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The Powerful Union of Emily Dickinson and Aaron Copland: Creation of Musical Silence through Transcendent Negation

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Introduction

Emily Dickinson's poetry has been notably set to music by over 1,600 composers, making her the poet with the most song settings in history.¹ Despite the sheer number of musical settings of Dickinson, author and former music professor Larry Starr reports that Aaron Copland is one of the few composers who have succeeded in entering the popular classical repertory with a setting of Dickinson (30). In this paper, I will endeavor to answer the question: why was this partnership of Dickinson and Copland in the song cycle *The Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* so particularly successful? Copland has expressed that poetry is like music without a melody; he believes that music and poetry are kindred spirits with a meaning that "spring[s] from some common source" (qtd. in Soll and Dorr 100). Dickinson would have agreed with this statement: according to Carolyn Lindley Cooley, Dickinson referred to her poems, as well as the poems of others, as "hymns," using the two words interchangeably (80), which displays her belief that a poet's work inherently involves the making of spiritual music. In fact, according to George Boziwick, the Chief of the Music Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dickinson's first artistic passion was the piano, and her playing (often of hymns) was

¹ In an article for *the Guardian*, Valentine Cunningham mentions that Carlton Lowenberg counted 1,600 Dickinson song settings in 1992, but "that number rose dramatically through the 1990s."

described as “heavenly music.” As she discovered her poetic voice, she used her favorite music and hymns as inspiration to realize her “fuller tune” as a poet (83).²

Dickinson’s readers can easily observe many musical and hymn-like qualities in Dickinson’s poems, making them especially appealing to composers like Copland. The musicality of Dickinson’s poetry is most evident in her selection of meter: Dickinson writes in a musical form, the “Common Hymn Meter,” which, according to Cooley, Dickinson drew from the Protestant hymnals popular in her time (70-71). Therefore, her poems already have an inherent singability that begs to be paired with a melody. Secondly, Dickinson alludes to the same biblical material as many of the hymns that she was familiar with (Cooley 83). Lastly, Dickinson made copious allusions to musical instruments, the musical sounds of nature, and music itself as a means of expression (Cooley 26), clearly drawing on musical imagery and sound to form her own poetic music. From this synthesis of poetry and music, a question arises: how can a composer like Copland work towards Dickinson’s artistic vision, such as replicating the spirit of a “hymn”?

There are many arguments to be made for Copland’s success in honoring Dickinson’s artistic vision through his song cycle. Copland audibly imitates the sounds described in Dickinson’s poems; therefore, one could argue that Copland succeeds in honoring Dickinson’s musical intention by bringing life to her rich and copious sonic allusions. Secondly, one could argue that Copland honors Dickinson by simply providing a melody to accompany her musicless poems that are meant to be hymns. However, I believe that the roots of their successful partnership are more complex. Although many composers were drawn to Dickinson’s rich musical source material, Copland particularly understood that remaining authentic to Dickinson’s

² Dickinson had a book of sheet music that scholars like Boziwick have studied, and they see clear ways that the music in her book inspired her choices as a lyrical poet. She described her own poetry as a “fuller tune” in one her poems (Fr270), suggesting a connection between her poetry and music.

intention is an incredibly challenging enterprise that requires much more than bringing her meter and musical allusions to life. This challenge derives from the difficulty of reading Dickinson's enigmatic language and, more specifically, the complexity of her poetic goal.

In order to understand the difficulty of honoring Dickinson's vision, we need to examine why her poems are so intentionally puzzling. According to James L. Machor, Dickinson employs diaphor as her method of metaphor, which "links two seemingly disparate ideas, so that the linking itself becomes the vehicle for the 'creation of new meaning by juxtaposition and synthesis'" (Philip Wheelwright qtd. in Machor 173).³ Another more potent term (other than diaphor) can be used to describe Dickinson's use of paradox to create meaning; she is sometimes referred to as an "apophatic" poet. One of the main proponents of this apophatic view of Dickinson's poetry is William Franke, a philosopher and emeritus professor of comparative literature, who explains that apophatic poets like Dickinson draw upon "negative theology" (after all, "apophasis" is the Greek term for negation). He defines apophasis as the use of negation to express an ineffable religious or spiritual message (61). Because the subject matter of Dickinson's poetry is literally indescribable, Franke argues that she endeavors to approach the subject matter by using language that unsays itself: "precisely the impediments to expression become her central message in telling ways, for they tell obliquely of a 'beyond' of language" (62). Therefore, "The difficulty, then, is not so much in the poem itself as in what it points out beyond itself and allows to be sensed or fathomed, but not to be comprehended" (69). Another term for the unfathomable, or a spiritual understanding that is beyond human conception, is "transcendental"; in fact, according to philosophy scholar Glenn Hughes, Dickinson studied,

³ Philip Wheelwright defined two classifications of metaphor: epiphor and diaphor. Dickinson's use of diaphor is especially notable because the primary mode of metaphor for nineteenth century poets was epiphor, which links a commonly held idea to one that is not as clear in order to form a comparison. There was limited experimentation with diaphor, and that was almost exclusively confined to male poets (Machor 173).

admired, and was influenced by the famous transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (287).

