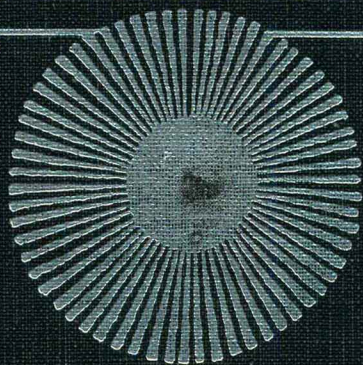

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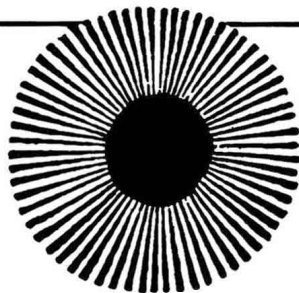
The
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Volume 9

HAROLD BLOOM

General Editor

The
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Volume 9

Late Victorian

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EMILY DICKINSON

1830–1886

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, the second of three children. She was particularly close to her younger sister, Lavinia, who lived at home her entire life, as well as to her older brother, Austin, who married a friend of hers and lived next door to the Dickinson home. Emily Dickinson was descended from a long line of Puritan leaders, including her grandfather, who helped found Amherst College, and her father, Edward, who served as the college's treasurer. A prominent lawyer, Edward Dickinson served as a state judge and later as a U.S. Congressman (1853–55).

Emily attended the Amherst Academy from 1834 to 1847. She then spent a year at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary; however, poor health forced her to end her formal education in 1848. Thereafter, she spent much of her time at home reading and writing poetry, a habit she had begun as a young girl. Much of her early poetry was influenced by Emerson's writings, although her own work generally exhibits a superior control of both rhyme and meter. As a young woman, Dickinson also was influenced by the poetry of Emily Brontë.

Throughout Dickinson's life several men exerted important influences on both her poetry and her personal life. Benjamin F. Newton, a young law clerk in her father's office, encouraged her to continue writing before his death in 1853. During the next two years Dickinson lived with her father in Washington, D.C. On their return home in 1855 they stopped in Philadelphia, where they heard the Rev. Charles Wadsworth preach. Dickinson soon began corresponding with him and she later referred to him as her "dearest earthly friend." In 1862 Wadsworth moved with his family to San Francisco, and his departure deeply hurt Dickinson.

In April 1862 Dickinson sent four of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a writer for the *Atlantic*. Impressed with their originality, he was to serve as Dickinson's quasi-literary agent for the rest of her life. Meanwhile, Dickinson began to devote more and more time to writing. In 1864 she traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to receive treatment for an eye disorder. After returning to Amherst in 1865 she never again left the village, and after 1870 she never ventured beyond the confines of her home and its gardens. During her later years she always dressed in white and was regarded by the people of Amherst as an eccentric.

During her lifetime only six of her poems were published. All appeared anonymously and without her consent, and most were heavily edited. By the time of her death on May 15, 1886, she had written almost 2000 short lyrics, many of which were bound in small handsewn books that she had begun preparing in 1858. Although her sister was determined to publish Emily's poems, family squabbles as well as the chaotic state of her manuscripts resulted in the delayed and haphazard publication of Dickinson's work. Three separate editions of her poetry appeared during the 1890s, but it was not until 1955, with the publication of a three-volume scholarly edition, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, that all of Dickinson's poems were collected. Many of the earlier editions attempted to standardize her unorthodox punctuation and alter some of her unusual constructions; however, with the 1955 edition her poetry finally appeared much as it was originally written.

Although she received only modest critical attention during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dickinson's reputation has grown steadily since the 1920s. Amy Lowell, as a leader of the Imagists, was among the first major poets to recognize Dickinson's contributions to American letters. Today Dickinson stands at the forefront of America's nineteenth-century poets.

YVOR WINTERS

"Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment"

Maule's Curse: Seven Studies

in the History of American Obscurantism

1938, pp. 149–65

Antiquist felt at noon
When August, burning low,
Calls forth this spectral canticle,
Repose to typify.

When the poems of Emily Dickinson first began to appear, in the years shortly following her death, she enjoyed a period of notoriety and of semi-popularity that endured for perhaps ten years; after about ten years of semi-obscurity, her

reputation was revived with the publication of *The Single Hound*, and has lasted unabated to the present day, though with occasional signs that it may soon commence to diminish. A good many critics have resented her reputation, and it has not been hard for them to justify their resentment; probably no poet of comparable reputation has been guilty of so much unpardonable writing. On the other hand, one cannot shake off the uncomfortable feeling that her popularity has been mainly due to her vices; her worst poems are certainly her most commonly praised, and as a general matter, great lyric poetry is not widely read or admired.

The problem of judging her better poems is much of the time a subtle one. Her meter, at its worst—that is, most of the time—is a kind of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon; and there is a remarkable

continuity of manner, of a kind nearly indescribable, between her worst and her best poems. The following poem will illustrate the defects in perfection:

I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks;
And then, prodigious, step
Around a pile of mountains,
And, supercilious, peer
In shanties by the sides of roads;
And then a quarry pare
To fit its sides, and crawl between,
Complaining all the while
In horrid, hooting stanza;
Then chase itself down hill
And neigh like Boanerges;
Then, punctual as a star,
Stop—docile and omnipotent—
At its own stable door.

The poem is abominable; and the quality of silly playfulness which renders it abominable is diffused more or less perceptibly throughout most of her work, and this diffusion is facilitated by the limited range of her metrical schemes.

The difficulty is this: that even in her most nearly perfect poems, even in those poems in which the defects do not intrude momentarily in a crudely obvious form, one is likely to feel a fine trace of her countrified eccentricity; there is nearly always a margin of ambiguity in our final estimate of even her most extraordinary work, and though the margin may appear to diminish or disappear in a given reading of a favorite poem, one feels no certainty that it will not reappear more obviously with the next reading. Her best poems, quite unlike the best poems of Ben Jonson, of George Herbert, or of Thomas Hardy, can never be isolated certainly and defensibly from her defects; yet she is a poetic genius of the highest order, and this ambiguity in one's feeling about her is profoundly disturbing. The following poem is a fairly obvious illustration; we shall later see less obvious:

I started early, took my dog,
And visited the sea;
The mermaids in the basement
Came out to look at me,
And frigates in the upper floor
Extended hempen hands,
Presuming me to be a mouse
Aground, upon the sands.
But no man moved me till the tide
Went past my simple shoe,
And past my apron and my belt,
And past my bodice too,
And made as he would eat me up
As wholly as a dew
Upon a dandelion's sleeve—
And then I started too.
And he—he followed close behind;
I felt his silver heel
Upon my ankle,—then my shoes
Would overflow with pearl.
Until we met the solid town,
No man he seemed to know;
And bowing with a mighty look
At me, the sea withdrew.

The mannerisms are nearly as marked as in the first poem, but whereas the first poem was purely descriptive, this poem is

allegorical and contains beneath the more or less mannered surface an ominously serious theme, so that the manner appears in a new light and is somewhat altered in effect. The sea is here the traditional symbol of death; that is, of all the forces and qualities in nature and in human nature which tend toward the dissolution of human character and consciousness. The playful protagonist, the simple village maiden, though she speaks again in the first person, is dramatized, as if seen from without, and her playfulness is somewhat restrained and formalized. Does this formalization, this dramatization, combined with a major symbolism, suffice effectually to transmute in this poem the quality discerned in the first poem, or does that quality linger as a fine defect? The poem is a poem of power; it may even be a great poem; but this is not to answer the question. I have never been able to answer the question.

