“The birds swim through the air at top speed”:

Kinetic Identification in Keats, Whitman, Williams, Stevens, and Dickinson

(Notes toward a Poetics)

“Not two, and not one.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“There is no place to put this whole body.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

“You and I are already dead. We think later we’ll be dead, but that’s baloney. Actually, right now in each breath we are alive and we are dead. We don’t know that and that’s why we are suffering.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1. So What the hell is it?**

One time back in the day, in New York where I grew up, at the ballet (probably Balanchine), my friend David, who’s intensely musical but doesn’t like to dance, said yeah, he guessed it was alright, but really he didn’t exactly see the point of a lot of people moving around making illustrations of the music. Which had pretty much nothing to do, I realized, with the mostly kinetic registrations which made me a balletomane, feeling the leaps and turns and lifts as if in my body. If you don’t like dance, maybe sports spectatorship (wrong word then) works the same way for you. Anyway that’s basically what I mean by “kinetic identification.”

Quick caveat: I.A. Richards makes some smart, acerbic remarks in *Practical Criticism* about “visualizers,” this among them: “It may seem to the visualizers that the poet works through [visual] imagery, but this impression is an accident of their mental constitution.”[[4]](#footnote-4) So maybe what follows is just the musing of a kineticizer—nice if you’re kineticizer; if not, not? But I’ll claim as an extenuating circumstance the evidence that the poets I’ll talk about today were themselves kineticizers of the first rank.

Second quick caveat: identification isn’t identity. I didn’t think I knew what it was like to be Suzanne Farrell through and through, or that, a la Whitman when he’s purple, I had assumed one identity with her. But here’s Walt ratcheted back a bit: “these [ . . . ] tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them”[[5]](#footnote-5): traces of the outside tracing an inside, echoes in (or of) a phantasmatic body.

It seems epistemologically grumpy to lean too hard on the limitations of such identifications, concocting, say, a bad monad theory in which they wholly miss their objects. In such moments some particular motion or gesture seems to impinge on us with special sharpness, shooting a gap***.***

They may often be isolated. Keats: “Or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.”[[6]](#footnote-6) I read this as a summary that inverts the logic of its occurrence: *because* I pick about the gravel when it does, I take part in the sparrow’s existence; it’s that kinetic relay, provoked by chance occurrence, that cues the rush of partial but sharp identification.

Such moments may be characteristically synaesthetic, though often not spectacularly so. So Walter Jackson Bate, paraphrasing and then quoting from Hazlitt’s 1816 essay “On Gusto,” notes that “the attributes or qualities that we glean through our different senses of sight, hearing, touch, and the rest are not presented separately or piecemeal, but ‘the impression made on one sense excites by affinity those of another.’”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart dwells at some length on the particular relay between the visual and the tactile or kinetic: “Tactile qualities,” she notes, “[can] be taken up in forms of presentation that we often think of as dominantly visual.”[[8]](#footnote-8) “Proximate vision,” she quotes Ortega y Gasset asserting, “has a tactile quality. What mysterious resonance of touch is preserved by sight when it converges on a nearby object? . . . It is enough that we recognize this quasi-tactile density possessed by the ocular ray, which permits it, in effect, to embrace, to touch. . . .”[[9]](#footnote-9) And she quotes Heinrich Wolfflin on the element of identification which mingles with the imagined sense of contact : “We always project a corporeal state conforming to our own onto the object of interpretation.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Keats, famously, seems to have been unusually susceptible to such kinetic reverberations. “He might,” Bate reports, “in describing the bearbaiting to Clarke, instinctively begin to imitate not only the spectators but the bear, ‘dabbing his fore paws hither and thither,’ and, in diagnosing Clarke’s stomach complaint and comparing the stomach to a brood of baby-birds ‘gaping for sustenance,’ automatically open his own ‘capacious mouth.’”[[11]](#footnote-11) Drawing on “Severn’s account of his walks with Keats on Hampstead Heath,” Bate notes Keats’s

vivid identification with organic motion in what he called “the inland sea”—the movement of the wind across a field of grain. . . . . “when ‘a wave was billowing through a tree,’ as he described the uplifting surge of air among swaying masses of chestnut or oak foliage,” or when he would hear in the distance “the wind coming across woodlands,”

