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## Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry

Donald E. Thackrey

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DONALD E. THACKREY

EMILY DICKINSON'S  
APPROACH TO POETRY

new series no. 13

*University of Nebraska Studies*

november 1954

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APPROACH TO POETRY**

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*university of nebraska studies*

*new series no. 13*

*published by the university  
at lincoln : november 1954*



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## *Acknowledgment*

For permission to reproduce the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson included in this study the author is grateful to Harper & Brothers, publishers of *Bolts of Melody*, to Little, Brown and Company, publishers of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, and to the World Publishing Company, publishers of *Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

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## introduction

One of the most fascinating aspects of any poet is his conception of his art. Many poets have written extensively on the theory of art around which they orient their poetry. Others have clearly revealed their theories by writing criticism of other authors. Emily Dickinson, however, left no critical essays, no elucidation of her artistic principles. It is quite probable, indeed, that she did not consciously concern herself to any extent with poetic theory. She may have written, and written in her unique way, through an instinctive need which would admit of no plodding deliberation or stylistic experimentation. Still, such a need would resolve itself in certain characteristic ways. Implicit in these ways would be an intellectual and emotional approach to poetry. I believe the main elements of that approach are discoverable.

A major difficulty confronting the student of Emily Dickinson is the unsettled state of her published material. It is remarkable that the poems were published at all considering their chaotic condition in manuscript and the strange career of these manuscripts after Emily Dickinson's death. The editorial quagmire from which the published poems emerged, however, does not make the errors and shortcomings more palatable. So many errors have been detected in *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, that one hesitates to accept the authenticity of the wording of any poem in the volume. Both this volume and *Bolts of Melody*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, suffer from poor organization. The poems are neither arranged chronologically nor categorized into well-defined classifications but are lumped under such inadequate headings as "Time and Eternity" and "That Campaign Inscrutable."



Despite the difficulties involved, there is ample justification for giving critical attention to Emily Dickinson's poems. In the first place, no matter who determined the final wording of the poems, many emerge as great works of genius. It is, after all, the poems, not the personalities involved, with which a student is primarily concerned. Also, by finding and compiling from Emily Dickinson's poems and letters selections which are relevant to a particular subject, the student can infer the poet's own attitudes concerning that subject. Her statements speak for themselves when systematically presented in their proper relationships and contexts, whereas the individual thoughts and attitudes are obscured in a haphazard and confusing multiplicity of themes in the present editions of her work.

After sketching the background of Emily Dickinson's poetry, I shall show her attitude toward the individual word in regard to its power for communication. Next I shall discuss the mystical tendency which her poems exhibit and compare her position with traditional mysticism as treated by Evelyn Underhill in her two authoritative books, *Mysticism* and *The Mystic Way*. In the fourth chapter I shall indicate how Emily Dickinson's attitude toward communication and her mystical tendency result in a rather definite aesthetic position which affected her attitude toward the creation of poetry. I shall conclude by examining an example of her best work, "There's a certain slant of light," which exhibits many of the essential characteristics of Emily Dickinson's approach to poetry.

## 1 / *Backgrounds*

**A** BRIEF summary of the background of Emily Dickinson's poetry will be helpful as an introduction to the critical portion of this study.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, December 10, 1830. She received a normal education for a New England girl and took part freely in the social life of Amherst until her middle twenties. During this time she was acquainted with the many eminent preachers, missionaries, men of affairs, and writers who often came to her father's home.

Most of her life was lived quietly at home. Gradually she drifted into a habit of seclusion which engendered local legends concerning frustrated love and a dictatorial father, and other gossipy speculations. After her father's death in 1874, which was followed by the invalidism of her mother, she secreted herself in the house and showed an extreme dread of being seen by strangers.

Emily Dickinson began writing poems in her teens but did not give evidence of her serious intentions as a poet until 1862, when she sent a few poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson for criticism. "The mind," she wrote, "is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask."<sup>1</sup> Higginson was an eminent man of letters, and although his abilities are generally regarded with condescension by Dickinson scholars today, he apparently was a stimulating and beneficial influence upon her. He was disturbed by her lack of organization

<sup>1</sup> Mabel Loomis Todd (ed.), *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1951), p. 7. This volume is a reprint of Mrs. Todd's original two-volume edition published in 1894 by Roberts Brothers.

and her unconventional syntax but clearly recognized her as a “wholly new and original poetic genius.” He gave her continual encouragement and sympathy which must have greatly gratified her, coming as they did from a man of a high reputation for literary judgment. That she earnestly desired critical appraisal of her work is evident: “If you truly consent, I recite now. Will you tell me my fault, frankly, as to yourself, for I had rather wince than die. Men do not call the surgeon to commend the bone, but to set it, sir, and fracture within is more critical.”<sup>2</sup> Higginson’s attempts to bring Emily Dickinson to conformity in the mechanics of poetry, however, were largely ignored. There is an unusual poem which has never received attention, so far as I know, which seems to be a comment upon her relationship with Higginson.