Her poetic subject matter might be subdivided roughly as follows: natural description; the definition of moral experience, including the definition of difficulties of comprehension; and mystical experience, or the definition of the experience of "immortality," to use a favorite word, or of beatitude. The second subdivision includes a great deal, and her best work falls within it; I shall consider it last. Her descriptive poems contain here and there brilliant strokes, but she had the hard and uncompromising approach to experience of the early New England Calvinists; lacking all subtlety, she displays the heavy hand of one unaccustomed to fragile objects; her efforts at lightness are distressing. Occasionally, instead of endeavoring to treat the small subject in terms appropriate to it, she endeavors to treat it in terms appropriate to her own temperament, and we have what appears a deliberate excursion into obscurity, the subject being inadequate to the rhetoric, as in the last stanza of the poem beginning, "At half-past three a single bird":

At half-past seven, element
Nor implement was seen,
And place was where the presence was,
Circumference between.

The stanza probably means, roughly, that bird and song alike have disappeared, but the word "circumference," a resonant and impressive one, is pure nonsense.

This unpredictable boldness in plunging into obscurity, a boldness in part, perhaps, inherited from the earlier New Englanders whose sense of divine guidance was so highly developed, whose humility of spirit was commonly so small; a boldness dramatized by Melville in the character of Ahab; this congenital boldness may have led her to attempt the rendering of purely theoretic experience, the experience of life after death. There are numerous poems which attempt to express the experience of posthumous beatitude, as if she were already familiar with it; the poetic terms of the expression are terms, either abstract or concrete, of human life, but suddenly fixed, or approaching fixation, as if at the cessation of time in eternity, as if to the dead the living world appeared as immobile as the dead person appears to the living, and the fixation frequently involves an element of horror:

Great streets of silence led away
To neighborhoods of pause;
Here was no notice, no dissent,
No universe, no laws.
By clocks 'twas morning, and for night
The bells at distance called;
But epoch had no basis here,
For period exhaled.

The device here employed is to select a number of terms representing familiar abstractions or perceptions, some of a

commonplace nature, some relatively grandiose or metaphysical, and one by one to negate these terms; a number of statements, from a grammatical point of view, have been made, yet actually no concrete image emerges, and the idea of the poem—the idea of the absolute dissidence of the eternal from the temporal—is stated indirectly, and, in spite of the brevity of the poem and the gnomic manner, with extraordinary redundancy. We come painfully close in this poem to the irresponsible playfulness of the poem about the railway train; we have gone beyond the irresponsible obscurity of the poem about the bird.

This is technically a mystical poem: that is, it endeavors to render an experience—the rapt contemplation, eternal and immovable, which Aquinas describes as the condition of beatitude—which is by definition foreign to all human experience, yet to render it in terms of a modified human experience. Yet there is no particular reason to believe that Emily Dickinson was a mystic, or thought she was a mystic. The poems of this variety, and there are many of them, appear rather to be efforts to dramatize an idea of salvation, intensely felt, but as an idea, not as something experienced, and as an idea essentially inexpressible. She deliberately utilizes imagery irrelevant to the state with which she is concerned, because she cannot do otherwise; yet the attitude toward the material, the attitude of rapt contemplation, is the attitude which she presumably expects to achieve toward something that she has never experienced. The poems are invariably forced and somewhat theoretical; they are briskly clever, and lack the obscure but impassioned conviction of the mystical poems of *Very*; they lack the tragic finality, the haunting sense of human isolation in a foreign universe, to be found in her greatest poems, of which the explicit theme is a denial of this mystical trance, is a statement of the limits of judgment.

There are a few curious and remarkable poems representing a mixed theme, of which the following is perhaps the finest example:

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.
We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.
We passed the school where children played
At wrestling in a ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.
We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.
Since then 'tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses's heads
Were toward eternity.

In the fourth line we find the familiar device of using a major abstraction in a somewhat loose and indefinable manner; in the last stanza there is the semi-playful pretence of familiarity with the posthumous experience of eternity, so that the poem ends unconvincingly though gracefully, with a formulaary gesture very roughly comparable to that of the concluding couplet of many an Elizabethan sonnet of love; for the rest the poem is a remarkably beautiful poem on the subject of the daily realiza-

tion of the imminence of death—it is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking. In so far as it concentrates on the life that is being left behind, it is wholly successful; in so far as it attempts to experience the death to come, it is fraudulent, however exquisitely, and in this it falls below her finest achievement. Allen Tate, who appears to be unconcerned with this fraudulent element, praises the poem in the highest terms; he appears almost to praise it for its defects¹: “The sharp *gazing* before *grain* instils into nature a kind of cold vitality of which the qualitative richness has infinite depth. The content of death in the poem eludes forever any explicit definition . . . she has presented a typical Christian theme in all its final irresolution, without making any final statement about it.” The poem ends in irresolution in the sense that it ends in a statement that is not offered seriously; to praise the poem for this is unsound criticism, however. It is possible to solve any problem of insoluble experience by retreating a step and defining the boundary at which comprehension ceases, and by then making the necessary moral adjustments to that boundary; this in itself is an experience both final and serious, and it is the experience on which our author's finest work is based.

Let me illustrate by citation. The following poem defines the subject which the mystical poems endeavor to conceal: the soul is taken to the brink of the incomprehensible, and is left there, for retreat is impossible, and advance is impossible without a transmutation of the soul's very nature. The third and fourth lines display the playful redundancy of her weaker poems, but the intrusion of the quality here is the result of habit, and is a minor defect; there is nothing in the conception of the poem demanding a compromise. There is great power in the phrasing of the remainder of the poem, especially in the middle stanza:

Our journey had advanced;
Our feet were almost come
To that odd fork in Being's road,
Eternity by term.
Our pace took sudden awe,
Our feet reluctant led.
Before were cities, but between
The forest of the dead.
Retreat was out of hope,—
Behind, a sealed route,
Eternity's white flag before,
And God at every gate.

She is constantly defining the absolute cleavage between the living and the dead. In the following poem the definition is made more powerfully, and in other terms:

'Twas warm at first, like us,
Until there crept thereon
A chill, like frost upon a glass,
Till all the scene be gone.
The forehead copied stone,
The fingers grew too cold
To ache, and like a skater's brook
The busy eyes congealed.
It straightened—that was all—
It crowded cold to cold—
It multiplied indifference
As Pride were all it could.
And even when with cords
'Twas lowered like a freight,
It made no signal, nor demurred,
But dropped like adamant.

The stiffness of phrasing, as in the barbarously constructed fourth and twelfth lines, is allied to her habitual carelessness, yet in this poem there is at least no triviality, and the imagery of the third stanza in particular has tremendous power.

The poem beginning, "The last night that she lived," treats the same theme in more personal terms; the observer watches the death of a friend, that is follows the friend to the brink of the comprehensible, sees her pass the brink, and faces the loss. The poem contains a badly mixed figure and at least two major grammatical blunders, in addition to a little awkward inversion of an indefensible variety, yet there is in the poem an immediate seizing of terrible fact, which makes it, at least fragmentarily, very great poetry:

And we, we placed the hair,
And drew the head erect;
And then an awful leisure was,
Our faith to regulate.

