

assuming the normativity of the mourner over the melancholic). For the speaker of Hardy's sequence, however, the turning point comes, if at all, not with "the invention of a durable figure" of identity signaling the recuperation and reinvestment of libidinal energies, but with the acceptance of the same divestment of person and latency of all but extinguished passion in which his grief begins. It is not that he ceases to impure thoughts, desires, and words to the woman who can now never speak her own mind; rather he does so reminding the reader that all he can do is interpolate in the absence of any direct access to her. This capacity to supply for oneself the other's imagined voice becomes oddly linked to and nearly indistinguishable from what might seem to be its opposite: a renunciation, not only of any claims to knowledge about that other, but also of any demands on her for authoritative judgment about oneself.

Thus we might compare "The Walk's" confession of coldness, "I did not mind," to its revision that is hardly a revision in the closing lines of "After a Journey": "Trust me, I mind, not." The mindlessness by which in the earlier poem the speaker went without his estranged wife, indifferently taking her absence for companionship, yields here to a different kind of permissiveness or readiness to be led on in an explicitly circumscribed, aubadellike dalliance with false surmise:

Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see,  
The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily;  
Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me,  
For the stars close their shutters and the dawn whitens hazily.  
Trust me, I mind not, though Life lours,  
The bringing me here; nay bring me here again!  
I am just the same as when  
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.

The initially objectless phrase, "Trust me, I mind not," derives its rich tonal ambiguity from the context of the pair's apparent estrangement in life: the memory of his former neglect accounts for the hint that her ghost would need such assurance before proceeding to court him a second time. At the same time, the phrase, however encouraging, implies his continued passivity in this ghostly courtship; his willingness to be so led, as if he lacked any direction of his own, resonates with, and indeed barely distinguishes itself from (a) the implied inertia of their relations late in life and

From Anne-Lise François, Open Secrets  
(Stanford UP, 2008)

(b) his numbness at the first shock of her death, when he seemed "but a dead man held on end/To sink down soon" ("The Going").

Yet it is perhaps finally to the fact of *her* death that Hardy's speaker remains true by responding with such tender indifference to her fictive invitations; the sense of so qualified an affirmative is, "I don't mind what you do since what you can is so little." Now that it can neither help nor be helped, his assent to whatever he might imagine her to be asking of him is free. It is not just that, as a kind of renewal of lapsed marriage vows, the declaration of desire costs him next to nothing since he has just acknowledged and accepted the transience of her power over him in death as in life. Knowing that he will probably not repeat the pilgrimage to her former haunts, he invites the second time—"nay bring me here again!"—and gives himself up to her memory just when he knows it is about to disappear. The echo of the aubade's trope of dawn whitening, usually the signal urging the lover to make haste and quit the bed so he can safely return the following night, sounds all the more emptily now that life's rudeness ("Life lours") cannot touch the dead, rage how it will. And yet by their very vanity, his words become as light as the image of contented inaction, or happy *otium* of the seals' lazy flopping, and recapture something of the freedom from care—the lightness and indifference to the future—"Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see"—that one can imagine would have defined the couple's first declarations of love.

The figure of the graveside loiterer, or of the mourner whose only aim is essentially unproductive—the letting go of something already gone—provides a rich conceptual image, then, for the redundancy and inconsequence of action recorded in these poems. In Hardy's elegies, the speaker's sense of his absent companion being not only incapable of answer but immune either to the healing or wounding power of his words constantly circumscribes his address, emptying it of ordinary claims to significance. In his unwillingness either to move forward from or concretize his loss, this poetic persona would seem to correspond to the paradigm for a loss without an object, the very experience of which has been missed, adumbrated in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia." Yet inasmuch as Freud's "melancholic" does not so much withdraw from as internalize a libidinal economy of loss and compensation, Freud's paradigm remains inadequate to registering to what an extent these lyric speakers sidestep the calculat-



ing function of psychic economy by the peculiarly undemanding tenacity with which they remark a loss (or gain) they could as easily commit to oblivion.<sup>78</sup>

The figure of the indifferent mourner or bearer of weightless loss differs from Freud's melancholic not simply in the sense that he abstains by his expressive reserve from excessive shows of "self-reviling," but in the sense that he does not punish himself, as the melancholic does, for a lack perceived in the other and now displaced onto the self. Later in the chapter I will have occasion to identify more explicitly the ethical character of this refusal to assume the burden of the other's lack (as one's own) through the Cavellian dialectic of acknowledgment and avoidance. At this point, however, it may be helpful to allow Dickinson, rather than psychoanalysis or ethics, to spell out the drama of (mis)recognition between "self" and "other" repeatedly alluded to in Hardy's sequence: I want to close this section with a brief look at "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes," a poem that thoroughly exorcises the melancholic's rage and the related temptation to respond to the other's perception of lack in oneself as to an accusation:

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes -  
 Incredulous of Ought  
 But Blank - and steady Wilderness -  
 Diversified by Night -  
 Just Infinities of Nought -  
 As far as it could see -  
 So looked the face I looked upon -  
 So looked itself - on Me -  
 I offered it no Help -

78. "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 14:243–58. Julia Kristeva's account of the melancholic subject also offers rich insights into these characters' absence of a will to progress and failure of development, or "enchainment." As I understand her account, however, the melancholic subject's inability not simply to form new attachments but to stand in relation to any object owes more to a fetishization of an original blankness of relation than to an Emersonian acceptance of the casualness with which new attachments might or might not be formed. See her description of the melancholic as "a morose atheist" in Kristeva, *Soleil Noir*, 22.

Because the Cause was Mine -  
 The Misery a Compact  
 As hopeless - as divine -  
 Neither - would be absolved -  
 Neither would be a Queen  
 Without the Other - Therefore -  
 We perish - tho' We reign -

Whereas *Poems of 1912–13* afford only glimpses of the unwritten novel of the Hardy's noncommunicative marriage, Dickinson's poem distills *in extremis* the naked image of a "self" and "other" locked in a mutual self-reliance that may never distinguish itself satisfactorily from shared solipsism. Here the impossibility of direct communication is not, as in elegy, a contingent fact, a function of the loved one's death, but the permanent condition of contact between the two concerned. Yet the poem is characteristic of the lyric of inconsequence studied in this chapter in that it rehearses—enacts in time—its own setting aside of drama; the progress of its reading introduces time into its apparently frozen psychic landscape. Following the six-line setup of the first term of the comparison—a wasteland in which the alternation of night and day constitutes the only temporal difference—there *is* a dramatic turn, a "gentle shock of mild surprise," by which the reader realizes along with the speaker that if the eyes look as if they were looking at nothing, it is because they are looking at her. Time intrudes on the landscape as the other does on the speaker, yet she does nothing in light of either peripeteia.