In order to approach transcendental experiences, Dickinson employs perplexing negations to create a sort of nothingness; Franke believes that this silence gives Dickinson her unique voice (63). Silence is the best technique to depict the transcendental because, according to Hughes, “the seeking soul can scarcely know [transcendence] beyond the mere fact of its reality, because transcendence must remain, in its substantial meaning, a ‘beyond’ and an absence” (192). In other words, a spiritually transcendent state exists as a concept, but it cannot be obtained because it defies human comprehension; therefore, it is both profound and, to the human consciousness, nonexistent. She also constantly employs ellipses (in the form of enjambment and em dashes) to literally create silence (Franke 63), and silence, like music, is often a prominent topic in her poetry. But how could Dickinson strive to simultaneously create both music and silence, and how could a composer create silence through music? If Copland attempted to interpret her poems, and solve the negation by writing music that gave the poem a clear mood, he would have canceled her apophysis and thwarted her transcendental goals. However, I believe that Copland does not fill in the gaps: he highlights them. Not only does Copland bring the music of Dickinson’s poetry to life, but he also helps her achieve her apophatic vision. In other words, the music of the song cycle collaborates with Dickinson’s poetry to approach the transcendental through negation.

**“One need not be a chamber to be haunted” - Dickinson:
The Trouble of Reading Dickinson Reductively**

If a composer like Copland does not understand the complexity of Dickinson’s work and character, he risks reducing her into a two-dimensional figure that upholds harmful stereotypes.

In her own time, Dickinson was regarded as a “voluntary recluse,” to use the words of *The*

Boston Post review from November 27, 1890. Critics also regarded her work as “strange” and “alien” (Holmes 75). In many ways, current readers have internalized the same harmful stereotypes: with our current access to more psychological terms to describe behavior, society has diagnosed her with depression, agoraphobia, and even bipolar disorder. Many modern day readers understand Dickinson as a mentally-ill and miserable woman who feared the outside world. She is imagined obsessing over her work as she spends her days alone in the house. She is essentially regarded as a melancholic and isolated genius, like a mad scientist. Admittedly, I personally believed that her agoraphobia was a known fact, and that she was isolated because of it, until I visited the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts. To my surprise, I learned that her frequent guests regarded her as an excellent host, and she spent her days surrounded by beloved family and close friends. There were also many plausible explanations for her apparent absence from society, such as an eye condition and her devotion to caring for her sick mother. However, the view of Dickinson as a haunting, lonely, depressed, and mentally ill figure prevails. For example, the images that were used to promote the New Camerata Opera’s production of *Divide Light*, an experimental opera based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson, depict her as a dark and spooky figure:





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Against the ominously dark and shadowed background of the first image, Dickinson is ghostly translucent in her white dress. Not only is she alone (which plays into the recluse stereotypes), but her body is duplicated, suggesting that she lives in an isolated labyrinth with her own thoughts (reflecting the mad scientist trope). In fact, she is covered with letters, as if she is trapped within her own poetic genius. In the second image, there is a hand with candles tied to each finger, and each candle is lit in an unnaturally blue flame. The image appears spiritual but unsettling, like a seance. The hand, with its long extensions, appears uncanny and alien-like (echoing the nineteenth-century reviews that described her as “alien” and “strange”). In addition, the fire suggests a threat, perhaps even hinting at self-harm. The last image depicts Dickinson as a frightening and inhuman phantom. Similar to the first, part of her body (her hair) is made of letters, suggesting that she has no personhood outside of her craft. Overall, all of these images

⁴ These images were part of the New Camarata Opera’s press release of their production of *Divide Light*. The press release proudly declares that the opera captures the span of Dickinson’s vast and wide-ranging emotions and topics (beyond anguish), including transcendence. I am critiquing these reductive promotional images, but not the production itself.

play into the perception of Dickinson that existed at her time and still exists for many modern readers: she was and is regarded as ghostly, strange, and troubled, and her work is often seen as an autobiographical unveiling of her psyche- a product of mental anguish or illness. In order to fight back against these inaccurate and reductive stereotypes, it is especially important for composers like Copland to highlight and maintain Dickinson's profound complexity in their adaptations. Copland does not simplify Dickinson's character into an anguished ghost or unfairly frame her poems as haunting tales of mental anguish. Rather, he is aware of Dickinson's complexity, and fights against these reductive readings by refusing to resolve her mysterious contradictions. Instead of using music to tell one clear story and confine her poem to one clear mood, Copland nuances Dickinson with ambiguous music that matches her apophatic spirit.

Copland's Negation of Nature Songs

Copland displays his understanding of Dickinson's negations when he intentionally begins his cycle with two contradictory nature poems. Copland chooses to start the cycle with "Nature, the gentlest mother," which describes nature as a maternal figure that cares for all life "with infinite affection," bringing peace to the world. This poem displays Dickinson's affinity with Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist view of nature, which Dickinson studied and admired. According to Hughes, Emerson believed that the natural world is Eden, and if humans could only recognize the goodness of nature, they would realize that they are living in paradise (286). "Nature, gentlest mother" therefore illustrates the harmonious and heavenly quality of the world that the transcendentalists believed in. However, according to Hughes, Dickinson's view of nature was not so simple; unlike the transcendentalists, she vacillated between loving and fearing nature, so that at times she saw its "divinity," but at others "she experienced Nature as an alien realm, as a threatening and indifferent universe" (287). To highlight Dickinson's

contradictory feelings, Copland immediately follows “Nature, gentlest mother” with “There came a Wind like a bugle,” which dramatically describes a destructive storm. Copland creates a negation of his own when he transitions directly from a poem that depicts nature as a peaceful, loving and maternal figure, into one that describes nature as violent, frightening, and callous.