Her inability to take Christian mysticism seriously did not, however, drive her to the opposite extreme of the pantheistic mysticism which was seducing her contemporaries. The following lines, though not remarkable poetry, are a clear statement of a position consistently held:

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.
To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

Nature as a symbol, as Allen Tate has pointed out in the essay to which I have already referred, remains immitigably the symbol of all the elements which corrupt, dissolve, and destroy human character and consciousness; to approach nature is to depart from the fullness of human life, and to join nature is to leave human life. Nature may thus be a symbol of death, representing much the same idea as the corpse in the poem beginning "'Twas warm at first, like us," but involving a more complex range of association.

In the following poem, we are shown the essential cleavage between man, as represented by the author-reader, and nature, as represented by the insects in the late summer grass; the subject is the plight of man, the willing and freely-moving entity, in a universe in which he is by virtue of his essential qualities a foreigner. The intense nostalgia of the poem is the nostalgia of man for the mode of being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share. The change described in the last two lines is the change in the appearance of nature and in the feeling of the observer which results from a recognition of the cleavage:

Farther in summer than the birds,
Pathetic from the grass,
A minor nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive mass.
No ordinance is seen,
So gradual the grace,
A pensive custom it becomes,
Enlarging loneliness.
Antiquiest felt at noon
When August, burning low,
Calls forth this spectral canticle,
Repose to typify.
Remit as yet no grace,
No furrow on the glow,

Yet a druidic difference
Enhances nature now.

The first two lines of the last stanza are written in the author's personal grammatical short-hand; they are no doubt defective in this respect, but the defect is minor. They mean: There is as yet no diminution of beauty, no mark of change on the brightness. The twelfth line employs a meaningless inversion. On the other hand, the false rhymes are employed with unusually fine modulation; the first rhyme is perfect, the second and third represent successive stages of departure, and the last a return to what is roughly the stage of the second. These effects are complicated by the rhyming, both perfect and imperfect, from stanza to stanza. The intense strangeness of this poem could not have been achieved with standard rhyming. The poem, though not quite one of her most nearly perfect, is probably one of her five or six greatest, and is one of the most deeply moving and most unforgettable poems in my own experience; I have the feeling of having lived in its immediate presence for many years.

The three poems which combine her greatest power with her finest execution are strangely on much the same theme, both as regards the idea embodied and as regards the allegorical embodiment. They deal with the inexplicable fact of change, of the absolute cleavage between successive states of being, and it is not unnatural that in two of the poems this theme should be related to the theme of death. In each poem, seasonal change is employed as the concrete symbol of the moral change. This is not the same thing as the so-called pathetic fallacy of the romantics, the imposition of a personal emotion upon a physical object incapable either of feeling such an emotion or of motivating it in a human being. It is rather a legitimate and traditional form of allegory, in which the relationships between the items described resemble exactly the relationships between certain moral ideas or experiences; the identity of relationship evoking simultaneously and identifying with each other the feelings attendant upon both series as they appear separately. Here are the three poems, in the order of the seasons employed, and in the order of increasing complexity both of theme and of technique:

1

A light exists in spring
Not present in the year
At any other period.
When March is scarcely here
A color stands abroad
On solitary hills
That science cannot overtake,
But human nature feels.
It waits upon the lawn;
It shows the furthest tree
Upon the furthest slope we know;
It almost speaks to me.
Then, as horizons step,
Or noons report away,
Without the formula of sound,
It passes, and we stay:
A quality of loss
Affecting our content,
As trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a sacrament.

2

As imperceptibly as grief
The Summer lapsed away,—

Too imperceptible, at last,
 To seem like perfidy.
 A quietness distilled,
 As twilight long begun,
 Or Nature, spending with herself
 Sequestered afternoon.
 The dusk drew earlier in,
 The morning foreign shone,—
 A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
 As guest who would be gone.
 And thus, without a wing,
 Or service of a keel,
 Our summer made her light escape
 Into the beautiful.

3

There's a certain slant of light,
 On winter afternoons,
 That oppresses, like the weight
 Of cathedral tunes.
 Heavenly hurt it gives us;
 We can find no scar,
 But internal difference
 Where the meanings are.
 None may teach it anything,
 'Tis the seal, despair,—
 An imperial affliction
 Sent us of the air.
 When it comes, the landscape listens,
 Shadows hold their breath;
 When it goes, 'tis like the distance
 On the look of death.

In the seventh, eighth, and twelfth lines of the first poem, and, it is barely possible, in the seventh and eighth of the third, there is a very slight echo of the brisk facility of her poorer work; the last line of the second poem, perhaps, verges ever so slightly on an easy prettiness of diction, though scarcely of substance. These defects are shadowy, however; had the poems been written by another writer, it is possible that we should not observe them. On the other hand, the directness, dignity, and power with which these major subjects are met, the quality of the phrasing, at once clairvoyant and absolute, raise the poems to the highest level of English lyric poetry.

The meter of these poems is worth careful scrutiny. The basis of all three is the so-called Poulter's Measure, first employed, if I remember aright, by Surrey, and after the time of Sidney in disrepute. It is the measure, however, not only of the great elegy on Sidney commonly attributed to Fulke Greville, but of some of the best poetry between Surrey and Sidney, including the fine poem by Vaux on contentment and the great poem by Gascoigne in praise of a gentlewoman of dark complexion. The English poets commonly though not invariably wrote the poem in two long lines instead of four short ones, and the lines so conceived were the basis of their rhetoric. In the first of the three poems just quoted, the measure is employed without alteration, but the short line is the basis of the rhetoric; an arrangement which permits of more varied adjustment of sentence to line than if the long line were the basis. In the second poem, the first stanza is composed not in the basic measure, but in lines of eight, six, eight, and six syllables; the shift into the normal six, six, eight, and six in the second stanza, as in the second stanza of the poem beginning, "Farther in summer," results in a subtle and beautiful muting both of meter and of tone. This shift she employs elsewhere,

but especially in poems of four stanzas, to which it appears to have a natural relationship; it is a brilliant technical invention.

In the third poem she varies her simple base with the ingenuity and mastery of a virtuoso. In the first stanza, the two long lines are reduced to seven syllables each, by the dropping of the initial unaccented syllable; the second short line is reduced to five syllables in the same manner. In the second stanza, the first line, which ought now to be of six syllables, has but five metrical syllables, unless we violate normal usage and count the second and infinitely light syllable of *Heaven*, with an extrametrical syllable at the end, the syllable dropped being again the initial one; the second line, which ought to have six syllables, has likewise lost its initial syllable, but the extrametrical *us* of the preceding line, being unaccented, is in rhythmical effect the first syllable of the second line, so that this syllable serves a double and ambiguous function—it maintains the syllable-count of the first line, in spite of an altered rhythm, and it maintains the rhythm of the second line in spite of the altered syllable-count. The third and fourth lines of the second stanza are shortened to seven and five. In the third stanza the first and second lines are constructed like the third and fourth of the second stanza; the third and fourth lines like the first and second of the second stanza, except that in the third line the initial unaccented syllable is retained; that is, the third stanza repeats the construction of the second, but in reverse order. The final stanza is a triumphant resolution of the three preceding: the first and third lines, like the second and fourth, are metrically identical; the first and third contain seven syllables each, with an additional extrametrical syllable at the end which takes the place of the missing syllable at the beginning of each subsequent short line, at the same time that the extrametrical syllable functions in the line in which it is written as part of a two-syllable rhyme. The elaborate structure of this poem results in the balanced hesitations and rapid resolutions which one hears in reading it. This is metrical artistry at about as high a level as one is likely to find it.