At first take the poem's speaker appears to be both the object and subject of a tragic skepticism that, "incredulous of Ought/But Blank," dismisses the world and, in Cavell's formulation, chooses to deny the existence of others rather than accept their mortality. Within a simpler version of this drama of denial, we might infer that the "face" appears to look on "Infinities of Nought" when looking at the speaker, because it *chooses not* to see her and remains willfully blind to her existence.<sup>79</sup> Yet the

79. Thus Cameron, pointing to the transitive use of the verb *look* in "looked itself on Me," insists on the violence of the other's projection, which not only ignores the particularity of the speaker's being but imposes its self-image on hers (*Lyric Time*, 141–42). Cameron's reading is more despairing of the poem than mine, because it posits at the poem's core a pain so great that the overwhelming need to externalize it makes the world illegible to oneself except as an empty self-image.



act of passiveness—"I offered it no Help -/Because the Cause was Mine -"—by which the speaker responds to this passing by telling us that the "Face" has read her only too well. "Because the Cause was Mine" confirms the other's insight into the speaker—"I had no help to offer since I was [as miserable, as empty, as much of a 'nothing'] as the face had seen me" (or, alternatively, "since my own gaze was as emptying, as evacuating of an already occupied space")—even as it asserts the speaker's self-sufficiency—"I offered it no help because I was pulling my own weight."

The unextended offer may look like a lack of generosity, a recalcitrant and self-protective withholding, yet the poem, I want to suggest, concerns less the failure to give than the burden of reception; its impasse hangs on the theological problem of how to accept—how not to dismiss—a world in which the only Other capable of bestowing recognition is moral like oneself.<sup>80</sup> The gesture of forbearance thus establishes a compact "as hopeless as divine" premised paradoxically on not alleviating the other's doubt and on not meeting her demand for an absolute confirmation of value. "Misery" has to be read in light of its proximity to the theological concept of grace, for the word designates the utter helplessness that not only necessitates divine mediation but is the condition for the reception of grace.<sup>81</sup> It is from within this theological understanding of the human creature's passivity in relation to its own depravity and salvation that the declaration, "I offered it no Help," implies a mode of faithfulness, even if it is only a stern and unflinching commitment to a world that God's absence leaves unredeemed. The speaker's repudiation of this world, as of the other's offer, is, in this sense, illusory, an effect of the last stanza's

80. This burden of secular acknowledgment—the burden of remembering one's fellow dead in a world devoid of transcendence—has been considered a central feature of the modern elegy. Thus Ramazani suggests that Hardy's sense of responsibility for one whom he cannot count on God to remember accounts for the "anxious proliferation of more than a hundred elegies for his estranged wife" (*Poetry of Mourning*, 47). See also Esther Schor's discussion of Enlightenment mourning in terms of the "ethical imperative for the living" to perpetuate the legacy of the past in the absence of divine memory (Schor, *Bearing the Dead*, 4). A similar argument might be made for the connection between the withdrawal of an omniscient God capable of guaranteeing that one will have been known by another and the importance of marital communion in a secular age.

81. The Calvinist emphasis on the arbitrariness of grace may inform the poem's punning negations of the language of legal obligation and finite responsibility in "Ought" and "Just."

syntactical delay and ambiguous conditional tense ("Neither - would be absolved -/Neither would be a Queen/Without the Other -"), which make it impossible to witness the act of taking between the two selves. It is not clear whether the speaker is describing an impasse or a summation, whether "Neither - would be absolved -/Neither would be a Queen" are conditions left unfulfilled by their repudiation of one another, or whether "Without the Other -" names the reciprocity by which each renders judgment of and acquires the other, while leaving intact the sovereignty of their self-images. The concluding "Therefore -/We perish -tho' we Reign -" suggests, in any case, that the relief of absolution has not been, as one might have thought, permanently foresworn but, on the contrary, already received. Grace, the poem suggests, lies in being known by the other without incurring any debt to her. Yet the corollary to such relief for the speaker and face is allowing one another to die rather than make something of their mirrored "Infinities of Nought."

"I offered it no Help -" The declaration might stand as the signature line for the lyric antihero whose type I have been identifying among the heedless lovers, indifferent heirs, idle mourners, and passive companions found in Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy. With Dickinson's speakers, these figures ask us to hear in their words an assertion of moral truthfulness rather than a confession of guilt, expression of regret, or admission of failure. The claim insists on the ethical value of doing nothing—of refusing to correct that perception of blankness in oneself, alleviate the other's loss, or compensate for the waste of either's desire.

### *u. weighs gain: Dickinson and the passing by of experience*

Passing too quickly and imperceptibly from an anticipatory to a retrospective mode of reception, Wordsworth's, Dickinson's, and Hardy's lyric speakers find themselves startled into having to take account of finished experience. This is the perspective of harvested experience, from which one is asked to take stock and declare what it all amounted to, that Emerson articulates in his essay "Experience," an essay in which he repudiates the very idea of educative *relos* associated with the term *experience*: "Let who will ask, where is the fruit? I find a private fruit sufficient. . . . I should feel it pitiful to demand a result on this town and country, an overt effect on the instant month and year" ("Experience," 233). As Emerson



goes on to suggest, the reception of experience diminishes the self's capacity for taking hold of it as a possession, and the sum of experience remains "private" not in the sense of being knowable only to the self in question but, on the contrary, in that of not being assignable to any particular cause: "The effect is deep and secular as the cause. It works on periods in which mortal lifetime is lost. All I know is reception; I am and I have; but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not" (233).

