

In Praise of Bog

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Abstract This essay inquiries into poetry and causation in relationship to poetic “matter.” Looking to Freud’s introduction of the concept of “overdetermination,” I show how poetry’s intrusion into the literal moment of the term’s definition, in Freud’s half-digested citation of Goethe’s dramatic poem *Faust*, offers a novel approach to grasping poetry’s material “effects.” For there, poetry marks matter’s ineluctable and earthy intrusion into multi-causal analysis. Inquiring further into how such matter and “muck” might ground poetry, I then turn to Emily Dickinson’s famous lyric poem, “I’m Nobody!,” in which the speaker’s abstract, conspiratorial associations, with its certitude in a causal order, yields to the stuff of “bog.” As “bog” becomes the poem’s “end,” as causal certitude bends to mere earth, poetry’s boggish “ground” shows itself to be the overdetermined and overdetermining material that enmires poetry and history alike in a common matter.

Keywords: causation, conspiracy, overdetermination, Freud, Dickinson, Goethe, bog

“The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.”

– Seamus Heaney, “Bogland”¹

In 1870, Emily Dickinson wrote a letter to her longtime interlocutor Thomas Wentworth Higginson telling him how she knew a poem when she saw one:

If I read a book and it makes me so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there another way?²

Dickinson had read many poems, though, and by conventional accounts, her head seemed to be intact. Yet her unusual method of verification — indeed, “the *only* ways I know [poetry]” — merits a second glance and not just because it makes it much more difficult to believe that “poetry

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¹ Heaney 1972, pp. 41-42.

² Dickinson 1959, p. 104.

makes nothing happen.”³ That is Auden’s much-loved line, from his poem on Yeats’s death, and it has been annotated amply: it tends to be treated with more seriousness than Dickinson’s cephalic quagmire above, perhaps because it is easier to imagine a poem presiding over nothing at all than over a near-lobotomy. But Auden’s intriguing definition implies another problem, too, one that Dickinson takes (pun intended) head on: poetry’s relationship to causation. Where Dickinson locates the poem as the cause of startling bodily effects, Auden’s maxim permits his readers to bypass poetry’s relationship to causation or to mystify it: cause and effect can either be dismissed (poetry doesn’t cause anything) or be relegated, with a mysterious flourish, to the void (what it causes is, in fact, capital-N Nothing). While it may yet be ridiculous to ask, “what causes poetry?,” it is a mistake to neglect the question or its inversion and not only because investigating it might reveal how a poem itself might decide to withhold an answer.

If there is at least some confusion about knowing a poem when one sees one, let alone the question of its hazards, there is still more when it comes to naming and discussing its causes and effects. This is reasonable enough given that “poetry” and “causation” are both hard to talk about let alone to define. When “cause” seems to call for “origins,” attempts to show how poetry “begins” point toward the vast matter of primal feeling (if they do not tie themselves in a knot of their own in noticing the problem with the “originary.”)⁴ More modest literary genealogies trace influence from one poet to the next as, say, Milton endures the burden of Shakespeare before him and so on. Contextualizing studies give the vast materials of history their due in making poetry “happen,” and from these materials, we see a range of material conditions, as well as power’s brute hand, infiltrating the poem’s production. These conditions, hardly exhaustive ones at that, are not obstacles to a poem’s interpretation but the ordinary conditions of it: they are the stuff debated, described, and discussed in competing readings; in so-called “method wars,” the degree to which their arrangement inspires distance or superstition remains an ongoing conflict about literary interpretation and the production of meaning.⁵ All this is without attending to Dickinson’s head, to asking what poems themselves cause,

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3 Auden 1991, p. 248.

4 M.K. Blasing’s *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (2007) locates in language in general and lyric in particular an expression of both the communal and maternal.