“The tide! the tide!” he would cry delightedly, and spring on to some stile, or upon the low bough of a wayside tree, and watch the passage of the wind upon the meadow-grasses or young corn, not stirring till the flow of air was all around him.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Or, with Clarke again, “doubtless feeling the weight of the parting billows on his own shoulders, he ‘*hoisted* himself up, and looked burly and dominant, as he said, “what an image that is—*sea-shouldering whales.*”’”[[13]](#footnote-13)

**2. Are You Being Suzanne Farrell, or Lifting Her?**

“We and everything we perceive / are interwoven and not interwoven, / and this interweaving continues on and on, while each thing stands in its own place.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

“Sparrow goes cheep cheep. Crow goes caw caw.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Those last two examples—Keats anticipating and then leaning into the wind as if it were the tide about to wash over him, or hoisting himself up feeling himself as the whale—highlight a wobble in kinetic registrations I want to draw attention to. Sometimes we’re clearly identifying our bodies with the kinetic activity in front of us, sometimes it’s as if we feel it impinging on us, and sometimes it’s a fuzzy amalgam of the two. This instability is probably a crucial attribute of the labile space shaped by kinetic intimations. “I have noted,” Stewart remarks,

that we do not see our eyes when we see or hear our ears when we hear, but tactile perception involves perception of our own bodily state as we take in what is outside that state. The pressure involved in touch is a pressure on ourselves as well as on objects. Although the hand is paramount, no particular organ is exclusively associated with touch; rather, the entire surface of the body is touch’s instrument. The early mutuality of the mother’s nipple and the child’s mouth is the paradigm for the reciprocity found in all tactile experiences.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

“The showing forth that takes place, literally, in the museum space,” she notes further on, “is a consequence of a series of gestures and actions [in the works of art], and these in turn evoke a set of gestural responses on the part of the viewer.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Are such responses imitative or dialogic, repetition or rejoinder? Often, I think, it would be hard to say.

A related, though not identical variable might be called the degree of permeability of the creatures and objects we see and register in tactile or kinetic echoes: do they seem to rebuff or invite touch or caress (do they let us in), to be all about interweaving and blending or standing staunchly in their own place. One of the things that can keep Whitman’s sometimes tedious lists lively, especially in “Song of Myself,” is this oscillation between sparrow and crow registrations. The crow team: “the geese nip their food with short jerks”[[18]](#footnote-18); “the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou.”[[19]](#footnote-19) And sparrow: “the play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag”[[20]](#footnote-20); or, more disconcertingly, “the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock”[[21]](#footnote-21) (wouldn’t you feel more comfortable putting rattlesnakes under long term contract to The Crows?). Oh: and Keats’s sparrow I think, picking about the gravel, is a sparrow.

Even more frequently than Whitman’s, William Carlos Williams’s poems tend to be composed largely of such variable kinetic and tactile intimations. J. Hillis Miller thus recurs to the figure of the doctor’s learned touch, *tactus eruditus*, evoking palpating as a crucial figure for the way extrapolated touch registers the creatures and objects the poems focus on.[[22]](#footnote-22) I don’t know whether this is true, but my fantasy of it, anyway, is that palpating involves a tricky combination of push-back and identification: the more you press into the object and feel it press back, the more intimately your own hand registers an echo of how it would feel to be it. In several Williams poems, at any rate, the poet’s eye turns out to be a kind of surreptitious palpating machine. Famously, there’s the cat:

POEM

As the cat

climbed over

the top of

the jamcloset

first the right

forefoot

carefully

then the hind

stepped down

into the pit of

the empty

flowerpot[[23]](#footnote-23)

Or the tree:

YOUNG SYCAMORE

I must tell you

this young tree

whose round and firm trunk

between the wet

pavement and the gutter

(where water

is trickling) rises

bodily

into the air with

one undulant

thrust half its height—

and then

dividing and waning

sending out

young branches on

all sides—

hug with cocoons—

it thins

till nothing is left of it

but two

eccentric knotted

twigs

bending forward

hornlike at the top[[24]](#footnote-24)