Emily Dickinson was a product of the New England tradition of moral Calvinism; her dissatisfaction with her tradition led to her questioning most of its theology and discarding much of it, and led to her reinterpreting some of it, one would gather, in the direction of a more nearly Catholic Christianity. Her acceptance of Christian moral concepts was unimpaired, and the moral tone of her character remained immitigably Calvinistic in its hard and direct simplicity. As a result of this Calvinistic temper, she lacked the lightness and grace which might have enabled her to master minor themes; she sometimes stepped without hesitation into obscurantism, both verbal and metaphysical. But also as a result of it, her best poetry represents a moral adjustment to certain major moral problems which are carefully defined; it is curious in the light of this fact, and in the light of the publicization which they have received, that her love poems never equal her highest achievement—her best work is on themes more generalized and inclusive.

Emily Dickinson differed from every other major New England writer of the nineteenth century, and from every major American writer of the century save Melville, of those affected by New England, in this: that her New England heritage, though it made her life a moral drama, did not leave her life in moral confusion. It impoverished her in one respect, however: of all great poets, she is the most lacking in taste; there are innumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities; her defects, more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly at the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems. This stylistic

character is the natural product of the New England which produced the barren little meeting houses; of the New England founded by the harsh and intrepid pioneers, who in order to attain salvation trampled brutally through a world which they were too proud and too impatient to understand. In this respect, she differs from Melville, whose taste was rich and cultivated. But except by Melville, she is surpassed by no writer that this country has produced; she is one of the greatest lyric poets of all time.

Notes

1. *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*, by Allen Tate. Scribners, 1936. The essay on Emily Dickinson.

RICHARD WILBUR

"Sumptuous Destitution"

Emily Dickinson: Three Views by Archibald MacLeish,
Louise Bogan, and Richard Wilbur

1960, pp. 35-46

At some point Emily Dickinson sent her whole Calvinist vocabulary into exile, telling it not to come back until it would subserve her own sense of things.

Of course, that is not a true story, but it is a way of saying what I find most remarkable in Emily Dickinson. She inherited a great and overbearing vocabulary which, had she used it submissively, would have forced her to express an established theology and psychology. But she would not let that vocabulary write her poems for her. There lies the real difference between a poet like Emily Dickinson and a fine versifier like Isaac Watts. To be sure, Emily Dickinson also wrote in the metres of hymnody, and paraphrased the Bible, and made her poems turn on great words like Immortality and Salvation and Election. But in her poems those great words are not merely being themselves; they have been adopted, for expressive purposes; they have been taken personally, and therefore redefined.

The poems of Emily Dickinson are a continual appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth. "Truth is so rare a thing," she once said, "it is delightful to tell it." And, sending some poems to Colonel Higginson, she wrote, "Excuse them, if they are untrue." And again, to the same correspondent, she observed, "Candor is the only wile"—meaning that the writer's bag of tricks need contain one trick only, the trick of being honest. That her taste for truth involved a regard for objective fact need not be argued: we have her poem on the snake, and that on the hummingbird, and they are small masterpieces of exact description. She liked accuracy; she liked solid and homely detail; and even in her most exalted poems we are surprised and reassured by buckets, shawls, or buzzing flies.

But her chief truthfulness lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner experience. She was a Linnaeus to the phenomena of her own consciousness, describing and distinguishing the states and motions of her soul. The results of this "psychic reconnaissance," as Professor Whicher called it, were several. For one thing, it made her articulate about inward matters which poetry had never so sharply defined; specifically, it made her capable of writing two such lines as these:

A perfect, paralyzing bliss
Contented as despair.

We often assent to the shock of a paradox before we understand it, but those lines are so just and so concentrated as to explode their meaning instantly in the mind. They did not come so easily, I think, to Emily Dickinson. Unless I guess wrongly as to chronology, such lines were the fruit of long poetic research; the poet had worked toward them through much study of the way certain emotions can usurp consciousness entirely, annulling our sense of past and future, cancelling near and far, converting all time and space to a joyous or grievous here and now. It is in their ways of annihilating time and space that bliss and despair are comparable.

Which leads me to a second consequence of Emily Dickinson's self-analysis. It is one thing to assert as pious doctrine that the soul has power, with God's grace, to master circumstance. It is another thing to find out personally, as Emily Dickinson did in writing her psychological poems, that the aspect of the world is in no way constant, that the power of external things depends on our state of mind, that the soul selects its own society and may, if granted enough strength to do so, select a superior order and scope of consciousness which will render it finally invulnerable. She learned these things by witnessing her own courageous spirit.

Another result of Emily Dickinson's introspection was that she discovered some grounds, in the nature of her soul and its affections, for a personal conception of such ideas as Heaven and Immortality, and so managed a precarious convergence between her inner experience and her religious inheritance. What I want to attempt now is a rough sketch of the imaginative logic by which she did this. I had better say before I start that I shall often seem demonstrably wrong, because Emily Dickinson, like many poets, was consistent in her concerns but inconsistent in her attitudes. The following, therefore, is merely an opinion as to her main drift.

Emily Dickinson never lets us forget for very long that in some respects life gave her short measure; and indeed it is possible to see the greater part of her poetry as an effort to cope with her sense of privation. I think that for her there were three major privations: she was deprived of an orthodox and steady religious faith; she was deprived of love; she was deprived of literary recognition.

At the age of 17, after a series of revival meetings at Mount Holyoke Seminary, Emily Dickinson found that she must refuse to become a professing Christian. To some modern minds this may seem to have been a sensible and necessary step; and surely it was a step toward becoming such a poet as she became. But for her, no pleasure in her own integrity could then eradicate the feeling that she had betrayed a deficiency, a want of grace. In her letters to Abiah Root she tells of the enhancing effect of conversion on her fellow-students, and says of herself in a famous passage:

I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause and ponder, and ponder and pause, and do work without knowing why, not surely, for this brief world, and more sure it is not for heaven, and I ask what this message *means* that they ask for so very eagerly: *you* know of this depth and fullness, will you try to tell me about it?

There is humor in that, and stubbornness, and a bit of characteristic lurking pride: but there is also an anguished sense of having separated herself, through some dry incapacity, from spiritual community, from purpose, and from magnitude of life. As a child of evangelical Amherst, she inevitably thought of purposive, heroic life as requiring a vigorous faith. Out of such a thought she later wrote:

The abdication of Belief
 Makes the Behavior small—
 Better an ignis fatuus
 Than no illume at all—¹

That hers was a species of religious personality goes without saying; but by her refusal of such ideas as original sin, redemption, hell, and election, she made it impossible for herself—as Professor Whicher observed—“to share the religious life of her generation.” She became an unsteady congregation of one.

Her second privation, the privation of love, is one with which her poems and her biographies have made us exceedingly familiar, though some biographical facts remain conjectural. She had the good fortune, at least once, to bestow her heart on another; but she seems to have found her life, in great part, a history of loneliness, separation, and bereavement.

