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Poetic Antagonyms

Bruised are our words and our full thought
Breaks like dull rain from some rich cloud.
Isaac Rosenberg

My subject is lexical self-opposition in English poetry. I approach it at a time of aggravated national self-opposition, from the viewpoint of a poet who had separated herself from the common life of her society, but like her I am concerned less with passing, outward antagonisms and more with an enduring, inward antagonism. In early 1864, Emily Dickinson wrote a poem (Fr867B) about the experience of holding together a series of thoughts that seem both to resist each other and rebel against the thinker:

> 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
> Unto the thought before -
> But Sequence ravelled out of Sound -
> Like Balls - upon a Floor -

There are many ways of discussing the tropes of division in this remarkable poem about a mind divided against itself. Dickinson's distinctive dash, for instance, here performs most ambivalently (and so most fully) its dual role as joiner and divider, separating line from line while also leading from one line to the next, twice dividing a line in two, only to hold its two halves together, and finally joining the end of the poem to nothing, to an absence, signalling not the conclusion of a sequence but an open, indeterminate, perhaps infinite deferral of sequence.

Visually and rhythmically, the dashes perform the breaking and joining that the poem describes, a self-performance which is repeated in the lexis Dickinson uses to describe it. Several constructions using the same vocabulary can describe a mental break: "my mind cleaved," "... clove," "... was cloven," "I felt a cleft ...," and so on. But, although the line "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" *can* describe the breaking apart of

thought, it can also describe a joining together of thoughts, because *to cleave* can mean, as Dickinson's own edition of Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary* has it, "to hold to . . . to unite or be united," as well as "to split or rive, to open or sever the cohering parts of a body"; *a cleaving* can be a uniting as well as a severing. There is nothing syntactically or contextually in the phrase "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" to lead the reader to prefer one sense over the other, and the ambiguity is left uncancelled by the pluperfect tense of the following line: "As if my Brain had split." "Had split" leaves the time of the splitting unsettled in relation to the time of the cleaving—if previous, the "cleaving" could well refer to a joining back of that which had been split. It is not until the third and fourth lines that the reader understands definitely that the poem is contemplating a failing attempt to re-join factious thoughts in full rebellion against the mind's rule.[1]

In this short poem about splitting and joining, *cleaving* is the first of several words which are semantically divided against themselves, housing antithetical meanings which cannot seamlessly be made to fit. Each of these words has to do with separating and reuniting, as the verb *match*, which Webster glosses with a series of opposing and self-opposing definitions: "1. To equal. 2. To show an equal. 3. To oppose as equal . . . 4. To suit . . . 5. To marry; to give in marriage." The anaphoric pronoun "it," the direct object of "match" in the poem, has a grammatically undetermined antecedent. "I tried to match it" can refer either to the "Cleaving," the event or action which the poet has tried to outmatch, overcome, or oppose; or it could refer to the riven "Brain," which the poet tries to match back up, to reunite. Whether the matching is occurring as an act of opposition or of reunion, it happens "Seam by Seam," but in both cases *seam*, too, takes on self-opposing senses. Webster defines *seam* only as "The suture or uniting of two edges," but, as its counterpart *seamless* indicates, the word also carries the sense of an interstice, a gap between edges. The second sense is actively at work in the third line of the poem, and actively working against the primary sense, as the poet tries to make *seam* mean "closure" but cannot herself close the intervening gap between one thought's edge and another's.

In the second stanza, "But Sequence ravelled out of Sound" confronts a reader's initial understanding with a second, antithetical one. The transitive verb *ravel* has two contrary definitions in Webster: "1. To entangle; to entwist together . . . 2. To untwist; to unweave or unknot; to disentangle." *Ravel*, in other words, is the exact synonym of its other antonym, *unravel*. If the final image of the poem is, as I think it must be, of balls *of yarn* on the floor, there is nothing there to decide whether they are in an unravelled or a ravelled state, or, rather, which mutually exclusive state of being *ravelled* they are in. We may hold to the conventional reading, which would have the last two lines figure the final failure of joining thought to thought as an image of the brain (or the mind) unravelling—ravelling out—as a ball of yarn rolling across a floor. Dickinson's variant line ("But Sequence ravelled out of

reach - ") tends even more strongly towards this understanding, because of the idiomatic force of the set phrase "out of reach." But we may also hold out for a second possibility, that the opposition in the second stanza is not between joining and breaking, but between the joining together of "thought" and the joining together of "Sound," and that the final lines represent the ravelling up of sequence "out of Sound," so that it lies, still as balls of yarn upon a floor, ready to be unravelled and ravelled up again into some intricate textual knit. A ravelling up out of "reach" may be taken in the same way, if the force of the idiom can be withstood and "reach" taken as the abstracted description of the poem's many strivings towards reconnection. If this second reading prevails, the end of the poem is set against the beginning, presenting a new concept of order to match—perhaps to overcome—the mental disorder described in the first six lines.

