



## INTERPRETING THE LANGUAGE OF INFERENTIAL EPILEPSY IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the possibility that Emily Dickinson was living with a form of epilepsy. It uses research by contemporary neurologists, who have differentiated how patients with epileptic seizures, and patients with non-epileptic seizures, use language features to describe their subjective seizure experiences. The features of language used by patients with epilepsy have been applied to the reinterpretation of a series of Emily Dickinson's poems that appear to be related to neurological experiences, especially 'inner' poems focusing on the operations of the "Brain", "Thought", "Mind", and "Consciousness". Further contemporary research into the auras of seizures, identified four signs that could stay in a person's memory if they remained conscious during a simple partial seizure (SPC). These are "suddenness, passivity or automatism, great intensity, and strangeness", which provided insights into Dickinson's 'inner' poem, Fr340, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,". The identification of the sensory manifestations of auras, such as, Somatosensory, Visual, Auditory, Vertiginous, Olfactory, and Psychic auras, has also helped to clarify aspects of Dickinson's 'inner' poems, especially Fr355, "It was not Death, for I stood up,". The autobiography of the Welsh writer, Margiad Evans, identified language use arising from epileptic episodes, including the response of 'giggling', and the appearance of a 'double self', which revealed a close association to Dickinson's language use in a range of poems. The application of research into autoscopy and "Déjà" experiences, and their appearance in poems, strengthened critical reading interpretations as expressions of inferential epileptic experiences. Finally, the poems featuring neurological experiences are seen to possess empirical dimensions that might help to explain Dickinson's consultations with Dr. Williams in Boston during 1864 and 1865, as a quest for a diagnosis and remedy for the disruptions to her consciousness.

**Keywords:** Epilepsy, Inner poems, consciousness, autoscopy, synaesthesia, Déjà

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## 1. Introduction

Speculation about a significant number of Dickinson's poems having a possible association with experiences of a form of epilepsy was stimulated by Lyndall Gordon's 2010 biography of Dickinson, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds*. Gordon's focus on the language and imagery in inferential neurological poems, "Pain" in Fr372, "Convulsion" in Fr339, interference with the "Brain" in Fr867, constant "Dread" in Fr341, and the "Bomb" within Dickinson's body in Fr360 and Fr522 (Gordon *Lives Like Loaded Guns* 115 and 116), concluded with a hypothesis, "[...] are we not looking at epilepsy?" (Op. Cit. 116).<sup>ii</sup> In my research into the impacts of epilepsy on a person's creative language use, Professor Simon Shorvon, a leading neurologist and epileptologist, recommended that I contact Professor Markus Reuber at Sheffield University, who was investigating, as an aid to diagnosis, how patients with epilepsy used language to describe their epileptic experiences. Therefore, in exploring Gordon's epilepsy hypothesis, I began by applying a linguistic analysis to Dickinson poems based on contemporary research undertaken by Professor Reuber and his neurologist colleagues, Leendert Plug and Basil Sharrack. They have used the scientific concepts and the analytic stance of Conversation Analysis within a clinical setting, to differentiate how patients, with epileptic seizures, and patients, with non-epileptic seizures, use metaphors, and other language features, to describe their subjective seizure experiences without overt direction from their doctors.

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a doctor-patient interaction in a one-on-one setting, in which the patient's commentary is not guided or driven by the doctor. In the research papers by Plug et. al. (2009 and 2011), CA has been principally used for the process of a patient describing a problem or concern, which is particularly related to the experience of seizures. The patient's spoken account of his or her seizure experiences is recorded on video or tape for transcription and allows close analysis for linguistic details and language features. This record also allows for the analysis of pauses that occur during utterances, along with analysis of other speech behaviours and gestures that occur during the patient's commentary. The process is intended to be orderly and informatively focused, as determined by the orientation of the patient, rather than by the doctor. The opening input from the doctor is invitational and open-ended. The primacy of the patient's input is undertaken through the process of sequencing and is encouraged by the patient's personally structured storytelling. In each paper, the patients were volunteers and gave permission for their recorded contributions to be used for research purposes. The object of CA in the context of the diagnosis of epilepsy is to establish a documented process in which doctor and patient can collaboratively and empirically work towards an accurate understanding of the nature of the patient's seizure disorder.

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<sup>ii</sup> Hirschhorn and Longworth's detailed 2013 rebuttal, "Was It Epilepsy? Misdiagnosing Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)", of Gordon's commentary on Dickinson's idiopathic health issues, initially focuses on research into the pharmaceuticals prescribed to treat epilepsy in the nineteenth century, before examining family factors in the possible inheritance of epilepsy. Little consideration is given to issues raised by Gordon dealing with the language of Dickinson's poetry.

This procedure was found to assist in the more accurate diagnosis of the two groups of patients, those with epilepsy seizures and those with non-epilepsy seizures, and was instrumental in the differential provision of appropriate therapies. Plug et. al. (2009) discovered identifiable differences in the way patients diagnosed with epileptic seizures, and patients diagnosed with psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, used metaphors in their talk about the experiences of their seizures, and these findings have helped to shape new perceptions in my interpretation of Dickinson's neurologically-focused poems, which explore abrupt and private events referring in detail to disruptive impacts on the operations of her 'Brain', 'Thought', 'Mind', and 'Consciousness'. However, I acknowledge immediately that there is common agreement among contemporary neurologists and epileptologists, that it is almost impossible to apply retrospective diagnosis of medical conditions accurately and reliably to well-known, and to less well-known, historical figures. Yet, in the case of Dickinson, I have found textual opportunities in her collection of poems, with access to qualified research evidence, to explore and speculate on how inferential neurological events might have contributed to the content in a range of critical poems.

In 2009, Plug et. al. determined that in the semantic field of Event/Situation, epileptic patients favoured the metaphoric description of their seizures as an Event or a Situation more frequently than non-epileptic patients. In the metaphoric conceptualisation in the semantic field of Agent/Force, epileptic patients favoured this identification of their seizure more frequently than non-epileptic patients, and even "personified" their seizures in terms of an Agent or a Force (Plug et. al. "Seizure metaphors differ in patients' accounts of epileptic and psychogenic nonepileptic seizures" 995). In the semantic field of Space/Place, non-epileptic patients were in the distinct majority. Their paper noted,

"Although it is possible that the differences are explained by how patients chose to present their paroxysmal symptoms to the doctor, it is more likely that the metaphor profiles used by the two patient groups reflect differences in the subjective seizure experience." (Plug et. al. "Seizure metaphors differ in patients' accounts of epileptic and psychogenic nonepileptic seizures" 999)

Dickinson's personification of the Agent or Force beyond the pronominal "it" appears to occupy a range of euphemisms, metaphors, epithets, insults, and placatory names, in the form of nouns, which include, "Monster" (Fr224 and Fr1364), "Poltroon" (Fr329), "Goblin" (Fr356, Fr360, Fr388, Fr425, Fr619, and Fr757), "Assassin" (Fr407), "Phantasm" (Fr456), "Cat" (Fr485), "Pit" (Fr508), "Bomb" (Fr360, Fr508, and Fr1150), "Spy" (Fr579), "Guest" (Fr592), "Ethereal Guest" (Fr989), "Wretch" (Fr784), "Chasm" (Fr1061), "Crisis" (Fr1067, and "Spider" (Fr1163). The more abstract terms consist of, "blameless mystery" (Fr307), "Fright" (Fr360), "postponeless Creature" (Fr556), "lonelier Thing" (Fr570), "shapeless friend" (Fr773), "Secret" (Fr803), and "Tremendousness" (Fr824). An adversarial identification occurs with "Enemy" (Fr556, Fr579, Fr649, Fr1520, and Fr1539), "Foe" (Fr1579) and "Fiend" (Fr425), where Dickinson has responded to

possibly three decades of carefully (and successfully) managed self-containment. In these linguistically inventive ways, Dickinson kept experimenting with, and re-interpreting, the ambiguities of her unpredictable neurological experiences through an interrelationship of imagery and tropes across a range of poems.