Copland highlights the stark contrasts between these two poems through his composition, intensifying the negation that he creates through his side-by-side placement of these two opposing songs. In the first piece, Copland demonstrates the kindness and divinity of nature through a simple, slow, and graceful melody. The accompaniment is similarly minimalistic and light, with fluttering 16th and 32nd notes that simply ornament the pleasant chords. Copland specifies that the accompaniment should sound “crystalline,” so it is meant to be played clearly and delicately so that his high and fast notes in the right hand have a twinkling quality. At the end of the poem/song, nature puts her finger to her lip “with infinite affection” (line 21) as she “Wills silence everywhere,” like a mother tucking her children into bed. Copland repeats the last line, “Wills silence everywhere,” twice, and he brings the dynamic level down to a *pianissimo*⁵ as the song dissipates into that peaceful “silence.” He has the singer quietly hold every note, and the accompaniment becomes especially bare as the piece fades away. He finally ends the piece with a *fermata*⁶ on a pleasant *pianississimo*⁷ chord. But, as soon as the piece settles, and the listener revels in the peace and “silence” that Copland has created, he transitions into the chaos of “There came a Wind like a bugle.” By contrast, the accompaniment in this piece is noisy, fast, chaotic, and busy, with large intervallic leaps, many accidentals⁸, and modulations.⁹ Whereas the last piece was composed of simple and pleasant chords, this one has many accented dissonant

⁵ *Pianissimo* is very quiet.

⁶ Meant to be lengthened by an unspecified duration

⁷ *Pianississimo* is very, very quiet.

⁸ Notes foreign to the key

⁹ Temporary deviations from the original key into some other key

chords in the accompaniment that produce unpleasant crashing sounds. Simultaneously, the singer, who previously sang *pianississimo* in the first piece, enters on a *forte*¹⁰ dynamic at the start of the second. Also, Copland instructs the singer to abandon the graceful and smooth lines of the last piece by singing “*non legato*”¹¹ in this one. The vocal part is complex and difficult, with loud high notes and dramatic low notes. The ending especially poses a contrast: whereas the first song ended with a quiet and pleasant sustained chord that communicated the divine peacefulness of nature, this one, according to Dorothy Zayatz Baker, “ends harshly with a final dissonant chord that moreover suggests the enduring terror that characterizes the world” (4). The result of these musical choices is a chaotic, frightening, and disordered feeling that mirrors the violence of the storm that Dickinson describes. Overall, according to Baker, Copland’s composition “destabilizes the sentimental vision of nature, when the silence imposed by ‘the gentlest mother’ is replaced by the din of a terrifying storm, and her divine order is supplanted by chaos” (4). Copland musically intensifies the peacefulness of the first piece and the violence of the second, highlighting the opposing qualities of these two nature poems and placing them side-by-side, opening the cycle in a way that displays his understanding and allegiance to Dickinson’s negative tactics.

Copland’s choice to place this clear negation at the start of the cycle is intentional and preparatory. According to Baker, these two pieces are the “*entrée*” into the song cycle, creating a “protocol for reading the remainder of the sequence” (5). These two poems are not apophatic by themselves, as one clearly depicts the peacefulness of nature while the other depicts the terror of nature, but when placed next to each other as Copland has done, they form a negation. Copland opens the cycle with these two poems and sets them to music in strikingly different ways in order

¹⁰ *Forte* is loud.

¹¹ *Non legato* is choppy.

to highlight Dickinson's negations that are present throughout the rest of the cycle; Copland's choice instantly demonstrates his understanding of her complexity. According to Baker, Copland's opening negation foreshadows Dickinson's later depictions of both the "security and pleasure in this world and one's terrified anticipation of the next" (5). Dickinson wants to believe in the goodness of nature but, like the transcendentalists, realizes that it is impossible to fully understand the natural world and discover the heavenly Eden. Similarly, as Hughes argues, Dickinson wants to believe in the concept of heaven, but acknowledges that the secrets of this world (the natural world) as well as the next (the afterlife) are transcendental, and therefore frighteningly mysterious because they are impossible to understand (287). In addition, Copland's negation through these two nature poems is spiritual, because it raises the question: why would a divine force create a natural world that is often beautiful and divine, but also volatile, frightening, and cruel? By using negation to raise this spiritual, transcendent, and unresolvable question, Copland is engaging in an apophysis that is similar to Dickinson's. Therefore, Copland's opening two songs work together to create a negation that instantly expresses the throughline of many of the later apophatic poems in this cycle: there is a beautiful spiritual realm that Dickinson hopes for and rejoices in, but she simultaneously acknowledges, with pain, that it is unattainable (Hughes 287).

Poetic and Musical Apophysis of the Familiar and Frightening in "The Chariot"

Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death" presents both familiar and strange images of the afterlife; she provides this negation in order to simultaneously imagine the afterlife and assert that it is a complete mystery. Hughes notes that Dickinson persistently discusses the afterlife in her poetry, and while she "often hopes it could be true, she remains convinced that human beings simply can't know anything about it," which is consistent with the

transcendentalist view (283). According to Baker, Dickinson starts the poem by providing an “unconventional” image of death as a kind “suitor” who takes her to heaven in a carriage (17). The idea of death as a friendly suitor is unconventional, but this personification makes death feel comfortingly familiar. A carriage is also a concrete image, but just as readers begin to feel comfortable with the relatable image of a carriage ride, she complicates it: she says that it “held but just Ourselves-/And Immortality” (lines 3-4). At first the carriage seems to hold two figures (the speaker and the human-like personification of death), which is an image that the reader can conceptualize. However, the idea of the space of a carriage holding all of “immortality” is incomprehensible because it implies infinity, which is a concept that the human mind cannot understand. In addition, the infinite cannot fit into a finite space like a carriage, which upends this everyday image and reminds the reader that the carriage is simply a metaphor for a more formidable concept. Therefore, the poem immediately provides familiar imagery to describe this afterlife while simultaneously negating that imagery with disquieting uncertainty. Ultimately, Dickinson uses these negations to thwart resolution as she refuses to define the incomprehensible afterlife.