Cleaving, *match*, *seam*, and *ravelled* are words with significations which do not only suggest different or divergent interpretations. In context their opposing senses actively resist each other's impressions and implications. They create a kind of ambiguity which is neither "dubious . . . signification" nor "equivocal expression" (OED 3a, 4), nor, strictly speaking, the nuancing of poetic language beyond direct prose statement that William Empson described (quoted in sense 3b of OED). Rather the ambiguity takes the uncanny form of a sustained antagonism between opposing significations in the creation of the poem's meaning, significations which cannot be reconciled within a harmonious reading. The fact of this antagonism may itself be significant and poetic, especially so if the poetic subject is one of conflict or discord, of lapse or of breaking (all of which are figured in "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind"). However, this particular kind of poetic significance cannot arise from some New Critical tension amongst interpretative possibilities, since this would depend on eventual resolution, leading to interpretative coherence and unity. It can only arise within a conflict of meaning that is unsolvable, lasting just as long as the duration of this interpretative self-antagonism.

Though some have described traditions of thought regarding antithetical or self-divided words,[2] not until recently have they been discussed in English, and almost not at all as literary phenomena. All of the current terminology for such words is new, and predictably various in application. Popular neologisms include *Janus word*, *self-antonym*, *auto-antonym* or *autantonym*, *contronym* or *contranym*.[3] Some writers have applied broader rhetorical figures of opposition, negation, or ambiguity, referring to *antilogies*, or *enantiosemous*, *enantiodromic* or *amphibolous* words.[4] The incidence of such words in English is not great, though the exact number depends on the breadth of the definition and what kinds of conceptual relations are admitted as relevant contrarieties. Frequently cited examples are *sanction* (OED 2a, "to permit" and 4, "to penalize"), *dust* (OED 3a, "to sprinkle with dust" and 6, "to free from dust"), *apology* (OED 1, "the pleading off from a charge" and 4,

"a frank acknowledgement of the offence"), and *fast* (OED 1a, "firmly fixed in its place" and 8a, "moving quickly"). Sometimes the proposed antonymic sense is not a current but an etymological one, as in *wan*, from O.E. *wonn*, now meaning "pallid . . . pale" (OED 4a), but until the seventeenth century meaning "dark-hued, dusky, gloomy, dark" (OED †1) (cf. *livid*). The term I propose to use for such words when they occur in poetry is *antagonym*, a relatively recent coinage even among this field,[5] but one which captures better than the others the crucial antagonistic property of the kind of antithetical words Dickinson and other poets have sometimes employed. With its four self-divided, self-antagonistic words, Dickinson's poem creates interpretative possibilities which are not simply manifold or divergent but which exist only and necessarily in conflict with each other, a conflict which may be seen to be mimetic of fundamental psychological, spiritual, and artistic antagonisms in the poem.

Empson was thinking along similar but much broader lines when he defined his seventh type of ambiguity—"the most ambiguous that can be conceived"—as occurring "when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (192). Given this definition, it is somewhat perplexing that Empson doesn't focus more narrowly on what I am calling antagonyms. In the main, he is occupied with the much broader category of the "two values of the ambiguity," which in most of his examples are created via metaphorical extension rather than lexical denotation. Only one of these turns on contradictory senses contained within a single word, and in that case the two senses are only connotatively opposed to each other, as Empson's liberally imaginative glosses show. The word is *buckle*, as Gerard Manley Hopkins used it in "The Windhover," which Empson analyses according to two meanings: "*buckle* like a military belt, for the discipline of heroic action, and *buckle* like a bicycle wheel, 'make useless, distorted, and incapable of its natural motion'" (225).[6] Empson's discussion of *prone* describes what he thinks is a bawdy double-entendre in *Measure for Measure*, since in *prone* Empson sees both "'inactive and lying flat' (in retirement or with a lover)" and "active . . . tending to." But "with a lover" and "active" are Empson's own insertions—OED has nothing approaching those connotations, the metaphorical sense of "tending to" being exactly analogous to that of *inclined*. For off-colour innuendo he might have done better with the First Gaoler's words in *Cymbeline*: "Unless a man would marry a gallows and beget young gibbets, I never saw one so prone" (V. iv. 208–9), since *prone* here might be more easily taken in either of Empson's imputed senses (in the positions of lying with the gallows to beget gibbets, and of lying in the ground afterwards), plus the one OED explains as "vertically descending" (OED *a.*, 3a) which is what one literally does when one figuratively "marries" a gallows. And for a truer self-antonym, Empson might have

looked two lines above, to the words of the previously condemned Posthumus Leonatus (his given name a kind of contradiction in itself), who has just found out that his and his gaoler's roles have been reversed: "Thou shalt be then freer than a gaoler; no bolts for the dead." No prisoner's door- or leg-bolts (OED "bolt" *n.*[1], 5–7) for the dead, that is, because the dead will have no sudden springs or starts (OED "bolt" *n.*[2], 1). To rephrase the pun in a way that incorporates the analogous polar inversion of gaoler and prisoner that has just occurred, gaolers will not bolt their cells because the dead will not bolt their cells.

