying the abject: “The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion” (*Powers of Horror* 17). Kristeva privileges poetry in particular because of its tendency to play with grammar, metaphor and meaning, thus laying bare the fact that language is at once arbitrary and limned with the abject fear of loss: “Not a language of the desiring exchange of messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges” (*Powers of Horror* 38). Dickinson's parent-reader does not know death, of course, even as it is concretised in the image of the dimple, so we cannot desire it, for desire is tailored into the symbolic meaning-structures. But we joy in it, “violently and painfully”, as Kristeva would have it (*Powers of Horror* 9). It is the eruption of the Real (associated in the poem with the abject) that drives the parent-reader's sense of *jouissance*.

For Lacan, the Real is indeed impossible to capture and reproduce: it is not merely beyond language; language itself is the barrier. But Kristeva, as well as Dickinson, questions the impossibility of coming face to face with the Real via language, the former in theory, the latter in poetic practice. In her ambitious essay “The True-Real,” Kristeva refers to the term “le vréal” in order to give expression to a defining element in the modernist revolution in Western thought and art:

the effort to formulate a truth that would *be* the *real* in the Lacanian sense of the term, or in other words: a “true-real” (from *le vrai* [the true] and *le réel* [the real]). The speaking subject in search of the “true-real” no longer distinguishes between the sign and its referent in the usual Saussurean way, but takes the signifier for the real (she or he treats the signifier *as* the real) in a move which leaves no space for the signified (Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* 214).

“We know”, Kristeva contends, “how logic and ontology have inscribed the question of *truth* within *judgement* (or sentence structure) and *being*, dismissing as *madness, mysticism or poetry* any attempt to articulate that impossible element which henceforth can only be designated by the Lacanian category of the *real*”. And so, “The old question returns: how can the *true-real* be made *plausible*?” (*The Kristeva Reader* 217). Although Kristeva links the “true-real” directly to poetry, she does not expand in this essay upon the ways in which poetry can make the “true-real” plausible. She is rather more con-

cerned here with its function in the discourse of psychosis, situating the term in relation to the history of the concept of truth in Western philosophy and logic. Yet her essay is pregnant with implications that concern the ways in which poetry, via its semiotic disposition, can make the true-real plausible. To begin with, her essay shows that the true-real falls outside the framework of what is considered intelligible in the socialized space of the symbolic order. Rather, it is shown to be a feature of certain linguistic categories often exploited by psychotics for their intrinsic instability and ambiguity. Kristeva's insistence that the true-real falls outside the symbolic order of signification, and that it is characterized by intrinsic instability and ambiguity, alludes to the eruption of the *genotext* within the *phenotext*:

The presence of the *genotext* within the *phenotext* is indicated by what I have called a *semiotic disposition*. In the case, for example, of a signifying practice such as 'poetic language', the *semiotic disposition* will be the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language: articulatory effects which shift the phonemative system back towards its articulatory, phonetic base and consequently towards the drive-governed bases of sound-production; the overdetermination of a lexeme by multiple meanings which it does not carry in ordinary usage but which accrue to it as a result of its occurrence in other texts; syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions, indefinite embeddings, etc.; the replacement of the relationship between the protagonists of any enunciation as they function in a locutory act [...] by a system of relations based on fantasy; and so forth (Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* 28-29).

On Kristeva's account, the reading of poetry serves thus as a space wherein we can enter to approximate the true-real. In Dickinson's poem, the true-real wears the form of death. The parent-reader is uncannily drawn to the infant-tomb, to the abject in a process whereby what separates the parent-reader from the infant is precisely what establishes a connection between them. As we follow the poem's progression, whereby the "Dimple" fuels the evolution of the "Tomb" to "Room" to "Home," we joy in this connection, violently and painfully indeed, driven by our desire for *jouissance*. The dimple in the tomb-room-home is thus also a dimple in the sequence of signification. What we sense via the poem's semiotic disposition (metonymy, conceits, displacement, ellipsis) cannot enter the symbolic order of understanding, returning us to a pre-symbolic mode of communication, one that brings us even closer to the infant, the irrecoverable loss of which figures as the (broken) link between parent-reader and the diseased subject of poetic articulation. Here, the protective sentiments triggered by the word "home" converge with the alienating feelings and thoughts associated with death and the claustrophobia of the tomb to create a gap where the reader inevitably enters. We enter, figuratively speaking, an infantile, pre-symbolic state where articulation of what we feel is