In its initial anger at the unreal character of even the most significant events—the "most unhandsome" part of our condition—the essay expresses the familiar suspicion that the most critical drama has been evaded and denied, and displays the habit of taking a final empty-handedness as evidence that something has been withheld. But repeating the revisionary movement we have seen in the poems, the essay ends by accepting as constitutive of experience the very absence of those forceful, tangible encounters it sets out to decri as a deficiency of experience. Read as an extended meditation on Emerson's own failure to mourn the death of his son—a project of mourning finally realized in being abandoned—the essay offers, as if in echo of Wordsworth's "A slumber did my spirit seal," insight into the seemingly tautological structure of experience—from unfelt nearness to unbridgeable distance. Surprised to find himself left intact—as he was before—by the loss of his son, Emerson learns that another's being could prove inessential to his own and receives a blank or negative instruction, negative in the sense that it brings him nothing new and cannot count as a positive acquisition. Like the speaker of the "Lucy" poems, he appears not to have taken account of the loved one's separateness until it was too late; yet, as the essay suggests, there may be no way to *live* that separates, to assume its weightless burden, except by missing it:

In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. (218)

"We can find no scar, . . . None may teach it" —Dickinson will echo, pointing to the same mystery of a virginal, negative education in loss. Yet Dickinson's engagement with the frameworks of both feminine education and theological conversion means that she asks very different questions of experience than the Emersonian harvester—not what does it amount to nor how to achieve it, but how to go on in the face of a gift that goes as mysteriously as it comes. In this section I will focus on poems by Dickinson steeped in the cultural and theological language of sexual modesty and humility, two discourses that from the outset entertain different expectations from experience than the Emersonian desire for marked and tangible—graspable—difference. Within the framework of each, the subject is exposed to a crisis (marriage, sexual consummation, death, conversion, or loss of faith) that it can neither seek nor avert but at most put behind. While the discourse of feminine virtue or sexual modesty is explicitly conservative—idealizing a verbal intercourse that leaves the sexually pure mind unchanged—the concept of theological grace may also, though more paradoxically, empty experience of its consequential value: it, too, constitutes an experience that the believer is expected, in one sense at least, to minimize by continuing to strive to fulfill the law as if he had not already been saved.<sup>82</sup> I return to Dickinson at this point, then, because she works within perspectives from which the Emersonian dissatisfaction with blank instruction—instruction so passively received that it may leave one with nothing to show—has already been put to rest. At the same time, of the three poets discussed in this chapter, she is the most likely to make a tragedy of the loss of faith. The crisis of her faith raises the stakes behind a kind of experience—easily ignored and sooner buried than developed—to which one can, at most, maintain a nonpossessive relation.

The movement of concession within Emerson's essay intimates a relation between renouncing expectations of experience and receiving its harvest. In *The New England Mind* Perry Miller offers some remarkable articulations of what seems to have been the Puritans' double command: act as if you have already received grace (and thereby have the power to satisfy the law) and as if you haven't (the law still requires satisfying): "Once more we may marvel at the ingenuity of a contrivance which manages to demand what men cannot give and yet not punish them for failing, which forgives the wrongdoer and yet does not ask the law to go unsatisfied. . . . The essential concept was obligation to the law along with commutation of its sentence" (385, 387).



vest that many of Dickinson's poems also assume. If experience, in particular the recognition of others, entails a moral obligation, these poems suggest that this is an obligation to do nothing rather than something in light of what occurs; to bracket rather than pursue particular encounters or meetings with an Other. This antinovelistic conception of experience as asking to be set aside rather than taken up allows us to reread the recession of contact in a poem such as "There's a certain Slant of light" as the very mode of its reception:

There's a certain Slant of light,  
 Winter Afternoons -  
 That oppresses, like the Heft  
 Of Cathedral Tunes -  
 Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -  
 We can find no scar,  
 But internal difference -  
 Where the Meanings, are -  
 None may reach it - Any -  
 'Tis the Seal Despair -  
 An imperial affliction  
 Sent us of the Air -  
 When it comes, the Landscape listens -  
 Shadows - hold their breath -  
 When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
 On the look of Death -

Reminiscent of hymn meter, the alternation of longer and shorter lines establishes the rhythmic inseparability of advance and recession, so that the imposition of the burden of mortality and the lightening of this burden constitute one and the same event.<sup>83</sup> If anything is carried in the

83. At 7-5-7-5 (6-5-7-5 in the third) syllables, the first three quatrains fall one syllable short of the 8-6-8-6 syllable pattern of hymn meter, and one might say that Dickinson further diminishes the "heft" of the "hymn" tune by distributing the odd lines' expected four song beats across unstressed speech parts, if not eliding one beat altogether. According to Shopraw's sensitive analysis of Dickinson's musical experimentation, the dashes may work as musical rests or graphic markers for the unheard fourth beat; by rendering the length of the lines ambiguous they also take off, diffuse the weight received. See, as well, Shopraw's account of the final quatrain's expansion and resolution into "regular" common meter.

poem, it is the conceit of burdensome light—never explained but displaced from one metaphor to another—by which Dickinson renders the gravity of grace and reminds us of the "heave" in "Heavenly." The sense of the human work of breathing, of bearing up the body, thus imperceptibly inflects the first two stanzas—from the "Heft" that must be carried across the line break, to the alliterative line "Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—" whose inverted syntax quite literally places the object to be borne before the receiving "us."

As a negative scene of instruction, the poem appears on one level to describe the same movement as "The Difference between Despair"—a shock that intrudes irrevocably on the speaker's psyche to take away the capacity to differentiate between inner and outer, "before" and "after." Alluding, as Cameron notes, to the Book of Revelation (*Lyric Time*, 101), the words "Seal Despair" indicate an apocalyptic, definitive experience—an intimation of death or divine sentencing—that marks the subject for life. "Despair" is a "Seal" that implies psychic death—the loss of the capacity to receive anything from time, to wait on its still unfulfilled promise.

Yet just as the poem's iterative present tense belies the definitiveness of this change and makes a habitual experience of what should be a singular, epiphanic conversion, the poem's language—"Heavenly Hurt, it gives us," "sent us of the air," "When it comes"—testifies to a continued capacity for temporal reception. "Winter Afternoons," taking up an entire line, both lengthens and pillows the "Slant of light"; the internal rhymes and repeated consonants fill out the luxury of that bare and undifferentiated plural—"Winter Afternoons"—in which one can take one's time now that the time for change is past and the urgency of harvesting gone.

The poem in this sense describes an experience that, like the Boy of Winander's, *makes a gift* of the very loss of the ability to take. Thus the abstraction that, beginning with the indefinite declarative, "There's a," makes it difficult to say who is the subject of this experience—it happens to everything and no one—is itself an effect of the "Slant's" queer and indirect mode of contact. The ostensive gesture that in Wordsworth still invited narrative expectations—the epigraphic interjection "There was a Boy"—is here transposed to the present tense of a certain meteorological condition. By thus making our daily vulnerability to the weather a figure for subjection to an absolute principle of alterity (God's or death's)—Dickinson rewrites for the living the familiar elegiac topos of the simultaneous exposure and invulnerability of the dead to all kinds of weather.