Many like examples could be adduced: Shakespeare especially is rife with contradiction, inversion, reversal, and double-entendre at every level—lexical, conceptual, and dramatic—and often, as in the above example, at all three levels simultaneously. But with the Bard the sense is never that one is being shown "a fundamental division in the writer's mind." Rather we perceive the virtuosic play of an intelligence that can inweave countless intricate oppositions and yet succeed finally in resolving them into gnomic unity, as in the epigrammatic closing couplet of his most self-divided sonnet: "All this the world well knows; yet none knows well | To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell" (Sonnet 129). The conceptual structure in Shakespeare is never that of mystery or paradox or aporia, not that of a philosophical or metaphysical or spiritual crux, but that of riddle, a seeming contradiction that depends for its force on the supposition that a resolution does exist, and by the degree of its difficulty shows the wit whoever can resolve it.

More revelatory of a fundamental division in an author's mind, though still not strictly speaking a case of lexical self-opposition, is Empson's extended discussion of Richard Crashaw's "The Sacrifice." Empson connects Crashaw's meditation on the Passion to a fundamental Christian mystery that would have the "complete Christ" a composite of "scapegoat and tragic hero; loved because hated; hated because godlike . . . and, because outcast, creating the possibility of society" (233). Here again Empson is chiefly concerned with the polar ambiguity of a metaphor or subtext, rather than a lexical polarity. Of the lines:

> Why, Caesar is their only king, not I.
> He clave the stony rock when they were dry;
> But surely not their hearts, as I well try.

Empson says what is surely true, that the rulers of the world are here opposed "to the profounder mercy of the Christ and to the profounder searchings of heart that he causes; I may *cleave their hearts* with my tenderness or with their despair" (230; original emphasis). But he overlooks the lexical self-opposition pulsing in his own paraphrase (the change of tense implied, but not realized, in the poem): the sense of Empson's *cleave* is of "breaking open, piercing," as is the preterite "clave" in the second quoted line. Yet, though Christ will pierce hearts in a way that is contrasted

to how Caesar broke the rock for water, the Christian mystery revolves around the *uniting* of hearts, not only to each other within an earthly "possibility of society" but also and more profoundly in and through Christ's own Sacred Heart—the atonement of men achieved by an at-one-ment of man and God. Here the cleaving of hearts that echoes back against the idea of Christ piercing the hearts of men is the opposite kind, commanded several times in the Old Testament: "cleave unto the LORD your God" (Josh 23:8; cf. Josh 22:5, Deut 4:4, 11:22, 13:4, 10:20, 30:20).

Crashaw's poem dwells on a mystery, and dwells in mystery, which is why it can show within itself the fault lines of a "fundamental division." Yet mystery, like paradox and as much as the riddle, is a conceptual problem that eventually demands acceptance, however long and intense an effort of mind and spirit this might require. To remain mysterious, to avoid becoming simply untrue or absurd, the mystery asks a contemplating mind to overcome the mental vexation that accompanies logical or factual contradiction, to submit to the reality of the mystery despite the protestations of the senses, the emotions, and the intellect. Within the aesthetic realm that a poem inhabits, John Keats described this sublime state as the defining quality of the "Man of Achievement, especially in Literature":

> I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason . . . with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. (72)

Yet the poetic antagonym resists even this aesthetic resolution. If produced by and itself producing beauty which can overcome "irritable reaching after fact and reason," it can only be an utterly transformed and oxymoronic "terrible beauty," in W. B. Yeats's psychologically tormented, ethically conflicted sense. The conceptual configuration that best describes the effect of the poetic antagonym, while its two senses are equally matched and locked in full agon, is not mystery or doubt but aporia, a permanent conflict in which no ground is given or taken.

As may already be clear, in the enriched sense I'm giving it, the paradigmatic antagonym in the English language is *cleave*, a word whose meaning is split between splitting and joining, the two meanings that are themselves joined within it. Though in current English it is self-divided, its semantic history (exceptionally for such words) is one of fusion rather than a coming apart.[7] When the Old English intransitive verb *clifian*, *cleofian*, meaning "to stick" (OED *v.²*) was adopted in Middle English as *cleve* (rather than *clive* or *cleove*), it became indistinguishable from the Middle English form of the Old English transitive verb *clíofan*, *cléofan*, meaning to "part or divide by a cutting blow, to hew asunder, to split" (OED *v.¹*). The "cutting" or "parting" sense of *cleave* is the more familiar one to most English speakers today, as it survives in *cleavage* and *cleaver*, and in the expressions *cleft palate*, *cloven hoof*,

and *cloven tongue*. The biblical origins of the last two phrases may or may not be recognized by those who say them, but if one is familiar with the "joining" sense of *cleave*, it is almost certainly associated with one of the best known verses in Genesis: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen 2:24; cf. Matt 19:5); and also perhaps, in addition to the several exhortations to cleave unto the LORD, from a handful of other frequently quoted phrases from the 1611 English Bible: "their tongue cleaved to the roof of their mouth" (Job 29:10; an idiomatic expression either for being dumbstruck or parched with thirst that reoccurs in Ps 22:15, Ps 137:6, Ez 3:26, and Lam 4:4); and "my bones cleave to my skin" (Ps 102:5), or "their skin cleaveth to their bones" (Lam 4:8).

