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Fumbling at Your Soul: From Celestial to Chemical Ether, the Hypothesis of Anesthesia in Emily Dickinson's Poem 315 ("He fumbles at Your Soul")

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Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), today considered one of America's major poets, was a prolific author who wrote almost 2,000 poems dealing extensively with ontological and metaphysical issues such as life, death, and the hereafter.¹ What is particularly remarkable is the way in which she addressed these philosophical matters through the lens of her immediate surroundings and everyday observations (her natural environment and the political and historical context of nineteenth-century America), thus linking physical and metaphysical concerns. This is particularly striking in her ambivalent use of words such as "ether," which may refer both to the realm of the divine and to the medical sphere.

Interestingly enough, the medical and pathological background in Dickinson's poetry has not been thoroughly analyzed by critics. Yet, there are multiple allusions to doctors, surgeons, and physicians and various references to medical equipment and remedies such as "gauze," "bandage," "narcotics," "anodyne," and, most frequently, "ether."

What we wish to focus on is the intriguing occurrence of the adjectival form of the word ether in a specific poem, probably written around 1862 during the Civil War.

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on—

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Accepted for publication August 21, 2012.

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He stuns you by degrees—
 Prepares your brittle Nature
 For the Ethereal Blow
 By fainter Hammers—further heard—
 Then nearer—Then so slow
 Your Breath has time to straighten—
 Your Brain—to bubble Cool—
 Deals—One—imperial—Thunderbolt—
 That scalps your naked Soul—

When Winds take Forests in their Paws—
 The Universe—is still—¹
 (p. 315)

Our point is to inscribe the poetic use of ether in its medical and political contexts and consider the way in which Dickinson might have chosen to refer to ether to establish a dialogue and an analogy between its medical effects and her metaphysical and mystical inquiries. This leads us to propose a new reading of this famous poem: that of an anesthesia being performed by a physician on a patient.

In the 1828 and 1844 editions of the Webster dictionary that Dickinson thoroughly consulted, ether is defined as referring to two distinct spheres—that of the divine and that of the medical:

1. A thin, subtle matter, much finer and rarer than air, which, some philosophers suppose, begins from the limits of the atmosphere and occupies the heavenly space. [...]
2. In chemistry, a very light, volatile and inflammable fluid, produced by the distillation of alcohol or rectified spirit of wine, with an acid. [...]²

Even though ether's chemical composition is mentioned, no hint is offered about its anesthetic properties. This is not surprising, given that these properties were only discovered by Dr. Crawford Williamson Long in 1842, and publicly demonstrated by Dr. William Morton on October 16, 1846 in Boston.³ Significantly, Dickinson had made a convalescence trip to Boston the very year the demonstration was performed, and when the poem was written some 15 years later, the Civil War was raging and the medical use of ether was widespread, although chloroform was usually privileged.⁴

As a possible echo to the newly practiced "etherization," the whole poem seems to revolve around, or "fumble about," the gradual approach of a disquieting and impending danger, identified as "the Ethereal Blow," and situated at the very center of the poem. One may notice that the imminent threat seems to be following a rise-and-fall movement and to be producing effects similar to those entailed by ether. This is particularly palpable in the use of the word "degree,"

which implies a step-by-step ascent or descent (and is also possibly a hint to the alcohol with which ether was sometimes mixed) and the presence of a musical theme in the background, whose hammering progression and final “drop” mimic the slowing down and sudden suspension of breath, which ether could induce.⁴

Other effects of medical ether seem to have a metaphorical counterpart in images such as “Your Breath has time to straighten/Your Brain to bubble Cool,” the climax of the “Ethereal Blow” being the scalping of the soul—a possible allusion to the surgeon’s instrument, though it is not established whether Emily Dickinson herself underwent any surgical operation. Let us also recall that the practice of scalping was a supposedly frequent custom in several American-Indian tribes, as recorded in “captivity narratives,” and consisted in the removal of the scalp; it may therefore be associated with anesthesia—loss of consciousness and death being the possible outcomes in both cases. This unconscious state is also conveyed by the adjectives “fainter” and “still” (the latter being the final word of the poem) and by a strange sensation originating in the brain: “bubble Cool” evokes a confused chemical reaction, with a simultaneously hot and cold temperature, and a possible confusion in language, because the verbs “bubble” and “burble” are close phonetically and etymologically.

The violence with which the image of scalping is laden may be perceived as implicitly identifying ether with both a physical and metaphysical intrusion, and the author of this violence could be assimilated to a doctor practicing an anesthesia. Indeed, poem 315 opens on the nonreferential, unspecified, masculine pronoun “He” acting upon a generic “you.” It is interesting to note that, this “you” is in the position of a grammatical object, thus conveying the impression of being somewhat submitted to the manipulations of an unknown and mysterious entity. Various hypotheses have been advanced to define a possible referent for the pronoun “He.” Critics have notably evoked the figure of God because of the underlying analogy with a divine power (“Ethereal” and “imperial—Thunderbolt” referring respectively to the divine sphere and possibly to Jupiter, the emperor of gods in Roman mythology) preparing to swoop down on a disarmed creature: this idea of helplessness is conveyed by the words “brittle Nature,” “naked Soul,” as opposed to violent terms such as “stuns,” “Blow,” “Hammers,” “scalps,” “Paws.” Whether it be God or not, the grammar and lexical fields in the poem lend weight to the idea of a dominating–dominated relationship. Given the medical context and imagery, it seems cogent to consider the possibility of an underlying doctor figure behind that “He.” Indeed, along with the priest, the doctor was an influential paternal and patriarchal agent in nineteenth-century American society. A source of relief for the families, he may also have aroused anguish on behalf of his patients in a context of groping medical experiments and inquiries. The opening verb of the poem (“fumbles”) precisely implies the idea of clumsiness and, as a result, a feeling of distrust and fear.

Whether real or fantasized, physical or mystical, the experience described in this poem craftily superimposes concrete and abstract sensations by blending together the celestial ether and its medical counterpart. Dickinson's use of the medical field only adds to the depth of her main object—her metaphysical inquiry—by providing her with a powerful and striking imagery in a century of medical progress and experiments, which witnessed the emergence of anesthesia. In that sense, Dickinson's poem may be considered as a pioneer text.

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