As for literary fame, some will deny that Emily Dickinson ever greatly desired it, and certainly there is evidence mostly from her latter years, to support such a view. She *did* write that “Publication is the auction/Of the mind of man.” And she *did* say to Helen Hunt Jackson, “How can you print a piece of your soul?” But earlier, in 1861, she had frankly expressed to Sue Dickinson the hope that “sometime” she might make her kinfolk proud of her. The truth is, I think, that Emily Dickinson knew she was good, and began her career with a normal appetite for recognition. I think that she later came, with some reason, to despair of being understood or properly valued, and so directed against her hopes of fame what was by then a well-developed disposition to renounce. That she wrote a good number of poems about fame supports my view: the subjects to which a poet returns are those which vex him.

What did Emily Dickinson do, as a poet, with her sense of privation? One thing she quite often did was to pose as the laureate and attorney of the empty-handed, and question God about the economy of His creation. Why, she asked, is a fatherly God so sparing of His presence? Why is there never a sign that prayers are heard? Why does Nature tell us no comforting news of its Maker? Why do some receive a whole loaf, while others must starve on a crumb? Where is the benevolence in shipwreck and earthquake? By asking such questions as these, she turned complaint into critique, and used her own sufferings as experiential evidence about the nature of the deity. The God who emerges from these poems is a God who does not answer, an unrevealed God whom one cannot confidently approach through Nature or through doctrine.

But there was another way in which Emily Dickinson dealt with her sentiment of lack—another emotional strategy which was both more frequent and more fruitful. I refer to her repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty; that to renounce is to possess the more; that “The Banquet of abstemiousness/Defaces that of wine.” We all know how the poet illustrated this ascetic paradox in her behavior—how in her latter years she chose to live in relative retirement, keeping the world, even in its dearest aspects, at a physical remove. She would write her friends, telling them how she missed them, then flee upstairs when they came to see her; afterward, she might send a note of apology, offering the odd explanation that “We shun because we prize.” Any reader of Dickinson biographies can furnish other examples, dramatic or homely, of this prizing and shunning, this yearning and renouncing: in my own mind’s eye is a picture of Emily Dickinson watching a gay circus caravan from the distance of her chamber window.

In her inner life, as well, she came to keep the world’s

images, even the images of things passionately desired, at the remove which renunciation makes; and her poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that to lose or forego what we desire is somehow to gain. We may say, if we like, with some of the poet’s commentators, that this central paradox of her thought is a rationalization of her neurotic plight; but we had better add that it is also a discovery of something about the soul. Let me read you a little poem of psychological observation which, whatever its date of composition may logically be considered as an approach to that discovery.

Undue Significance a starving man attaches
 To Food—
 Far off—He sighs—and therefore—Hopeless—
 And therefore—Good—
 Partaken—it relieves—indeed—
 But proves us
 That Spices fly
 In the Receipt—It was the Distance—
 Was Savory—

(439)

This poem describes an educational experience, in which a starving man is brought to distinguish between appetite and desire. So long as he despairs of sustenance, the man conceives it with the eye of desire as infinitely delicious. But when, after all, he secures it and appeases his hunger, he finds that its imagined spices have flown. The moral is plain: once an object has been magnified by desire, it cannot be wholly possessed by appetite.

The poet is not concerned, in this poem, with passing any judgment. She is simply describing the way things go in the human soul, telling us that the frustration of appetite awakens or abets desire, and that the effect of intense desiring is to render any finite satisfaction disappointing. Now I want to read you another well-known poem, in which Emily Dickinson was again considering privation and possession, and the modes of enjoyment possible to each. In this case, I think, a judgment is strongly implied.

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne’er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.
 Not one of all the purple Host
 Who took the Flag today
 Can tell the definition
 So clear of Victory
 As he defeated—dying—
 On whose forbidden ear
 The distant strains of triumph
 Burst agonized and clear!

(67)

Certainly Emily Dickinson’s critics are right in calling this poem an expression of the idea of compensation—of the idea that every evil confers some balancing good, that through bitterness we learn to appreciate the sweet, that “Water is taught by thirst.” The defeated and dying soldier of this poem is compensated by a greater awareness of the meaning of victory than the victors themselves can have: he can comprehend the joy of success through its polar contrast to his own despair.

The poem surely does say that; yet it seems to me that there is something further implied. On a first reading, we are much impressed with the wretchedness of the dying soldier’s lot, and an improved understanding of the nature of victory may seem small compensation for defeat and death; but the more one ponders this poem the likelier it grows that Emily

Dickinson is arguing the *superiority* of defeat to victory, of frustration to satisfaction, and of anguished comprehension to mere possession. What do the victors have but victory, a victory which they cannot fully savor or clearly define? They have paid for their triumph by a sacrifice of awareness; a material gain has cost them a spiritual loss. For the dying soldier, the case is reversed: defeat and death are attended by an increase of awareness, and material loss has led to spiritual gain. Emily Dickinson would think that the better bargain.

In the first of these two poems I have read, it was possible to imagine the poet as saying that a starving man's visions of food are but wish fulfillments, and hence illusory; but the second poem assures us of the contrary—assures us that food, or victory, or any other good thing is best comprehended by the eye of desire from the vantage of privation. We must now ask in what way desire can define things, what comprehension of nectars it can have beyond a sense of inaccessible sweetness.

Since Emily Dickinson was not a philosopher, and never set forth her thought in any orderly way, I shall answer that quotation from the seventeenth-century divine Thomas Traherne. Conveniently for us, Traherne is thinking, in this brief meditation, about food—specifically, about acorns—as perceived by appetite and by desire.

The service of things and their excellencies are spiritual: being objects not of the eye, but of the mind: and you more spiritual by how much more you esteem them. Pigs eat acorns, but neither consider the sun that gave them life, nor the influences of the heavens by which they were nourished, nor the very root of the tree from whence they came. This being the work of Angels, who in a wide and clear light see even the sea that gave them moisture: And feed upon that acorn spiritually while they know the ends for which it was created, and feast upon all these as upon a World of Joys within it: while to ignorant swine that eat the shell, it is an empty husk of no taste nor delightful savor.

Emily Dickinson could not have written that, for various reasons, a major reason being that she could not see in Nature any revelations of divine purpose. But like Traherne she discovered that the soul has an infinite hunger, a hunger to possess all things. (That discovery, I suspect, was the major fruit of her introspection.) And like Traherne she distinguished two ways of possessing things, the way of appetite and the way of desire. What Traherne said of the pig she said of her favorite insect:

Auto da Fe and Judgment—
Are nothing to the Bee—
His separation from His Rose—
To Him—sums Misery—

(620)

The creature of appetite (whether insect or human) pursues satisfaction, and strives to possess the object in itself; it cannot imagine the vaster economy of desire, in which the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object is spiritually possessed, not merely for itself, but more truly as an index of the All. That is how one comprehends a nectar. Miss Dickinson's bee does not comprehend the rose which it plunders, because the truer sweetness of the rose lies beyond the rose, in its relationship to the whole of being; but she would say that Gerard Manley Hopkins comprehends a bluebell when, having noticed its intrinsic beauties, he adds, "I know the beauty of Our Lord by it." And here is an eight-line poem of her own, in which she comprehends the full sweetness of water.

