

“Precarious Gait” in Emily Dickinson’s Footsteps



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I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my feet the Sea –

Posant mes pas de Planche en Planche
J’allais mon lent et prudent chemin
Ma Tête semblait environnée d’Etoiles
Et mes pieds baignés d’Océan –

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch –
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience –

Je ne savais pas si le prochain
Serait ou non mon dernier pas –
Cela me donnait cette précaire Allure
Que d’aucuns nomment l’Expérience –

Emily Dickinson, poem Fr#926¹

Trying to translate Emily Dickinson’s poetry feels very much
like walking on sticks, particularly because her syntax is so oddly

¹ I will follow the numbering adopted by Ralph W. Franklin’s variorum edition of Dickinson’s complete poems: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, 3 vols. According to common practice among Dickinson specialists, the poem’s number is here preceded by “Fr” to differentiate this numbering from that of T.H. Johnson’s older (1955) edition.

equivocal—and French syntax abhors equivocation, always needs to rationalize and clarify, and in some cases has no choice but to clarify. In the sparse universe which is Dickinson’s, I like to think of translation as slow steps one must take “from Plank to Plank,” risking to trip over at every moment, the feet disconnected from the head. A tricky balancing act. Not incidentally, in an earlier poem these “planks” were in fact even more clearly metapoetical “blanks”: “From Blank to Blank – / A Threadless Way / I pushed Mechanic feet –” (Fr#484). This was an even more frightening situation, in which the connections between the different stages of “the way” no longer depended on the (apparent) solidity of planks, but on thin air.

Could I boldly link the two in French, too, by stepping from *De Planche en Planche* to *De Blanche en Blanche*? Not quite, because this “Blank” cannot be reduced to the white ground of the *page blanche* on which the poet’s pen leaves its black markings. It refers also to the awful chasm of nothingness, a void (*un vide*), the blankness of a pain so absolute it makes one lose one’s way. “Pain – has an Element of blank –” (Fr#760), Dickinson avers: it is this thick element one has to wade through when translating. “A slow and cautious way” indeed, which the Amherst poet was wont to travel: “I can wade Grief – / Whole Pools of it –” (Fr#312).

The “planks” in the first line of Fr#926 irresistibly evoke the hallmark of Dickinson’s writing, her notorious dashes, laid down like so many floorboards to carry us across the stanzas (literally, “rooms”) of her poems. Their ubiquitous presence creates a poetic landscape made up of disjunctive parts, an impression supported by the looseness of her syntax, in which the dashes often replace clearer connections: they are the “planks” which produce “blanks” in the poems’ texture. These planks are fragile, and can easily snap under treading feet, as in the inconclusive conclusion of the famous poem “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Fr#340), which ends on two remarkable dashes creating a syntactic, and more radically temporal, equivocation.

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –

Because it remains suspended between the two final dashes, the last word's meaning cannot be decided. If one reads it with a falling tone, it means that "I Finished knowing" *when* I reached the bottom of the layered worlds that yawned open when "a Plank in Reason, broke"; if one reads it with a *rising* tone, as the second dash invites us to do, it suggests the possibility of yet another world gaping below the moment when knowledge ceases. Beyond the theological question this poem raises (Is there the possibility, or the hope, or the curse, of a world after death?), its graphic materiality speaks volumes. For, unlike the unbroken dash concluding the second line of this stanza, the dash refusing the poem its conclusion is literally split in two by the word "then." The latter thus becomes the blind spot at which the plank becomes the blank; to put it differently, the graphic sequence "– then –" helps us to visualize, and eventually see, the meaning of "And then a Plank in Reason, broke," even as it compresses it spatially for increased effect. The rational process of the poem (*logos*) is *dashed* by its visual logic².

The plank cannot be translated without the blank. Dash and word are the twin sides of the poem's meaning; preserving their dynamic relationship and balancing their respective effects is the "precarious gait" the translator must adopt. Translating dashes should not prove to be a problem *per se*, but in Dickinson's case it becomes a nest of problems.

Another example will help illustrate my point—the line concluding the second quatrain of "I reckon – When I count at all –" (Fr#533):

I reckon – When I count at all –
 First – Poets – Then the Sun –
 Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
 And then – the List is done –

But, looking back – the First so seems
 To Comprehend the Whole –

² As critic Paul Crumbley argues in his study of Dickinson's dashes, "she made visual play a consistent feature of her writing." Note should be taken that Crumbley comments specifically here on the way in which two dashes interact "with the misplaced horizontal cross of the manuscript 't'" of the word "too." Paul Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p.185 n6, & p.95.