The “we” speaks from no definite point of reference because, like the shadows that must hold their breath, it has no immunity from a contact it can neither avoid nor seek.

*Slant*, of course, recalls that other “slant” of the grave, the slope or inclination that in “We do not play on Graves” all but elides the presence of buried dead underfoot. The poem’s paradoxical association of an abstracted, deathlike passivity with the capacity still to receive anything from the hour or weather (*temps* in both senses it has in French), resonates with numerous other poems in which Dickinson reinvents the elegiac trope of contrasting seasonal change above ground to the stoniness of the grave. A poem such as “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” for example, repeats the leveling movement of Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal” in the sense that it recasts what should be an ironic contrast—the insentient beneath the feet of the sentient—as a successive nearness or temporal doubling:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,  
 Untouched by morning -  
 And untouched by noon -  
 Lie the meek members of the Resurrection -  
 Rafter of satin - and Roof of stone -  
 Grand go the Years - in the Crescent - above them -  
 Worlds scoop their Arcs -  
 And Firmaments - row -  
 Diadems - drop - and Doges - surrender -  
 Soundless as dots - on a Disc of Snow -<sup>84</sup>

As with “A slumber did my spirit seal,” the act of reading the poem puts into time a spatial juxtaposition that implies neither identity nor antithesis but the proximity of incommensurables: in Wordsworth’s poem, love’s indifference to the “touch of earthly years” is simply succeeded by the state of being wholly given over to immense temporal change—“rolled around in earth’s diurnal course.” In Dickinson’s case, the poem’s theological underpinnings already render dialectical the simple ironic contrast between the living and the dead: those sealed in impregnable “Alabaster” “lie” awaiting resurrection and only appear to be beyond all change, while nothing will come of the sweeping pageantry above. The antinomy was

84. This is R. W. Franklin’s C version, based on a penciled note sent to Susan Dickinson in 1861 (see Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 161).

clearer in the poem’s first version, which did use the two-stanza form to set the unsuspected faith below against the heedlessness of creatures of the air:

Light laughs the breeze  
 In the Castle above them -  
 Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,  
 Pipe the sweet Birds in ignorant cadence -  
 Ah, what sagacity perished here! <sup>85</sup>

Having apparently already objected to this first version, Susan Gilbert Dickinson wrote in response to Dickinson’s second attempt at the second stanza: “It just occurs to me that the first verse is complete in itself it needs no other, and can’t be coupled—Strange things always go alone—as there is only one Gabriel and one Sun” (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 161). For Susan to describe the poem’s first stanza in terms of self-sufficiency is extraordinarily overdetermined given the paradox on which it hinges: reliance on an as yet unfulfilled divine promise is finally indistinguishable from self-containment.<sup>85</sup>

85. Franklin’s B version, transcribed about late 1859 (see Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 160).

86. Skeptical readers might object that, in fact, Dickinson renders thoroughly untenable the Christian fiction of resurrection: too much pressure lies on the opening word “Safe” for any but an ironic reading of such sequestering, and the closeness with which “Roof of stone” follows so precisely on “Rafter of satin” leaves no room for transcendence. Yet one might argue instead that the poem captures the extent to which this faith is always already untenable—impossible to put forward: the changeless state rendered by a meter that returns to fall so evenly and indifferently on either of the two syllables of “Untouched” presents the paradox of an openness toward a time-as-yet-to-come, a hope so “meek” and so sure of itself it cannot confess itself as such, and so looks like the “seal Despair.” In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart suggests that Dickinson appears to have made two lines of what a hymn quatrain would have had as its second—even—thyme line—“Untouched by morning and untouched by noon” (121). Such a line would have less ambiguously placed both its song and speech beats on the “touched” of “untouched”; by instead distributing the same semantic material in the course of two self-quieting lines within a poem otherwise dominated by opening downbeats, Dickinson not only lengthens the time in which nothing happens but makes audible the indifference of stress on this word, whatever its place in the line—a word itself about the nonreception of light as something tactile.



Susan Gilbert's dismissal of Dickinson's repeated experimentations with the second stanza may thus gloss the poem's own paradoxical annulment of fictions of afterlife and afterlife, but the criticism misses the way in which the 1861 doubling only heightens the insularity of each stanza. Indeed, here the supplemental character of the second stanza, which can neither complete nor repeal the first, may account for the superb release of movement in "Grand go the years -." Here the dancelike, nearly dactylic meter now expresses the daring, confidence, and *élan* of the epic and world; as Dickinson opens up the same form (a hymn quatrain, whose second line has been unfolded into two), occupied in the first instance, in the stanza that "lies" above, by a single subject and verb—the dead lying below—to six different cosmic actions—"Grand go the years - . . . / Worlds scoop their Arcs - / And Firmaments - row -, etc. There is a bold indifference to telos in this queently sweep and excursive going out; in this sense the two stanzas do not make a pious contrast between the vanity of heroic enterprises and the patient wisdom of those who now remain indifferent to worldly goods. Instead, the telescoping of celestial revolutions recasts the naive pastoral orium of the 1859 variant as the playground of centuries, where the expanse of power is indistinguishable from its squandering. The metonymic abbreviation "Diadems drop" is all we see of the fall of monarchs: heads roll with the lightness of a change of fashion. This swiftness, coupled with the sure-footed meting out of single stressed beats per action, expresses the arrogant nonchalance of one who experiences the course of centuries as "nothing."

But the poem's close does more than bring us back to the perspective of the dead for whom all change in fortune is also as nothing: for in the meting out of syllables whose alliteration enacts the iterative repetitiveness described—"Soundless as dots - on a Disc of snow -"—eternity comes down to a single moment in time. In contrast to the earlier compression of epic action, the last line lengthens the momentary in the simple filling out of an adjectival phrase, and its metric "fall" gives us back the evanescence of real time. The untenable image of the "Disc of snow" reduces the earlier astronomical images of stars and planets to something that can hold no weight and certainly cannot last, and thus makes the reduction of epic telos—its coming down to nothing—inseparable from a return to the temporal and earthly.<sup>87</sup> However "strangely abstracted" and lost to

87. The *OED* gives for *disc* the "(apparently flat) surface or face of a planet as it appears to the eye."

the senses, the image evokes the empirical memory of the almost audible hush that snow spreads.<sup>88</sup> In this sense—like those moments in Milton that it remotely recalls, and in which pastoral metaphors interrupt and suspend the epic's development, reducing its scale to earthly time—the poem's close amounts to a claim for this world, however circumscribed.<sup>89</sup>

As I have been arguing, then, the second stanza's redoubling of the first neither revokes nor confirms the spell under which the dead lie, but puts into time death's annulment of time. However paradoxically, given the poem's focus on what it means to be sealed off from change, the poem ends up being about reception—about receiving something from time, even if it is only a supplementary impoverishment: in the place of the promised resurrection, the poem returns (and returns us) to the temporal world of the senses by emptying it out a second time.