5 On the so-called method wars, Rita Felski’s gloss is especially useful: “What does it mean to read a text, scholars are asking, and are there other things we can do with texts besides interpreting them? Critics are debating the merits of close reading versus distant reading, surface reading versus deep reading, and reading suspiciously versus reading from a more receptive, generous, or postcritical standpoint. The focus has shifted from theoretical claims or empirical arguments to matters of method and mood, style and sensibility—in short, the various procedures and practices that inform our encounter with a text.” (Felski 2014, p. v.)

from the ideas they make possible as philosophy's staging-ground to more pedestrian experiences like the reader's response or the critic's "affective fallacy." So it is surprising how seldom we discuss poetry's causes and effects given how very difficult indeed it would be to talk about the many spheres it touches and is touched by without them. It is not as if literature has not been central to thinking about causation as such. Consider just two examples: Heidegger needs Angelus Silesius's "rose without a why" to distinguish between "why" and "because."⁶ Deleuze needs Lewis Carroll's *Alice* as the "nonsense" that permits him to bequeath the Stoic stuff of immaterial *lekta* to materialists of the twentieth century.⁷ And so it seems to me to be worth it to take Emily Dickinson's claim a bit more seriously and to center poetry's effects frontally, rather than incidentally, by asking what a poem causes and what causes it.

To do so, however partially, I want to take on the problem of poetry's "cause" in light of the complexity of explanation I have described above, which is to say, there are many causes and many effects, and it is terribly difficult for any of us to untangle them. Therefore, I want to look to the place where cause and effect hang together in a causal muddle at the birth scene of the concept of "overdetermination" itself, that is, in its first invocation by Freud. I show how the appearance of Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust* puts poetry at the center of multi-causal interpretation in a scene of reading that invites us to look for poetry's ground in the unlikely stuff of its excretions. Following the diet of Freud's "Bücherwurm," I suggest that Freud's definition of "overdetermination," the dream's own overdetermination, finds through the poem the puncturing, and perhaps sullying, of overdetermination itself, as the poem turns the dream to text at the site of a common, if imperfect, digestion. As Freud's account of causal complexity finds itself in and productive of an unlikely poetic muck, I follow his cue toward that matter in particular. Moving from dramatic to lyric poetry, I conclude in the "bog" of Dickinson's "I'm Nobody!" There, the poem's speaker grasps multi-causal explanation of another sort: I suggest that the poem begins with the causal (and identificatory) hopes of the conspiracy theory, with its causal certainty, but ends in the strange matter of "bog," an organic adiaphora that also offers itself as poetry's ambiguous ground.

The Future of an Allusion

In "overdetermination" (Überdeterminierung), Freud gave new language to the old problem of analyzing complex, multi-causal phenomena as

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6 Heidegger 1996, pp. 32-39. I am grateful to Alex Dubilet for his insight into "groundless ground" and "life without a why." (Cf. Dubilet 2021.)

7 Deleuze 1969.

he made dreams knowable and rendered them objects of interpretation central to the alleviation of psychic pain. Though the term would itself take on additional and distinct psychoanalytic, as well as political, dimensions over many decades to come,⁸ its first appearance is remarkable even beyond its arrival in the extraordinarily remarkable *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). As Freud's "overdetermination" elaborates the concept of "condensation," it seems unwittingly to deliver a parallel effect whereby the dream becomes a text likewise unknown to itself. Through overdetermination's first invocation in the context of Freud's "dream of the botanical manuscript," Freud's association of the dream with his childhood persona as a "bookworm" (Bücherwurm) becomes the irresistible principle of his interpretation's own composition, one that has the effect of partially determining – and occasionally undermining – "overdetermination" itself. Rather than singly signifying the specter of a childish curiosity for sexual knowledge, as it is sometimes interpreted (when it is noticed at all),⁹ the "bookworm" is all the more interesting when read not for what it symbolizes but for what it does: namely, excrete scraps of poems. As Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust* punctures the definition of "overdetermination," Freud seems both to demonstrate a bold-faced Faustian wish (for knowledge, for textual immortality) and to show a poetry whose function is to survive the journey the reader, or dreamer, inflicts upon it, from the mouth of the worm to its textual expulsion.

First the dream, and then the worm. Freud's dream of the "botanical manuscript" comes up twice, once at the scene of its first relation and then once more in the context of defining the concept of "condensation." It is in its second appearance that Freud introduces "overdetermination." We meet the dream first in its summary: "I had written a monograph on a certain plant. The book lay before me and I was at the moment turning over a folded coloured plate. Bound up in each copy there was a dried specimen of the plant, as though it had been taken from a herbarium."¹⁰ Interpreting the dream, Freud shows how its apparent simplicity is only apparent as he considers each link in its rich relationship to recent events and more distant childhood memories. In the second appeal to the dream, we acquire the term "overdetermination." Noting the oversaturation of each oneiric element, Freud introduces his now-famous term:

Thus 'botanical' was a regular nodal point in the dream. Numerous trains of thought converged upon it.... Here we find ourselves in a factory of thoughts where, as in the 'weaver's masterpiece'—

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8 For an exceptionally clear discussion of overdetermination's relationship to the "instance" in the work of Althusser, Lacan, and others, see Balibar 2014, pp. 22-24.