Several of these passages appear to be locked in allusive antagonism in Sylvia Plath's early poem, "Insolent storm strikes at the skull" (325–26), which, like Dickinson's "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind," attempts the impossible task of conveying a state of mental commotion in a medium constructed of and displaying highly regular conceptual and linguistic patterns:

> Insolent storm strikes at the skull,
> assaults the sleeping citadel,
> . . .
> Skeptic cyclones try the bone
> of strict and sacred skeleton;
> polemic gales prove point by point
> how flesh cleaves fast to frozen joint,
> and a hurricane headache rocks
> the temples of the orthodox.

Perhaps "flesh cleaves fast to frozen joint" is paraphrasing Lamentations or perhaps it is inverting the 102nd Psalm; the substitution of "flesh" for "skin" may faintly echo Genesis's "one flesh." Any of these allusions would accommodate the poem to what might otherwise seem an archaic and unusual choice of diction. But what image does "flesh cleaves fast" produce? One reader may read *cleave* as "stick" and *fast* as "firmly," seeing muscle clamp down on bone. The same reader could just as well understand *cleave* as "split" and *fast* as "quickly," seeing a broad and deep gash open up on the tormented body, exposing the frozen joint beneath. The double meanings of each antagonym line up with their counterparts against each other. Both readings on their own may be authorized or accommodated; they are not to be reconciled.

A subtler example of *cleave* dividing a reading comes from a recent poem by Seamus Heaney. Decades ago Heaney wrote of Old English poetry and its "iron | flash of consonants | cleaving the line" (1975: 108), where the antithetical meanings

of *cleaving* could be read together in harmony, since the alliterative echo occurring in the second half of the cloven line can well be thought of as a point of connection to the first half, just as the caesura itself, like the hyphen or the dash, is both a point of separation and a place of connection. In "A Hagging Match" (*District and Circle* 62), however, the word is used unambiguously in echo of Genesis, but within a series of discordant images that disturb the integrity of that allusion, and with it the integrity of the poem's metaphorical designs. The poem is short, yet it gives over its information slowly:

> A Hagging Match
>
> Axe-thumps outside
> like wave-hits through
> a night ferry:
> you
> whom I cleave to, hew to,
> splitting firewood.

The title may at first suggest a contest between men, a possibility the first line leaves open, even as it removes the speaker from that contest. The fourth line's "you" puts the speaker of the poem back into relation with its subject, but it is only when *cleave* is introduced in the penultimate line, in a form recalling Genesis, that we understand finally that the poet is listening to his wife chopping wood (for some readers perhaps an unexpected reversal of conventional gender roles), thinking metaphorically about separation in general and specifically of himself separated from his beloved, though still near enough to hear her at work outside. The travelling sound of her cutting wood has put him in mind not only of their small separation but also of their overarching marital connection, and both of these lines of thought converge on the word *cleave*.

So far, so good: the title is "A Hagging Match," where *hag* has the sense of "To cut, hew, chop" (OED *v.*², 1), just like its etymological cousin *hew* (both from the reconstructed Indo-European root **kau-*, coming into Germanic as reconstructed **hawwō*, **hawwann*). A "hagging match" is both a chopping contest (OED "match" *n.*¹, 7) opposing one chopper (splitting wood) to another (splitting senses, maybe), and a "wife . . . a mate," an "equal" (OED "match" *n.*¹, †1, 4) who is in the act of chopping. You cleave the wood, and in another sense of the word I cleave to you. But there are early signs of trouble in this happy compact of ambiguities. The poem's first simile compares the sound of the axe coming down to that of waves hitting a vessel, and already a strange effect is produced, since though the rhythmic hits and reverberations of waves crashing may well be compared to axe-thumps, the action that produces them is the opposite of the one described. Waves do not cut

through ferries as an axe through wood; rather, it is ferries that cut through waves. If this goes unnoticed initially it is recalled by the second metaphorical move in the pivotal sixth line. Heaney follows "you | whom I cleave to" with syntactically parallel but semantically antithetical "hew to," retroactively putting into question the connotative direction of "cleave to." To *hew to* is a shortening of *to hew to the line*, a builder's expression, probably of American origin, meaning to trim timbers straight, level, or square (cf. OED "line" *n.²*, 4a: "A cord used by builders . . . for making things level or straight"), which has been extended to mean "to uphold, follow closely, or conform."[8] It describes the cutting of wood in a way that is synonymous with one sense of *cleave*, but not the sense the poem has seemed to be employing.