Read together as meditations on the problem of following, or supplanting the sequel to, something that expects no *suite* (continuation or consequence), poems such as "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" and "A slumber did my spirit seal" help explain the setting aside of experience in "There's a certain Slant of light." Here, too, it is not the dead alone who lose the power to develop their experience in the process of receiving it. For the "Slant of light" intrudes not only to mark the subject for life but also to defer and displace that difference onto a permanently indefinite plane. I return to this poem to conclude the exposition of this lyric subgenre, because the poem's second stanza can be taken both to recapitulate and displace the founding of Romantic lyricism in the recognition of "a difference to me." Dickinson recasts this crisis of modern subjectivity in terms of the predicament of the Protestant soul who cannot tell her election by outward signs:

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -  
We can find no scar,

88. David Porter borrows the oxymoronic formulation "strangely abstracted images" from Archibald MacLeish to name the obliteration of sensory experience in Dickinson's poems. Wonderfully attentive to the poem's movement of deprivation in its passage from polysyllabic to monosyllabic words, Porter finds in this reduction a definitive abandonment of the world of the senses, where I am suggesting we can hear a return to time (see Porter, *Dickinson*).

89. I am thinking of those passages from *Paradise Lost* discussed by Hartman in which Milton suddenly telescopes the poem's epic scale and brings the fallen angels down to earth (see Hartman, "Milton's Counterplot").



But internal difference -  
Where the Meanings, are -

Yet even as it rehearses this founding moment, the poem puts to rest the fiction of heroic and expansive selfhood that Peter Brooks associates with the "desire for plot" of the nineteenth-century novel, by decreeing the impossibility of acting appropriately toward such insight: "None may teach it - Any -": either the content of this experience cannot be taught—passed down to others; or "it" has nothing to learn from you, from anyone or anything—"Despair" is sealed to further instruction. In either case the gnomic utterance declares an end to the acquisition and transmission of inheritance.<sup>90</sup>

The poem suggests instead that assuming the burden of such a dispensation means doing nothing—just as one does nothing to receive it. This Protestant emphasis on the passivity of the subject's relation to grace or election informs the last stanza, where the difficult image of "the Distance/ On the Look of Death" expresses the mystery of a grace whose coming near one cannot claim as a directed address and which thus remains as alien as death:

When it comes, the Landscape listens -  
Shadows - hold their breath -  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the Look of Death -

The state of suspense and attentiveness is simply followed by the "Distance" of having been put beyond expectation, as if the listening itself were to displace the awaited message and the surrender of attention were what counted, not whether there was anything to be received; the world stops breathing, then picks up again immeasurably altered. As readers have repeatedly noted, Dickinson gives no content to the "it" but describes only its effects on the receiving subject, as if in deference

90. Thus one gloss for the line might be the Puritan dismissal of "education" as worthless when it comes to faith; here is Thomas Hooker, as if anticipating the "I can't tell you how I know" of aesthetic taste and irony, as quoted by Perry Miller: "faith is not a thing which our nature can attain to with outward helps. . . . Neither education, nor examples of others, nor our own resolutions, can settle our hearts upon God, till we find an inward power and authority causing divine truths to shine into our hearts" (Miller, *The New England Mind*, 28).

to the theological prohibition on naming God.<sup>91</sup> This chaste indirection renders the landscape's attentiveness and openness to experience indistinguishable from a refusal to look up, a being prepared to miss. In this sense, the stanza reads as a revision of the passage from Exodus, discussed in my first chapter, where Moses, rather than being allowed to see God face to face, is hidden in the cleft of a rock as God passes by; there, as here, a passing light and its eclipse are only "felt" as a tactile and aural experience. And just as Moses must intuit God's presence from his own momentary blindness as God's hands cover his eyes in passing, here the only face we are given is nature's. The same faith that will not allow the speaker to claim any relation to transcendence but that of distance and deferral keeps her in touch paradoxically with the natural world.

In "Listening to Dickinson" John Shopraw has traced the poem's dormant religious metaphors of conversion and election as divine ravishment and (dis)possession back to their sources in several hymns by Isaac Watts. Shopraw emphasizes, as most readers do, the bleakness of the "seal Despair" by which the speaker remains inviolate and yet not inviolate enough: on the one hand, spared/denied the face-to-face contact of the kind a Moses-like Watts seeks in terms analogous to erotic consummation ("How long wilt thou conceal thy face. . . /My God how long delay?"); on the other hand, marked internally—precisely in having been spared, not chosen, not taken up—by the "slant" light, whose "hurt" is to fail to "scar" and that "oppresses" with the weightless "heft" of indirect address or nonaddress. Read this way, the poem performs the by now familiar inversion of the deferral of violence into the violence of deferral, according to which a potential crisis event is all the more traumatizing for being missed and survived without apparent injury. Identifying the "heft of Cathedral tunes" with the curse of *near* intelligibility by which Christendom continues to make demands on Dickinson's antinomian ears, such a reading also makes the poem exemplify the crisis of an incompletely secularized modernity, not unlike the condition that Scholem ascribes to German Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, in which the commands of revealed

91. So Derrida describes the premise of negative theology: "[la négativité se-ra] une preuve de Dieu par ses effets, plus précisément une preuve. . . par des effets sans cause, par le sans cause" (*Psyché*, 338). For a discussion of the decentering, Derridean effects of Dickinson's "nonspecific or indefinitely recurring 'it,'" see Crisanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, 97–102.



