

The Poetic Liberation of Metaphysical Boundaries:
Emily Dickinson's 'I am Afraid to Own a Body' as a Lens for Transcending
Philosophy and Theology

*I am afraid to own a Body—
I am afraid to own a Soul—
Profound—precarious Property—
Possession, not optional—

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.*

During the 19th century, Emily Dickinson likely grappled with the intricate philosophical and theological responses to the metaphysical quandary of the body-soul duality. Philosophers constructed their arguments on empirical reasoning, contending that our bodies' existence equates to our existence. The soul, however, presented a challenge in terms of empirical evidence. Conversely, theologians championed the concept of the soul as an explanatory framework for the intricacies of the human mind. Their stance emphasized that just because the soul remains imperceptible does not negate its existence; faith in both the soul and God was paramount.

These two camps, philosophers and theologians, engaged in a spirited discourse. Theologians disapproved of what they perceived as the philosophers' reliance on mere intellectual speculation, while philosophers were disheartened by what they saw as fervent religious zealotry. Within this intellectual landscape, thinkers like Charles Peirce and William James engaged in lively debates at nearby Harvard University during Emily

Dickinson's lifetime. In this paper, I argue that, in "I am Afraid to Own a Body," Emily Dickinson takes her speaker and readers on a transcendent journey, surpassing the limits of even the most eloquent philosophical discourse or theological teachings.

In her poem "I am Afraid to Own a Body," Emily Dickinson liberates her speaker from the confines of philosophical debates and dogmatic theologians. Through her speaker's voice, Dickinson demonstrates that poetry offers a path to a unique sense of liberation beyond the metaphysical quandary of the body and soul duality. One can transcend the limitations imposed by philosophical speculation and theological doctrines concerning this duality through poetry. Dickinson's speaker does not align with the roles of a traditional philosophical theologian or a theological philosopher. Instead, she prefers to contemplate the possibilities of poetry, which delves into a realm where neither faith nor reason seems fully satisfying. This sentiment is underscored by the skilled use of literary techniques such as anaphora, tone, imagery, parallelism, and carefully chosen diction throughout the poem. In "I am Afraid to Own a Body," Dickinson's speaker invites readers to explore a realm where the boundaries of the body and soul are blurred, encouraging a profound and imaginative engagement that transcends the confines of conventional metaphysical discourse.

The utilization of anaphora in the first and third lines of the opening septet of the poem serves to emphasize the speaker's deliberate suspension of belief. In the first line, "I am afraid to own," an emotional resonance emerges, distinct from the detached rationalization of philosophy or the unquestioning acceptance of theology. The speaker's admission of fear is not a weakness but rather a source of strength, encapsulating the

power of poetry in contrast to philosophy and theology. Philosophical quests for truth often unfold with unyielding rigor, while theological doctrines are profoundly ingrained. Emily Dickinson, during her lifetime, was undoubtedly exposed to both. Her speaker's fear acknowledges and embraces uncertainty—a quality that challenges the steadfast faith of theologians and the analytical clarity of philosophers. Both demand conformity, whereas Dickinson's poetry thrives on the potential for diverse interpretations.

The iambic meter in the phrase "I am afraid to own" underscores the speaker's uncertain stance, portraying it as something the speaker confidently embraces. This meter punctuates the speaker's assured tone even in uncertainty. The anaphora in the third line continues in iambic rhythm but suggests an even more pronounced suspension of belief. Dickinson directs her speaker to hesitate, with the enjambed verb "to own" delayed after the hanging preposition "to." This hesitation signifies a moment of uncertainty, but paradoxically, it is this very uncertainty that liberates the speaker to engage with the metaphysical issue on terms that neither the philosopher nor the theologian can claim without their inherent biases. While one could argue that the poet herself carries a bias, her bias lies in expanding comprehension—or even miscomprehension—of the problem rather than confining it within the boundaries of a philosopher's academic discipline or a theologian's faith. In its open-ended exploration of the metaphysical, Dickinson's poetry seeks to widen the scope of understanding rather than impose rigid doctrinal or academic limitations.