In 2011, Plug et. al. investigated the differential use of metaphors by patients with epilepsy and patients with psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, and again found notable differences in the metaphors used by each group. They also found an underlying cause in the differences in metaphors used by each group may be attributed to the differences in their seizure experiences.

“In the metaphorical expressions favoured by patients with epilepsy — the seizure is a moving object, a seizure involves actions performed by an external agent, a seizure involves a struggle with an opponent — the seizure is either an external object that moves towards or away from the patient, or an external agent that is either invisible to the patient, or visible as an opponent, and whose actions impact on the patient.” (Plug et. al. “Metaphors in the description of seizure experiences: Common expressions and differential diagnosis” 227)

Plug et. al. also found that:

“Epileptic seizures are events beyond the patient’s volition and direct control, while NES [Non-Epileptic Seizures] are comparable to mental states in which patients find themselves. The conceptualisation preferred by patients with NES suggests that patients do experience a degree of control in relation to their seizures.” (Plug et. al. “Metaphors in the description of seizure experiences: Common expressions and differential diagnosis” 227-228)

The details of Plug et. al.’s clinical research into linguistic aspects that identify commentary by people experiencing epilepsy, as distinct from people experiencing psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, are strengthened when their insights are combined with the research outcomes reported in “Epileptic Consciousness: Concept and meaning of Aura”, conducted by Alvarez-Silva et. al. (2006), where the focus was on differentiating the descriptions of seizure experiences by patients with epilepsy from patients with psychoses, also used to assist in more accurate diagnosis. Alvarez-Silva et. al. clarified the meaning of “aura” by observing,

“[...] it would seem that anything happening during an epileptic seizure should be interpreted as part of the aura, provided that consciousness is preserved and it stays in the patient’s memory. That being the case, the terms *simple partial seizure* (which by definition occurs without affecting consciousness) and *aura* are synonyms [...]. (Alvarez-Silva et. al. “Epileptic consciousness: Concept and meaning of aura.” 529)

Alvarez-Silva highlighted that “[...] in psychopathology, consciousness is affected by any kind of attack, including a SPS [simple partial seizure] [...] [and in a SPS, there is] an exclusively qualitative alteration of the consciousness” (Op. Cit. 531). Alvarez-Silva identified four signs that “should serve as defining criteria of the qualitative alteration undergone by the epileptic consciousness during a SPS” (Op. Cit. 531).

“The presence of the four signs (suddenness, passivity or automatism, great intensity, and strangeness) constitutes a useful tool for arriving at a differential diagnosis between epilepsy and psychiatric disorder, which proves especially difficult in SPSs of exclusively psychic content.” (Op. Cit. 531)

The four signs identified by Alvarez-Silva, namely, “suddenness, passivity or automatism, great intensity, and strangeness” (Op. Cit. 531), offer insight into the operation of the imagery in poem Fr340, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” along with elements of the seizure as “an external agent [... imposing] events beyond the patient’s volition and direct control” from Plug et. al.’s (2011) research (Plug et. al. “Metaphors in the description of seizure experiences: Common expressions and differential diagnoses” 227-8), while nevertheless remaining inferential about the ontology of the invasive and disruptive neurological event.

## 2. A Major Innovation in Poetry

In the early 1980s, Porter notes that Fr340 was “the first coolly targeted modern interior in American poetry [...] and] was representative of a substantial cluster of Dickinson’s works on psychic distress” (Porter *The Modern Idiom* 227). In the early 1990s, Farr observes, “Dickinson’s story here [is] of a fainting spell that ends sensation [...] and] the poem is a mindscape [on the subject of] the death of consciousness” (Farr *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* 90). In 2010, Vendler declares that “Dickinson frames this famous account of a mental breakdown, indistinguishable from death because it so obliterates consciousness, in a single sentence paratactic narrative [...]” (Vendler *Dickinson* 141).

In my view, these perceptive observations only begin to delineate the startling novelty of Fr340, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” from about summer 1862 in Fascicle 16. (I am indebted to Ralph Franklin for identifying in Dickinson’s poetry, compositional time and variant sequences.) The entirety of the action of a poem is located within, and focused on, the operations of Dickinson’s consciousness. She is uninhibitedly, and dramatically recalling, and re-living the disruptive, bewildering, alienating, and imposing impact of an invasive episode, which appears to contain elements that can be identified as consistent with an event of focal epilepsy, a simple partial seizure, or ‘absence seizure’, on her otherwise autonomous inner world of rational self-identity.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum –  
Kept beating – beating – till I thought  
My mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul                      Soul] written <Brain> Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then 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 –

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

The poem announces a cerebral 'event', consistent with Plug et. al.'s (2009) and Alvarez-Silva et. al.'s (2006) identification criteria, an alarming, relentless, multi-dimensional sensory event, arriving without warning like an invading agent taking possession of her consciousness. Without prompting, the completely inner experience enlarges relentlessly and irresistibly in a series of operations, amounting to an automatism, in which Dickinson becomes a passive participant in an end-of-life ceremony, an increasingly auditory aura, which engulfs her. The repetition of the "treading", emphasised by the isolating dashes "– treading –", is intensified and magnified, and traverses percussively into the second stanza as "beating", again made commanding by the dashes "– beating –", and made intimidatingly tangible as "Boots of Lead" in stanza three. She was struggling for coherence, as the sound of drumming appears equated with the solemnity of "A Service", ironically foreshadowed as though "Sense was breaking through –". Heaviness and immobility are embedded subjectively in Dickinson's auditory crescendo, creating a submissive 'numbness' in her "Mind".

Only incrementally does Dickinson convey awareness that her consciousness has become the synaesthetic subject of the 'death-experience' "Funeral". This is another remarkable poetic innovation in the action of this poem. The well-documented synaesthetic coalescence of separate senses has been re-invented and reformed to encompass the sensory strangeness, another of Alvarez-Silva et. al.'s aural criteria, within the consciousness experience. Dickinson is captured and transfixed when "Space" itself "began to toll", and her synthesising senses assume, what I propose to call, a cognitional

synaesthesia, where senses and cognition become conjoined inseparably, intensifying and enlarging her subjective existential experience in the fourth stanza:

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here –

A phenomenal auditory aural 'Belling', as capacious as the "Heavens", has enveloped her "Being" into an absorbing "Ear", and rendered her, and the shared, passive "Silence", as belonging to some "strange Race", left helpless and damaged. Again, 'strangeness', in the context of sensory criteria consistent with a partial seizure event, makes an appearance. The location of "here", with a possible pun on 'hear', appears to be within the remembered reverberating inner locus of her vibrating, echoing self. It is almost as though her writing is more than a memory, expanding into a way of explaining to herself, as clearly as possible, the complex content of her inner-sensory experiences.

The focus moves inward to her consciousness in the final stanza. The innovative cognitive synaesthesia continues in "a Plank in Reason, broke", and her sense of stability and orderliness is lost. The experience has taken possession of her as it becomes, in Plug et. al.'s (2009) terms, 'a moving object'. The image of verticality, an aspect of the seizure as a moving object, which is identifiable with a vertiginous aura in other 'seizure' poems, overwhelms her sense of self-control. She falls, 'drops', and 'plunges' into the depths of unknowingness. Her fading consciousness "hit[s]" and, in a variant, "Crash[es]",<sup>iii</sup> through "a World", or metonymically her valued sentient existence, at every "plunge", and in the involuntary ending of the narrative, she "Finished knowing". This appears to be the representation of a loss of consciousness, usually a brief event that sometimes occurs at the end of a focal epilepsy, simple partial seizure, or absence seizure, event.

The final stanza sequence of anaphoric 'And's', reflects ironic incomprehension of a relentless cumulative loss of autonomy. Dickinson is unable to describe the descending farewell to a world of self-aware and co-existing reason. Everywhere else in the poem, "then" has had a companion word or phrase or consequence. However, as the final word, the unrhyming "then" is a reverberating nothingness, conceding the hollowness of time, and Dickinson a disconnected automaton. Yet, throughout the recollected narrative in the poem, she has found rhyme, or near rhyme, and sustained a ballad-like rhythm, in each stanza, representing an attachment to a memory of an orderliness from an earlier world.