religion still press on the ears of secular Jews but fail to address them meaningfully. (Thus Cameron classifies the poem among those whose landscapes bear “more meanings than a given speaker can interpret” [*Lyric Time*, 5].) Yet as I have been arguing, comparison with the passage from Exodus allows an alternative reading, according to which the deflection of address and eclipse of epiphanic light (an eclipse indistinguishable from, because continuous with, its diffusion and dissipation) might be construed of a differently *completed* revelatory experience and not simply a sign of its blockage—a reading minimally indicated by the poem’s own evocation in the vernacular not of a singular crisis event but of a repeated, weatherlike occurrence seemingly sustained a number of times by human and nonhuman experiential subjects, across a rhythm of the heightening and receding of expectations. Whether it designates the gaze of nonrecognition with which the dying look on death, however close its approach, or on the world they once took for near, or whether it evokes an allegorical figure distantly reminiscent of the grim leviathan, whose absent gaze would not, even when “marking” you, “mean” you—indeed would be devoid of anything to which you might answer—the remarkably compressed figure “the Distance / On the Look of Death -” (the only face revealed in place of God’s) suggests that we understand as part of this recession, the receding of “enigmatic” messages, whether of redemption or damnation, judgment or accusation. In this sense, Dickinson’s poem might be read not as the expression of what Scholten called the “nothingness of revelation,” whereby “revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance” (cited in Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, 39), but rather as the notation of a kind of “antireligious,” undemanding “revelation,” free of accusative address, and permitting a different kind of attention to the natural world, which one might now call “received” for having been put back or let down into it.<sup>92</sup>

92. I gingerly borrow the phrase “anti-religious revelation” from Santner’s reading of Rosenzweig, since Rosenzweig’s use of it, as rendered by Santner in *The Psychohistory of Everyday Life*, exposes its fundamental continuities with the “anti-religion” at the core of the Pauline and Protestant trope par excellence: that of the falling away of those reified “idols” or “totems” standing in the way of the subject’s proper responsiveness to God: “In a diary entry from 1922 . . . Rosenzweig . . . characterizes revelation as a kind of ‘anti-religion’ aimed at loosening the grip of the ‘religionists’ that ensues when fantasmatic formations or ‘totems’ of any kind begin to block out often anguished exposure to/answerability within

Another way of expressing the mood of this groundedness, or commitment to the given world, is through the claim of one who, turning up empty-handed, asserts, “Nothing has been delayed, deferred, or sacrificed. I have experienced all.” Or “this little can be everything, for me. If reception consists of no more than the act of waiting, and at a certain point, giving up the wait, then the actual fruits of time cannot measure the fullness of a life.” This sentiment informs the lightness with which the protagonists of the lyric of inconsequence that I have been identifying in Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy pass over the crisis of modern subjectivity and set aside the legacy of “the difference within.” Exemplifying a nonappropriative mode of keeping time, these indifferent heirs do not suffer a loss in committing their gain to inconsequence. “We have had our answer, and it came to naught,” they seem to say. “We are chastened of any illusions, not of the possibility of certainty but of the difference that it can make”; “we have had to supply—improvise—our own instruction in the absence of teachers and are by the same logic compelled to divest that experience of any authoritative power over others”; and at the same time, “to the extent that we could not but give the answer we did (we could not have withheld it), this affirmative act does not come from us at all; it is not ours to claim or pass on.”

I close this section by looking briefly at one last summation of missed experience. The poem appears at first to be a declaration of having had nothing from life—an explanation of empty-handedness at the hour of reckoning. The female speaker has been kept from exploring the world by queuing and confined, instead, to domestic chores—sewing and other sedentary work—that keep her head down. Yet the poem turns the prejudice against the claustrophobic shelter of feminine experience on its head, as its speaker achieves a tone of celestial largesse similar to that struck in the “Grand go the years” stanza of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” a

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the midst of life” (123n53). Rather than calling for more “answerability,” in its final recessiveness, Dickinson’s poem appears to traverse the fantasy of interpreting phenomena “sent us of the air” as super-egoic demands. In “The Angle of a Landscape -” Dickinson more playfully describes the bounty of weather- and season-supplied phenomena soliciting but also declining her interpretation—offerings seemingly received on condition of accepting the unconcern with which they occasionally “accost” and leave her, in contrast with the steeple’s “finger” that never “stirs” but always points in the accusative.



tone that, in its grand indifference to the world, is finally indistinguishable from the modesty of the meek:

The missing all - prevented me  
 From missing minor things -  
 If nothing larger than a world's  
 Departure from a Hinge,  
 Or Sun's extinction - be observed -  
 'Twas not so large that I  
 Could lift my Forehead from my work  
 For Curiosity -

The speaker's wit lies in letting us know how much she can tell of earthly loss without looking up from her domestic work—she keeps time with it, as one might tell the hour by the shadows on the wall. Indeed this tonal playfulness makes it difficult to take her impassive detachment as evidence of a traumatic loss so great that the destruction of worlds is as nothing in comparison.<sup>93</sup> For the queenly lightness with which she brushes off catastrophe—"If nothing larger than . . ."—corresponds to the uneventful, inconsequential way in which a "world" may depart "from a Hinge" (apocalyptic eclipse or quotidian sunset), and reminds us of the Emersonian pun on the "casual" in "casualty": "We thrive by casualties. . . . Our chief experiences have been casual" ("Experience," 226).<sup>94</sup> Far from a refusal to assume the burden of loss, her deficiency of grav-

93. See, for example, J. V. Cunningham's claim that "Only loss of salvation justifies such hyperbole" (quoted in Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 171). This is another version of the argument that insists on reading apparent numbness to the world as the symptom of a secret and catastrophic loss or trauma. Cameron herself takes some distance from this reading by distinguishing the poem from others in which Dickinson records "a forfeit so monumental as to render any later particularity trivial," and by claiming that the speaker's forfeit here instead puts her in touch with a loss "that is at last recognized as the true face of the natural world, what Dickinson had elsewhere called 'the Distance / On the look of Death—'" (ibid.). Yet this claim continues to attribute to the speaker's judgment of the world the definitiveness of despair; something that the poem, I am suggesting, belies.

94. Here again I am indebted to Susan Stewart, who suggests to me that the poem may be making equivalent the blindness incurred from looking at the sun during an eclipse and that which follows from doing "close work" in crepuscular light—a strain that may well have contributed to Dickinson's eye problems.

ity remains faithful to the weightlessness that makes the existent all but already gone. "From a hinge" renders the sense that things have as little hold on life as she does—are as likely, in Wordsworthian language, "to go silently out of mind" as "to be violently destroyed."

A richly ironic representation of feminine modesty, the poem thus vocalizes the perspective of the unassuming observer with a terseness worthy of Austen's Fanny Price. As we will see in the next chapter, Austen's portrayal, like Dickinson's, leaves room to acknowledge the cold and unforgiving aspects of Fanny's prudence. Neither Austen nor Dickinson makes it easy to distinguish the repudiation of spectacle from the selfish ruthlessness of one who, finding herself excluded, commits it all to perdition. But Dickinson's poem is finally a joke on the ethos of having nothing to spare and on the Puritan condemnation of idleness evoked in the last line: "For Curiosity." The ease with which this grammatically unnecessary modifier is carelessly, freely thrown out belies its denotative sense. The effect is like that of the word "Occasionally," with which Dickinson ends the poem "We do not play on Graves," and by it the speaker expresses with quiet mockery the mildly ironic, detached love of her inattentive attention—a disavowal that embraces far more than it abandons.