Dickinson continues to provide a sense of familiarity that she simultaneously contradicts. During the first three stanzas, she provides images of the relatable living human world: the speaker travels in a carriage, passes playing children, sees fields of grain, and watches the sun set. In addition, Starr notes that the meter is comforting in its predictable “‘Common Meter,’ alternating eight- and six-syllable lines of iambic feet” (15), which imitates the trotting of the horse. But Dickinson then writes: “We passed the Setting Sun,/ Or rather-He passed Us-” (lines 12-13), and there is a stanza break between these lines.¹² Here, Dickinson troubles the speaker’s

¹² This is the last line of the third stanza and the first line of the fourth.

reliability because the speaker is unsure of whether or not the sun is setting over them or if they are passing the sun. The poem's meter fittingly abandons the established and predictable iambic pattern for the entirety of the fourth stanza.¹³ Now, in this new and comparatively unsteady meter, Dickinson portrays images of stillness, lifelessness, and strangeness that contradicts the first half of the poem. She writes: "The Dews drew quivering and Chill-/ For only Gossamer, my Gown-/My Tippet- Only Tulle-" (lines 14-16). She previously described a carriage ride, children playing, fertile grain growing, and the setting of the warm sun, but now she describes a still scene of cobwebs gathering in the cold. She previously depicted an afterlife that seemed like a continuation of life as her reader knows it, but now she depicts an unmoving and cold corpse-like figure who is covered with "gossamer" or cobwebs as she decomposes. In addition, her allusion to "a dress" humanizes this afterlife, but Dickinson simultaneously defamiliarizes the dress by saying that it is made of cobwebs. Also, a "Tippet" is an ordinary clothing item that is worn in cold weather, but instead of being made of a substance that would keep the speaker warm, it is made of "only Tulle" which emphasizes the coldness of the scene, the bareness and vulnerability of the speaker in death, and the strangeness of this image that originally seems ordinary.

Dickinson concludes the poem with a mingled sense of the familiar and strange, purposefully ending with negation and an illusion to the unfathomable. She writes: "We paused before a House that seemed/A Swelling of the Ground-" and then explains that the speaker can just see the very top of the house jutting up from the ground (lines 17-20). They "paused" before this image that resembles a gravesite, suggesting that this is the speaker's final destination. This image of a house as the final resting place implies a similarity between the afterlife and life: a home is where humans are meant to spend their days and feel a sense of belonging, reflecting

¹³ The fourth stanza was often omitted by earlier editions, including the one that Copland used (Starr 15).

Dickinson's hope that there is a comfortable life after death. However, at the end of the poem, the speaker says that it has been centuries since her carriage ride, but she feels like it has been only a day, which again complicates the poem's sense of time to suggest that there are unfathomable aspects of the afterlife that cannot be compared to life. Lastly, the speaker "surmised the Horses' Heads/ Were toward Eternity-" (lines 23-24). Because the destination of this carriage ride (the final resting place) is "eternity," which is an unfathomable concept, Dickinson suggests that the afterlife cannot be comprehended or described through language. As an apophatic poet, she negates all of her imagery that seems to paint a picture of the afterlife, and instead ends with the incomprehensible openness and silence of "eternity."

When Copland sets this poem to music, he honors Dickinson's goal of establishing concepts that are comfortingly familiar so that they can later be negated. Copland used the first line of Dickinson's poem as the title for all of the other eleven songs, but he made the decision to title this song "The Chariot" rather than "Because I could not stop for Death." "The Chariot" immediately establishes the clear everyday image of a horse drawn carriage. He further highlights this common image by emphasizing her iambic rhythm that mimics the trotting (or galloping, depending on the tempo) of the horse: Starr observes that Copland's "basic rhythmic kernel [throughout the piece] is a unit of a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note" (Starr 17). That dotted rhythm only stops for a brief measure, on the words "He [death] kindly stopped for me" (line 2), which clarifies that the accompaniment replicates the trotting sound made by the horse, which literally and figuratively stops to pick up the speaker. Overall, the first half of the poem sounds playful with its high pitched dotted rhythm, and peaceful, as Copland notes that it should be played "with quiet grace." According to Starr, the "quiet grace" matches the unexpected "civility" of Dickinson's personified "Death" (94). The tempo is also relatively slow,

which mirrors the carriage ride that knows “no haste,” emphasizing the peacefulness of this scene.

Copland then helps Dickinson negate this comforting and familiar image of the afterlife. Even though Copland worked with a version that omitted Dickinson’s fourth stanza, which is the stanza that disrupts the meter, Copland maintains the spirit of this missing stanza through his disruptive musical decisions. As soon as Copland reaches the final word of the third stanza, he disrupts the dotted rhythm (horse trotting) and suddenly changes into a minor key. The trotting can still be vaguely heard, but it lacks the previous consistency; this choice suggests that we are entering uncertain territory, and that the mysterious and unknowable afterlife cannot be simply compared to a carriage ride. In addition, Skidmore music theory Professor Anjni Amin notices that Copland widens the range of the accompaniment, which sounds less certain and organized than the previous sections. The trotting figure is also no longer placed on those playful higher notes. The minor key, as well as the disruption of the rhythmic pattern, suggests a shift into a more serious or somber topic, which reflects the subject matter of the fifth stanza: it describes the gravesite or “House that seemed a Swelling of the Ground” (lines 17-18). This darker key contradicts the mood of the first half of the piece, creating uncertainty: are we looking at a new home or a grave? Is death a kind and welcome figure, or is it cold and frightening as Dickinson’s fourth stanza suggests? Through his musical decisions, Copland mirrors and intensifies Dickinson’s negations of the reassuring and disturbing, helping to highlight the incomprehensibility of the unknowable afterlife.