impossible: we dwell in the lost infant, as much as we dwell in the tomb-room-home. Via the semiotic powers of her genotextuality, Dickinson makes Kristeva's *vrée!* plausible. She uses a discourse that may seem to verge on madness and even psychosis, as it is a discourse where the signifier has no signified to which we could firmly anchor our understanding.

Dickinson brings death (and the infant) home, diminishing the distance between the speaker, reader and death in a manner that creates a blank space, signalled by Dickinson's characteristic use of the dash to signify language's endless possibility, such that it opens to "The Gambrels of the Sky", as Dickinson has it in poem 466. This opening in the poem, this dimple, suspends us above the gravitational pull of phenotextual-symbolic signification. In poem 466, Dickinson refers to the poem itself as a secure place which is "Impregnable of Eye". We are provided with an image of a poem-house constructed of cedar walls. This tomb-like enclosure, nonetheless, has an open "Everlasting Roof", signifying the possibility for ultimate freedom. The reader is thus directed to visualize the locus wherein the speaker "dwell[s] in Possibility", the utterance with which the poem opens. The vision proposed is that of a private and secure enclosure which promises an upward trend "To gather Paradise". The liminal space where the poet places the reader is rather challengingly materialised through the conceptually indeterminable openings that populate Dickinson's poetic house, which are "More numerous of Windows —/ Superior — for Doors —" (Dickinson, 466). These openings or dimples in this "fairer House than Prose" together form the poem's semiotic disposition, serving as vehicles via which we can intuit meanings that are no longer tied to the symbolic order of understanding.

Like "I dwell in Possibility —", Dickinson's "A Dimple in the Tomb" becomes a Platonic-Kristevan *chora* in which we enter to forge a renewed understanding of death and unbearable separation, an understanding that is visceral, intuitive, semiotic. For Kristeva, the endless flow of pre-symbolic pulsions is gathered up in the *chora*, a Platonic concept that Kristeva appropriates and redefines to conclude that the *chora* is neither a sign nor a position, but "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. [...] Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm" (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 25-26). The subject's entrance into the symbolic order signals that the *chora* has been more or less repressed, and can be felt only as pulsional pressure on or within the phenotext, as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences. "A Dimple in the Tomb / Makes that ferocious Room / A Home—" makes this disruptive pulsion within

language felt, opening up rifts or dimples in the sequence of signification to make the true-real (associated in the poem with the abject) plausible.

The claim that Dickinson's poetic language offers valuable opportunities for articulating, sounding off and even transmitting or sharing pain in all of its undiagnosed complexity has tantalizing implications for the medical humanities. Vivian Delchamps suggests that Dickinson was indeed fascinated by the medical innovations of her time while she refused to grant omniscient authority to patriarchal medical science. She finds that Dickinson's scepticism about diagnosis and her poetic experiments with articulating pain invite us to think about disability and pain beyond medical epistemological frameworks. Her writings, Delchamps argues, simultaneously present disability as a social phenomenon and acknowledge it as an embodied experience both by criticizing medical authorities' patronizing approaches to disability and by experimenting with various methods to translate physical and psychic pain into poetic form. She concludes that "Dickinson's poetry provides opportunities for considering pain and disability studies without returning to models of pathologization or pity. It does not promise that diagnoses or treatments will resolve pain; instead, it presents pain as a significant part of life, one that possesses inarticulate, undiagnosable, and contradictory qualities" (123). Michael Davidson has also argued that Dickinson's unconventional uses of language might help disability scholars better acknowledge "the lived experiences of loss, frustration, pain and embarrassment" (178). *Wider than the Sky*, Cindy MacKenzie and Barbara Dana's collection of essays, offers richly revealing perspectives on how the language in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson helps readers cope with emotional, spiritual, and physical suffering.