*vi. passing judgment: passivity and the ethics of acknowledgment*

By homely gift and hindered words  
 The human heart is told  
 Of nothing -  
 "Nothing" is the force  
 That renovates the World -

—Emily Dickinson

A poem begins and ends in silence. Why not call it nothing then?  
 —Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer*

Dickinson's, Hardy's, and Wordsworth's poems thus present in the place of dramatic exchange an internal transformation in character that often includes a diminishment of the capacity to register change as such. Their speakers' indifference to narrative economy corresponds to a paratactic relation between "before" and "after" that looks like an absence of prog-



ress; as I have argued, however, this open-endedness of relation is itself the effect of experience. In marking how close loving another person may come to missing him altogether, their poems yield insight into the passiveness of moral knowing, a passiveness that has nothing to do with being determined from without by external causes, with having no control or responsibility, but with the little one has to do, the little one's loving amounts to. The story that I have sought to tell through my readings of these poems is thus that of a possible resolution to the crisis of modern skepticism over the existence and knowability of others, in particular of an Other capable of verifying one's own existence. Cavell has described this crisis as a tragedy of avoidance, whereby the skeptic "attempts to convert" into "an intellectual lack" the "metaphysical finitude" that the other sees in him and represents for him. The skeptic denies the other's knowledge, rather than allow the other to know him, to find him mortal and separate, which is all the other can do.<sup>95</sup> The problem is a function of the impossible roles that the "process of secularization"—Cavell calls it "romanticism"—puts humans in the position of playing for one another. For inasmuch as this process accepts Protestantism's antinomian emphasis on inner faith over obedience to external laws, it is now up to me to summon myself before God and determine what is asked of me, shoring up what I can from my own now boundless experience: "From now on one manages one's relation to God alone, in particular one bears the brunt alone of being known to God" (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 470). But just as no one now calls forth my gift, there is no one to acknowledge it but another like myself, separate and mortal: with the disappearance of the Godhead, "the other now bears the weight of God, shows me that I am not alone in the universe" (470). In two new respects, Cavell's language suggests, humans are asked to assume burdens once carried by God or representatives of God. These two new roles—my allowing myself to be known and your playing God to know me, the putting forward and the acknowledging of the private riches each has within, even the invention of something to be known and someone to know it—are rife with heroic possibility. Yet

95. Cavell's account presupposes throughout the reversibility of what he calls skepticism's "active and passive forms"—the denial that I can know another being and the denial that I can be known by another. My argument here draws heavily on the concluding section to *The Claim of Reason*, "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance," in particular Cavell's reading of Othello's denial of the mortal desire Desdemona has discovered in him (329–476).

Cavell goes on to describe the disastrous consequences of "the wish for absolute activeness and absolute passiveness; which is to say, for absolute recognition of and by another" (470), and everything in his argument points to the need to abjure such heroism. The "humanization" of acknowledgment—our assumption of the power to confirm one another's self-images—"places infinite demands upon finite resources" (470), and assuming its burden means, in large measure, renouncing these demands. Unlike divine absolution, in other words, human acknowledgment, even of another's (or one's own) capacity to sustain "infinite interest," must acknowledge its own finitude—it includes and inevitably yields to a sense of the little such acknowledgment can do for another.

Cavell's account of skepticism as a tragic avoidance of the other and the other's insight commands attention here, because it implies an ethics of acknowledgment that would seem to indict the missings recorded in these poems as moral rather than cognitive failures; it articulates the position against which Wordsworth's, Dickinson's, and Hardy's speakers must defend their ellipses, omissions, indirections, continued lightness of address, and capacity for inattention. Cavell wants to insist on the "activeness" of acknowledgment as an ethical choice, a step one must want to take, not something one can assume comes with knowledge: "Acknowledgment 'goes beyond' knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession" (428). Again this concept of acknowledgment as a burden for which one is solely responsible presupposes the secular, perhaps paradigmatically Romantic, sense of being alone in the world, the bearer of experiences that without one's broadcast will remain unknown; inevitably Cavell's own terms for it often betray a heroic defensiveness against such emptiness. Hence the forced energy of the sequence, "claim it, stake it, enact it," in his paraphrase of Emerson's stance in "Self-Reliance"—"I'm a being who to exist must say I exist or must acknowledge my existence—claim it, stake it, enact it" (*In Quest of the Ordinary*, 109). In it we hear the rush to lay claim and assign an owner to uncounted time typical of the anxiety over waste in a secular age. The call on individuals to establish rather than merely assume their claims to truth and power can render limitless their sense of responsibility for missed potential.

If acknowledgment is indeed a question of thus claiming, staking, and



enacting otherwise unmet insight, then there is no question that Wordsworth, Dickinson's, and Hardy's reluctant mourners and undemanding lovers fail their object by their reticence of notice. But much of Cavell's argument, in fact, militates against this heroic understanding of acknowledgment by limiting its status as an "event" to a slight adjustment in "attitude," a change in one's way of seeing others whose expression in a direct, definitive statement may never take place:

If my attitude towards him expresses my knowledge that he has a soul, my attitude may nevertheless not be very definitely expressed, nor very readily. It may take ages; it may be expressed now in the way I live. . . . The word "attitude" can be misleading here. It is not, in the matters at hand, a disposition I can adopt at will. It will be helpful to take the English word in its physical sense, as an inflection of myself toward others, an orientation which affects everything and which I may or may not be interested in discovering about myself. (*The Claim of Reason*, 366)

The resolution to the impasse produced by the questions, "Does the other have a soul?" or "Am I one of the elect?" (questions that romanticism might translate as "Am I knowable to another? to myself?"), does not lie, then, in the arrival of fresh and conclusive evidence (no evidence could be reason enough to give an affirmative), but in a simple readjustment of perspective whereby the questioner does not so much renounce the possibility of certainty as he does fantasies about the eventfulness of its achievement. He stops constructing interiority (whether the other's or his own) as a mystery to be penetrated, a secret that someone is in on, if he isn't, and instead accepts it as an open secret of which no one is the master and that he might have chosen to see or not *at any time*.