Myself was formed a carpenter.  
 An unpretending time  
 My plans [plane] and I together wrought  
 Before a builder came  
  
 To measure our attainments—  
 Had we the Art of Boards  
 Sufficiently developed  
 He’d hire us at halves.  
  
 My tools took human faces,  
 The bench where we had toiled  
 Against the man persuaded.  
 “We temples build,” I said.<sup>3</sup>

The carpenter is clearly the poet and the plane is, perhaps, her poetic sensibility. The ironically capitalized “Art of Boards” is the conventional rules of poetry to which Higginson was devoted. Apparently Higginson offered her his help in eventual publication if she would develop the Art of Boards. Her answer, of course, reflects her awareness of the merits of her poetry. She seems also aware that, for her, a change to conventional poetic practice was impossible. “I had no monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself; and when I try to

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson (eds.), *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), pp. 410 f., No. lxii. The second word in the third line of the first stanza is printed *plans* in the Bianchi and Hampson edition. George F. Whicher corrects this to *plane* in an extensive list of corrections on page 238 of *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938).

organize, my little force explodes and leaves me bare and charred."<sup>4</sup> And the state of her manuscripts bears witness to the fact that most of her poetry was written not with the deliberate, conscious process of organization which Poe described, but with the intense heat of what she aptly called the "explosion" of her "little force." Mrs. Bingham describes the state of the manuscripts as follows:

But when first discovered they looked impossible—a jumble of words on odds and ends of paper, some of it crumpled and torn. They were not sorted alphabetically, or according to size, or subject matter, or date of composition. Most of them were smothered with alternative words and phrases crowded into every available space—around the edges, upside down, wedged between the lines. Some poems, filling the margins of drafts of letters to friends, are difficult to distinguish from the body of the letter, following without a break on the same sheet of paper. Many are written on the backs of brown-paper bags or on discarded bills, programs, and invitations; on tiny scraps of stationery pinned together; on leaves torn from old notebooks (one such sheet dated "1824"); on soiled and mildewed subscription blanks, or on department- or drug-store bargain flyers from Amherst and surrounding towns. There are pink scraps, blue and yellow scraps, one of them a wrapper of *Chocolat Meunier*; poems on the reverse of recipes in her own writing, on household shopping lists, on the cut-off margins of newspapers, and on the inside of their brown-paper wrappings. . . . Often the writing is clear and distinct. On other scraps it is so confused that it looks as if written in the dark—lines overlapping, letters half formed.<sup>5</sup>

"I am in a hurry—" Emily Dickinson once wrote, "this pen is too slow for me—it hath done what it could."<sup>6</sup> Editorial difficulties aside, it is quite obvious that Emily Dickinson cared little for the visible form of her work. As George F. Whicher says, "the tune was in her head, and she was indifferent to its representation on paper."<sup>7</sup>

There are several significant consequences of the chaotic state in which Emily Dickinson left her poems. Editorial incompetence and the recriminatory controversies over the possession, editing, and publication of the poems have resulted in the inclusion of numerous errors in the editions of the poems. Also, the poet's entire workshop, so to speak, has been opened to public inspection side by side with a

<sup>4</sup> *Letters*, p. 258.

<sup>5</sup> Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham (eds.), *Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), pp. xii, xv.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Whicher, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

few truly great products of that workshop. Though it was not congenial to her method and inclination, we can only wish that Emily Dickinson had taken the trouble to select, revise, and arrange the poems herself. Her refusal to do so reflects her constant preoccupation with putting down on paper whatever sudden impression or thought had absorbed her attention, and also an incapacity for deliberate, painstaking judgment. She wrote to Higginson: "While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb."<sup>8</sup>

Emily Dickinson's poetry betrays less evidence of external influences than that of most poets. She, of course, inherited the New England Puritan tradition, which may be detected in her best as well as in her inferior work.<sup>9</sup> She did not try to emancipate herself from provincial traits.

The Robin's my criterion of tune  
 Because I grow where robins do—  
 But were I Cuckoo born  
 I'd swear by him,  
 The ode familiar rules the morn.  
 The Buttercup's my whim for bloom  
 Because we're orchard-sprung—  
 But were I Britain-born  
 I'd daisies spurn—  
 None but the Nut October fits,  
 Because through dropping it  
 The seasons flit, I'm taught.  
 Without the snow's tableau  
 Winter were lie to me—  
 Because I see New Englandly.  
 The Queen discerns like me—  
 Provincially.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of the Puritan religion of New England upon Emily Dickinson's poetry is obvious. However, the influence did not result in a pious, orthodox point of view. Emily Dickinson attended church

<sup>8</sup> *Letters*, p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> Such characteristics as vague, monotonous abstractions, erratic emotional texture, and incompleteness in ideas, which appear in the least successful poems, can plausibly be charged to the least desirable elements of the puritan culture as a whole.