The Others look a needless Show –
 So I write – Poets – All –

In spite of its triumphantly assertive tone, this line—actually placed at the center of the poem—erases the verb (“are”), so that just when the writer (or, as she herself said, the “Supposed Person” speaking in her poem) seems to narcissistically celebrate the supremacy of poets as being the sum total of what exists, she in fact negates the very possibility of being altogether. Here, the dash becomes a radical sign of existence: Poets *are* All. But this is ironical indeed, if one sees the dash—as one well might, visually speaking—as a “minus” sign paradoxically concluding the “reckoning” the poem has performed so far. At the last moment, balancing her account in the *summation* of her list, Dickinson chooses to write in an elliptical, *subtractive* mode. The ambivalence (almost in the mathematical sense of that word) of such a poetic sign as the dash is a way to let us comprehend the “Hole” rather than the “Whole,” to link emptiness and fullness, absence and presence. The existential mode of “Poets,” therefore, is better left unsaid, elided, placed under erasure. In Dickinson’s world, “Poets ~~are~~ All,” their language acts cannot match anything that actually exists. And quite appropriately, there is another “hole” in these lines, following the word “Whole,” when another dash replaces the expected conjunction “that”: “the first *so* seems to comprehend the whole *that* the others look a needless show.”

But in French? These elisions, or deletions, are literally impossible to reproduce, unless the coherence of the sentence be lost:

Mais, voyons – les premiers semblent
 Si bien comprendre l’Ensemble –
 Que les Autres paraissent un Spectacle inutile –
 Donc j’écris – les Poètes – sont Tout –

I need the *que* after *si*, which makes the dash at the end of the second line redundant, whereas in the original, the momentous suspension and elision it creates are vital necessities to understand how the “Whole” can never be fully comprehended, except by including its inevitable, undermining opposite, a “Hole.” I also need to reinstate the verb “are” (*sont*)—not to mention adding the definite article *les* before *Poètes*—and in so doing, I am doomed to missing the missing

link. Dickinson's syntax is full of such adjacencies that translation into a language like French, with its stricter syntactic hierarchies, cannot render properly. It would be quite simply impossible to write, "Donc j'écris – Poètes – sont Tout –". But if I use fully expressed syntactic props instead of dashes, the planks / blanks the poem begs me to walk on, if I add a second flooring to these stanzas, then my translation turns Dickinson's aerial "house of possibility" ("I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose –", Fr#466) into a stuffy, Victorian mansion, complete with wainscoting.

As a matter of fact, this is exactly what happened within the English itself, when earlier editors of Dickinson set out to *translate* her peculiar idiom into more standard language. If one looks closely, for instance, at the disjunctive syntax created by the dashes in poem Fr#320, one can see how they felt it necessary to make changes in the punctuation, so that the poem should read "normally," particularly in the beginning:

There's a certain Slant of light,	There's a certain slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –	On winter afternoons,
That oppresses, like the Heft	That oppresses, like the weight
Of Cathedral Tunes –	Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us – Heavenly Hurt it gives us,³

In doing so, they created a temporal sequence which they felt was logical: the peculiar "slant of light" is to be seen "on winter afternoons," which becomes a mere circumstance, *and* it oppresses. Thus made circumstantial only, the phrase "winter afternoons" emphasizes the psychological dimension of the verb "to oppress": one can rationalize the oppression as a form of minor "depression" induced by the cold and dark weather of New England. The poet's original choices, however, yield an entirely different order of meaning, proceeding by disjunctive evocations rather than logical sequence, and reinforcing the ontological, rather than psychological, dimension of the meaning. With their remarkable capital letters (erased in the normalized version of the poem), "Winter Afternoons" are not the moment when "a certain Slant of light" occurs, they actually *are*

³ In *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, with an introduction by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1924).

this slant: the comma at the end of line 1 is a moment of decisive hesitation, as the speaker tries to find a possible ontological equivalent for the “slant of light”; consequently, the deictic “that,” severed from the preceding line by a dash, in its turn does not refer simply to “Slant of light” but to the entire evocation of lines 1 and 2, as suggested by its stressed position in the line: “*That* oppresses”—i.e., “*Here is what* oppresses,” which thus acquires a much more threatening and absolute, radical meaning. Contrasting with these sudden compressions and disjunctions, the “Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes” is introduced by a discursive comparison in a sort of afterthought that makes it sound accidental, a secondary ornament; the enjambment between lines 3 and 4 creates a dismissive acceleration in the rhythm. The overall effect is to devalue the comparison, making the religious dimension of the “slant of light” appear inferior in substance to the more equivocal “Winter Afternoons” of line 2. The dash poised at the limit of this first stanza inconclusively suspends the comparison, an inconclusiveness which is reinforced by the inverted syntax of the next line, “Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —”. Here again, the 1924 edition normalized Dickinson’s verse by changing the dash for a period and suppressing the comma before “it gives us.” Dickinson’s original punctuation, on the contrary, leaves things uncertain. If the dash is replaced by a period, the meaning becomes safely unambiguous: “Heavenly Hurt” can logically be understood as the complement of the verb “gives,” “Hurt” being a noun—the slant of light is this “it” that gives us a heavenly wound, not unlike the psychological hurt suggested by winter afternoons, which may be as gloomy as some cathedral tunes. While this reading satisfies a certain sense of logic, it is made possible only at the expense of considering the comma between “Hurt” and “it” to be negligible; it also obliterates the visual connection between “Heft” and “Hurt,” phonetically and visually relayed by “Tunes” and “Heavenly.” This connection becomes all the more insistent if one recalls, as Barton St Armand suggests, that “the word ‘heft’ also reminds us that one favorite medieval punishment for heresy or the defiance of authority was to have the victim slowly pressed to death.”⁴ In this reading, “Heavenly” acquires distinctly sarcastic overtones: the oppression of cathedral tunes becomes a metonymy for the literal violence and oppression the church as institution has used over the