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<sup>iii</sup> Iterations of "Crash" reappear in three more poems, spanning almost 20 years: Fr1010, "Crumbling is not an instant's Act", in l.12, from about 1865, possibly towards the end of the second series of consultations with Dr Williams in Boston; Fr1532, "More than the Grave is closed to me –", in l.5, from about 1880; and Fr1665, "The farthest Thunder that I heard", in l.19, from about 1884. In each poem, inferential semantic associations with "crash" can be made with Dickinson's recurrent disruptions of consciousness.

This poem begins what becomes a sequence of poems, identifying the "Brain", that recounts and explores aspects of consciousness and the complexities of Dickinson's neurological 'events' by using innovative figurative language. The uninhibited focus on subjective inwardness has enriched the conceptual dimension of nineteenth century poetry.

### 3. Epilepsy and 'Inner World' Poems

In addition to the research of Plug et. al. and Alvarez-Silva et. al., Foldvary-Schaefer and Unnwongse (2011) investigate localising the symptomatology of auras and seizures to optimise surgical therapy procedures. As a result of their study, it is possible to identify a range of symptoms connected to partial seizures that can also be identified in the imagery of Dickinson's 'inner' poems, such as 340Fr, focusing on the operations of the 'Brain', 'Thought', 'Mind', or 'Consciousness'. Every seizure event is highly complex, complicated further by its intensity, suddenness, and unpredictability. The range of aura and seizure symptoms derived from Foldvary-Schaefer and Unnwongse's research is much more extensive than might possibly be in a single seizure event, yet it offers insight into the language and images in a variety of Dickinson's poems dealing with neurological experiences. I have found six of their identified symptom areas offering insights into Dickinson's poems ostensibly dealing with the experience of a neurological event:

*"Somatosensory auras* include tingling, numbness, electrical shock-like feelings, thermal sensations, and pain [...] *Visual auras* include both simple and complex manifestations. Simple visual auras such as static, flashing, or moving lights in different shapes and colors are characteristic of activation of the primary visual cortex and contiguous visual association areas. Complex visual auras of people, scenes, objects, and illusions [...] *Auditory auras*, like visual auras, range from simple to complex in character. Simple auditory auras include ringing and buzzing sounds. Complex auditory phenomena include voices and music [...] *Vertiginous auras* include sensations of rotation or movement in all planes that are usually associated with visual or auditory symptoms [...] *Olfactory auras* are typically unpleasant sensations, often associated with gustatory phenomena [...] *Psychic auras* include emotional symptoms (e.g., fear, anxiety, impending doom, and elation) and distortions of familiarity (e.g. déjà vu, jamais vu, and multisensorial hallucinations including revocation of complex memories)." (Foldvary-Schaefer and Unnwongse "Localizing and lateralizing features of auras and seizures" 161)

One of the principal criteria in the diagnosis of epilepsy is determining that there is recurrence of the seizure event. This is exactly what I interpret to be the case in Fr355, "It was not Death, for I stood up," from about summer 1862 in Fascicle 17. The sequence of events detailed in the poem indicates that Dickinson was intent on remembering what had happened during an invasive, turbulent, and possessive experience before being



engulfed by something like "Chaos". While it is possible this poem could be a reiteration of the same event from Fr340, I have interpreted it as another seizure event, with some linguistic variation, and an expansion of imagery that reveals a range of aura symptoms that can be identified from Foldvary-Schaefer and Unnwongse's research.

It was not Death, for I stood up,  
And all the Dead, lie down –  
It was not Night, for all the Bells  
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh                      Flesh] Knees *interlined above*  
I felt Siroccos – crawl –  
Nor Fire – for just my Marble feet                      my] two *interlined above*  
Could keep a Chancel, cool –

And yet, it tasted, like them all,  
The Figures I have seen  
Set orderly, for Burial,  
Reminded me, of mine –

As if my life were shaven,  
And fitted to a frame,  
And could not breathe without a key,  
And 'twas like Midnight, some –

When everything that ticked – has stopped –  
And Space stares – all around –  
Or Grisly frosts – first Autumn morns,  
Repeal the Beating Ground –

But, most, like Chaos – Stopless – cool –  
Without a Chance, or Spar –  
Or even a Report of Land –  
To justify – Despair.

If we read the pronominal "It" of the poem as referring to the experience of a focal epileptic seizure, then we can see that Dickinson's account is an attempt to record and comprehend what has happened to her, especially to her rational consciousness yet again. The abrupt, unexpected arrival of an external agent in the Psychic Aura of the opening line, immediately disrupting Dickinson's self-perception and autonomy, has similarities with the beginning of poem Fr340. This aura event also takes on the appearance of an unannounced 'near death'-like experience. In a Vertiginous Aura, Dickinson is surprised she is standing, rather than being prone, as is customary with "the

Dead". The Auditory Aura, in lines 3 and 4, blends with the Visual Aura in a quixotic metaphoric synaesthesia as the clappers of, presumably, church "Bells", become "Tongues", and speak in light rather than as an idiophone. Even "Noon", her sanctuary synonym for being with a treasured friend, Phillips Lord, (a topic for another paper) is mocked and derided by the Bells.

The second stanza is meshed in Somatosensory Aura. While Dickinson's "Flesh" is warmed, insect-eerily, by 'crawling' 'Sirocco' breezes, paradoxically, her "marble feet" are cold enough to "cool" an entire "Chancel". Then, in the first line of stanza three, synaesthesia is imposed on synaesthesia in an Olfactory Aura, transforming the multisensory images in the first two stanzas to the complete subjectivity of 'taste'. Dickinson's personal perspective intensifies the remainder of the poem. She feels she has arrived at her "Burial", an experience overlapping with Fr340.

In stanza four a constriction, almost literally, darkens Dickinson's recall of events. Her "life", unlike the "Dead" in the first stanza, now adopts a corpse-like form, as if it had been "shaven", "And fitted to a frame", or in Vendler's reading, "the coffin" (Vendler *Dickinson* 155). The ambiguity of "fitted" distorts the scene. It can mean 'shaped', as well as unmistakably the past tense of 'fit', a synonym for "Seizure" (Hallen edl.byu.edu). It is as though her neurological trauma has reduced her existence to a measurable outcome, even though recurrent, resembling a metaphorical "Midnight" darkness. The insistent anaphora in this stanza mimics the compounding "And" anaphora in the last stanza in Fr340.

In stanza five the Auditory Aura comprehensively returns, "[...] everything that ticked – has stopped –", and in the last line, the "Beating" reverberations, similar to Fr340, have been 'repealed' (no pun intended) or banished by savage natural law in the arrival of "Grisly frosts", and "space" is personified into gaping "stares", an expression of automatism. Her emotional descent has been caught in the ambiguity of "Autumn morns", as though the season is feeling sadness, or 'mourning' the inevitability of winter's bleakness. The diminishment in Dickinson's consciousness has become as disorderly as "Chaos" in the last stanza, and there is an irony in our awareness that the epitome of even a partial epileptic seizure is held in the helplessness of the vivid neologism, "Stopless", whereas there is no guarantee that Dickinson was fully aware of this. In Fr340, as Vendler notes, Dickinson "and Silence were shipwrecked together. But in 'Chaos' there are no companions; she is alone in the midst of an uninhabited sea" (Vendler *Dickinson* 155).