9 On the bookworm and its relationship to Freud, "the sexually curious child" (p. 407), and bodily poetics, see Hoffman 2006, pp. 406-408.

10 Freud 2010, p. 193.

Ein Tritt tausend Fäden regt,
Die Schifflin herüber hinüber schießen,
Die Fäden ungesehen fließen,
Ein Schlag tausend Verbindungen schlägt.

*(...a thousand threads,
At a step on the treadle, are set moving,
Back and forth the shuttles fly,
The strands flow too fast for the eye)¹¹*

So, too, 'monograph' in the dream touches upon two subjects: the one-sidedness of my studies and the costliness of my favourite hobbies.

This first investigation leads us to conclude that the elements 'botanical' and 'monograph' found their way into the content of the dream because they possessed copious contacts with the majority of the dream-thoughts, because, that is to say, they constituted 'nodal points' upon which a great number of the dream-thoughts converged, and because they had several meanings in connection with the interpretation of the dream. The explanation of this fundamental fact can also be put in another way: each of the elements of the dream's content turns out to have been 'overdetermined'—to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over.¹²

Here, overdetermination explains the multiple and distinct factors that contribute to a single effect and, likewise, how one "element" might thus signify multiply, without detriment to other "dream-thoughts" or the dream's interpretation. With "several meanings in connection," all converging at a given "nodal point," one sees easily how interpretation might proceed thanks to, rather than in spite of, meaning's liability to multiply. Freud's concept illuminates his book's own method, too, for it explains the principle of textual expansion that he remarked upon just pages earlier, already obvious in each individual dream's substantial explications: "if a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page,"¹³ he explains, while its elaboration and explanation required vastly more space. In the description above, the concept of "overdetermination," too, comes to accrue "elements" of its own, including a second definition of sorts because it can be "put in another way."

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¹¹ Goethe 1992, p. 59.

¹² Freud 2010, pp. 300-301.

¹³ Freud 2010, p. 296.

This is all without mentioning the devilish intrusion that marks overdetermination as a Faustian endeavor, that interrupts the definition itself with poetry. For it is Mephistopheles' wry speech to a feckless student from Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust* that pierces the definition, as if the rich account of the botanical manuscript's dreams are alone insufficient. Mephistopheles' description of the loom is illustrative, of course, of Freud's point: as in a loom's rapid weaving, so the dream's many threads and tangles are created through complex interweaving and repetition, and suitably, this complexity might be apprehended through analysis (that etymological "loosening up"). But it is hard to believe that the poem's eruption ought to be treated as so innocent an example given the dream Freud has just described, one in which the "costliness of my hobbies"¹⁴ refers to a habit begun in childhood, one mentioned in the first discussion of the dream of the botanical manuscript, the moment at which Freud, in his own words, came to realize, "I had become a bookworm (Bücherwurm)."¹⁵ Freud's association takes on more than a hobbyistic turn when we see our bookworm is mid-digestion: having bored through the intervening text, it leaves unignorable traces elsewhere.¹⁶ For while the "factory of thoughts" (Mephistopheles' fabulous "Gedanken-Fabrik") finds its way into Freud's prose, digested as if Goethe's language is his own as it hangs from his vermicular mouth just before the quotation, the poem itself appears as an undigested kernel.

The anatomy of the worm is on extraordinary display as the morsels of learning pass through the holes in the text, placing poetry into the prose and thereby marking on it. In this chewed up, and then apparently wholly passed, bookwormish work, Mephistopheles' rhymed couplets not only tell us explicitly about the unseen threads (die Fäden ungesehen) of our own dreams but remind us that that which we ingest may be knotted in ways that twist (and, for Freud, who, unlike Mephistopheles, sees the threads of dream as "tangles"¹⁷) the past too quickly or complicatedly to apprehend (the little shuttles [of the loom] shoot here and there: "Die Schifflein herüber hinüber schießen"). The possibly-uneaten fragment

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14 Freud 2010, p. 301.