Ultimately, Copland’s compositional choices highlight Dickinson's apophysis and her obsession with the unknowable nature of the afterlife. Even though the accompaniment in the second half of the piece sounds uncertain with its wide range and unpredictable pattern, Copland

instructs both the pianist and singer to be “calm.” The minor chords and uncertain piano imply a sinister presence, but there is still a sense of peace that prevails; the unsettling feeling created by the chords is negated by the calmness of the musicians so that it is unclear whether or not this afterlife is comforting or disturbing. Then, at the end of the fifth stanza, Copland returns to a major key, but still does not provide the same rhythmic constancy as before. Instead, he uses long sustained chords underneath the singer. Therefore, like Dickinson, Copland concludes without providing an answer, so the listener does not get a clear sense of the afterlife. Dickinson intended to create this openness when she placed warm, lively and relatable images of the afterlife next to cold, strange, and frightening ones. Copland fulfills Dickinson’s intention because he not only highlights those juxtapositions, but he also concludes the piece with musical ambiguity.

Copland is especially true to Dickinson’s apophysis on the final note of the piece, on the word “eternity,” which is notably also the final note/word of this song cycle (this is the last song). He mimics the idea of eternity by placing a *fermata* in both the vocal and piano line. During the singer’s held note, the piano brings back the original high pitched dotted rhythm:

3. 60. E. R & H. 17865 (Duration 2 mins. 55 secs.)

This rhythm harkens back to the comfort and peace that was established in the first half of the song. The brief reintroduction of this motif could also suggest that the speaker's journey resumes, insinuating that the afterlife continues to resemble a reassuringly familiar carriage ride. However, there is a ritardando to indicate a slowing tempo, which gradually brings this trotting to a halt, or might suggest that the carriage is leaving her behind as it slowly fades into the distance. Therefore, the listener is not sure if this "eternity" is peaceful and relatable or isolating and strange. In fact, Copland also seems to be unsure: on this final note, he gives the singer a choice to either sing the F sharp at the bottom or top of the treble staff. Throughout the entire cycle, this is the only time (on the last note) that Copland provides an option of pitch. Both notes are easy in the soprano range, so he provides the optional octave as an artistic choice. If the singer selects the upper note, the piece would end on a more hopeful tone, while the lower note would suggest a more uncertain one. Copland therefore gives the singer the agency to choose what impression they would like to leave on the listener, which is especially significant because it is the last note of the entire cycle. Copland provides this choice of interpretation at the end of the cycle to suggest that no one knows what mood Dickinson hoped to establish, just like how no one, including Dickinson and Copland, could understand the afterlife. The optional octave

allows the singer to interpret the poem, which stays true to Dickinson's complex poetry. Her unresolved paradoxes make it so that reading Dickinson is an inevitable act of interpretation. Therefore, Copland does not interpret the mood of the poem's conclusion, just as Dickinson does not provide a concrete story or message, so that the singer or the reader are left interpreting an undefined message. Specifically, Dickinson provides multiple layers of meaning about "eternity" or the afterlife because it is a transcendental context that cannot be known or described through language, and Copland allows her to retain the mystery, even at the conclusion of his cycle. By providing two different and equally correct endings, this optional ending heightens Dickinson's apophysis: her use of simultaneous and juxtaposing images of the afterlife that negate each other in order to approach an incomprehensible topic that cannot be described through language. Therefore, Copland ends with a negation that results in a void or absence of clear meaning, maintaining Dickinson's transcendent complexity by ending the cycle with musical silence.

Poetic & Musical Apophysis of Mental Illness and Clarity in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

At first glance the poem "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" seems to merely depict a mental breakdown in which the speaker imagines her own funeral, or the death of her sanity. In the first line, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," the words "in my brain" are surrounded by commas, allowing it to operate as an aside that simply provides the location of the funeral: the brain. This placement insinuates that the speaker's brain is dying, which is revealed in the last stanza when a "Plank in Reason, broke" (line 17), suggesting that this is a funeral for her lost "reason" or sanity. Then, she describes mourners who "tread" across her brain (line 2-3). Mourners are connected to grief and loss, so their treading represents the passing of melancholic intrusive thoughts across the speaker's brain. She repeats the word "treading" twice to suggest that the "to and fro" (line 2) movement of these mourners or ruminations is repetitive and constant. Not only

are they constant, but they are painful and destructive: “A Service, like a Drum-/Kept beating- beating- till I thought/ My mind was going numb-” (lines 6-8). The repetitive treading of the mourners morphs into a more violent “beating” that impedes her ability to think: this service is a metaphor for the mental illness that pains and hinders the speaker. Her brain is therefore described as a place that is afflicted by these distressing ruminations, implying inescapable mental illness or madness.

Even though the poem describes mental illness, it simultaneously alludes to mental clarity and transcendence. Dickinson writes that the treading of the mourners continues “till it seemed/ That Sense was breaking through,” which means that the movement in her brain is starting to have a clear meaning. The confusion in her brain is somehow making “sense,” which could convey that she has plunged deeper into a delusional state, especially because she uses the word “seemed,” which makes the speaker unreliable. Nevertheless, the lines present the possibility that this descent into madness is simultaneously some discovery. In the second stanza, she writes that her “mind was going numb” (line 8), and then in the third, the mourners lift the coffin and “creak across [her] Soul” (line 10). George Monteiro notices Dickinson’s shift from the concrete “brain,” to the more abstract “mind,” and then to the spiritual and indefinable “Soul” (658). Dickinson eventually connects this movement in the speaker’s brain to the state of the speaker’s soul, which connects the poem to a spiritual experience. According to Hughes, Dickinson’s poetry consistently rejects the idea that there is a physical and limited location for the “realm of transcendence— what she calls *Eternity* or *Paradise* or *Heaven*,” and instead, like Thoreau states in the readings that Dickinson studied, suggests that it is a state of understanding that would be found within one’s own consciousness (289). Therefore, it would make sense that

Dickinson writes about discovering a transcendent spiritual experience by exploring the seemingly incomprehensible depths of one's own brain, the creator of consciousness.