⁴ Barton Levi St Armand, *The Soul’s Society: Emily Dickinson and Her Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 239.

centuries. So, if the dash ending stanza one is viewed, as it should, as a suspenseful punctuation rather than a closure, “Heavenly Hurt” could be read as the continuation of “Cathedral Tunes,” with “Hurt” being an adjective qualifying those “Tunes”—the melodies sung at church service are imparted with a certain intrinsic morbidity: because they are hurt, they can in turn hurt us. This would force the second half of this line to remain dangling, since “it gives us” would have no complement: it gives us what? But then, by this time the reader must have accepted that Dickinson’s dashes are traces of this “internal difference” she is trying to impart to language itself. Precisely because “We can find no scar,” what “it” has given us must remain on the order of the unknown, the inaccessible, only palpable as a dash. Or, on another account whose possibility is created by the equivocation of dashes, this internal difference is perceived as what Cristanne Miller calls “Dickinson’s form / class grammatical experiments” by which one word can potentially have several grammatical functions at once, like “Hurt” in our example. As Miller writes about this poem in particular:

Using a word of one grammatical class to function as another disguises a complex predication. Juxtaposing words that do not function together in normal usage creates a kind of parataxis, for which the reader must work out the appropriate relationship. [...] The discourse of the poem indicates the direction these reconstructions of meaning and syntax should take, but it does not clarify the ambiguity altogether.⁵

Although apparently less “rational” than the first reading, this second reading has an internal logic corresponding more closely to Dickinson’s alternative construction of meaning through unusually discriminating writing marks, or “scars.” The attentive reader must have noted that Dickinson creates a contrapuntal pattern of punctuation in these lines, in which commas and dashes alternate to blur the syntactic limits of her sentence(s): the slant of light affects, or afflicts, primarily the syntactic moves of the poem, thus becoming a metaphor for the “internal difference” the poet wishes to express. The kind of wound inflicted by the slant of Dickinson’s words is not

⁵ Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson’s Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 60-1.

exhibited like scars (the stigmata of saints, the visible proofs of divine election), it is not to be taught, or even imposed, by any piety such as the “cathedral tunes” are apt to profess, but it certainly marks the body of the poem itself, which is the only place where the meanings actually *are*.

A real translation of Dickinson’s poems should obviously step exactly in the other direction than the rationalization and normalization the early editors undertook. One should perhaps try to step into the poems’ “precarious Gait,” a particularly interesting word in itself. Indeed, as *Webster’s Dictionary* notes, underlining an ambivalence that could only appeal to Dickinson, “gait” is etymologically connected to “gate,” both linked to “way”: “Gate signifies both the opening or passage, and the frame of boards, planks or timber which closes the passage.”⁶ What better image could one imagine for translation as a form of contradictory passage, simultaneously open and closed—a “meeting apart,” as Dickinson herself would probably say (Fr#706)? To translate is to take the poem away—“a slow and cautious way”—from itself, the better to bring it back to itself. In short, to “experience” the poem, i.e. etymologically to “go all the way through” it. As Dickinson no doubt realized, shrewd lexicographer that she was, the precariousness of such a gait was the sign of a certain suffering proper to “experience.”⁷

In my own French version of “I stepped from Plank to Plank —”, “Gait” becomes “Allure” because—beside being a seductive word in English!—in French this word means both “speed” (as in *à toute allure*) and “appearance” (as in *avoir belle allure*). Also, it comes from the verb *aller*, and is thus a cognate of the English “go” and “way.” Let us hope it makes the meaning, and its translation, sufficiently precarious for the poem to do its job.

⁶ Dickinson’s veneration for her “Lexicon”, the 1844 edition of Noah Webster’s dictionary, should be recalled here. “For several years,” she wrote in 1862 to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “my Lexicon was my only companion.”

⁷ Webster defines “experience” as “Trial from suffering or enjoyment; suffering itself; the use of the senses; as the experience we have of pain or sickness.” (meaning #3).