

Notes on I stepped from Plank to Plank by Emily Dickinson:

“Stepped” recalls the first word of Plato’s Republic (katabain, “I stepped down”) and the title of Xenophon’s autobiographical account, the Anabasis (“step up,” “ascend”). We don’t need to get into any detail about either work, though – the question is why horizontal motion here, as opposed to vertical motion. Is asking for life to stay roughly on the same course the most difficult thing? Is there some anxiety the speaker is trying to avoid?

“Slow” tells the movement of the body, “cautious” the hesitancy of the mind. Body and mind are united by means of a “way,” a path one must travel: perhaps this is a means, again. The “Stars” are most certainly only felt, not necessarily known. The Sea is most certainly known, and I think we know where the speaker’s gaze is directed. The avoiding of anxiety is itself anxiety, but we didn’t need a packed poem to tell us that.

“I stepped” parallels “I knew not;” not all “ways” are created equal. “Plank to Plank” forces the ambiguity of “but the next:” “plank” is not “blank,” it has content, implying harm to the speaker. “But the next” is closer to “blank,” but is itself hesitancy. “Would be my final inch” – why not “could?” “Could” would imply “can,” thus giving agency to the planks (which are capitalized anyway). “Would” implies will – are we getting an account here of where will must of necessity move? Not ascending, not descending, but straight across?

“This” gave me “that:” something alien to the speaker has been at work the whole time, even as that something is not an external object. “Gait” is not just one’s manner (body/mind unity), but from Old Norse gata, meaning “path.” “Precarious” is the word that stuns: the Latin is precarius, “obtained by entreaty.” Something uncertain is something prayed for.

Some call this “experience,” but this may not be experience. This is the unassisted, unreflective will, perhaps, and it is making the leap into the divine. Fine, but note that the divine itself has literally dealt with an ocean of chaos.