The parallel construction implies a parallel interpretation that will not conform to sense: the speaker cannot be united with his beloved and also be making his way directly toward her, cannot within the same metaphorical construct be joined to her and also use her as a guide towards some end. Reversing the meaning of *cleave to* to mean "pierce towards" somewhat solves the problem of parallelism—I cut my way towards you like an axe through wood, I hew to you like an adze down the line[9]—but must be resisted by the initial interpretation, which has its own claims to sense as well as prosodic and allusive features to recommend it. All this is made even more knotty and contentious by the etymological bond between *hag* and *hew* on one hand, and on the other hand the connotative drift of the expression *hew to (the line)*, perhaps on analogy to *cleave to* or perhaps to *toe the line*, to mean "adhere," a way of saying "conform" which begins to show a progression of connotative associations leading very close to the "sticking" sense of *cleave*.

Other languages have their own paradigmatic antagonyms. In many cases these, like *cleave*, appear to contain within their self-divided meanings oppositions that, as Empson speculates more generally, may "pierce to regions that underlie the whole structure of our thought" (226), may show "the most complicated and deeply-rooted notions of the human mind" (233), notions which, expressed as dualities, include unity/duality, joining/breaking, creating/destroying, life/death, light/dark, and so on. Karl Abel's work on Ancient Egyptian, discussed by Freud in "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," professed astonishment that such a civilized if ancient culture could systematically give "one and the same phonetic vehicle to the most mutually inimical thoughts" (quoted in Freud, 157), and further that "there are also compounds like 'old-young', 'far-near', 'bind-sever', 'inside-outside' . . . which, in spite of combining the extremes of difference, mean only 'young', 'near', 'bind' and 'inside' respectively" (*ibid*). What Freud in turn found astonishing was that the "particular preference" of dreams "for combining contraries into a unity . . . is identical with a peculiarity in the oldest languages known to us" (155–56). The emphasis on age is not insignificant; it reinforces an analogy between primal thoughts and desires

buried deep in the psyche, manifesting themselves in dreams to be interpreted by the psychoanalyst, and primitive linguistic and conceptual structures buried deep in the past, decoded from fragments to be interpreted by the philologist.

Empson was right to look coolly upon the pseudo-anthropology of Freud and Abel, but also right perhaps to think of linguistic and/or artistic self-negation in a basically Freudian way, as a possible manifestation of fundamental oppositions within human thought, oppositions which can give structure to that thought but which also can trouble that very structure. Plato's treatment of the Egyptian writing myth in the *Phaedrus*, as Jacques Derrida contends, turns on an ambiguous word—*pharmakon*—the double valence of which is manipulated into what I would call a literary antagonym by the character of the writing god Theuth within the Platonic text:

> Theuth a sans doute joué sur le mot, en interrompant, pour les besoins de sa cause, la communication entre les deux valeurs opposées . . . l'avant-scène textuelle du mot *pharmakon*, tout en signifiant *remède*, cite, ré-cite, et donne à lire ce qui *dans le même mot* signifie, en un autre lieu et à une autre profondeur le la scène, *poison*. (111; original emphasis)

> (Theuth without a doubt has made a play on words, in interrupting, for his own needs, the communication between the two opposing values . . . the textual fore-stage of the word *pharmakon*, all the while signifying *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and allows us to read that which *in the same word* signifies, in another place and at another stage level, *poison*.)

The Greek word *pharmakon* is antagonymous in the *Phaedrus* because the *Phaedrus* is a written text in the form of dialogue and not an actual dialogue between speakers. The word occurs, in fact, in a dialogue within a dialogue, when Plato's Socrates relates to Phaedrus the mythical conversation between Thamus, the god of speech (and king of gods), and Theuth, the god of writing. Plato's Theuth can only make the play on words attributed to him by Derrida because he is himself written, and rewritten, or overwritten—rewritten, that is, in Greek, and not the language that the fiction implies he is speaking, just as that fiction, in its report of the conversation, obliterates that very language. As the writing god, he may preside over the text in some way, but he is an antagonist in the *Phaedrus*, not its author. That eminent man of letters famously espoused conflicted and conflicting views on the value of representation in general and of writing in particular. Yet, all we know of his wisdom necessarily comes to us in written form.

As Derrida points out, in authoring these texts Plato had to abide by fundamental structures of thought and language:

> Platon a dû conformer son récit à des lois de structure. Les plus générales, celles qui commandent et articulent les oppositions parole/écriture, vie/mort . . . pre-

mier/second . . . âme/corps, dedans/dehors, bien/mal . . . dominent également et selon les mêmes configurations les mythologies égyptienne, babylonienne, assyrienne. (96)

(Plato had to make his narrative conform to structural laws. The most general, those that govern and articulate the oppositions speech/writing, life/death . . . first/second . . . soul/body, inside/outside, good/bad . . . govern to the same degree and according to the same configurations the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian mythologies.)