15 Freud 2010, p. 196.

16 Freud places metaphorical dirt next to the "dream's navel," with its "reach...down" offering a kind of absent umbilical worm of its own: "There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium." (Freud 2010, p. 528). See also Freud 2010, p. 135.

17 For one example of such "tangling," see Freud 2010, p.528, above.

of the poem, however, is not unsullied by the bookworm whose guts have handled it (possibly excreted it), and the little shuttle's movement "herüber hinüber" reminds us that the loom has already given a path for the rearrangement of the central vowels of the infinitive "schießen" to show, to put it euphemistically, the vermicular path of their rearrangement from bookworm's mouth to its expulsion. Freud, our bookworm, has given us a dream of a botanical manuscript in which the dirt in which some worms turn is scarcely repressed, for however clean the pages of the "botanical manuscript" with their dried plants, the dirt in which representations of plants once grew cannot be fully expunged and is instead produced in the apparent manure of citation.¹⁸

Freud's own instructions to look to the dream to perceive wish fulfillment make it difficult not to see in the scrap of *Faust* a wish of another kind. It is hard *not* to see Freud as having taken Mephistopheles' own advice to Faust from the very same scene Freud cites, namely, his counsel to "Hire a poet, learn by his instruction. (Associirt euch mit einem Poeten / Laßt den Herrn in Gedanken schweifen.)"¹⁹ So Freud "hires" a poet (his bibliophilic habit, after all, has already been marked for us as suffering from a certain "costliness"), and we see at the same time the figure that permits the expense to produce its own currency in the worm who bores into the dream in the moment it becomes text.²⁰ But Freud has also made of himself the very Faust whose frustrations with the limits of the laboratory led to Mephistopheles' appearance in the first place. In other words, Freud, like Faust, would need to "hire a poet" precisely because what is on display is a Faustian ambition: to know beyond what is thought knowable, to turn even the great mystery of dreams into an achievement of scientific acumen. The bookworm imperils such ambitions: as it chews through manuscripts, it threatens to reveal that one's work was shit all along. But it also exceeds Goethe's poem in delivering a more ridiculous humiliation: whereas Mephistopheles follows Faust home in the guise of a poodle, the bookworm does one better as Freud's invertebrate familiar. It chews through the library and deposits bits of poems that the reader cannot recognize in full for what they openly

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18 Consider, too, the figure of the gardener: "I was reminded in the analysis that the man who interrupted our conversation was called Gärtner [Gardener] and that I had thought his wife looked blooming." (Freud 2010, p. 198) Freud's recollection of the gardener appears immediately after another citation of a dramatic poem, this time, from *Hamlet*: "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this." (qtd. in Freud 2010, p. 198). Freud's work on *The Interpretation of Dreams* began in 1895, as he wrote of it to Fliess, and was published in 1899; Freud's father died in 1896. I do not need to remind my readers of the dirt or the worms of *Hamlet* – or the dead father haunting it.

19 Goethe 1992, p. 55.

20 Fittingly, then, the third scrap of poetry the bookworm produces is from Lessing, and it is about wealth that is "misplaced," not unlike our bookworm's hobbies. (Cf. Freud 2010, p. 413 on "the connection between gold and faeces.") In his comments on reading Ennius, Virgil makes epic poetry the scene of a like convergence: "I am searching for the gold in the dung (*aurum in stercore quaero*)" (qtd. in Goldschmidt 2013, p. 66). I thank Gerard Passannante for his insight and for this reference.

are. The poem, then, does one better than Mephistopheles, who demands a drop of blood in the exchange of soul for demonic power, because it achieves a cloak of invisibility: as if Freud's "*Zauberwort*" had become a *Zauberwurm*, the bookworm chomps his way through the text in spite of his bizarre reminder to the reader to be on the alert for such damage because the "bookworm[s']...favourite food is books."²¹