In accordance with the apophatic tradition, Dickinson describes this transcendence through a decided lack of clear description; she uses negation to create a "silence." Right after the coffin is moved,

Space- began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race,

Wrecked, solitary, here- (lines 12-16)

The sound of a bell tolling is reminiscent of a church bell, and therefore has spiritual connotations, and this sound fills all space, suggesting that the speaker has reached transcendence or a heaven-like state. Dominic Luxford analyzes Dickinson's Poem 315, which also describes a spiritual experience that ends with the stillness of the whole universe, much like the tolling of this space. He says "No longer localized or confined to a single self, the ego expands to ultimate proportions, identifying with all of conscious space, including the 'universe.' This loss of ego then comes to resemble identification with divinity" (57). Luxford's theory applies to this poem as well, as the mourners move from her brain, to her soul, and then to an infinite ringing "space." "I and silence" suggests that the speaker's soul is expanding into this "silent" but heavenly space, like the transcendental expansion of the "ego," and subsequent "identification with divinity," that Luxford describes. If "all the Heavens were a Bell" and she becomes merely an "ear" to receive its bell, then she is hearing and experiencing the divine

music of the “heavens.” However, the apophatic tradition uses negation to approach the transcendental because the experience is defined by its inability to be defined. Fittingly, Dickinson follows the allusions to heavenly bells by stating that the speaker is “wrecked” and “solitary,” which again alludes to mental illness and suffering. Also, the music of this tolling bell contradictingly brings a sense of open “Silence,” “Space,” and “solitude” because transcendence is “strange” and cannot be understood. Fittingly, Dickinson ends the stanza on the word “here,” but does not provide a location of this space, which corresponds with her rejection of transcendence having an imaginable location.

The final stanza further provides allusions to transcendence in order to complicate the idea that this poem is merely about mental illness, and Dickinson concludes the poem with an apophatic silence. The first line of the stanza states: “And then a Plank in Reason, broke,” which seems to be the moment that speaker’s sanity, or “reason” officially dies. After this plank breaks, the speaker “dropped down, and down,” which sounds like a descent into madness. Emeritus Colorado University chancellor Hastings Moore explains that Dickinson may have considered madness a necessary part of transcendence:

If one were able to experience the beauty, the fragility and the essential mystery of human life profoundly and intensely in that dimension of consciousness explored in apophatic literature, the experience could well be such as [in the words of Dickinson:] to “clog the cogs/ Of that revolving reason/ Whose esoteric belt/ Protects our sanity.” (J.1717[Dickinson])... Beyond this “sanity” one may be blessed by that unique form of “madness” which is actually the “divinest Sense”—at least “to a discerning Eye—” (J.435 [Dickinson]). (14)

Moore summarizes Dickinson's view that she espouses in her other poetry: Dickinson suggests that "reason" exists in order to "protect our sanity," but she believes that "madness" is actually the "divinest sense," meaning that experiencing the divine requires one to be "mad." Therefore, madness and transcendence appear to be similar, which supports the ambiguity of this poem. The last two lines state that the speaker "hit a World, at every plunge,/And Finished knowing -then-" (lines 19-20). The speaker may have "finished knowing" because she plunged into insanity and lost her ability for conscious thought. Or, as in the transcendental philosophy that interested Dickinson, she may have glimpsed another plane of existence where one knows all (and therefore she does not need to "know" anymore), especially because the speaker discovers multiple "worlds" as she falls, which suggests that multiple mysterious realms are revealed to her. Furthermore, Dickinson may have abruptly ended the poem and referenced "space," "silence," and a lack of knowledge (rather than possession of knowledge) because there are simply no words to describe that transcendental state: Dickinson simply ceases her story-telling and leaves the reader hanging with the word "then" followed by an em dash. The reader will never know what happens next after the "then," and is simply left with a dash, which could signal that the speaker has an indescribable experience. In addition, the second and fourth lines of all of the previous stanzas have matching end rhymes, but the last line suddenly breaks the pattern, as if the speaker loses the ability to finish the poem when she "finished knowing." She may have become too mentally unstable to complete the rhyme scheme and/or she may have reached an indescribable transcendental state, which is why she writes a dash as if she will continue, but then offers no conclusion. Dickinson, as an apophatic poet, does not provide clear answers and instead leaves the reader with the paradoxes and absences. Rather than trying to

describe the speaker's experience in full, Dickinson more powerfully conveys the speaker's illusive transcendental experience through ellipses, negations, and a decided lack of explanation.

The piano part of Copland's setting of this poem contributes to Dickinson's apophatic story-telling by mimicking the sounds that Dickinson alludes to in the poem. At the start of the piece, Copland instructs the pianist to play "heavy, with foreboding" (as marked in the image below) which indicates to the pianist that the goal is to create a high-stakes, stressful, and fearful feeling that would correspond with the mental illness that the poem seems to describe:

To Cumargo Guarnieri 31

9. I felt a funeral in my brain

Music by
AARON COPLAND

Rather fast ($\text{♩} = 80$)
heavy, with foreboding (blurred, uneven)

PIANO

Ped. on each beat

Because Dickinson includes such rich description of sound, such as the thudding footsteps, Copland had much opportunity (that he took) for what Starr referred to as "word-painting," or using music to mimic the sounds that Dickinson alluded to (51). During the entire first page (beginning in the first system which is pictured above), Copland writes two dissonant seventh chords in each measure, and uses tenutos to tell the pianist to stress those chords. The effect of playing these dissonant seventh chords in a heavy and stressed manner is a repetitive and aggressive thudding sound, which mimics the disturbing treading of the "boots of lead." Underneath the ugly aggressive chords, Copland writes sixteenth notes in the left hand that toggle back and forth in intervals of either major or minor seconds. He also instructs the pianist to hold down the pedal on each beat, which would blur those major or minor seconds together,

creating muddled discord. The fast pace of those constant sixteenth notes in the left hand during the entire first stanza creates a frantic feeling. When that jumbled urgency is combined with the muddled and unpleasant sound, the piece mirrors the painful and frightening mindset of the speaker.