Derrida sees in the opposition of the two meanings of *pharmakon* an illustration of how language simultaneously constructs and deconstructs meaning, how the structure implied by Plato's general distinctions is itself dissolved in the terms that seek to represent and configure them. Yet if we take Plato's text as (amongst other things) a *literary* composition, to read the senses of the word *pharmakon* in their most antagonymous configuration is to recognize a literary figure for literature itself: both speech and text, internal and external, memory and forgetting—and, on increasingly symbolic planes, both cure and poison, refuge and menace, life and death. This way of understanding need not collapse or vitiate every categorical distinction that Plato makes, though it may well upset the good/bad binary priority he systematically assigns to their constituent parts. Rather, these distinctions can be maintained, but only in a state of perpetual antagonism, and only while they are so equally matched. This represents a different way of understanding Derrida's two self-divided definitions of Theuth: "Le dieu de l'écriture est donc un dieu de la médecine . . . Du remède et du poison. Le dieu de l'écriture est le dieu du *pharmakon*" (107) [The god of writing is therefore a god of medicine . . . Of remedy and of poison. The god of writing is the god of the *pharmakon*]; "Le dieu de l'écriture est donc à la fois son père, son fils et lui" (115) [the god of writing is therefore at the same time his father, his son, and himself].

On first glance it may appear that J. Hillis Miller is following Derrida's self-oppositional rhetoric about writing in his discussion of criticism, the writing about writing, or the writing about reading. And, indeed, in "The Critic as Host," Miller makes use of what might be the paradigmatic antagonym in French—*hôte*—which like its Italian cognate *ospite* can mean both "host," one who receives, and "guest," one who is received. The corresponding pair of English words are themselves distantly related, which, as the *American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* explains, reflects a significant cultural fact about the society that spawned them:

The basic meaning of the Indo-European word *ghos-ti-* was "someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality." In practical terms it referred to strangers in general, as well as to both *guests* and *hosts* (both of which words

are descended from it). The word *ghos-ti-* was thus the central expression of the guest-host relationship. . . . Strangers are potential guest-friends but also potential enemies; note that the Latin cognate of English *guest*, namely *hostis*, means "enemy." (32)

Hôte is like *pharmakon* in that it appears to turn against itself, and unlike it in that its antagonymous property has to do not with a double and contrary signification, as *poison* and *antidote*, but rather with a double signification subject to ambivalent agency. It is most actively an antagonym when the active and the passive senses are juxtaposed—*hôte* as receiver and received, provider and provided for, feeder at someone else's table and, when the "guest" of the "host" is a parasite, himself a fed-upon meal. Through a series of etymological disquisitions Miller re-imbues his key terms *host*, *guest*, and *parasite* ("'Para' is an 'uncanny' double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority" [441]) with an antagonism of agency which is at the same time a mutual dependence. This allows him to locate within *host* a figure for the critic and his relation to text, its context, and intertexts. The critic is thus simultaneously a reader and a writer, a feeder in both senses (one who feeds another, one who is fed), a self-opposed and self-sustaining host: "There is no parasite without its host . . . A host is a guest, and a guest is a host. A host is a host" (441–42). As for Derrida, for Miller admitting "heterogeneity within homogeneity, enemy within the home" (447) means radically upsetting the basic inside/outside binary, revealing fundamental interpenetration where others have understood fundamental opposition.

Yet for some poets, at least, language's duality has resembled less the deconstructed, interpenetrated, and mutually defining relation of Castor and Pollux, less the biblical or platonic polar priorities of Abel and Cain (weak-good over strong-evil) or Romulus and Remus (strong-honourable over weak-dishonourable) and more the struggle between the Ulster cycle hero Cúchulainn and his foster-brother Ferdia—brothers and not brothers, dearest of friends and deadliest of enemies, hospitable and hostile to each other—who were fated to battle to the death all day, and yet shared each other's food and medicines at night. Or, one might say, it resembles less the petty mundane quarrels between Jacob and his twin brother Esau and more the unyielding struggle between Jacob and the angel at Peniel. Geoffrey Hill has described himself "wrestling grammar | trusting as Jacob" ("Oraclau" 8), has said that "Poetry's its own agon" ("A Treatise" 38), and that reading a poem is "like being brushed past, or aside, by an alien being" (*Collected Critical Writings* 566). In critical writings spanning more than forty years he has paused repeatedly and at length to consider words with "a double nature," bearing two senses "at once opposed to . . . and yet inextricably tied to" (*Collected Critical Writings* 160) the other. These antagonyms are often, like *hôte*, relational terms that can have their

senses turned by an inversion of subject and object. Hill calls them "the great words which lie directly on the active-passive divide" and thinks that it is "here, on the line, that, through language, value is to be realized" (*Collected Critical Writings* 391).