Freud's worm's poetic meal breaks the book's definition. The "monograph" (Monographie) not only "touches upon" (rührt...an) two subjects: it also plainly proves itself to be the oneiric element that extirpates the word's very roots. The monograph is not only *not* about one topic, as Freud himself has already demonstrated. It is also not even one book. The "plant," dried out in the dream itself, already signaled a kind of intrusion of something other than ink into the book, as if manageable dried matter separated page from page, a specimen at once resembling a bookmark. But writing the book of the dream into the book of the book (*The Interpretation of Dreams* itself) shows how making the dream into text is not an ordinary operation at all. It is not just that the second book witnesses the expansion of condensed dream elements. It is also the case that the interpretation itself has been infiltrated by the botanical manuscript's associations: the Bücherwurm's triumph is total because he has eaten many works from its library. The bookworm does its reading not with its mind but with its mouth. The poem stains the page, rupturing the definition and the production of the "new" concept; it likewise shows a poetry that both overdetermines and undermines, that is expelled somehow still intact even its very appearance raises the question of the threshold of meaningfulness, of a scrap of poem or a scrap of dream. The worm's destructive diet maims that which it touches but nonetheless also leaves a mark, one that, here at least, is clearly legible. In other words, the poem survives.

In Freud's overdetermination, then, we come upon our modern vocabulary for a problem of multiple causal factors we may not successfully unweave from the single effect they produce, even with a new capacity for noticing them. But in its appearance in Freud, the concept itself is produced by a method that issues an odd causation of its own with the intriguing eruption of the poem—if not quite a free association (freier Einfall) then at least an association of a kind, as in Mephistopheles' directions ("Associirt euch mit einem Poeten"). This happens at the hands – or rather at the mouth – of Freud our Bücherwurm, a bookworm that imposes a method and a form for the dream's analysis both overdetermining and undermining. For the bookworm subsists on literature, delivers poetry in scraps; it survives on it, and its digesting body seems quite the opposite of the skillful "master weaver" presiding over the thought factory or the analyst making the *katabasis* of the

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21 Freud 2010, p. 213.

dreamwork a scientific endeavor.²² Although he would also eulogize Freud in verse, it is rather Auden's eulogy of Yeats, with its enigmatic observation that "[P]oetry makes nothing happen," that recalls us now to the terminal moments of the stanza in which it appears:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
 In the valley of its making where executives
 Would never want to tamper, flows on south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
 A way of happening, a mouth.

Auden's poem shows the repetition Freud thought characteristic of overdetermination in its redoubled insistence of poetry's ongoing liveliness: "it survives...it survives." But I suggest that this other attribute of poetry, its status as "A way of happening, a mouth" might also invite us to think about the poetry borrowed by our Bücherwurm, himself not a poet, but nonetheless the mouth that receives it and, apparently, the ass that expels it.²³

The model of overdetermination gives us another way to grasp poetry's cause. In Freud's digestion, and indigestion, of the dramatic poem of *Faust*, I have tried to show poetry happening, and leaving evidence of having done so, at the scene of causation's explication. When Freud asks what is condensed in the dream, when he shows the multiple events and associations that together cause the dream's elements, his dream turned text does not reveal poetry's causes so much as its indelible effects. As the poem passes through the bookworm, who in turn passes through Freud's books, we see how both the dream and the text are the objects of complex causal schemes, how overdetermination passes through apparently indeterminate ingurgitations and out again. Freud's description of the dream's many associations illuminate a complicated web, one startling in its revelation of unseen threads (Fäden ungesehen) and its intimation of inmost wishes. In joining text and sustenance, in showing our most ordinary and embarrassing effects in the streaks they leave on the page, the material the worm has given us is one effect among many, but it also points us toward poetry's material grounds, toward the bog in which matter, poetic and otherwise, resides. But Faust's infernal,

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 22 An intriguing counterpoint is to be found in the labor, and poetics, of the silkworm, which Crim (2020) reads across Marx and Bervin's *Silk Poems*.

23 For Strachey, reading itself follows a sequence of ex-corporation from author to reader: "The author excretes his thoughts and embodies them in the printed book; the reader takes them, and, after chewing them over, incorporates them into himself" (Strachey 1930, p. 328.) I cannot help wondering, however, if this human centipede might better describe, for Strachey at least, translation. A more recent count of reading as "not merely an intrapsychic, but rather an intersubjective entity" (p. 119), bringing a Bionian framework to the matter of reading, is to be found in Maniadakis 2016.

soul-sealing contract points us in an additional direction, however: while the dreamer's wish necessarily takes place in the optative mood, it is in the indicative mood, with its promise to turn the multi-causal node into the scene of prediction and certainty, that we find another poetic method of noticing connections and explaining their causes, namely, a poetry of conspiracy.