This poetic freedom does not imply that Dickinson's speaker remains aloof from the philosophical and theological meanderings inherent in the metaphysical dilemma of

the body and soul duality. Quite the contrary, Dickinson skillfully navigates this complex terrain, as evidenced by the interplay in her poem. Following the suspension of belief expressed through the anaphora in the first and third lines of the septet, Dickinson directs the speaker's attention squarely toward the concepts of "body" and "soul," deftly juxtaposed in the parallelism of the second and fourth lines. The questions are profound: Does the fear of owning a body imply that one is merely a soul? Conversely, if one fears owning a soul, does it reduce them to a mere body? Is one entangled as a soul within a body, or is it a body enmeshed with a soul? The metrical difference between "a body" in iambic meter and "own a soul" in cretic feet, with its accented-unaccented-accented syllable pattern, suggests a subtle preference for the concept of the soul over the body in Dickinson's speaker.

Yet, the blank space that separates the two stanzas of the poem embodies the initial hesitation, eventually leading to poetic imagery. This imagery points to Dickinson's soul-centric leanings within her speaker's contemplation. While favoring the soul concept, the speaker delves into the metaphysical issue with nuance and depth, resisting a simplistic dichotomy and embracing the rich complexity of the body and soul interplay. Through vivid imagery, Emily Dickinson bestows upon her speaker a sense of poetic humor, a stark departure from the ponderous and impassioned stances often associated with philosophers and theologians.

This humor serves as a counterweight, lightening the existential weight of the metaphysical problem, focusing instead on the intriguing duality encapsulated in the "double state" that can be "entailed at pleasure upon an unsuspecting heir." In this context,

poetry becomes a means for the speaker to stand outside the confines of this dual estate, offering a unique vantage point to observe the intricate interplay shaped by philosophical reasoning and theological faith. By providing this perspective outside the "double estate," Dickinson's poem enables the speaker to grasp the inherent doubleness of it all. Rather than confining the speaker within the rigid parameters of reason or faith, Dickinson's work liberates the speaker to transcend these boundaries and explore the expansive realm of poetic possibility.

Within this realm of possibility, the speaker embarks on a profound investigation of the metaphysical problem, and this investigation is imbued with a sense of humor. As the poem humorously suggests, this exploration unexpectedly "falls, as the reader has seen, 'upon an unsuspecting heir,'" who only discerns the implications of this duality after the fact—an ironic twist that underscores the humor. Ultimately, it is only by inhabiting the dual state of a soul entangled in a body that the soul realizes its entanglement's intricacies. Dickinson's poetic touch allows her speaker to traverse this terrain with wit and insight, creating a beautiful and thought-provoking exploration of the metaphysical problem.

Whether one identifies more closely with the body, aligning with the philosopher's realm of reasoned evidence, or with the soul, embarking on the theologian's faithful leap of belief, it is the poetic "I" who, through the lens of poetic imagery, possesses the power to transcend the conventional definitions of body and soul. This poetic observer can break free from the rigid confines of these definitions and instead embrace, acknowledge, accept, and even revel in their interplay. In Dickinson's words, the body is likened to a "duke in a moment of deathlessness," a vital yet transient aspect of our existence. This