In language, as much as in life, for Hill "value" is to be found in labor and suffering, and it is often in words associated with work and pain that Hill sees the word turning against itself. Thus *endure* is understood as both passive suffering and active resistance—"Our capacity to endure is both judge and thrall of the mere necessity to endure" (*Collected Critical Writings* 447)—*dogged* as "hounded" when pronounced with one syllable and "tenacious" when pronounced with two (*Collected Critical Writings* 159), *bond* as both "reciprocity, covenant," and "shackle, arbitrary constraint" (*Collected Critical Writings* 161), *arbitrary* itself as "discretionary or despotic" (*Collected Critical Writings* 563). The word *inure*, Hill writes, "doubles an active and a passive function . . . as creatures of Nature we both act (inure) and are made to suffer (are inured) indifferently. We become used to that which uses us up" (*Collected Critical Writings* 517). And the linguistic medium as a whole "is a doctrinal solution, in which 'solution' acts or suffers what it describes" (*Collected Critical Writings* 363); it can, in its different manifestations, either act to solve of the problems of doctrine, or submit itself to the passive dissolving of them.

In his own poems Hill sets some of these very words into syntactic structures that exacerbate their antagonymous tendencies as he has described them, actively staging problems of language, ethics, and faith at their most unsolvable, their most indissoluble. In *The Orchards of Syon*, Hill uses the two antithetical senses of *solution* he outlines (albeit in two different forms) along with the phrasal antagonym *near death* (meaning both "sure to suffer death soon," and "just escaping death") to think about St Paul's self-conflicted meditation on life and death: "I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ . . . Nevertheless to abide in the flesh" (Phil 1:23–24). Hill writes, "We are—what, all of us?—near death. So wave | me your solution. *Cupio dissolvi*, | Saul's vital near-death experience" ("Orchards of Syon" 4). Death is also one half of the subject-object fulcrum on which the antagonym *endure* turns in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. In one section of that long poem Hill begins by demonstrating how *endure* can lie directly on the active-passive divide: "these presences endure; they have not ceased | to act, suffer." In the next stanza the word returns embedded within an ambiguous genitive construction that allows its antagonymous senses to arise: referring to the "marble rote" of the war memorial, Hill writes, "their many names one name, the common 'dur' | built into duration, the endurance of war; | blind Vigil herself, helpless and obdurate" (*Collected Poems* 192). Helpless because war endures; obdurate because war must be endured.

Hill has written that above all contemporary literature requires "a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead" (*Collected Critical Writings* 405), where *memorializing* stands in ambivalent relation to *memorizing*, which is either elaborating or

correcting the preceding term. Both may be acts of memory, yet the conflict between Thamus and Theuth over the sense of *pharmakon* turns precisely on the difference between them: the latter is oral, internal, living memory; the former written, external, dead reminder. What is at stake is not the duration of written memorials, but rather how long the real "presences endure," how long they obdurately "act, suffer," and how long we keep our obdurate vigil in the face of what has been and must be endured. The "marble rote" may be in one sense a remedy for forgetfulness, but it must mightily resist the inevitable fate Hill describes in another poem, where memory has become "Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable | Unbelievable in fatted marble" (*Collected Poems* 49). In a staged conversation with the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2008, Hill played Thamus to anyone who would offer up Google as a modern aid to memory, arguing that the "velocity" of modern computing "will destroy memory, and when memory has been destroyed the whole dimension that you need for meaningful criticism is destroyed also. . . . I think there are things built into the information culture which are destructive of the very things it seeks to gain information about" (quoted in Sperling 333–34).

I do not want to claim, as I think Hill might if pressed, that all literature that truly attends to language displays within itself a self-opposition which is reflective of a basic antagonism at the heart of all language. Instead, I think the poetic antagonym can reveal areas of self-conflicting aporia within what has broadly and historically been an art of reconciliation, a bringing together of language, thought, faith, experience, and so on. These aporetic areas may be denser or less dense, and may be of differing significance according to their density, but where they occur they must remind us that reconciliation is not always possible, let alone desirable. In my exposition I've attempted to locate those insoluble antagonyms that give rise to relatively dense areas of aporia, beginning with Dickinson's masterful straining to put unreconciling thoughts together. I will close with a relatively less dense area within a broadly reconciling poem, as a figure for how a poem like Dickinson's might stand in relation to the immense field of poetry. It is a final instance of *cleave*, occurring in a poem by Isaac Rosenberg which, like Hill's poem, is also about an enduring presence, though of a different kind, and with different results for the poem. Nearing the end of his undated "Even now your eyes are mixed in mine" (69), Rosenberg writes:

> I breathe you. Here the air enfolds
> Your absent presence, as fire cleaves,
> Leaving the places warm it leaves.
> Such warmth a warm word holds.
>
> Bruised are our words and our full thought
> Breaks like dull rain from some rich cloud.