The Psychic Aura concludes the poem, not in the bleak vacancy of "Finished knowing", but in a more desolate "Despair", another form of unresolved comprehension. Juhasz has observed that "Images are evoked only to be denied: no chance, no spar, no report [...] and that] all aspects of experience are brought into play [...] physical (spar), abstract (report), conceptual (chaos, chance)" (Juhasz "The Irresistible Lure of Repetition and Dickinson's Poetics of Analogy" 27-28). This also represents the comprehensive inexplicability of focal epilepsy, which wasn't fully differentiated in Dickinson's

historical period.<sup>iv</sup> The deep emotional solitariness of Dickinson's "Despair", emphasised by full stop punctuation, is the consequence of not being in control of the experience, either to forestall or thwart it, or to oversee its impetuous invasiveness, or to bring it to an end so that it would never reappear.

The record-keeping dimension of the poem is featured in the near absence of enjambment. As the poem progresses, each line becomes a self-contained observation indicating Dickinson's focus on 'distilled' exactness. She crafts slant rhymes in lines 2 and 4 in five of the six stanzas reflecting discordant disquiet at her circumstances. There is also the emergence of an innovative enquiring mind, avoiding supernatural explanations and an absence of moralism, while pursuing what the modern-day world would see as evidence of insights from phenomenology. Dickinson was intent on making the recurring and invasive disruptions of her consciousness intelligible to herself. However, there is no speech in the poem, nor any self-directed movement. She is at the mercy of the onslaught of events.

#### 4. Margiad Evans's Epilepsy

Dickinson's poems detailing her neurological experiences are not without parallels in the work of other writers. Peter Wolf, a German neurologist, has identified the subjective side to epileptic seizures, especially in the auras, as "a feature of epilepsy relatively frequently appearing in literary accounts of epilepsy" (Wolf "The epileptic aura in literature: Aesthetic and philosophical dimensions. An essay" 415). He has surveyed the works of Dostoevsky, de Assis, Tennyson, and Thom Jones, among many others. My focus is on his commentary about the Welsh poet and novelist, Margiad Evans, who had her first epileptic seizure, when she was 41, on 11 May 1950, with the diagnosis confirmed on 8 June at the Burden Neurological Institute outside Bristol (Larner "Literature and medicine: 'A ray of darkness': Margiad Evans's account of her epilepsy (1952)" 193). It was a consequence of a brain tumour that resulted in her death in 1958. Her book, *A Ray of Darkness*, describing her epilepsy experiences, was published in 1952, three years before Johnson's remediating three-volume publication of Dickinson's poems.

Evans's commentary in prose identifies first-hand personal details about her epilepsy experiences that offer aura and lexical similarities to Dickinson's figurative language focused on her inner world of disrupted consciousness. At the advent of an attack, Evans writes,

"I cannot act. That sight, hearing, memory, *personality* in fact, are intact almost to the last I have proved, but *speech* and *action* are both taken away. The power of speaking is wiped from the lips – the power of motion – or reasonable motion – is stolen [...] One's eyes are nailed on an object or a face. This rigid attitude in which one seems to be listening to a call important beyond all human matters – there is

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<sup>iv</sup> The British neurologist, Dr John Hughlings-Jackson, is credited with publishing the first identification of 'focal epilepsy', or an epilepsy localized to one part of the brain, also known as a partial seizure, in an 1888 paper (Hogan and Kaiboriboon, "The 'Dreamy State': John Hughlings-Jackson's Ideas of Epilepsy and Consciousness" 1741).

of course no voice, but such is the effect, as if the last trump had been blown – dissolves into a kind of hovering. One turns round or away from helpers, if they are present, if not, from the presence of the appalling calamity in the room which is the body. The utmost source of terror to me was never the summons but this awful and yet *silly* moment, when the being tries to laugh it off, to leave it behind, to walk irresponsibly away. That ghastly moment is *funny* whether one can believe it or not. But have not many people written of the giggling silly horror of pure terror? Whether or not my last sensation, and the one I most dread, the one which has nearly touched me with true neurosis, the one I cannot forget, is that laughter, that shrugging it off. The next instant I fall into nothing.” (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 155)

Similarities with Dickinson’s poetry concerning seizure experiences begin with the loss of autonomy in ‘speech’ and ‘action’. There is also a resemblance to being immersed in, or captured by, an irresistible external force, such as “a call important beyond all human matters”. The event, the seizure, the agent, is also identified by the pronominal “it”. But a surprising and unpredictable similarity arises when Evans reveals the “*silly moment*” where she “tries to laugh it off, to leave it behind”, and ends up “giggling” as a sort of response to the intimidating “pure terror” of the experience. This is exactly the word, “giggling”, that Dickinson uses in line 16 of Fr423, “The first Day’s Night had come –”, which is discussed in detail later in this paper.

Wolf notes that the seizure on 11 May 1950 made Evans “aware that for many years [...] she had had isolated auras [...] and undertook] numerous reformulations” (Wolf “The epileptic aura in literature: Aesthetic and philosophical dimensions. An essay” 420). In one brief aura experience Evans observes that “it lasted a few seconds [...] I only knew [...] by the numb sensation in the centre of the brain which followed it” (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 39). In October 1951, Evans describes returning to her cottage from a walk, when she was consumed by a fit, just as she sat down at the kitchen table. A very short time later her companion, Mrs B—, was able to comfort her. Evans writes, “It seemed quite natural and not at all as though anything had happened because my brain was still partly numb and I had forgotten everything” (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 150). Dickinson also refers to the consequential experience of numbness in several poems focused on what appears to be related to the complex turmoil of a neurological event:

Fr340 “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,”

Fr421 “It ceased to hurt me, though so slow” [with an alternative, benumbed, in l.4]

Fr498 “I lived on Dread –”

Fr1088 “I’ve dropped my Brain – My Soul is numb –”

Fr1093 “’Twas Crisis – All the length had passed –”

Dickinson's repeated inclusion of the sensation of numbness can be interpreted as a signifying element of her seizure experiences. It is as though the repetition is her means of delineating an embedded memory in the multifaceted sensory invasion.

Evans also writes about "two selves" arising in her aura experiences, without the complexity of Dickinson's experiences of doubling, especially in the personification of the seizure, which is discussed later in this paper:

"When they have happened to me while crossing a room I have, if I may so illustrate it, left myself on one side and come to myself on the other, while feeling an atom of time divided the two selves, as the room might divide the figures of myself, supposing any one could create two figures of me [...] It took me a whole year of suffering and possibly a dozen major fits, to disentangle myself from the terror of mental disorder [...]." (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 40)

This sense of duality appears matched in her aroused interest in oxymora, which Wolf sees arising from her auras. He provides examples from Evans's 1943 publication, *Autobiography*, "stern kindness", "harsh gifts", "wind [...] fell like a whip and a caress", and "swift slowness" (Wolf "The epileptic aura in literature: Aesthetic and philosophical dimensions. An essay" 421). The title, *A Ray of Darkness*, is a visual oxymoron, along with "patches of invisible blackness" (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 122), and an auditory oxymoron, "loud silence" (Op. Cit. 39). Dickinson generated oxymora as a way of depicting the intensity of her neurological events. Examples from summer 1861 to about late 1863, prior to her consultations with Dr Williams, reveal an array of sensory and linguistic originality, such as the uninhibited physicality mixed with assonance in "Mangle daintier", from Fr242, "It is easy to work when the soul is at play –"; the conceptual dichotomies in "Granite crumb" and "The Cordiality of Death", from Fr243, "That after Horror – that 'twas *us* –"; the personified animation in "An awe came on the Trinket!", and a tactile conundrum in "Degreeless noon –", from Fr259, "A Clock stopped –"; and the aural challenge in "calm bombs", from Fr508, "A Pit – but Heaven over it –". Dickinson's linguistic experiments with elements of dissonance and asymmetry in her many inventive oxymora, may have had their genesis, as Evans has indicated in discussing her epilepsy, in the similar invasive disruptions to her consciousness.