Throughout *The Claim of Reason* Cavell thus uses Wittgenstein's refutation of the "fantasy of a private language," of the idea that the self's relation to itself is one of privileged knowledge, not to dispute skepticism's "disappointment" with the outward criteria supposed to establish inner processes but to offset certain exaggerated responses to that disappointment, in particular a certain Romantic misprision of interiority as a domain over which the self has sole jurisdiction. Wittgenstein, according to Cavell, does not so much deny privacy as he does the need to predicate inwardness on the capacity for secrecy; he wants to spare the self the heroic position of having either to keep itself inviolate, inscrutable to the eyes of others, or to make itself completely known to another:

[Wittgenstein] seems to rivalize my (inner) life.—In a way this is true. I think one moral of the *Investigations* as a whole can be drawn as follows: The fact, and the state, of your (inner) life cannot take its importance from anything special in it. However far you have gone with it, you will find that what is common is there before you are. The state of your life may be, and may be all that is, worth your infinite interest. But then that can only exist along with a complete disinterest toward it. The soul is impersonal. (361)<sup>96</sup>

When Cavell does enact "acknowledgment," it is as a strangely unselfish disappointment and admission of limits, as in this remarkably deflationary passage: my recognition of a "soul" or capacity to sustain "infinite interest," whether within myself or others, coincides with my renouncing certain fantasies of immortality and accepting not only that soul's ordinariness but my divestment from its "infinite interest."

In this sense, Cavell seems to rejoin Simone Weil in defining generosity between humans as inherently deflative—a question not of meeting one another's unreal demands but of forgiving both those demands and our inability to meet them:

Les hommes nous doivent ce que nous imaginons qu'ils nous donneront. Leur remettre cette dette.

96. In subsequent passages Cavell reiterates this counterintuitive claim according to which one's sense of self is predicated on one's learning to accept a nonpossessive and nonprivileged relation to one's experiences:

In *The Senses of Walden* I have argued for an understanding of the having of a self as an acceptance of the idea of being by oneself, and an understanding of being oneself in terms of being beside oneself. . . . It proposes an understanding of self-possession as a certain achievement of aloneness. . . . The achievement requires learning to deal in certain secrets. Not, however private, or rather personal ones, as if someone might in principle keep them (as if for himself or herself); but, like the secrets of philosophy always open ones, ones always already known before I present myself to them. (*The Claim of Reason*, 367)

Cavell's use of the notion of philosophy's open secret to denote a lack of privileged relation to mystery, to that which eludes demonstration and philosophical argument, is congenial to my own. The "open secret" *demythifies without explaining* the humanly unintelligible. The "openness" denotes not the subject's achievement of perfect lucidity but rather the absence of shelter: he or she cannot take refuge in the fiction of a mystery that once penetrated will reveal what to do or who the subject is.



Accepter qu'ils soient autre que les créatures de notre imagination, c'est imiter le renoncement de Dieu.

Moi aussi, je suis autre que ce que je m'imagine être. Le savoir, c'est le pardon.

[Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. Forgive them this debt.

To accept that they are different than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God.]

I too am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.<sup>97</sup>

In the contours of Weil's thought, we can follow the same expansive, contractive movement of the drama of secularization described above—the discovery of boundless promise and its voluntary setting aside. The initial claim that “others owe us what we imagine they will give us” surprises by its affirmative boldness; with it Weil turns the social contract's rational economy of mutual obligations on its head. We do not ask in return for services rendered but rather invent the other's gift in advance of any cause or signal to do so; the asking does not wait for reason, and is by itself enough to constitute the claim. Yet here having conferred full declarative power unto the usually passive recipient, Weil abjures its use. Precisely because nothing now limits what we can ask of each other but the consciousness of our own imaginations, all we can do is “forgive” such imagined debts. For the French verb *remettre* [return, put back]—here trans-

97. Weil, *La pensanteur et la grâce*, 17; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 9. The aphorism, from “Vide et Compensation,” opens with a woman making an unsolicited appeal that she then retracts by supplying her own answer to it: “A beloved being who disappoints me. I have written to him. It is impossible that he should not reply by saying what I have said to myself in his name.” The reversal of passive and active roles here in the blurring of petitioner and judge, debtor and creditor, upsets not only the conventional divisions of labor within the Christian hierarchy but also traditional gender expectations. A woman's word goes ahead of and makes redundant anything her lover might say on his behalf. In this respect it would be interesting to consider Weil's emphatic self-effacement as a self-willed rewriting of, rather than regressive return to, the conventions of feminine passivity. By their very assertiveness and forwardness, her gestures of abnegation mark a serious break from both the impassive silence of the “Lady” of courtly love, who always returns the same unforgiving verdict, and the pleading silence of the conduct-book heroine, who waits to be spoken for and asked in marriage.

lated as “forgive”—Dickinson would have given us “remit”; both suggest that the only gift that can, in fact, take place is our returning to others something they never had.<sup>98</sup>

Generosity between humans appears, in this view, to become peculiarly intransitive, a mere deflection or cessation whose occurrence we can hardly register. One aim of this chapter's poetic readings has been to reawaken the sense that the simple gesture of desisting is, in fact, transitive, a going out and conferral of a weightless burden from one to another, through a careful examination of the peculiar use of time made in short Romantic and post-Romantic poems. Indeed the examples of Cavell and Weil already point to the role of the mere passage of time in distilling an “event” of acknowledgment or forgiveness, although nothing, no singular epiphanic event, in time causes one to make up one's mind to it. They tell a story of the reprieve from counting, from both its anticipatory and critical energies, that we find repeated in Wordsworth's, Dickinson's, and Hardy's poems of averted experience. In a pattern that emerges as paradigmatic of scenes of secularized judgment, the supplicant who begins by awaiting an answer to validate his existence, finishes by allowing this demand simply to recede. Weil and Cavell each suggest why this recession should come not merely in the place of, but in the name of, fulfillment. They can help explain the patterns of apparent temporal lapse—of demands made then ceded—that we find in the literary examples discussed above and begin to tell us why these patterns elicit not disappointment but a sense of completion in the initial setting by and soon permanent forgetting of the absent “gift” of judgment.

98. I am indebted to David Bromwich for reminding me of Dickinson's “Re-mit as yet no grace” from “Further in the Summer than the Birds.” “Re-mit” is also the word Wordsworth uses to describe the recession of the Boy of Winder's anxious listening; see *Poetical Works* 2:440.