We thirst at first—'tis Nature's Act—
And later—when we die—
A little Water supplicate—
Of fingers going by—
It intimates the finer want—
Whose adequate supply
Is that Great Water in the West—
Termed Immortality—

(726)

Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire, and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances. Far-off words like "Brazil" or "Circassian" appear continually in her poems as symbols or things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned-for. So identified in her mind are distance and delight that, when ravished by the sight of a hummingbird in her garden, she calls it "the mail from Tunis." And not only are the objects of her desire distant; they are also very often moving away, their sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness. "To disappear enhances," one of the poems begins, and another closes with these lines:

The Mountain—at a given distance—
In Amber—lies—
Approached—the Amber flits—a little—
And That's—the Skies—

(572)

To the eye of desire, all things are seen in a profound perspective, either moving or gesturing toward the vanishing-point. Or to use a figure which may be closer to Miss Dickinson's thought, to the eye of desire the world is a centrifuge, in which all things are straining or flying toward the occult circumference. In some such way, Emily Dickinson conceived her world, and it was in a spatial metaphor that she gave her personal definition of Heaven. "Heaven," she said, "is what I cannot reach."

At times it seems that there is nothing in her world but her own soul, with its attendant abstraction, and, at a vast remove, the inscrutable Heaven. On most of what might intervene she has closed the valves of her attention, and what mortal objects she does acknowledge are riddled by desire to the point of transparency. Here is a sentence from her correspondence: "Enough is of so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits." The writer of that sentence could not invest her longings in any finite object. Again she wrote, "Emblem is immeasurable—that is why it is better than fulfilment, which can be drained." For such a sensibility, it was natural and necessary that things be touched with infinity. Therefore her nature poetry, when most serious, does not play descriptively with birds or flowers but presents us repeatedly with dawn, noon, and sunset, those grand ceremonial moments of the day which argue the splendor of Paradise. Or it shows us the ordinary landscape transformed by the electric brilliance of a storm; or it shows us the fields succumbing to the annual mystery of death. In her love-poems, Emily Dickinson was at first covetous of the beloved himself; indeed, she could be idolatrous, going so far as to say that his face, should she see it again in Heaven, would eclipse the face of Jesus. But in what I take to be her later work the beloved's lineaments, which were never very distinct, vanish entirely; he becomes pure emblem, a symbol of remote spiritual joy, and so is all but absorbed into the idea of Heaven. The lost beloved is, as one poem declares, "infinite when gone," and in such lines as the following we are

aware of him mainly as an instrument in the poet's commerce with the beyond.

Of all the Souls that stand create—
I have elected—One—
When Sense from Spirit—flies away—
And Subterfuge—is done—
When that which is—and that which was—
Apart—intrinsic—stand—
And this brief Tragedy of Flesh—
Is shifted—like a Sand—
When Figures show their royal Front—
And Mists—are carved away,
Behold the Atom—I preferred—
To all the lists of Clay!

(664)

In this extraordinary poem, the corporeal beloved is seen as if from another and immaterial existence, and in such perspective his earthly person is but an atom of clay. His risen spirit, we presume, is more imposing, but it is certainly not in focus. What the rapt and thudding lines of this poem portray is the poet's own magnificence of soul—her fidelity to desire, her confidence of Heaven, her contempt of the world. Like Cleopatra's final speeches, this poem is an irresistible demonstration of spiritual status, in which the supernatural is so royally demanded that skepticism is disarmed. A part of its effect derives, by the way, from the fact that the life to come is described in an ambiguous present tense, so that we half-suppose the speaker to be already in Heaven.

There were times when Emily Dickinson supposed this of herself, and I want to close by making a partial guess at the logic of her claims to beatitude. It seems to me that she generally saw Heaven as a kind of infinitely remote bank, in which, she hoped, her untouched felicities were drawing interest. Parting, she said, was all she knew of it. Hence it is surprising to find her saying, in some poems, that Heaven has drawn near to her, and that in her soul's "superior instants" Eternity has disclosed to her "the colossal substance/Of immortality." Yet the contradiction can be understood, if we recall what sort of evidence was persuasive to Emily Dickinson.

"Too much of proof," she wrote, "affronts belief"; and she was little convinced either by doctrine or by theological reasoning. Her residual Calvinism was criticized and fortified by her study of her own soul in action, and from the phenomena of her soul she was capable of making the boldest inferences. That the sense of time is subject to the moods of the soul seemed to her a proof of the soul's eternity. Her intensity of grief for the dead, and her feeling of their continued presence, seemed to her arguments for the reunion of souls in Heaven. And when she found in herself infinite desires, "immortal longings," it seemed to her possible that such desires might somewhere be infinitely answered.

One psychic experience which she interpreted as beatitude was "glee," or as some would call it, euphoria. Now, a notable thing about glee or euphoria is its gratuitousness. It seems to come from nowhere, and it was this apparent sourcelessness of the emotion from which Emily Dickinson made her inference. "The 'happiness' without a cause," she said, "is the best happiness, for glee intuitive and lasting is the gift of God." Having foregone all earthly causes of happiness, she could only explain her glee, when it came, as a divine gift—a compensation in joy for what she had renounced in satisfaction, and a foretaste of the mood of Heaven. The experience of glee, as she records it, is boundless: all distances collapse, and the soul expands to the very circumference of things. Here is how she put it in one of her letters: "Abroad is

close tonight and I have but to lift my hands to touch the 'Hights of Abraham.'" And one of her gleeful poems begins,

'Tis little—I could care for Pearls—
Who own the ample sea—

How often she felt that way we cannot know, and it hardly matters. As Robert Frost has pointed out, happiness can make up in height for what it lacks in length; and the important thing for us, as for her, is that she construed the experience as a divine gift. So also she thought of the power to write poetry, a power which, as we know, came to her often; and poetry must have been the chief source of her sense of blessedness. The poetic impulses which visited her seemed "bulletins from Immortality," and by their means she converted all her losses into gains, and all the pains of her life to that clarity and repose which were to her the qualities of Heaven. So superior did she feel, as a poet, to earthly circumstance, and so strong was her faith in words, that she more than once presumed to view this life from the vantage of the grave.

In a manner of speaking, she was dead. And yet her poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life but an eccentric mastery of it. Let me close by reading you a last poem, in which she conveys both the extent of her repudiation and the extent of her happiness.

The Missing All, prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World's
Departure from a Hinge
Or Sun's extinction, be observed
'Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.

(985)

Notes

1. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), Poem 1551. The number in parentheses after each quotation refers to the number of the poem in this edition.

DENIS DONOGHUE

"Emily Dickinson"

Connoisseurs of Chaos:

Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry

1965, pp. 100–128

To bring us quickly into the poems of Emily Dickinson I would offer a motto from René Char, a note in his war journal. "We are stretched on the rack," he says, "between the craving to know and the despair of having known. The goad will not give up its sting, nor we our hope."¹

The craving to know was part of Emily Dickinson's sense of life, another part was her self-confidence, and the two parts run together. She often reminds us of Keats and his touching faith in his own powers. In one poem she speaks of "that fine Prosperity/Whose Sources are interior,"² and the prosperity in her own case was clearly a profound belief in her own imagination. The brain, she says, is "wider than the Sky," [632] for it will contain the sky "with ease"; and if any further proof is required, the brain is "deeper than the sea." When she speaks of the "Growth of Man" she gives it as "the solitary prowess/Of a Silent Life," [750] the human imagination

minding its proper business. Sometimes she invokes the imagination directly, sometimes she calls it the brain, and once she calls it, quite simply, "revery." By any of its names it is creative. It can make a prairie out of a clover and one bee, and if necessary, out of even less. If this reminds us of Wallace Stevens and his perhaps exorbitant faith in the human imagination, we are not thereby deceived; the poets are in this and other respects cousin. Both poets believe, at least on fine days, that we can "fit our Vision to the Dark" [419] and meet the road erect, or nearly so. The imagination is the "Sinew from within" [616]; it is the source of that "madness" that is "divinest Sense." [435] And there is one poem of some scandal in which Emily Dickinson attributes all power to the poet and all reality to his poem:

I reckon—when I count at all—
First—Poets—Then the Sun—
Then Summer—Then the Heaven of God—
And then—the List is done—
But, looking back—the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole—
The Others look a needless Show—
So I write—Poets—All—

[569]

Hence, when we bring together Emily Dickinson's self-confidence, her belief in the imagination, and her craving to know, we see why meaning exists for her only to the extent that it can be drawn into the poem. She will say, "Each Life Converges to Some Centre" [680] when in fact she means that all life, all reality, converges to her poem. We often say that Emily Dickinson withdrew into her room and rejected the busy world, but this is wrong. She withdrew into her room and attracted into it whatever of life her unwritten poem needed. Life is drawn into her room and sometimes entertained there and often trapped there. This is what she means by that "Possession" that is "an Estate perpetual/Or a reduceless Mine." [855] (We are meant to take the pun quite seriously.) Emily Dickinson does not turn the poem outward upon a world now, as a result of the poem, more lucid. The world must look to itself. The only assurance she gives is that she will not hurt it or—to use D. H. Lawrence's phrase—"do dirt" upon it. What is final is the poem. There all roads end. In one of her most impassioned poems she claims, as if by divine right, joys and privileges denied her in historical fact. "Mine," she says, "Mine—here—in Vision—and in Veto!" [528] Within her room she is empress, she has every power, vision and veto; whatever tribute her imagination brings from the outer provinces is hers forever. Indeed, she is very like that "concentred self" which Stevens invokes in "Credences of Summer":

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three
times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed
The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.³

This does not mean that Emily Dickinson thought her own order strong enough to control all the chaos of the world, to bring it to the heel of lucidity. "Many Things—are fruitless—/'Tis a Baffling Earth—," [614] she says, and there are several poems in which she makes fun of the childish presumption of power—"pretty estimates/Of Prickly Things." [637] In one of her greatest poems she says, "I felt a Cleaving

in my Mind—/As if my Brain had split—," [937] and she doesn't claim the knack of putting the pieces together again. There are circumstances in which even the imagination retires, defeated. "Except the smaller size," she says, "No lives are round". [1067] And there are many poems in which the attempt to make or keep a life "round" is baffled by the indisputable facts of suffering and death. [1100] But just as she held fast to life when the legal evidence in its favor was slight, so she continued to believe in her imagination, perhaps on the principle that, however poor a thing, it was her own. Indeed, there are three or four poems in which she almost boasts of her prowess. "I can wade Grief—," she says, "Whole Pools of it—," as if tempting a vindictive Providence to strike again. And on at least two occasions she was prepared to make a general rule of her capacities:

Give Balm—to Giants—
And they'll wilt, like Man—
Give Himmaleh—
They'll Carry—Him!

[252, 310]

Indeed, if we follow this one stage further, we find Emily Dickinson taking a certain masochistic pleasure in the vision of horror: "'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—," [281] she says, and goes on to prove it. A starving man is rebuked for attaching undue significance to distant food; he ought to know that it was the distance, not the food, that was savory. [439] In any event, why should we have the capacity to suffer, if we do not suffer?

There is strength in proving that it can be borne
Although it tear—
What are the sinews of such cordage for
Except to bear . . .

[1113]

And there are moments in which Emily Dickinson dreams of impossibility for the refined thrill of defeat:

I would not paint—a picture—
I'd rather be the One
Its bright impossibility
To dwell—delicious—on—
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare—celestial—stir
Evokes so sweet a Torment—
Such sumptuous—Despair—

[505]

This is to go far beyond Wallace Stevens in searching out exotic gratifications. The sweets of defeat were not to his taste even among the variegated pleasures of *Harmonium*. And even in Emily Dickinson it is an extreme occasion, though it has companions. So we should not make too much of it. A poet who has nothing but her own imagination will set it off in strange directions, foraging.

And if she has chosen to live within her room, she will choose to live there dangerously. "My little Circuit," as she calls it, [313] will have to be an eventful place. She will crave to know, and then she will face the despair of having known. Only then, if ever, will she be content. The floor will be a battlefield; her motto will be: "Finite—to fail, but infinite to Venture—." [847] "I dwell in Possibility," she says [657] a little blithely, but more often she will urge her imagination into the valley of death:

The gleam of an heroic Act
Such strange illumination
The Possible's slow fuse is lit
By the Imagination.

[1687]

The fuse is lit in a hundred poems. "Exultation is the going/Of an inland soul to sea,/Past the houses—past the headlands—/Into deep Eternity—." [76] "Our lives are Swiss," she complains at one point, waiting for the great day of danger to come. [80] And if the danger is slow to come, she will hasten it or invent it. In one poem sunshine on the hills makes her dream of the clash of arms and mighty wars, and she "charges" from her chimney corner—"But Nobody was there!" [152] So dreams of liberty become tremendous escape stories, with chains cut, guns in pursuit, and the like. [277] If a clock stops, it becomes an act of metaphysical defiance, and we hear Satan in the wings. [287] And conjecture itself becomes a scene in science fiction:

The possibility—to pass
Without a Moment's Bell—
Into Conjecture's presence—
Is like a Face of Steel—
That suddenly looks into ours
With a metallic grin—
The Cordiality of Death—
Who drills his Welcome in—
[286]

If this use of the imagination needs a supporting theory, perhaps the best one is given when Emily Dickinson says, "I made my soul familiar—with her extremity—/That at the last, it should not be a novel Agony—." [412] Taking a more objective view of it, we could think of it as a life in the middle style craving a taste of the sublime. This would explain a curious feature of Emily Dickinson's poetry: she tends to use traditionally "dangerous" terms as terms of praise—the word "desire," for instance. In Emily Dickinson generally this word refers to a capacity, differing in different people, for imaginative leaps, feats of emotional daring, leaps into the sublime. Those who lack it, or possess it meagerly, are, quite simply, dead. In a poem about heaven she says:

Heaven is so far of the mind
That were the Mind dissolved—
The Site—of it—by Architect
Could not again be proved—
'Tis vast—as our Capacity—
As fair—as our Idea—
To him of adequate desire
No further 'tis, than Here—
[370]

Accordingly, in Emily Dickinson's poems everything is here, in her narrow circuit, or it is nowhere. Hence the grammatical figure that is of the greatest comfort to her—more consoling even than metaphor—is synecdoche, which allows the part to stand for the whole, the little thing for the big thing, here for everywhere. (Robert Frost said on one occasion: "I believe in what the Greeks called 'synecdoche'; touching the hem of the Goddess. All that a poet needs is samples.") If you crave to know, and if you live in one room, you will derive great comfort from synecdoche, and you will work your imagination to the bone. And as long as it works, here will be everywhere, small will be all. [284]

But sometimes, in Emily Dickinson, the trick doesn't work. In the love poems especially, when the lovers are separated, here is not everywhere, here and there are rigid, neither will budge. So grammatical principles are no good. One of Emily Dickinson's greatest poems, one of the greatest love poems in the language, begins:

I cannot live with You—
It would be Life—

And Life is over there—
Behind the Shelf
The Sexton keeps the Key to—

It ends:

So We must meet apart—
You there—I—here—
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are—and Prayer—
And that White Sustenance—
Despair—

[640]

This is the despair of having known. Emily Dickinson often speaks of it as vision, vetoed; the light of the sun, put out by night [768]; or (in a remarkable image) the eye of a statue, "That knows it cannot see." [305] In several poems she distinguishes it from common analogues that it might be thought to resemble—death, frost, fire, midnight, and the like—and she opts for chaos as the only approximation, the chaos of a drowning man, in one instance:

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
Without a Chance, or Spar—
Or even a Report of Land—
To justify—Despair.