Evans also ventures into the imagery of synaesthesia and simile in referring to a seizure:

"Time has become as rotten as worm-eaten wood, the earth under me is full of trap-doors and the sense of being, which is life and all that surrounds and creates it, a thing taken and given irresponsibly and without warning as children snatch a toy. Sight, hearing, touch, consciousness, torn from one like a nest from a bird." (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 122)

She expands an auditory aura into a dramatic synaesthesia:

"Nothing I saw at that period *was silent*, but all spoke to me of themselves. It was like a great symphony which never ended, in which the instruments were running away with the music to disaster." (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 76)

Finally, Evans recollects an auditory and visual aura from her days before 1950:

"[...] my 'little wheel', going off again. It seemed like a tiny wheel – the wheel say, of a watch, whirring at blurring speed, quite soundlessly, in my head while I went on with whatever I was doing, guided *by the consciousness left over* rather than the consciousness of the moment.

The wheel would then cease, and there was a loud silence such as follows a blow on a drum, also in my head. A clanging ache followed that." (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 39)

The auditory aura has a physical and metaphorical correlation with Dickinson's Fr259, "A Clock stopped –", from about late 1861 in Fascicle 11, which can be read as a metaphorical account of the power of epilepsy to stop and cancel personal time. Even though there is no evidence that Evans had any contact with Dickinson's poetry, before or after Johnson's publication in 1955, there are many parallels in the ways Evans has written in prose about her moments of epilepsy, and about their impact on her sense of identity. These moments help to heighten our awareness of the sophistication in Dickinson's poetic portrayal of her repeatedly and dramatically disrupted consciousness by what I have inferentially identified as arising from a form of focal epilepsy.

## 5. Personifying the Seizure

In 2008, Schwabe et. al. explored how linguistic analysis, based on 110 doctor-patient encounters, could help in the differential diagnosis of seizure disorders. One of the outcomes of their research, focusing on five patients, showed a greater likelihood for patients experiencing epilepsy to personify their seizures compared with patients experiencing non-epileptic seizures. In particular, for focal epilepsy patients, "Seizures presented as an external independent, threatening entity" and that the seizure appeared to be conceptualised as an "Active struggle against seizure threat, e.g. metaphors describing a fight" (Schwabe et. al. "Listening to people with seizures: How can linguistic analysis help in the differential diagnosis of seizure disorders?" 67).<sup>v</sup> These findings are consistent with Plug et. al.'s 2009 research paper, quoted earlier in this paper, which found that epilepsy patients tended to use metaphors about their seizures that appeared "to be personified", compared with the absence of such metaphors in the descriptions of non-epilepsy patients (Plug et. al. "Seizure metaphors differ in patients' accounts of epileptic and psychogenic nonepileptic seizures" 995).

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<sup>v</sup> Dickinson's poems generate a complex interrelationship with the polysemous 'wrestle' trope, and its inflexions, which invite further investigation. These include: Fr111, Fr145, Fr227, Fr229, 255Fr, Fr341, and Fr400.

This linguistic research can be applied to the analysis of several Dickinson poems, which create an array of terms and metaphors relating to a neurological 'agent', or 'entity', who has taken to invading her consciousness. A particular example is Fr407, "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted", which has two variants. Variant A was recorded in about autumn 1862 and is included in Fascicle 20. However, Variant B, (below) was sent to Susan Dickinson in 1864,<sup>vi</sup> and has variations in four lines from Variant A, which maintain the sense of encountering an opponent. There is no indication that Variant B was written in pencil. However, the subject matter of the poem and the significance of Dickinson's location in Boston, leads me to disagree with Franklin's dating of Variant B as "about early 1864" (Franklin *Variorum* 431). It is much more likely to have been sent from Boston sometime after April in 1864. This poem, with its four changes, sent to Susan Dickinson in 1864, invites speculation about a possible neurological condition as the principal reason for Dickinson's prolonged consultation with Dr Williams, stretching across two years.

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –  
One need not be a House –  
The Brain has Corridors – surpassing  
Material Place –

Far safer, of a midnight meeting  
External Ghost  
Than it's interior confronting – an] it's  
That cooler Host –

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,  
The Stones a'chase –  
Than unarmed, one's a'self encounter – moonless] unarmed  
In lonesome Place –

Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed –  
Should startle most –  
Assassin hid in our Apartment  
Be Horror's least –

The Body – borrows a Revolver – Prudent – carries] Body – borrows  
He bolts the Door –  
O'erlooking a superior spectre –  
Or More – More near] Or More

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<sup>vi</sup> This suggests that Dickinson had almost certainly taken her fascicles with her to Boston in 1864 and was reading and working with them.

This is another entirely self-referential poem, reflecting on the circumstances of what was continuing to happen within her "Brain" in defiance of Dickinson's profound resistance to 'a threatening entity'. Yet, the poem is also an objectification, generalised through the neutral, indefinite pronoun opening the poem. The unusual plural/singular pronoun, "Ourselves", in stanza four, with its self-sensitive overtones, reveals an unexpected awareness of her circumstances. Finally, the poem's voice adopts a male gender pronoun, "He", in the last stanza, as a way of universalising the subjective challenge of coping with a defiant spectre co-habiting 'our' sovereign consciousness. It could also be a personification of the male-like forcefulness of the physical impacts on her body. We are involved in living and sharing her dramatic experience from Dickinson's perspective. Through her creative resources, Dickinson was continuing to interpret a central predicament asserting itself in her emotional and cognitive life, this time by incorporating the denotational influence of metaphor, personifying her idiopathic seizure in the form of "cooler Host" and "Assassin". She is engaging in a process of reflective detachment as she asserts a form of control over her recurrent disruptive neurological disorder.

Beyond the anaphora of the impersonal "One" in the opening lines, Vendler has noted that the poem "tends toward the personal, as the poet begins her speculation on an inner terror within the labyrinthine 'Corridors' of the resolutely anatomical 'Brain'" (Vendler *Dickinson* 185). The reference to "inner terror" identifies the intimidating tone of the poem and captures Schwabe et. al.'s finding, quoted earlier, that for people living with epilepsy, seizures have the presence of "an external independent, threatening entity" (Schwabe et. al. "Listening to people with seizures: How can linguistic analysis help in the differential diagnosis of seizure disorders?" 67). However, Dickinson turns this into the central paradox of the poem. She knows that the 'threatening entity', the "Assassin", is "hid in our Apartment", and can enter the "Chamber" of her consciousness without warning.

Unsurprisingly, it is "Far Safer" meeting an "External Ghost" at midnight than encountering it within herself, "an interior confronting", or the insubstantial essence of a 'haunting' "cooler Host", apparently a hallucinatory self-projection. This can be identified as an 'autoscopic' moment, especially when expanded in stanza three to "one's a self encounter", and echoed in the first line of stanza four, "Ourselves behind Ourselves". In a review of scientific literature on autoscopic phenomena, Anzellotti et. al. (2011) has observed that "Partial epilepsy, particularly parietal and temporal lobe seizures, is considered the most frequent aetiology" (Anzellotti et. al. "Autoscopic phenomena: case report and review of literature" 4). Autoscopy literally means 'seeing oneself', and

"[...] comes from the Greek words 'autos' (self) and 'skopeo' (looking at). Autoscopy phenomena are psychic illusory visual experiences defined by the perception of the images of one's body or one's own face within space, either from an internal point of view, as in a mirror or from an external point of view." (Anzellotti et. al. "Autoscopic phenomena: case report and review of literature" 1)



Other researchers, Denning and Berrios (1994), have also identified visual and psychic components in autoscopy and have added, "[...] there may also be associated kinaesthetic sensations (e.g. a feeling of being followed)" (Denning and Berrios "Autoscopic Phenomena" 810). This has immediate synchrony with the stalking events in stanza four:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –  
Should startle most –  
Assassin hid in our Apartment  
Be Horror's least –

The irony of the outcome in this pursuit is, as Vendler notes, "the rhymes 'most' with 'least' [...] indicate the self as its own worst Horror, more to be feared than the [...] 'Assassin' behind one's own front door" (Vendler *Dickinson* 185).