Composed five decades or more before the long expounding of the Derridean ideas of *trace* and *différance* began, the frisson produced here by "absent presence"—an oxymoron used also by Crashaw to describe God (in his "Answer for Hope") and Phillip Sidney to describe his Stella—is still itself a lingering presence when the reader's eyes fall on the simile "as fire cleaves," which may at first seem to describe the forking of flames in turbulent air, as in the biblical simile "cloven tongues like as of fire" (Acts 2:3). It *does* of course have this meaning, for a time anyway, which meaning may continue to fight for a place in our reading even as its antithesis takes hold in the poem, as we see that fire not only leaves and is absent but also leaves behind its warmth and is present, clinging to whatever it has touched. And so "cutting" *cleave* clings, "leaving" in the two divergent ways described in the third line, and here is a suggestion that the "fundamental division in the author's mind" may, in this poem, be eventually repaired. "Leaving . . . leaves" describes an absence and a presence, but *leave* is not an antagonym here. The implications may be divergent, but the senses are complementary rather than self-opposed: a thing must leave in order to leave something behind. The poem has moved from producing two incompatible meanings of *cleave* to showing two reciprocal meanings of *leave*.

It is inevitable perhaps, though no less remarkable, that Rosenberg's metaphysical conceit for love in separation should near the end of the poem turn to language, since it has been turning on language, and turning language, throughout. Words can contain the warmth of the beloved, can themselves keep that warmth even when the beloved has gone. But our words, Rosenberg writes, are also "Bruised," and we are left to wonder: as the result of what undisclosed struggle, what underlying agon? And what, if anything, will prove the cure? The final quoted lines break at "thought | Breaks," the enjambment a tempting premade figure for broken thought, the alliterative line-initial "Breaks" a prosodic suggestion that the previous line's "Bruised" will be reprised and extended—our words are bruised, our thoughts are broken. Yet neither of these suggestions is realized in the poem. Instead what is described is a breaking out of thought and into words, a breaking out of words from thought. Coming after antagonymous *cleave* and reciprocal *leave*, the dark counterpart of the poem's active sense of *break* is but a prosodic shadow, an untaken path, a present absence perhaps but an absence all the same.

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NOTES

1 Of course the hemispheric human brain *is* literally split (if also joined), a biological fact which illustrates well the difference between *mind* and *brain* as these terms are usually employed, usually in contradistinction to one another. The poem is one of several showing Dickinson's habitual joining of mental and physical experience, e.g.: "I felt

a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340), "The Brain—is wider than the Sky" (Fr598), "Ages coil within | The minute Circumference | Of a single Brain—" (Fr833).

2 Giulio Lepschy, for instance, defends the theories of Karl Abel on such words as belonging to "a long tradition of studies, from the Stoics' grammar and the etymologies *e contrario* . . . to the chapter in Arab linguistic tradition devoted to the addād . . . to the medieval Jewish grammarians' discussions on parallel phenomena in Hebrew . . . to Christian biblical scholars who at least since the seventeenth century examine cases of 'enantiosemy' in the Sacred, classical, and modern languages" (29). For a good discussion of the analogous Arabic concept of ʾaḍdād, see James Barr (173–77).

3 None of these terms is recorded in the OED, except *Janus word*, which is listed only as a combination (s.v. *Janus*) and has no definition nor any quotation evidence. Among them, *contronym*—which was apparently coined by Jack Herring in *Word Study* in 1962 (8), and later adopted by Richard Lederer in *Crazy English* (88)—appears to be gaining acceptance in scholarly circles. See Karaman, "On Contronymy," helpful among other things for its taxonomy of contronymy, which usefully distinguishes between the kinds of oppositional relations two senses of a term can take.

4 These terms and others are suggested in a lively online discussion initiated and moderated by Alex Eulenberg on the LINGUIST listserv between late 1994 and early 1995. The discussion is a good early example of how the phenomenon of the contronym in English has been approached collaboratively and largely in the digital medium.

5 Invented in the late 1990s, by Chris Ellis on his website: http://www-personal.umich .edu/~cellis/antagonym.html. While Ellis proposes it as a general term, my sense of *antagonym* describes a subset of the larger class of contronymous or auto-antonymic words, however that might be defined.

6 The relevant senses are glossed in OED as "To fasten with a buckle" (1a) and "To warp, crumple" (6a), which while they may point in different directions, are not necessarily self-opposed.

7 One other case of convergent antagonymy in English is *let, v.¹* ("to allow"; from O.E. *lǽtan*) and *let, v.²* ("to prevent"; from O.E. *lęttan*), which were in concurrent use from the ninth century until the latter became restricted to archaic and poetic writing after the late seventeenth century, and fell out of use completely after the nineteenth.

8 Neither Webster's 1844 dictionary nor the OED records the expressions "hew to" or "hew to the line." *The American Heritage Dictionary* has "To adhere or conform strictly; hold." *The Random House Dictionary* glosses it somewhat better: "to uphold, follow closely, or conform (usually followed by *to*): *to hew to the tenets of one's political party*."

9 I say this only "somewhat solves" since the objects of the preposition "to" are not to be understood in parallel: "I cut my way towards you" vs. "I follow your guideline in cutting my way through life."

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