On Behalf of Bog: "A Swelling of the Ground"

I return, therefore, to Emily Dickinson's head and the products of it. Known for her "choosing not choosing," as Sharon Cameron describes Dickinson's characteristically indeterminate syntax,²⁴ Dickinson makes the multiplication of meaning an interpretive challenge for the most routine grammatical parsing of her poems. She seems at first glance a perfect test case for textual overdetermination of the sort Freud's ingenious method of reading makes available. And she likewise has an uncanny grasp of how weird causation can be²⁵ and not just because she intimates that poems can have strange effects on some of their readers. Showing how one of Dickinson's most famous and most commented-upon poems, "I'm Nobody!," relocates the problem of causation to a problem of both the causal and the literal ground of the "bog," I argue that Dickinson makes of our multi-causal analysis an even stickier affair than that of the Freudian bookworm above.²⁶ For Dickinson grasps a special problem for causation's recognition in portraying its appearance first in the serious abstraction of conspiracy before offering its dissolution in the earthy stuff of bog. In the case of Dickinson's bog, it is not that, when it comes to poetry's "cause," that the "center cannot hold," to borrow Yeats' apocalyptic verse, but rather that it never could because it was always bog.

Emily Dickinson was preoccupied with bog enough to have mentioned it in multiple poems. It was good enough stuff for poetry, even when the substance itself kept questionable company:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –

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24 Cameron 1992.

25 See, for instance, Dickinson's "Rehearsal to Ourselves," which seems to intuit Stoic causation. Dickinson 1999, p. 296.

26 Of course, Dickinson herself was famous for producing her own literary disjecta. On Dickinson's envelope poems and on lyric recognition, see especially Jackson 2005.

To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!²⁷

Much has been said about Dickinson's "pair" of "Nobodies" here. Most recently, Alain Badiou has located in the "pair" of Nobodies the mark of the impersonal, a refreshing alternative to a croaking liberal subject and, as such, an admirable alternative to the noxious individualism that began long before Emily Dickinson did.²⁸ The poem supports this reading well enough because, to be fair, it is easy to see how being "Somebody" might be a "dreary" state, one somehow already filthy with bog even before the poem arrives at its immersion, a circumstance perhaps even wounded in its own way by the etymological "gore" that inheres in the "dreary" (as in its now obsolete usage and its root in Old English "*dréorig* gory, bloody, sorrowful, sad").²⁹ In her ironic rejection of the fame of being "Somebody," the reclusive Emily Dickinson performs to her fabled reputation as attic hermit and perhaps even offers a flicker of political hope along the way.

But the poem's speaker, hailing its absent addressee, perhaps summoning a sympathetic reader, assumes that there is a kind of virtual community when there is no one to answer, at least not in the reader's earshot. The conclusion that "Then there's a pair of us" points to a "there" where the "pair" is more apparent than actual, produced by the speaker's own multiplication of "Nobody" or from the still more vague possibility that shouting "I'm Nobody!" might—in some locales, in certain "theres"—produce an echo, as it does across the poem's homophonous repetitions in which such pairing announces "two" (i.e., in the "too," "to," "to," "to" that trickles through the stanzas). Still, there is a relatively smooth sequence of cause and effect, stable enough such that future actions and future consequences can be predicted with the relative certitude of the conditional "would": if you're nobody, then there's a pair of us, and if you tell, then they will advertise. The sticking point here, I think, lies in what "they" do when "they...advertise." The third person plural "they" anticipates the nasty and "public" croak from the second stanza. But it is also a conspiratorial mark: the "they" that advertises does something warped with the poetic matter of "verse": like a pervert but more pointedly, the advertiser twists or turns (*vertere*) toward (*ad*). "They" also seem to warp knowledge, making something public rather than permitting what's untold – or told only in confidence – to remain a secret: to advertise is to make everyone know rather than just one (or two, "you know!").

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²⁷ Dickinson 1999, pp. 116-117.

²⁸ Badiou 2022, pp. 120-122.

²⁹ "dreary, adj.," *OED* 2022.