The conclusion of the autoscopic experience in the last stanza is even more ironic in the 'borrowing' of a Revolver (rather than the Variant A 'carrying' or owning) and the self-confining, paradoxical, 'bolting' of the house's door, presumably against some aspects of her own consciousness. Dickinson seems to believe in the possibility that these 'intimidations' may transform her into "a superior spectre", with a threatening "Body", monstrous enough to terrify and self-purge the stalking "Assassin", the personified seizure "Horror", from her sensory and cognitive existence. Vendler has also singled out the dramatic contrast between the two odd lines in the poem, the first and the last. The opening "declarative thematic pentameter" and the "unexpected monometer" at the end (Op. Cit. 186). The contrast may represent, at the end, a daring self-inflicted prosodic shortening of the life of the unwanted intruding creature. The resolute search for a remedy to the continuing "Stopless" affliction appears to be what Dickinson, from Boston after April 1864, communicated to Susan Dickinson, in Amherst, by sending her Fr407B.

## 6. Experiences of Autoscopy

Fr693, "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes –", from about the second half of 1863 in Fascicle 32, can be interpreted as an autoscopic experience, offering an utterly surprising conciliatory engagement with the 'agent' that has become resident in her life. Here, in the bold opening line, Dickinson is looking at herself in a mirror, and without any hint of self-censorship, is describing what she sees in the eyes of her mesmerising 'occupant' looking back at her. She is projecting her consciousness into/onto the unexpectedly receptive consciousness of 'the other', the being who is capable of erupting so turbulently and assertively in the infliction of a seizure. It is almost as though Dickinson is looking into her adversary's experience of life for the first time, beginning to perceive a sense of duality, which astonishingly appears to be a learning experience about a shared vision into her own existence.

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 –  
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 –

The first word, "Like", is ambiguously the beginning of a simile, as well as a synonym for 'similar' or 'the same as'. And it could be symbolically overlapping, as Dickinson sees, in a reciprocal vision, that she has the same eyes as the figure's eyes in the mirror, sharing the same desolate and "Blank" expression as a consequence of 'looking on Wastes', only partially softened when the experience is "Diversified by Night –".

The first word in the second stanza, "Just", is another ambiguity, possibly meaning 'Justifiable' as well as 'Only' or 'Simply'. Such semantic dualities match the underlying eventful double persona subject matter of the poem. "Infinities of Nought" echoes the paroxysmal emptiness of "Miles on Miles of Nought" in Fr522. In the second line, almost invisible, the pronominal "it" confirms the seizure face in the mirror, providing linguistic evidence for the presence of the creature/agent in the interpretation of seizure poems, throughout Dickinson's fascicles and sheets, that begin with, or include, the declarative "It". (The pronominal "it" also reappears in the first line of stanza three.) The enigmatic masking effect of "It" can also be interpreted as Dickinson's way of externalising the epilepsy experience. Then, in lines 3 and 4, the revelation of the autoscopic doubling:

So looked the face I looked upon –  
So looked itself – on Me –

The reciprocation is an epiphanistic moment of acceptance in the intensely personal act of self-reflection and self-discovery.

In the third stanza, Dickinson takes responsibility for what has been happening to her so disruptively for so many years, again with a magical, almost invisible lexical doubling, "Because the Cause was Mine –". She accepts a duality in the presence of another self, impacting within her, even though the consequential "Compact" with the other will be a "Misery". Yet, if the agent finds its way within her, however "hopeless" that might be, the agent is also 'alive' and, therefore, shares in, or becomes part of, Dickinson's 'divinity', or synonymously a "perfect understanding" (Hallen edl.byu.edu).

The resolution of acceptance continues in the last stanza with "Neither – would be absolved –", where "absolve" goes beyond "acquit" and "excuse" into thematically significant meanings of "separate", "set free", and "release from obligation" (Hallen edl.byu.edu). The anaphoric pairing of "Neither" in the beginning of lines 13 and 14, helps to confirm the necessary duality of their co-existence, and that "Without the Other", "Neither would be a Queen". The deductive conclusion of this inseparable relationship is that they will "reign" together, knowing that they are each 'mortal beings', who will eventually "perish". This is an innovative metaphorical coalescence, an understanding of the agent as a mutual being that is an intimate part of her existence.

Dickinson's use of autoscopy becomes much more intensely paradoxical in Fr709, "Me from Myself – to banish –", from Fascicle 33 in about the second half of 1863, not long before her first sojourn in Boston.

Me from Myself – to banish –	
Had I Art –	
Invincible My Fortress	Invincible] Impregnable
Unto All Heart –	] To Foreign Heart

But since Myself – assault Me –  
How have I peace  
Except by subjugating  
Consciousness?

And since We're Mutual Monarch  
How this be  
Except by Abdication –  
Me – of Me – ?

The poem appears to pose an impossible self-consciousness puzzle, "to banish", or isolate and drive away "Me", usually the object of an action, from "Myself", a reflexive form of pronoun usually connected to "I". In the grammar of Dickinson's consciousness, she is desperate to stop being forever acted upon. A solution to this semantic separation paradox exists in the second line, "Had I Art –". The etymology of "Art" in the Lexicon is surprisingly revealing, as derived from the Latin, *ars*, meaning "to fit" (Hallen edl.byu.edu). Even though "fit" can be expanded to mean 'to put together' or 'the art of joining', Dickinson's choice of "Art" discloses a consequential artfulness of being able to

'banish Me from Myself'. She is turning the seizure experience on its other head. If she (Me) had the capacity, or the metaphorical expertise, to initiate the seizure event, she is speculating, she might be able to expel the personified 'other Myself' in herself from herself, regaining a sense of self-control. It is possible to conclude that she believes this would completely free her from her affliction.

The choice of "Invincible", in line 3, in preference to "Impregnable", indicates Dickinson's belief that her consciousness is 'unconquerable' rather than 'impenetrable'. And the preference for "Invincible" impacts on the choice in line 4 of "Unto All Heart", rather than the alternative, "To Foreign Heart". If she was able to banish the seizure, personified in 'Myself', and prevent it from continuing to occupy her personal identity, depicted as 'Me', she hopes her consciousness will be unconquerable, and she will have restored 'Me' as her whole heart, as in "Unto All Heart", and there will be no longer a "Foreign Heart" existing in her self-consciousness.

The battle imagery in the second stanza flows from the "Fortress" image in the first stanza and confirms the metaphoric conceptualisation in Plug et. al.'s research, from earlier in this paper, that people with epilepsy preferred the semantic field of "Agent/Force" (Plug et. al. "Seizure metaphors differ in patients' accounts of epileptic and psychogenic nonepileptic seizures" 995) in the identification of their seizure. The two rhetorical questions that consume the second and third stanzas show that Dickinson is aware that the prospect of a self-expulsion of the seizure-self is confounded by insoluble imagery, that they are unconquerably "Mutual Monarch" co-existing in the "Fortress" of consciousness. It is also confounded by insoluble denotational physicality. No longer is the contest between "Me" and "Myself", as expressed in the opening line. In the final line, the adversarial engagement is completely conceptually autoscopic, between "Me" and "Me", Dickinson and Dickinson. This is the deadlock she was seeking to solve in Boston.

## 7. Déjà Experiences

There has been considerable research into the occurrence of 'déjà' experiences during the aura of a temporal lobe, or focal epilepsy event, beginning with J. Hughlings-Jackson in England in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

"Déjà experiences [feature] the [déjà vu] feeling of 'reliving' the current experience prompting the use of the term 'déjà vécu' (*already lived*) [...] We have subsequently developed a theoretical differentiation between déjà vu and déjà vécu, but it is one which overlaps with Bancaud et. al.'s view that déjà vécu is a longer and more intense form of déjà vu—the difference is neatly captured in the translations of déjà vu (already seen) and déjà vécu (already lived)." (Illman et. al. "Déjà Experiences in Temporal Lobe Epilepsy" 6)

While there remain unresolved definitional issues in the nature, duration, and complexity of déjà experiences, both in 'healthy' contexts, and in those during a person's epilepsy event, the content of Fr423, "The First Day's Night had come —", appears, from

the focal epilepsy perspective, to be related to an intensely relived *déjà vécu* occasion, written by Dickinson in about autumn 1862, and entered in Fascicle 15.