Williams’s alertness to kinetic and tactile registers is so pervasive that, as Miller notes, he reads dramatic motion from static shape (as we do when we look at a Pollock painting)—“one undulant / thrust” being the signature moment here.[[25]](#footnote-25) Keats lurks as presiding genius here, as process and time are packed into, or read off of, a single moment and a still scene, through imaginative palpation: so in Keats, Bate notes, “process, though slowed to an insistent present, is carried in active solution . . . . Previous functions . . . are a part of the truth of the thing as it now is.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

In “Young Sycamore,” telling as tactile registration acquires an intensity that makes it at least proto-transitive: “it thins” probably predicates “trunk” not “this tree” (though given the maniacally branching syntax it’s a little hard to be *absolutely* sure), so that if we read “tell,” as we normally would, as intransitive (I must tell you *that* this tree) the utterance is unfinished (I must tell you that this tree—what?)—as, strictly grammatically, it is, as the tree leaning forward into its future is too).[[27]](#footnote-27) Nevertheless, the tree is *told*: I tell or toll it, give it to you palpably by running your imaginary hand along its surface with mine.

One other quick point about that undulant / thrust. There’s certainly a mimetic quotient here, registering, as Williams’s enjambments so often do, a muscular bursting through resistance and impediment.[[28]](#footnote-28) But as Kenner also points out, that’s only part of the story: schooled by Marianne Moore’s prickly syllabic verse though he never wrote in syllabics, Williams derived a sense of the line as a compromise formation among mimesis, expressive rhythm, and the impersonal triangulation of what we might call the synchronic dimension of the language*,* the recalcitrant materiality of the linguistic structures that generate the movement of the machine of English.[[29]](#footnote-29) More broadly, the characteristic relation between a poem’s verbal rhythms and the rhythms of the creatures and objects its words track is probably not simply imitative—at any rate we might prefer Williams and Whitman to, say, Vachel Lindsay—or Balanchine to Agnes DeMille—not hankering after a straightforward rhythmic mapping of the point guard’s wily dribbling in the bounce of the poet’s syllables. The compromise formation I’m adducing is characteristically complex enough to make efforts to disentangle mimetic, expressive, and synchronic-language-system strands generally more tedious than fruitful.

**3. Leaves as Rats**

I want to revisit briefly a couple of the Whitman phrases we glanced at a moment ago, to pick up on another aspect of their kinetic performance. Trope plays a crucial if compressed role in several of them. The implicit area of intersection is often tactile: “the alligator in his tough pimples.” Or it can be kinetic: “the play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag” (does anyone else get it tiny hit of dog here? “wag,” at any rate, won’t be found in most lexicons of literal tree movement verbs. I think that, oddly enough, the subliminal dog lurking around here helps give the tree something of its inviting and permeable sparrow quality). My hunch is that such tropes often enter the picture not at the end-game stage of “let’s tell ’em what we know,” but in the moment and as the mode of the initial recognition: I get what the motion of the tree boughs feels like as I register, simultaneously, the kinetics of the boughs and the instantly stirred up kinetic traces of the dog’s tail (there’s something about the thickness and strength at the very base of the tail, a little heavier and less supple in its movement than the rest, that’s like, in wind, the swaying of the base of the branch coming out of the trunk). That’s a little strange, not so much because it suggests the centrality, for humans, of a mania for analogy, as because it locates the moment of human empathy within an ongoing, not merely human, chain of kinetic reverberations: a world as if ghosted by Balanchine.

Master of intersections dancing with non-intersections, of startling displacements and syncopations, Balanchine might serve as tutelary spirit for a reading of the odd trope from early Stevens I used as my section title: “When the elephant’s-ear in the park / Shrivelled in frost, / And the leaves on the paths / Ran like rats.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Here metaphor gets to what’s right by way of something wrong: live self-impelled motion can’t trope the passive movement, caused by wind, of dead leaves—can it? But rats have an odd, frantically rushed scurry that feels weirdly gusted; contrapositively, brittle leaves, bent in myriad shapes which bounce unpredictably, can seem as if they’ve stolen and deflected the wind’s animation, making it their own. In the resultant phantasmatic terrain, we’re maybe a little unsure, for a moment, of what’s animate and what’s not, or where animation comes from. My hunch would be that Stevens, too, “got” the kinetics of the leaves in the moment of being startled by this unlikely trope.