Now I do not want to suggest that the speaker of the poem seduces its addressee or the reader into a kind of “Bog-Anon,” a secret society in which one Nobody speculates to another about what “They” do. But I think it is important to state the obvious, namely, that Nobody is talking (maybe *to* Nobody) about Nobodies and Somebodies with the certainty that another party altogether, “They” – themselves weirdly neither Nobodies nor Somebodies exactly – has the power either to “advertise” (making a Nobody a Somebody) or even to “banish” (making a Nobody a Somebody who lives Nowhere).³⁰ The flicker of paranoid knowledge (“you *know!*”), the identificatory fantasia that seemingly requires no answer from the interlocutor (“there’s a pair of us!”), performs at once a certainty in the stability of a causal order (if you tell, then this will come to pass) and an exciting crescendo just before the poem’s bathetic relocation to the swamp. It is this causal landscape, frankly the most straightforward of those I’ve discussed, that I want to investigate here: the kind where “They” do things and mere nobodies speculate about them and the order of things they orchestrate. Because Emily Dickinson may have gotten her head taken off many times upon encountering poems, because the things we dream about may contain secret messages from the day, from our deeper pasts, and from the literature that intrudes upon them should we try to turn those dreams to text, it is worth noting the superficial (I stress superficial) similarity of our furtive Nobody and the conspiracy theorist.

Because nothing deflates a conspiracy so fast as a frog’s belch. To be sure, the breathy exclamations of the poem continue (there are six exclamations across its eight lines, as if sparing two lines from enthusiasm for the sake of our “pair”), but the opening question “Who are you?” of the first stanza cedes to two “hows” in the second, “hows” that measure and valorize rather than interrogate: “How dreary,” “How public.” As “how” designates an unspecified extent, “They” recede entirely, and the machinations of both “advertisement” and “banishment” enjoy an exile, too, cast aside as the poem turns to organic matter. This movement, from the abstract to the mud offers something of a repetition of the fate that befell the clean concept of overdetermination as the threads of a saturated causation took their place alongside the worm’s excretions in the discussion of Freud above. Here, the second person address concludes, as if the secret of the Nobodies is kept, and its brevity (a mere four lines) contrasts with the ironic eternal summer of the “livelong June” of ranine self-congratulation. In this way, Dickinson’s second stanza enacts its own conspiratorial protection of the potential secrecy of the first stanza but also makes of our glimpse of the causal an affair that ends in muck. This does not so much indulge the conspiracy theorist’s tendency to “monocausal explanations that largely resist

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30 “Banish” is the variant of “advertise” in Line 4.

refutation”³¹ as suggest that revelations about an overdetermined causal order may be more humble and more humbling: a keen grasp of how quiet non-conformists are likely to be treated may offer a momentary respite, a fleeting June and not a livelong one, a brief hiatus from the usual demands on attention from the loudest segments of the public. It might just be a conspiracy in its literal sense, a breathing taken together (from *con-* with and *spirare*, to breathe).

I would like, then, not so much to defend the bog from which the nasty frog of Dickinson’s poem gurgles its obnoxious self-promotions as to ask what the bog is the basis of, for this poem, and to ask how “bog” might be useful for thinking about poetry and the problems of “cause” I have adumbrated above. In “I’m Nobody!,” the bog is where the frog names itself, where it is audible even to the point of noxiousness. It is elsewhere, for Dickinson, the place where a fleeting beauty that requires no declaration at all to announce its extraordinary becoming as its beauty arrives in fantastic color: “It will be summer eventually.... //The wild rose – redden in the Bog -.”³² In still another poem, bog is the guileless substance that sticks to the speaker’s boot:

A Bog affronts my shoe.
What else have Bogs to do –

The only Trade they know —
The splashing men?³³

Like the bog of our poem, this one bears the capacity to offend, but it is plainly not the bog’s blame, just as it is not the fault of the burdock of the same poem that snares her dress when she comes “too near.”³⁴ To be sure, the “nearness” of the bog is a threat of a kind in our poem, too. For this bog has a special capacity not only to “splash” (and be splashed in) but likewise to “admir[e].” One wonders even if the bog might sometimes gaze back. The bog’s “nearness,” however, places it very close to the speaker’s foot, the metrical one, shod here and audible, in spite of the soft ground beneath, thanks to the sound of verse. The soft bog of our poem not only absorbs the abstractions of the first stanza and permits the wallowing of the sordidly aspirational but also reminds us that bog, too, is “ground.” It is the “ground” that causes “splash[es]” and stains, the stuff where summer rose’s wildly “redden[s].” It is likewise where a poem, or at least a stanza (from the Italian for “room”), may be submerged, not so

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31 Spiegel 2022, p. 66n20.