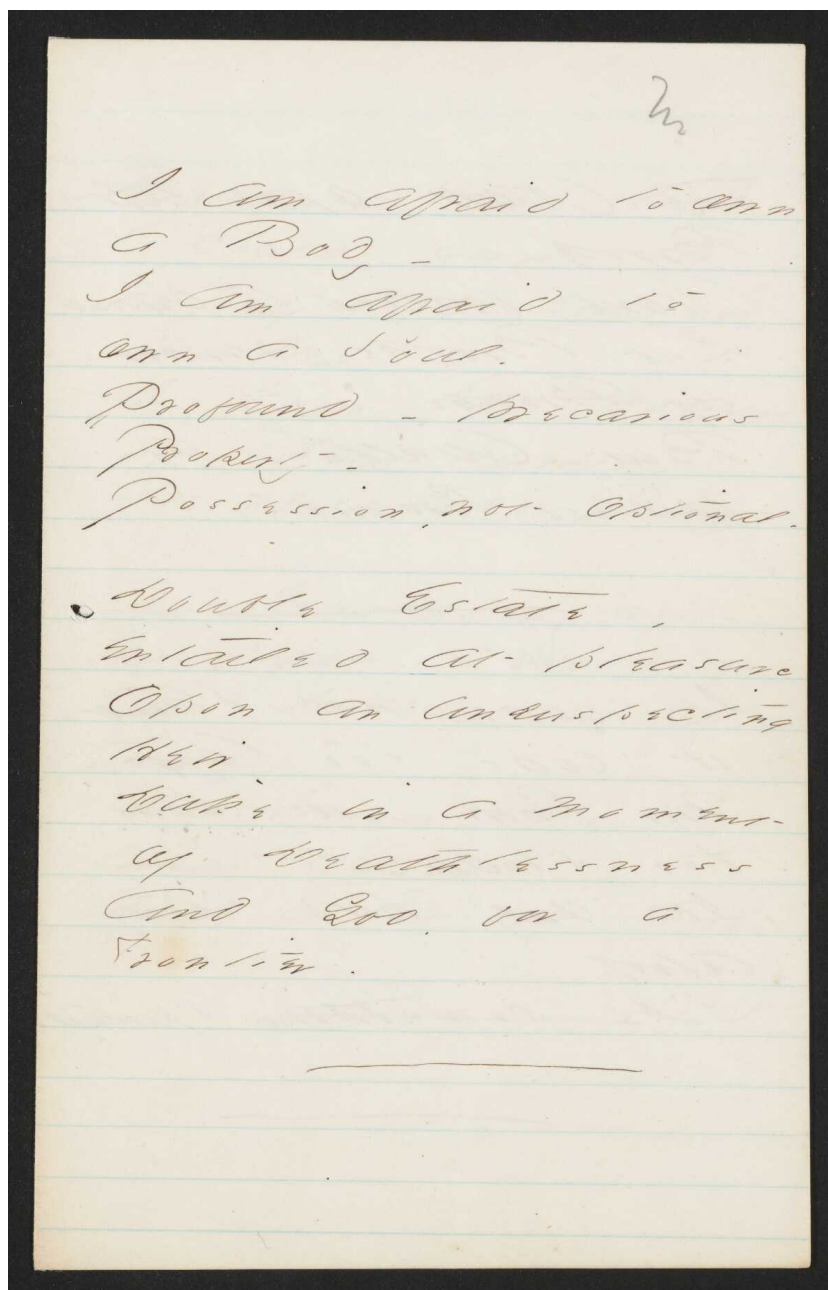
imagery playfully suggests that considering oneself as "deathless" is akin to a curious self-deception, implying a defiance of mortality. The idea of feeling deathless is inherently paradoxical, as it may empower one to confront death.

However, through her speech, Dickinson does not advocate for such hubris. Instead, she encourages readers to adopt a more profound perspective: to become "God, for a frontier." In this metaphor, the "frontier" symbolizes the boundary between body and soul, where one can accept the coexistence of these aspects without succumbing to the limitations of mere faith or reason. By taking on the role of "God for a frontier," one transcends the constraints of traditional dichotomies and achieves a poetic and more lucid standpoint. This viewpoint encourages the reader to embrace the complexity of the human experience and to step beyond the confines of faith and reason, thus arriving at a deeper understanding of the body-soul duality.

In "I am Afraid to Own a Body," Emily Dickinson embarks on a transformative odyssey, leading her speaker and readers beyond the confines of even the most articulate philosophical arguments or theological doctrines. This poem offers its readers a profound sense of poetic liberation, inviting them to explore the intricate and inescapable aspects of their bodies and souls, undeniably essential possessions. To assume the role of "God for a frontier" is to stand alongside the divine at the threshold of life's often painful revelations while maintaining a humorous and poetic perspective. This perspective, present even at the moment of death, allows one to view life as merely a frontier—a transition point into the unknown that awaits beyond. The grace and humor that Dickinson bestows upon her speaker are equally extended to her readers, empowering them to laugh and learn, to

harbor doubt while remaining open to the endless possibilities of existence. This duality—laughter and learning, doubt and openness—forms the essence of human experience, and through her poem, Dickinson invites her readers to fully embrace and engage with these facets of being human.

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