I want to risk poor taste and offer some possibly questionable personal testimony to, at least, the in-on-the-ground-floor status of kinetic metaphor by talking for a moment about a line of my own poetry; it’s a line I’m fond of, which may mean it’s a bad one, but I hope it serves to make a point.

**4. Brief Interlude: Hand Criticism**

“Willie told papa don’t put me down / They’re doin’ that Hand Jive all over town.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

“We reason about them with a later reason.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Here’s the line:

the palm tree clattering shaking loose its birds, skeining away toward the mountain like gum[[33]](#footnote-33)

The part I want to attend to here isn’t the probably annoyingly literary (Pound, Yeats) “skeining” (which is also inverted, since I wanted unwinding not winding), but the slightly Warholesque “like gum” (what’s that mean? umm, nothing). I was about to delete it, as too proudly pushy non sequitur, when I got a mental hand motion. There’s that kid thing where you keep one end of the gum in your teeth and the other in your hand, pulling out and down**,** and at some point pretty soon some combination of the increased stretchiness of the pulled and thinned gum and the weight of the little blob below the stretchy part makes the falling gum mass quickly accelerate (compare O’Hara noting how Pollock’s thinning of a line makes it seem to pick up speed) and then as you curve it out going away from your body now almost horizontally you can imagine that accelerated motion arcing back upward and—up, up, and away--like the birds, gathering speed and shooting off toward the Catalinas. I’m pretty sure all *that* was there when I wrote the line, in a hurry, just as the feel of the curved and accelerated motion and the words “like gum,” no more thought than that, a little sense-memory message from the body.

In my literature classes we do something called “hand criticism.” It started when I kept noticing that, at least once or twice a class, someone would be struggling to name what was going on in a particular passage in a poem—not finding a suitable term for the tone or the local speech act, say—while at the same time making gestures with his hands that accurately embodied what was going on. So a student might be saying “he’s unhappy” while making an up-and-down chopping gesture with two hands (one hand going up while the other goes down) concerning a moment in the poem where “he’s ambivalent” or “he’s feeling conflicted” would do the trick; or “she’s uncertain” (while holding up both hands and twirling them quickly around) where “she’s agitated” would be better; or “he’s disagreeing with her” (while making a gesture of pushing away with both hands) where one might say “he’s rejecting her.” Very often, just drawing attention to the hand gesture is enough to elicit the occluded term. So the poem gets into the body as kinetic traces, reverberations we can turn back into words.

**5. “Not knowing is most intimate.”**[[34]](#footnote-34)

“A picture held us captive”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Kinetic particulars that arrive with an especially startlingly intensity, a jolt, seem often to have a close relation to the quick crumbling away of some range of received certainties—a picture we took for granted, of how things are, goes poof. If that’s an experience to which inveterate meditators may be especially liable, it’s also at the heart of Keats’s musings about negative capability and, I think, of the Keatsian poetics that makes its way into such American inheritors as Dickinson, Williams, and Moore (Whitman is a tricky case). So the sparrow picking about the poet’s window in the November 22, 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey is located by Bate within the gravitational field that centers on the December 21st letter to Keats’s brothers—“I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”[[36]](#footnote-36) A later, October 27, 1818 letter (to Richard Woodhouse) effectively links the two concerns in the figure of the chameleon poet—a degree-zero instance who would have no settled conceptions or self-conceptions, and who would be peculiarly liable to being washed over by intense identifications: “As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing--It has no character. . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other body--”[[37]](#footnote-37)

The jolt of intensely registered sensation—it need not be kinetic, but often is—and the falling away of the taken-for-granted model or picture tend to happen with a kind of bang/bang succession that makes priority difficult to sort out, though I think maybe the jolt typically comes first. But they tend to have a cascading effect, opening outward with a kind of quick alternation (and the opening can be vast, however small the instigation). Here are the first two stanzas of a remarkable Dickinson poem, # 328, that runs the cascading process in slo-mo:

A Bird came down the Walk—

He did not know I saw—

He bit an Angleworm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew

From a convenient Grass—

And then hopped sidewise to the Wall

To let a Beetle pass—[[38]](#footnote-38)

This is as pert as you please (though by the end of the poem it’s clear that this retrospective scene is being recounted by a speaker whose relation to the ostensible jaunty confidence of her bouncy narrative is in fact a ploy). The pretty regular meter (no big bumps in the road) and insouciant full-rhyme convey what the tropes tell us too: the speaker evokes what seems to be the narcissistically gratifying mirror of nature, where we’re met by a carefully framed creature who’s a diminutive version of ourselves. So the bird “came down” the walk, in promenade, hopping sidewise in a display of good manners that’s also an impressive triumph of intentionality (*To* let a beetle pass). And if he committed a small faux pas—eating the worm in a condition that puts him on the wrong side of the Levi-Straussian nature/culture divide--the lapse was after all supposed to be discreet and might thus be pardoned. And at least he prepped the worm into careful portions before he chomped it. Nature, too, has been graciously arranged and measured, by obliging unseen hands: how nice to have our Dews pre-packaged (would you like another, Sir?), and ensconced amid the conveniences.

It’s a dream from which it would be difficult not to wake. Here’s the saving intrusion:

He glanced with rapid eyes

That hurried all around—

They looked like frightened Beads, I thought—

He stirred his Velvet Head[[39]](#footnote-39)

“around / Head”!? Off-rhyme indeed: a mirror smashed. The meter’s still regular, I guess, but look at the heavily enjambed third line, and at what it jams into the final foot, stuck awkwardly at the line end between a disconcertingly non-parallel comma and dash: “I thought.” It could hardly be clunkier, this moment where thought hears itself go clunk: um, I thought. Like the mirror, our little gentleman is reduced to shards: he isn’t even himself anymore, just a loose confederation, a heap, of semi-autonomous, disconcerting kinetic attributes, intensely, jarringly registered. It’s a crow moment more than a sparrow one: the eyes are the windows of the *what*? Having a mind of their own, if mind is the right word, they scurry around (almost like rats or leaves, one is tempted to say). Obeying what animating intention, O beads? Well, at least they’re frightened beads (getting animate again here Boss): but the oxymoron implodes any incipient comfort, abrupting in that awkward, self-deprecating “I thought.” Poof.

Such a small thing; just a bird going opaque on us. Yet things immediately get richer, and then they get stranger. “He stirred his Velvet Head.” At least there’s an animate and animating presence here, taking control: but notice how emptied out “He” is of all its earlier cloying, patronizing resonance. The textural “Velvet” seems a little more inviting than what precedes it, but its status as finery may warn away touch, the comparison, here again, to something inanimate quash any resurgent impulse toward prosopopoeia.

Things immediately get stranger. We need the final line from stanza three as run-up:

He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,

I offered him him a Crumb[[40]](#footnote-40)

We think we know what’s where, do we? He stirred his velvet head like one in danger, cautiously, and I offered him a crumb? No, he stirred his velvet head like one in danger, so I cautiously offered him a crumb? No, he stirred his velvet head, and in this suddenly strange moment, I offered him a crumb cautiously, like one in danger. Maybe. Instead of a mirror, it’s as if there’s an alert membrane here, a permeable boundary between the speaker and the bird that’s uncomfortable, charged, as if alive itself, a fuzzy border where things might get lost, or found, or changed. We’re not quite sure anymore what belongs to the bird, what belongs to us, and what’s fallen into the space in play between the two.[[41]](#footnote-41)