32 Dickinson 1999, pp. 171-172.

33 Dickinson 1999, p. 129.

34 Ibid.

unlike Dickinson's "House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground."³⁵

In "I'm Nobody!," the bog ambiguously grounds Emily Dickinson's poem rather than causes it, and in doing so, it permits us to see a "bog" that is the "end" of a poem, the literal terminus, that is, but also its pleasantly indifferent telos. In a world of nobodies, somebodies, frogs, and "The[m]," the bog is something else altogether. It seems instead to resuscitate the Aristotelian category of *adiaphora*, or things indifferent, in its weird role in our poem and across its other boggish appearances. In each invocation, it happens to be there, it often inconveniences, and its existence, however predictable (the splash may surprise us, but the fact of it does not), seems to produce effects better described as undermining than overdetermining. The ambiguous imputation of the bog's capacity for "admiration" is too ironic to be taken seriously, and no one would begrudge frogs unhailed by simile their preferred habitats. The bog does not cause or make judgments about the rose's reddening. And in its contact with the speaker's "shoe" it offers a welcome alternative to "Trade" in illuminating, or rather splashing, the poetic foot's "tread." The bog is the muck in which celebrity-seeking frogs call attention to themselves, and its "admiration" (from *ad* toward, *mirare* to marvel) entails being *enmired* (from "en" in and "mire," mud, or, simply just bog). In its peaty invocation, "admiration" extirpates one root and puts a boggy one in its place. To look to the bog for the ordinary kind of "admiration" is the "Somebody's" mistake, for bog is the matter under foot, the splashing stuff revelatory of the unavoidable and indifferent contact between parts of matter, including between poem and ground.

I began this essay with two problems for poetry: the difficulty of its recognition and definition, on the one hand, and the problems of poetry's "cause," on the other. In its old invocation by Aristotle, poetry distinguished itself as "more philosophical and more serious than history"³⁶ because it dealt with that which was "possible" in contrast to telling what had already happened. When bog is under foot, history and poetry and philosophy are no longer distinguishable. And this is why I want to praise the bog rather than overlook it. In "I'm Nobody!," the bog is the end of the poem. It is the last word, but I think it also registers the poem's effect; it receives the conspiracy of the first stanza in its muted indifference, and in doing so, we gain not insight into "Them" and their machinations but rather that a fleeting certitude may end up in silence, in bathos, or simply in the mud. In Freud's Goethe, we see the terms of a poem's survival in similarly earthy terms: a poem might simply pass

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35 So Dickinson puts it in her "Because I Did Not Stop for Death." Dickinson 1999, pp. 219-220.

36 Aristotle 1995, pp. 58-59. Although "*spoudaioteron*" is often rendered as "more elevated," I translate it as "more serious," fittingly for our bog, which tends to be below rather than above.

through the reader, some of them bookworms, to become a sort of bog again. In this way, the abstract stuff of poetry and its determinations both issues matter and is of it. What it makes “happen” or the “nothing” into which it decays is a production in and of the matter it causes, the matter that grounds it.

In approaching the present of poetry in this way, we might see the poem as enmired in history, in the matter of our most searching philosophical questions and our most banal; the poem may be or become the bog we might chance upon should it float to the surface. Across an ocean and a century, Seamus Heaney wrote in one of his bog poems, “The ground itself is kind, black butter.” We know this “kind” to entail more than one type of “kind,” to house both the sympathetic adjective but also the familiar noun meaning “kin.” “Melting and opening under foot,” the bog grounds the poem’s metrical feet even as it occasionally threatens to subsume them. If there is a kind of yearning, in “missing its last definition,” it is not in the nature of the bog to desire but just to be there, for “millions of years,” to be shouted upon or into by the crass, to be contributed to by the bookworm. It survives. And, on occasion, it is grasped by the poet in spite of, or perhaps because of, its ungraspable and yet utterly ordinary depth: “The wet centre is bottomless.”³⁷

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37 Heaney 1972, p. 42.

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