Like Dickinson's poem that simultaneously describes both madness and "sense" in an apophatic fashion, Copland also demonstrates this juxtaposition through his word-painting in the accompaniment. As soon as the speaker says that "Sense" breaks "through," the fast sixteenth notes abruptly stop, and the accompaniment changes to a more organized and less frantic pattern:

The image shows a musical score for Copland's 'The Bells'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system starts at measure 32 and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "..... that sense was break - ing through(exaggerate the". The piano accompaniment has a fast, frantic texture of sixteenth notes in the left hand. Above the first system, the tempo is marked "ritardando" and "Slower (♩ = 63)". The second system starts at measure 33 and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "first beat of each measure) And when they all were seat - ed A ser - vice like a". The piano accompaniment has a slower, more organized texture of eighth notes in the left hand. Above the second system, the tempo is marked "mf (♩ = 60)". Below the second system, the tempo is marked "mf, ma marc.". The piano accompaniment in the second system has a repetitive pattern of eighth notes in the left hand, with markings "8>.....:" and "(secco)".

This less busy texture reflects the next line, which states that the mourners have sat down for the funeral service. In other words, Copland stops the sixteenth notes that were imitating their confused and scuttering footsteps because the mourners have now settled in their seats for a planned service. The muddled sound is replaced by clear "thud-like" (to use Copland's musical direction) sounds that mimic the repetitive "beating" of the drum. To mimic this drum, Copland

instructs the pianist to “exaggerate the first beat of every measure,” creating a more percussive feeling.¹⁴ This two chord beating figure continues throughout the rest of the song. Even though the poem begins by mimicking the chaos as the confused mourners walk around, he later emphasizes the more organized ceremonial nature of the “service” through this reliable and predictable beating. Both the treading and the beating stanzas are composed of dissonant chords with many accidentals, which creates an unpleasant listening experience that would mimic the mental illness of the speaker. However, even though both stanzas sound unpleasant, there is a sort of simultaneous and seemingly antithetical “sense” that already begins to “break through” as Copland highlights Dickinson’s shift from chaos to organized ceremony. This shift reflects Dickinson’s apophysis of madness and clarity.

Copland collaborates with Dickinson to complicate the mental illness narrative because the song, like the poem, also alludes to transcendence. Copland’s word painting continues: his piece imitates the “bell” that tolls through all space and therefore brings life to Dickinson’s musical description of a transcendental experience. Right before the line in which the bell tolls, Copland writes a high pitched and wide ranged chord, and tells the pianist that it should be “bell-like.” According to Professor Amin, the wide spacing of the notes of the chord imitates the overtones of a ringing bell. Copland then includes a series of high pitched and spacious chords that mimic this tolling bell. However, Professor Amin notes that the bell-like chords actually begin, less noticeably, before this moment; they begin when Dickinson refers to the “soul,” which connects the heavenly bells to a spiritual or transcendental experience.

However, Copland’s music does not suggest that the piece is merely about a heavenly experience: just as the piece complicates the idea that the poem is merely about mental illness, it

¹⁴ This is another instance when Copland uses Dickinson’s musical imagery (in this case she references drums and percussion) as a chance for word-painting, bringing her musical visions to life.

also resists a clear and heavenly conclusion. Even though there are bell-like chords, the beating figure still continues throughout the whole piece, suggesting that there is still some disturbing figure, or disturbed thoughts, present. Therefore, it is unclear whether this state of “being” is disturbing, or if it is heavenly, because he imitates both heavenly bells and thudding drums within the same piece. Notably, on the word “ear” of the line “Being but an ear,” Copland creates a “thud-like” dissonant chord¹⁵:

The image displays a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. It is organized into three systems. The first system contains the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the lyrics: "... As all the hea-vens were a bell And Be-ing but an ear.....". The second system continues with the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the lyrics: "And I and si-lence". The third system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the lyrics: "some strange race Wrecked.....". The piano part features a prominent "thud-like" chord on the word "ear", marked with *mf* and *sostenuto*. The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The dichotomy between the disturbed and divine is further emphasized by the fact that the word “bell” is set on the highest note of the piece, and then the word “ear” in the following line is set on the lowest note (both pictured above), which sounds especially ominous because it is a pitch

¹⁵ Professor Amin expressed that this chord is especially interesting because it is a major-major seventh chord, which typically sounds nice, but Copland arranged it so that there is a dissonant half step in the bass part. Therefore, it is a chord that traditionally sounds nice, but it sounds unpleasant here, further emphasizing Copland’s ambiguity.

that requires a heavy “chest voice” in the soprano range. That huge descent and the thudding arrival point is especially emphasized because, as Professor Amin pointed out, it is not only marked *sforzando*¹⁶, but is also the only chord that gets a tent accent (^).¹⁷ Professor Amin also noticed that it is the moment when the piano part is highest and the vocal part is lowest, which especially draws the listener’s attention. Moreover, the “heavens” are a “bell” sounds hopeful, but then “Being but an ear” sounds somber, and, as Professor Amin noticed, it marks the end of the bell sounds. This dichotomy and shift may suggest that the speaker got a glimpse of transcendence, but is confined to the human plane with the human senses, like hearing, so that she is just an “ear.” In other words, transcendence exists but is out of reach.