1. **Lift Off**

To get at what happens next, I’m going to haul in an at least ostensibly extraneous heuristic here—pretty abruptly, in the HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME spirit: the trope of the Buddha’s three bodies: Nirmanakaya, Sambhogakaya, Dharmakaya. Dickinson’s poem might be said to start in the space where we mostly spend our time, the Nirmanakaya, apparent fixities and definites buttressed by firm categorical boundaries. Dreams, visions, the fuzzed semi-awareness before sleep, prolonged meditation, koan work, and poems, among other compromise formations that seem to arise in response to liminal space, can gouache the Nirmanakaya into Sambhogakaya. “One of the features of the *sambhogakaya* . . .” writes Australian-American Zen teacher and poet John Tarrant, “is the instability of the landscape. It is the domain of those fleeting, unstable, and haunting experiences that seem both to be located in the body and to transcend the bounds of the body.”[[42]](#footnote-42) “The intimate, tender not-knowing that appears in the inner life of the Zen student,” he notes, “is an emergent form of the openness, the cloudiness of this realm. . . . . The core of this world is its *both-and* quality. *Sambhogakaya*, seems both numinous and intensely personal.”[[43]](#footnote-43) I’d hoped to hover here awhile, in a poetry terrain that might include, along with the shifty membrane space in Dickinson’s poem, Whitman’s catalogues (at least at their best) and the floaty, voice-thrown vaporous presence of Whitman’s poet figure, flowing around you and even within you; and, less imperially, the haunting “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet” stanza of the Nightingale ode;[[44]](#footnote-44) and, with a more disconcerting edge, Moore’s “The Fish”[[45]](#footnote-45) and parts of “A Grave,”[[46]](#footnote-46) and Williams’s “Spring Strains.”[[47]](#footnote-47) But what about the *dharmakaya*? “It refers to the place beyond categories that is empty or mysterious,” Tarrant says, “the place without form from which all form comes. . . .”[[48]](#footnote-48) Or, we can add, it might include meeting a form that seems to have just emerged from that place, still numinous--“the formless form comes into form,” as the great eighteenth century Japanese teacher Hakuin put it--or to be slipping back into it.[[49]](#footnote-49) Here’s Dickinson, as the charged space we’ve been looking at morphs into that vastness:

Like one in danger, Cautious,

I offered him a Crumb

And he unrolled his feathers

And rowed him softer home—

Than Oars divide the Ocean,

Too silver for a seam—

Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon

Leap, plashless as they swim.[[50]](#footnote-50)

I think there’s a kinetic cue here, a keenly registered detail, suddenly more sparrow than crow like, letting the speaker in: “unrolled his feathers.” It’s a tricky moment: but I take “unrolled” to be that kind of cascading ruffle down the wing from top to bottom, with a little almost shudder, that birds make (oddly, compare HD, “White World”: “Slid from the hill, / as crumbling snow-peaks slide, / citron on citron fill / the valley”).[[51]](#footnote-51) And then the bird takes off, sliding into and through a space that analogy quickly makes vast, luminous, and viscous. The cascade of tropes here, perhaps initially disconcerting, can instead yield the liberating sense that things keep opening up, or out, as each model we have falls away in favor of another.