Dickinson's poetry does steer clear of patronizing approaches to pain and disability, her language helping readers in unique ways to cope with sorrow. She does so, we would add, via her poetry's genotextual disposition. There is nothing one can say to sooth a parent's pain when losing a child. And there is nothing the parent can say to express their intolerable pain, frustration, rage and despair. As words fail absolutely in their phenotextual disposition to create the necessary links for the establishment of meaningful communication, a process of isolation and insulation begins. Here, there is no promise to gather paradise, no dimple in the enclosure of isolation. "Salvation through the Band-Aid of denial, refusal" (Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness* 32) often serves as the only means available to cope with one's pain: "their secret is walled up, no horror, 'the writer must not create sorrow in her books,' suffering is refined into nothingness, erudition, beauty" (Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness* 247). But Dickinson's three-line poem does not pretend to refine suffering into nothingness, to paint it in cheerful

colours to sustain beautiful (life) style. On the contrary, her uncanny poetics of abjection brings death home, encouraging an attachment to entombment and loss in a manner that gestures towards its liberating potential, which rests in the dimple of the tomb, in the signifying rifts that give rise to a genotextuality in which poet and parent-readers merge in a sort of holy communion, where the unutterable, the true-real, is felt, intuited and shared. And so, Kristeva contends that, in contrast to writers who deny ill-being for the sake of a “beautiful style”,

[o]thers, [...] surgeons of abjection or psychiatrists of borderline states, cultivate a loyalty to malaise. They enjoy holding their crisis close while upsetting the harmony of belles lettres and revealing their proximity to pathology [...] Psychoanalysts are not the only ones to think the truth cannot be *entirely* said. It can be said by destroying—destroying itself, destroying literature (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 247).

Kristeva's statement that the truth can be said only via its self-destruction may seem to be paradoxical, but what she is referring to is the type of truth (the true-real) which, once it enters the symbolic domain of discursive articulation, is destroyed. Any attempt to convey the true-real in ordinary language, or in a form of literature that depends on conventional language structures, is bound to fail, because the very means by which we attempt to convey it is the means by which it is destroyed. But we can be made to encounter it in language's semiotic dispositions that upset “the harmony of belles lettres” (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 247). It is thus only in its destruction in ordinary language that the true-real can be recovered, and it can only be felt and intuited in the pulsions it exerts on and within the phenotext, in the semiotic dispositions of genotextuality. Such semiotic recovery of the true-real is a call for a new textual and literary production, for a revolution in poetic language, wherein linguistic practices, such as Dickinson's, subvert conventional and stable communication to uncover the repressed and allow for the return of the semiotic to the symbolic.

Dickinson becomes thus one of Kristeva's surgeons of abjection who cultivates a loyalty to malaise, to death, and via this cultivation, she enables sharing and de-insulation. This process has the potential to facilitate a democracy of proximity. What is pathological is the insulatory band-aid of denial, which finds expression in the *belles lettres* of a society unable to make the true-real plausible and partake in it. Kristeva's ambition, her utopia, she tells us in *Hatred and Forgiveness*, “consists of believing” that the vulnerability of the afflicted “can be *shared*” (30). This process of sharing, “this humanism”, is “the ‘cultural revolution’ with which to construct the democracy of proximity that the postmodern age needs” (*Hatred and Forgiveness* 30). Kristeva identifies the pathology of our modern age in the inability to find the means or the outlet to share one's malaise,

which handicaps the promise of ripping off the band-aid of denial so as to allow for the dimple, the wound in the tomb or the rift in the sequence of signification, to liberate one from the atomic individualism and insulation that the *belles lettres* cultivate in a society where proximity is sacrificed on the altar of beautiful (life)style.

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