Copland ends the piece with silence and a lack of resolution as Dickinson intended. After all of the musical contradictions that Copland creates to mirror Dickinson’s negations, he defuses the energy of the piece into an unresolved nothingness. As pictured below, the piece slowly comes to a halt as the piano texture becomes thin; the full chords of the “beating figure” in the left hand are replaced by single notes. Also, the dynamic level becomes “*piano*”¹⁸ and the vocal line becomes straight quarter notes, which is relatively slow and simple compared to the previous music:

¹⁶ Performed with sudden emphasis

¹⁷ A tent accent is more pronounced than a regular accent, and this is the only chord of the piece with a tent accent.

¹⁸ *Piano* is soft (quiet).

ear. And I and si - lence

ff-p
sostenuto
(the l.h. thud-like) (*mf-sempre*)

some strange race Wrecked

mp *p*
soi - i - tar - y here. ril -

p *pp* *8* *morendo* (Duration 2 min. 10 secs.)

Copland therefore thins out the texture and energy of the music in order to dramatically approach silence. He even emphasizes the word “silence” in the final line by using an accidental that is foreign to the previously established key. He then places a breath mark after the word “silence” even though it falls in the middle of a sentence. This pause is a similar tactic to Dickinson’s common use of ellipses. It creates a moment of rest to not only draw attention to the word “silence,” but to also mimic the “silence.” In the last system, he writes “*morendo*,” meaning “dying away” in both volume and tempo, which works to approach Dickinson’s conclusion that ends in clear “silence,” ambiguity, negation, and nothingness. Starr states that as this “*morendo*” is happening during the last two lines, “all expected rhythmic behavior is finally abandoned,” so that the “voice’s patterns and phrases are literally ‘wrecked,’” like the speaker (Starr). In order to mirror Dickinson, who breaks her own rhyme scheme at the poem’s conclusion, Copland breaks down the consistent rhythm and beating figure that he previously established. Copland also ends

the piece with a *fermata* which functions much like Dickinson's final em dash, as both create a suspension. This silence is Dickinson's only method to convey the unknowable and the transcendent; the meaning of the poem comes precisely from the negations, ambiguity, and unresolved silence. Through a lack of musical resolution and a dramatic fade into silence and nothingness, Copland hints at layers of unresolved transcendent meanings as Dickinson intended.

Conclusion

Copland deeply understood Dickinson's apophatic goal, and he carried out her intention with his music. He notably creates a Dickinson-like negation of his own through his selection of the opening two contradictory nature poems, allowing the contrast to emphasize, and prepare the listener for, all of the coming negations. Through his side-by-side placement of contrary poems and his strikingly different composition styles that highlight their differences, Copland forces the listener to face the simultaneous beauty and terror of nature. Then, he apophatically leaves the negation unresolved, conveying that the transcendent workings of the natural world can never be known; through that opening, he establishes Dickinson's use of negation and irresolution to approach the indescribable, incomprehensible, and unanswerable. Then, in "Because I could not stop for Death," Dickinson provides juxtaposing images of the afterlife that are either reassuringly similar to the living world or frighteningly strange. Copland musically highlights that negation, helping Dickinson communicate her simultaneous hope for an afterlife and her fearful regret that she cannot be certain of its existence or quality. Dickinson would not concretely depict the afterlife (and would not want Copland to) because it is unknowable; instead, Dickinson and Copland more appropriately handle this transcendental topic with unresolved negations. Then, in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," Dickinson uses imagery and descriptions of sound (like drums and bells) to simultaneously tell two opposing narratives that

negate each other: one is a story of mental illness, and the other is a story of divine mental clarity. Dickinson provides simultaneous depictions of madness and transcendence that could contradict each other, but could also occur together so that madness and transcendence look alike. By simply imitating Dickinson's sonic descriptions, Copland highlights these contradictory stories, allowing them to exist together, unresolved. Again, both Dickinson and Copland use negation to avoid leaving any clear answers. Dickinson creates a sort of profound silence to describe this elusive transcendent experience, which Copland intensifies through his setting, creating his own musical silence.

Ultimately, Copland sharpens all of Dickinson's negations, allowing the poetry to continue creating the silence that she intended, and that silence allows Dickinson to maintain her profound complexity. Because of Dickinson's negations and the unfillable silence that they create, every reading of her poetry is inevitably an interpretation. Copland accomplishes the difficult task of simply highlighting Dickinson's apophatic poetic techniques, and not interpreting her work for the listener, so that the poetry maintains its unresolved mystery. Copland could have easily created tidy music that depicts each poem in one particular way. For example, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" could have sounded unpleasant the whole way through, without the heavenly bell section, and it could have ended with ominous and unpleasant chords rather than unresolved silence. If Copland made those choices, the poem would be reduced to a story of mental illness and insanity, and could have easily been regarded (as Dickinson's poems often are) as a confessional poem about Dickinson's own mental anguish. Copland rejects the common tendency to read Dickinson as a dark, unstable, and antisocial woman. This dangerous stereotyping reduces her poetry to mere psychological unveiling, and fails to see her as the prolific transcendentalist poet that she was. Instead of attempting to solve or interpret the

mysterious gaps in Dickinson's poetry, Copland maintains and highlights them in order to intensify her profound silence. In doing so, he preserves, complements, and accentuates her transcendental complexity and, therefore, the multidimensional genius of her work and character.

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