The strangest phrase, perhaps, is “Banks of Noon,” a compressed moniker, maybe, for “Banks of flowers *at* noon” that confoundingly yokes concrete object and abstract temporal marker--not a bad thing to do in a stanza in which form and emptiness slide into or out of each other. “Noon,” a concordance might show, is also a Dickinson name for the blinding light of direct vision (think Stevens’s “Credences of Summer”),[[52]](#footnote-52) as in the disconcerting degree zero of “And Consciousness—is Noon” that abruptly ends #1056, “There is a Zone whose even Years,” --the mirror tumbling into the mirror.[[53]](#footnote-53) But here the glinting light is bearable, in fact bears us up (if we go with the bird), like liquid. Everything seems slowed down, as if moving through air were like moving through water—like the world of the grapefruit sized baseball that in-a-zone Reggie Jackson hit into the stands three times on three pitches in the 1977 World Series to beat the Dodgers; or as in Yunmen’s great koan asking for the difference awakening makes: “I don’t ask you about before the fifteenth day; try to say something about after the fifteenth day”:[[54]](#footnote-54) Xuedo’s poem on the koan, in *The Blue Cliff Record*, responds, in part: “*His relaxed gaze descries the tracks of flying birds. . . . The grasses grow thick.*”[[55]](#footnote-55) Amid the condensations and displacements in Dickinson’s final stanzas, we both don’t and do see the water-like, thickened and viscous air wash outward from the wings, toward us; can’t register and can the resistance and the buoyancy it offers the wings; while the glinting light, not there except as a back-formation from the glinting, maybe sunset, ocean, “too silver for a seam,” which is also not there except for the boat that’s not there, seems nonetheless to bathe the scene as if in a vision; and division--of water by oars that would make a visible line if not for the glinting light; of air by the wings, lines that we could see if air were really as viscous and thick as water—or is it?—appears and disappears in a single moment, unfolding and folding two aspects of something elusive. In this air that might be water, can we breathe? Is there something that can’t, that dies or falls away? something else here that can? [[56]](#footnote-56) “You and I,” writes Norman Fischer, “are already dead. We think later we’ll be dead, but that’s baloney. Actually, right now in each breath we are alive and we are dead. We don’t know that and that’s why we are suffering.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Kinetic identifications, moments in a concatenating dance that’s vast and endless, may at some point carry us past that unhappiness, into that recognition. ““There is no place to put this whole body.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

1. “The birds swim through the air at top speed”: Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (New York, 1994), p. 49.

   Thanks to Gillian Jerome and the University of British Columbia English Department, and Ed Dryden, Lynda Zwinger, and *Arizona Quarterly*, for providing the instigation and opportunity to present earlier versions of this essay; and to Joan Sutherland.

   Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (Boston, 2011), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kūon Yamada, *The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans* (Boston, 2004), p. 101. This is from the poem written on the case by Wumen, the compiler of *The Gateless Gate*. In his commentary on the case Yamada adds: “Your being is so vast there is nowhere to put it!” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Norman Fischer, “The Music of Our Lives: Commentary on Zhaozhou’s Asses Cross, Horses Cross.” http://everydayzen.org/teachings/older/music-our-lives/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York, 1930), pp. 223-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1976), p. 40, line 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Letters of John Keats*, 1:186. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA 1963), p. 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, 2002), p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. José Ortega y Gasset, qtd. in Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Heinrich Wolfflin qtd. in Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, p. 157. On this mingling of our own kinetic experience with our sense of the other see also Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge, England 1913), pp. 55-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bate, *John Keats*, p. 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bate, *John Keats*, pp. 254-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bate, *John Keats*, p. 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Shitou Xiqian, “Taking Part in the Gathering,” Awakened Life, Texts and Services (Santa Fe, privately printed, 2010), 2:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hakuun Yasutani, qtd. by Joan Sutherland in conversation with the author, January 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, pp. 162-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Whitman, “Song of Myself,” p. 59, line 758. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Whitman, “Song of Myself,” p. 57, line 722. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Whitman, “Song of Myself,” p. 26, line 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Whitman, “Song of Myself,” p. 57, line 721. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See J. Hilllis Miller, “Introduction,” in *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1966), p. 8: “above all touch, that tactus eruditus . . . which it is proper for a physician to have. The assimilation of the world by the senses makes of the body a kinesthetic pantomime of the activity of nature.” Miller cites Williams’s own use of the term in “Della Primavera Trasportata al Morale”: see A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, eds., *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939* (New York, 1986), p. 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*, p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*, pp. 266-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Miller, “Introduction,” pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Bate, *John Keats*, p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. On this point see Miller, “Introduction,” p. 9. For the rest of Miller’s superb reading of the poem see pp. 7-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Punctuation, like enjambment, can also be marshalled for mimetic purposes; we might look especially at moments where punctuation is inserted, or omitted, in violation of usage rules. Williams’s work offers salient instances. Here’s the conclusion of “The Last Words of My English Grandmother”:

    On the way

    we passed a long row

    of elms. She looked at them

    awhile out of

    the ambulance window and said,

    What are all those

    fuzzy-looking things out there?

    Trees? Well, I’m tired

    of them and rolled her head away.

    *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*, p. 465.