[510]

And to emphasize that on these occasions here is not everywhere, she says in another poem, "No Man can compass a Despair—." [230] Despair is "Pain's Successor," [396] in the love poems the dreadful boundary between his consciousness and hers, [644] the "fictitious Shores" a drowning man sees, [739] or the "imperial affliction" sent from the air on winter afternoons. [258] It is light that "oppresses," knowledge that kills.

When Stevens speaks of these occasions he touches them much more daintily, and he tries to bend them to his saving figure, the imagination and reality, equal and opposite, a violence within holding an equal violence without. Despair, in Stevens' poems, tends to accompany a blankness of perception, and we rarely feel that the sinews are about to break. Emily Dickinson does not resort to Stevens' image. But she has her own favorite stratagem, good as long as it works: she tries to translate loss, somehow, into gain. And human events are so complicated that this is sometimes possible. Often she will capitalize upon the separation of soul from body, which enables her to say, "Captivity is Consciousness—," but on the other hand, "So's Liberty." [484] Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other, as rudimentary mathematics will allow. More often still she will take comfort from the thought that to appreciate joy one must have tasted pain. [73, 684, 771, 1754] A very common motto in her poems is, "Water is taught by thirst," [135, 207, 213, 459, 571, 572, 675] "'Tis Parching—Vitalizes Wine—," [313] or the last word in bleak translations, "Dying—annuls the power to kill." [358] More consolingly, she speaks of "that Ethereal Gain/One earns by measuring the Grave—," [574] and in another poem [660] she offers the doubtful boon of reflecting that there is only a difference of degree between one woe and another. Danger at the edge of pleasure is good, apparently [807]; and while possibility is "flavorless," impossibility, "like Wine/Exhilarates the Man/Who tastes it . . ." [838] And there is always the consolation, for those who are prepared to pay a stiff price, that agony may get them a seat in the sublime circle that she calls "tremendousness." [963] Another kind of translation, equally desperate, enabled Emily Dickinson to reflect that "The Missing All—prevented Me/From missing minor Things." [985] And from

here on there is no limit to the whirling ingenuity of the translator:

A Wounded Deer—leaps highest—
I've heard the Hunter tell—
'Tis but the Ecstasy of death—
And then the Brake is still!

[165]

And there is even another possibility:

I might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness—
I'm so accustomed to my Fate—
Perhaps the Other—Peace—
Would interrupt the Dark—
And crowd the little Room—
Too scant—by Cubits—to contain
The Sacrament—of Him—
I am not used to Hope—
It might intrude upon—
Its sweet parade—blaspheme the place—
Ordained to Suffering—
It might be easier
To fail—with Land in Sight—
Than gain—My Blue Peninsula—
To perish—of Delight

[405]

Beyond this there is only one consolation, the thought that, at a certain stage of pain, one can elect to give up the ghost:

Looking at Death, is Dying—
Just let go the Breath—
And not the pillow at your Cheek
So Slumbereth—
Others, Can Wrestle—
Yours, is done—
And so of Woe, bleak dreaded—come,
It sets the Fright at liberty—
And Terror's free—
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!

[281]

The craving to know, the despair of having known—anyone who has served his apprenticeship in these trades will be hard to impress. And this is one of Emily Dickinson's distinguishing marks: she stands before the bitterest contingencies of chance, unabashed. She is not imperturbable or fearless. In her poems pain sometimes comes as "One—Imperial—Thunderbolt," [315] and after a while "a formal feeling comes." [341] Or life may be "a brief Campaign of sting and sweet." [159] Or we may have to learn joy by pain "as Blind Men learn the sun!" [167] But there is always the thought that a thing, at the worst, can only be itself; "Defeat means nothing *but* Defeat." [172] Heaven, Emily Dickinson says, "is what I cannot reach." [239] It may not even be true. [121] But agony is true, and convulsion, and despair, and death. [241] Or, bringing many pains together, there may be the despair of having known heaven. [243, 256] Or, again, the soul, having known the heaven that is freedom, may be recaptured and led off like a felon. [512] And there is always the special pain of secret wounds. [1737] But even if none of these facts can be altered, even if reality laughs in the imagination's face, it is still possible to effect a dignified retreat:

I reason, Earth is short—
And Anguish—absolute—
And many hurt,
But, what of that?

I reason, we could die—
The best Vitality
Cannot excel Decay,
But, what of that?
I reason, that in Heaven—
Somehow, it will be even—
Some new Equation, given—
But, what of that?

[301]

Can we not ask here, as Stevens asked on another occasion, "Are not the imagination and reality equal and inseparable?"⁴ Emily Dickinson's poem is a triumph of tone, which is the same thing as a triumph of imagination. The refrain is different in each stanza, although the words are the same—"But, what of that?"—because the words take color or take fright from the reflections that precede them, and the reflections differ as one part of the mind's life differs from another. In the first stanza the refrain answers and rebukes the note of complaint, because it is beside the point. In the second stanza it answers and rebukes the cry of gloom, because it is beside the point. In the third, it answers and rebukes the voice of hope, because it too is beside the point. Each cry is valid enough and worth attending to, except for this, that all cries are irrelevant, archaic. (Emily Dickinson is an adept of exclusions. She can clear a space around her pain in the time most poets take to get from one stanza to the next.)

The triumph of that poem consists—this is one way of putting it—in the dignity with which the ground is held, and held by virtue of Emily Dickinson's own strength. This is one of the remarkable qualities of her poetry: her images present themselves on their own authority, which is the authority she gives them. When she speaks of "the mob within the heart/Police cannot suppress," [1745] when she says that "the Outer—from the inner/Derives its Magnitude," [451] she sets these words down on her own authority, without offering either evidence or apology. She simply says, in effect, "It was so." One of her greatest poems goes:

The first Day's Night had come—
And grateful that a thing
So terrible—had been endured—
I told my Soul to sing—
She said her Strings were snap—
Her bow—to Atoms blown—
And so to mend her—gave me work
Until another morn—
And then—a Day as huge
As yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face—
Until it blocked my eyes—
My Brain—begun to laugh—
I mumbled—like a fool—
And tho' 'tis Years ago—that Day—
My Brain keeps giggling—still
And Something's odd—within—
That person that I was—
And this One—do not feel the same—
Could it be Madness—this?

[410]

The thing so terrible is not defined, except that having endured it, one is grateful rather than proud, and this is definition enough. The soul as the Aeolian lyre is common enough, especially in romantic poetry, but the lines about mending it are entirely characteristic of Emily Dickinson, a refusal of unearned sublimity. The day as huge as yesterdays in pairs is some dreadful messenger of doom, vetoing her vision; and