The first Day's Night had come –  
And grateful that a thing  
So terrible – had been endured –  
I told my Soul to sing –

She said her strings were snapt –  
Her Bow – to atoms blown –  
And so to mend her – gave me work  
Until another Morn –

And then – a Day as huge  
As Yesterdays in pairs,  
Unrolled it's horror in my face –  
Until it blocked my eyes –

My Brain – begun to laugh –  
I mumbled – like a fool –  
And tho' 'tis Years ago – that Day –  
My Brain keeps giggling – still.

And Something's odd – within –  
That person that I was –  
And this One – do not feel the same –  
Could it be Madness – this?

The action of the poem is entirely located within Dickinson's consciousness. In the first line, "Night" appears to be disguising a personal 'blacking out' event, a loss of consciousness, behind its common diurnal meaning. The more usual pronominal 'it' in poems about seizure events, is replaced in the first stanza by the equally unspecific "thing", here equating to Plug et. al.'s (2009) neurological 'external agent or force'. Even though it was something "So terrible" and violent, ravaging beyond her physical body, the fragile 'instrument' of her Soul, or "inner being", "Self", or "rational faculty" (Hallen edl.byu.edu), Dickinson is unaware of that damage until after the assault, or Plug et. al.'s (2009) "struggle with an opponent", "had been endured" (l.3) and she has regained consciousness. Only then, in an innovative metaphorical doubling does the personified soul also reveal its metaphorical musical instrument identity, with "snapt" strings and an 'atomised' bow, needing to be mended.

However, before the restoration can be confirmed the following "Morn", Dickinson's *déjà vécu* recalls a second "horror", or adversary, now bearing the pronominal "it" identification, directly into her "face". It should be noted that "horror"

is a 'shuddering fear' "[Ofr < L. 'shudder'.] (webplay: [...] fear [...] shuddering [...])" (Hallen edl.byu.edu). Like "Yesterdays" recurring idiopathic events, her eyes are again eventually "blocked", representing a recurrent unconsciousness event. This is where, after three stanzas, the poem ended when it was first published in 1935. Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Dickinson's niece, censored the last two stanzas (Vendler *Dickinson* 195). Dickinson's references to her "giggling" brain and a fear of possible "Madness", were not repaired until 1947, four years after Bianchi died.

The reference to her Brain 'laughing' and continuing to 'giggle', has a direct parallel connection with Margiad Evans's comments about her epileptic seizures, referred to earlier in this paper. Evans personified the seizure as a "summons" and described how she tried "to laugh it off, to leave it behind, to walk irresponsibly away. That ghastly moment is *funny* whether one can believe it or not. But have not many people written of the giggling silly horror of pure terror?" (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 155). This offers an insight into what Dickinson was experiencing when her 'Brain began to laugh' in the face of the Horror, and "My Brain keeps giggling – still." It can be interpreted as a way of attempting to diminish, or even contradict, the appalling and non-negotiable calamity that continued to possess her.

Bianchi may have been disturbed by Dickinson's portrayal of disorientation, and the vivid depiction of her traumatised brain. Not only does Dickinson remember the mumbling "– like a fool –", but also that her brain, from those distant events of neurological "horror", has continued "giggling", in a minimising way, self-ironised by the added antithetical word, "still". Perhaps Bianchi wanted to conceal the implicit admission that years after the "first Day's Night", Dickinson was still experiencing unabated paroxysms. Vendler observes, "With its sinister punctuation of a period (always consequential in Dickinson when it replaces her customary dash), the long four-stanza sentence describing the undoing of a Soul comes to a halt, its last utterance ending in the hideous wrongness of the irrational and onomatopoeic 'giggling'" (Vendler *Dickinson* 196).

In the last stanza, Dickinson has returned to the present and the trope of doubleness exploits the crisis of being aware of 'Something' that is "odd – within –". The person that she "was" before that "First Day's" disruption of consciousness, "And this One –", no longer in the past, "– do not feel the same –". This verification of memory is also double-edged. While it can confirm elements of identity, it also highlights a sense of uncertainty. This element of discord is reinforced in the metrical structure of the poem. Each stanza, beginning with a trimeter rather than the usual tetrameter, is shaped 3-3-4-3. The odd line buried inside each stanza could hold the incompatible agent/consciousness that keeps invasively taking temporary hold of her mind. Each third line can be interpreted as holding elements of an influential interpolated other. In the first stanza the signification exists in "terrible"; in the second the requirement to mend damage; in the third, the invasive "horror" is transparent; in the fourth, the resonance is inescapable in "that Day". In the final stanza, the ambiguous reference to "this One" seems to be referring not to "One" at all, but to an unsettling and realised *déjà vécu* duality.

The concluding troubled self-revelation of the poem is Dickinson's deepest fear of going "Mad". Yet, by speculating 'Madness' so plainly, even in a line of dislocated syntax, she is trying, through broaching the subject, to avert any such personal and public outcome and the indelible stigma that would surely follow, as was evident in the censorship of two stanzas even fifty years after her death. Finally, the accumulated trauma of the poem is, perhaps, cautiously eased by a final sigh of incredulity from within the 'undemonstrative' pronoun — "this".

## 8. Continuing Crisis in the 'Brain'

Sometime during her consultations with Dr Williams, and between the compilation of Fascicle 38 and Fascicle 39,<sup>vii</sup> Dickinson wrote the two-stanza, Variant B version of Fr867, "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind —", recorded in Set 2. Variant A is a copy of the second stanza with two alternative wordings from Variant B, distancing any reference to a "Brain" trauma, which was sent to Susan Dickinson in Amherst, according to Franklin's estimation, "about early 1864" (Franklin *Dickinson* 812). This is clearly inconsistent with the timing of Variant B. The poem's subject can be interpreted as another troublesome involuntary paroxysmal event that appears to have, quite dramatically, disturbed Dickinson's consciousness at some time during her stay in Boston.

### Variant B

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind —  
As if my Brain had split —  
I tried to match it — Seam by Seam  
But could not make them fit —

The thought behind, I strove to join	strove] tried
Unto the thought before —	
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound	Sound —] reach —
Like Balls — upon a Floor —	

An invasive eruption occurs without warning inside Dickinson's "Mind", revealed in the simile, "a Cleaving [...] As if my Brain had split —". The event has arrived without Dickinson's control. She tries to respond to it by a cerebral repair, metaphorically matching "Seam by Seam", but was unable to overcome the apparent rift. The simple monosyllable, "fit", concluding stanza one, is boldly ambiguous. The meaning of a reassembling, or a rejoining of the split Brain, would assume that such a thing was

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<sup>vii</sup> Franklin notes that in 1864 Dickinson "[...] returned to small groups of stationery: fascicles 38, 39, and 40 have individual paper types unique in the fascicles" (Franklin "The Emily Dickinson Fascicles" 15), and that the last three fascicles were completed in the order "40, 38, 39" (Franklin *Variorum* 25). These details tend to suggest the last three fascicles were transcribed when Dickinson was resident in Boston, where she may have acquired the "individual paper types", and that the contents of 38 and 39 possibly derive from circumstances and events after April 1864 when she was living in Boston with her Norcross cousins and consulting Dr Williams. Franklin's dating of "About early 1864" for many of the poems in these three fascicles may need to be reconsidered for revised dates.

possible. There is also the explicit seizure meaning of “fit”, in which Dickinson may believe that she could reunite her halved Brain simply by willing a reciprocal, self-initiated, “fit”. If that was her intention, it was unable to occur.

In the second stanza, she activates another strategy of reconnecting ‘thoughts’, as though they were physical objects, “behind” to “before”. Again, cognitive synaesthesia conveys the multi-sensory outcome as the attempted sequencing of cerebral event into tactile material and further into auditory experience, “ravelled out of Sound”. The auditory aura merges with the visual aura in a simile, “Like Balls – upon a Floor –”, which concludes in a vertiginous aura. Here the thoughts recreated into ‘balls of sound’ have fallen and rolled upon “a Floor”. Not ‘the’ Floor, but a conceptual and imagined universal place of finality.