    “Usage rules” is admittedly a bit of a misnomer here, since the grandmother’s words are initially marked off not by quotation marks but by an introductory comma; but we have a right (don’t we?) to expect a matching comma at the end of her speech. Its absence serves as kinetic registration: there’s no pause at all between her last (laudable) burst of irritable energy and her head rolling away in death. Williams’s work is full of such effects. Frank O’Hara’s poetry would also conspicuously repay this sort of attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Kenner, *A Homemade World*, pp. 102-04. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 112 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Johnny Otis, “Willie and the Hand Jive,” Capitol Records, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Tenney Nathanson, *Ghost Snow Falls through the Void (Globalization)* (Tucson, 2010), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “The Book of Serenity,” trans. Joan Sutherland (unpublished translation). This is from Case 20. For a published version of the case see Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues* (Boston, 2005), pp. 86-90. Cleary has “not knowing is nearest” (p. 86). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1999), p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *The Letters of John Keats*, 1:193. For Bate’s discussion of this cluster see John Keats, pp. 233-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *The Letters of John Keats*, 1:386-87. Miller adduces a similar constellation in Williams, the poet’s emptied out sense of his own identity allowing for intense identifications. In Williams’s early poem “The Wanderer,” as Miller notes, the poet figure sinks into the “filthy Passaic” and is “swallowed up by ‘the utter depth of its rottenness’” (New Jersey speak for practicing negative capability). In a letter to Marianne Moore which Miller quotes, Williams explains that “something . . . occurred once when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up.” See Miller, “Introduction,” p. 7. For the passage from “The Wanderer” see *The Collected Poems* *of William Carlos Williams*: Volume I 1909-1939, p. 35. For the letter to Moore see John C. Thirwall, ed., The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams (New York, 1957), p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston, 1960), p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Such destabilizations are characteristic of what Laura U. Marks, in her work on film, calls “haptic visuality,” a mode of visual experience compounded with a sense of touch (or kinetics) at least partly congruent to what I’ve been calling “kinetic identification.” Characterized by “a shifting between distance and closeness,” “haptic images invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity into close and bodily contact with the image” so that “the viewer gives up her own sense of separateness from the image.” (Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* [Minneapolis, 2002], p. 13.) The haptic image “offers its object to the viewer but only on the condition that its unknowability remain intact, and that the viewer, in coming closer, give up his or her own mastery” (*Touch*, p. 20). See also Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC 2000), especially 141-42 and 162-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. John Tarrant, “Zen, Poetry, and the Great Dream Buddha,” in *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich (Boston, 1991), p. 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Tarrant, “Zen, Poetry, and the Great Dream Buddha,” p. 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA, 1982), pp. 280-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Moore, *Complete Poems*, pp. 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Moore, *Complete Poems*, pp. 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*, pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Tarrant, “Zen, Poetry, and the Great Dream Buddha,” p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hakuin Ekaku, “Praise Song for Meditation,” Awakened Life, Texts and Services (Santa Fe, privately printed, 2010), 1:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 156. Sharon Cameron points to the poem’s “contrast between diachronic progression and the synchrony that surpasses it, between the mortal world which can be fathomed and the magical one which evades the understanding as it evades the eye.” See Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore, 1979), p, 7. The poem, I think, suggests they’re the same world, and that it’s possible to see it from both perspectives at once. A similar outlook seems to animate Cameron’s more recent *Beautiful Work: A Meditation on Pain* (Durham, NC, 2000); see for example pp. 92-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. H. D., *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz (New York, 1983), p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 376: “It was difficult to sing in face / Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves / Or else avert the object.” [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 481. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boston, 2005), p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Cleary and Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Such questions also hover in the slowed down “flowers at my feet” stanza of the Nightingale ode, another suspended moment where form and emptiness seem to pass into and out of each other. See Keats, *Complete Poems*, pp. 279-81 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Fischer, “The Music of Our Lives.” Compare Marks on the way the haptic image can offer “a powerful expression of respect and relinquishment at the border of the unknowable experience of death. . . . a reverent nonunderstanding in the face of death.” (*Touch*, p. 20.) [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Yamada, *The Gateless Gate*, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)