Another significant detail of this description of a focal seizure is its compression, both in aura detail and in temporal duration, compared with multi-sensory aura-driven poems from previous years. There is also Dickinson’s emotional restraint in Fr867. Even though Dr Williams’s medical input to their sessions can never be known, Dickinson appears, innovatively, to have tried to engage with the seizure event, to be active rather than passive, and has sought to interpose some self-willed decision-making on the sequence of events, which in earlier poems are portrayed as autonomously happening to her beyond her volitional power. Yet, Dickinson has remained aware that the unfolding sequence of events would not accommodate her attempted cerebral ‘actions’.

**Fr867 – Variant A**

The Dust behind I strove to join	Dust] thought
Unto the Disk before –	Disk] thought
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound	
Like Balls upon a Floor –	

Vendler notes that the second-stanza version of Fr867A, sent to Susan Dickinson, contains a “more powerful metaphor” in “Dust” and “Disk” (Vendler *Dickinson* 359). Vendler sees, “The past is ‘Dust’ (like all mortal things) [... and Disk] is the Sun of sunrise – always a sign of a new beginning” (Op. Cit. 359). The inability to join two short alliterative words emphasises the predicament of “the past, crumbl[ing] to dust; [and] as she reaches for the dawn, it will not come” (Op. Cit. 359).

In my interpretation, the “Dust” appears to be Dickinson’s personalised past, and the “Disk” aligns with her future. In the contest with the seizure event, Dickinson has resorted to recalling accessible personal experience, and tangible thoughts, to try to thwart the predicament engulfing her. There is no certainty that Susan Dickinson would have interpreted the cryptic dynamics of Dickinson’s imagery, especially its relation to an invasive neurological event revealed in the deleted first stanza. However, the subjectivity of “Dust” is directly observable in the immediately preceding poem, Fr866, “This Dust, and it’s Feature –”, also from about ‘later in 1864’ (my preferred dating) and included in Set 2.



This Dust, and it's Feature –  
Accredited – Today –  
Will in a second Future –                      Future] Being  
Cease to identify –

This Mind, and it's measure –  
A too minute Area  
For it's enlarged inspection's  
Comparison – appear –

This World, and it's species                      species] Nations- • Fashions- • symbols- • standards  
A too concluded show  
For it's absorbed Attention's  
Remotest scrutiny –                      Remotest] Memorial –

It is possible that this poem, with an anaphoric beginning to each stanza, could have been dated after, rather than before Fr867, and could be read as a reflective commentary by Dickinson on her emerging feelings of uncertainty about the outcome of her sessions with Dr Williams. Here, she could be self-referential with "This Dust", and the "Feature" she is "Accredited" with possessing, as being her adumbrated epilepsy, which, she speculates, will only cease to exist in "a second Future", or in the alternative word to "Future", "a second Being", a replacement self.

The second stanza suggests that the scale of the investigation into the functioning of her "Mind" is compromised by her own 'singularity', and that an "enlarged [...] Comparison" with the operations of a range of other 'minds' would be required to "measure" what is happening within the operations of her Brain. Dickinson is revealing, unselfconsciously, the depth of her reflective empirical reasoning.

It may even be, declares the final stanza, that the "species" range of human beings in this "World", as indicated by the many considered alternative words for line 9, is not diverse or variable enough, to be able to satisfy the implied Darwinian-like 'Attention' of Biology's "absorbed [...] scrutiny". The empirical examination of her predicament, beginning with the incisive summation of her existence as "Dust", reveals the strength of Dickinson's growing self-awareness. The absence of any consistent rhyme in the poem could reflect Dickinson's insights into the improvisational nature of Dr Williams's approach in trying to find even a potential solution for her idiopathic ailment.

## 9. Conclusion

The poems in this paper have been interpreted as experiences of inferential neural events impacting, unpredictably from time to time, on the operation of Dickinson's brain. They appear to display aspects of the four signs Alvarez-Silva et. al. has identified when consciousness is being altered by a paroxysmal attack, such as a Simple Partial Seizure, "suddenness, passivity or automatism, great intensity, strangeness" (Alvarez-Silva et. al.

"Epileptic consciousness: Concept and meaning of aura" 531). The poems also include imagery identified by Plug et. al.'s 2009 research into semantic fields, where patients with epilepsy favoured the description of their seizures as an "Event" or a "Situation", and favoured the choice of "Agent" or "Force" as an identification of their seizure, even to the extent of personifying their seizures. In Plug et. al.'s 2011 research into the use of metaphors or metaphorical expressions, patients with epilepsy chose to express their seizure as "a moving object", involving "actions performed by an external agent", where "the seizure is either an external object that moved towards or away from the patient", or is "either invisible to the patient, or visible as an opponent". This research also found that the metaphorical actions of the seizure agent impacted on the patient, and that the events of the seizure were "beyond the patient's volition and direct control" (Plug et. al. "Metaphors in the description of seizure experiences: Common expressions and differential diagnosis" 227-228). These findings, relating to the loss of autonomy, closely correspond with Margiad Evan's detailed account of her epilepsy experiences in *A Ray of Darkness*, where speech and deliberative action were taken from her.

The research by Foldvary-Schaefer and Unnwongse (2011) identified a number of symptom areas for auras related to neurological experiences, of which I was able to apply the Somatosensory, Visual, Auditory, Vertiginous, Olfactory, and Psychic auras to elements in Dickinson's poems with ostensibly neurological focus. These crucial adjuncts to linguistic analysis were expanded by the research by Anzellotti et. al. (2011) and by Denning and Berrios (1994) into autoscopic phenomena. Anzellotti et. al. notes that "Partial epilepsy, particularly parietal and temporal lobe seizures, is considered the most frequent aetiology" (Anzellotti et. al. "Autoscopic phenomena: case report and review of literature" 4). This division into two selves was identified by Margiad Evans in the personification of a seizure, "as the room might divide the figures of myself, supposing any one could create two figures of me" (Evans *A Ray of Darkness* 40), reflecting the doubling of selves evident in a number of Dickinson's autoscopic poems. The Déjà experiences explored by Illman et. al. (2012) extend further insights into the doubling events arising from apparent focal epilepsy experiences in a range of Dickinson's poems. After undergoing about seven months of consultations with Dr Williams during each of two consecutive years in Boston, Dickinson withdrew from further consultations planned for "a few days in May" 1866.<sup>viii</sup> It would appear that no ongoing remedy for Dickinson's unidentified ailment had been found. This would have been a predictable outcome if her ailment was what I have hypothesised as a form of focal epilepsy, which, in many cases today, still has no curative treatment. The nouns, "Brain", "Thought", "Mind", and "Consciousness", relating to the complex operations of the brain, almost entirely disappeared from her poems after 1865. It was as though the empirical poetic accounts of the apparent paroxysmal disruptions of her consciousness, recorded mostly across four years from 1862 to 1865, had nothing further to contribute diagnostically. Even though her poetry output contracted from the prolific 1865 to less than one-poem-a-month during 1866 to 1869, Dickinson continued her active letter writing to friends and family,

<sup>viii</sup> Dickinson wrote to T. W. Higginson in early 1866, JL316, "I had promised to visit my Physician for a few days in May, but Father objects because he is in the habit of me" (Johnson *Letters* 450).

and within the Amherst community maintained a continuing presence of head-strong privacy and self-sufficiency.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author does not have any conflict of interest to disclose.

### **About the Author**

Gordon Shrubbs is a retired English teacher, who has worked in gifted and talented student education, post-graduate teacher training, and state-wide High School English Curriculum development in New South Wales. He has recently graduated with a PhD on the poetry of Emily Dickinson at the University of Newcastle in Australia. His research interests encompass the many fields of English Literature, with a special passion for the works of William Shakespeare.

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