<sup>10</sup> *Poems*, p. 307, No. lii.

services regularly until her twenty-fifth year but never became a church member. She discovered that she could not share the religious life of her Puritan neighbors and at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary began the first of her great renunciations by publicly rejecting the orthodox theology. A letter written in her sixteenth year says: "I have perfect confidence in God and His promises, and yet I know not why I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections."<sup>11</sup> And later she writes: "To be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine he was uncontented till he had been human."<sup>12</sup> These are characteristic of the comments concerning religion which appear in her letters and poetry. Of the doctrinal paraphernalia of the Puritans she retained only the concept of immortal life, and even this concept was for her scarcely a rational belief, but an emotional sensation which became a pervasive reality in her life. "I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a sea."<sup>13</sup>

Not only New England Puritanism but also New England Transcendentalism was a significant element of the intellectual environment in which Emily Dickinson lived. Her biographers affirm that she read much of the new, heretical literature, particularly the poems and essays of Emerson. Resemblances, both in thought and style, between Emerson and Emily Dickinson have been pointed out by critics. Undoubtedly, she was influenced specifically by Emerson and more generally by the whole philosophical movement which Emerson epitomized. The extreme individualism, the conviction of self-sufficiency of the Transcendentalists, is echoed by Emily Dickinson's treatment of the individual soul's sovereignty, infiniteness, and polar privacy. The concern with the all-pervading spiritual power which inhabits and transfigures the physical world is as apparent in Emily Dickinson's poems as in the writings of Emerson. Likewise, they have in common a sense of the unified nature of the apparent diversity of the universe. In poetic theory, furthermore, Emerson's demand for the terse, vital expression of thought—metre-making argument—in poetry is fulfilled by Emily Dickinson's practice. In whatever way the unique genius of Emily Dickinson was shaped and modified by the two conflicting New England philosophies, it is certain that each exerted a considerable influence.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

Emily Dickinson's attitude toward formal education may be inferred from her remark to Higginson, "I went to school, but in your manner of the phrase had no education."<sup>14</sup> Although she naturally was influenced and matured by her school years, she did not credit them as valuable. A slight hint of derision appears in nearly every comment on formal studies. "I have four studies. They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany. How large they sound, don't they?"<sup>15</sup>

I went to school  
But was not wiser . . .<sup>16</sup>

But let not revelation  
By theses be detained.<sup>17</sup>

One and One are One,  
Two be finished using,  
Well enough for schools . . .<sup>18</sup>

She was not sympathetic with science and philosophy.

Could we stand with that old Moses  
Canaan denied,—  
Scan, like him, the stately landscape  
On the other side,—

Doubtless we should deem superfluous  
Many sciences  
Not pursued by learned angels  
In scholastic skies!<sup>19</sup>

Arcturus is his other name,—  
I'd rather call him star!  
It's so unkind of science  
To go and interfere!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 116, No. 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22, No. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Poems*, p. 356, No. cxl.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44, No. xciv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76, No. xx.

Eclipses be predicted  
And Science bows them in,  
But so one face us suddenly—  
Jehovah's watch is wrong.<sup>21</sup>

The rainbow never tells me  
That gust and storm are by;  
Yet is she more convincing  
Than philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

The only relationship Emily Dickinson cared to have with science was her use of the inductive method in seeking psychological truth.

Experiment to me  
Is every one I meet.<sup>23</sup>

Literature also had little importance to the writing of her own poems. Nowhere in her work can one find the abundant literary references which characterize much poetry. Indeed, she consciously avoided particular stylistic influences. She wrote to Higginson: "I marked a line in one verse, because I met it after I made it, and never consciously touch a paint mixed by another person. I do not let go it, because, it is mine."<sup>24</sup> It may be assumed that she read considerably more books than she mentions in her letters and poems. George F. Whicher is undoubtedly correct in saying, "Her attitude was Emersonian: a poet's first business was less with the literature of old than with the impressions of life thronging about him."<sup>25</sup>

Emily Dickinson wrote over fifteen hundred poems during a life which was singular in its dearth of outward events but was more singular still in its abundant and significant inward activity. Living in a constant awareness of the wonder of the universe and the great, mysterious eternity from which one comes and to which one goes, she

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314, No. lxxvii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305, No. xlviiii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27, No. liv.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters*, p. 259.

<sup>25</sup> Whicher, *op. cit.*, p. 206. The chapter "Books and Reading" from which this quotation is taken is a good treatment of the subject of literary influences upon Emily Dickinson.



died on May 15, 1886, shortly after sending the following note to the Norcross sisters:

Little Cousins,—

Called back.

Emily<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Letters*, p. 374.

## 2 / *The Communication of the Word*

**I**N the beginning was the word." Emily Dickinson probably would have accepted a literal interpretation of this opening phrase of the Gospel of St. John. Language and communication exercised an almost hypnotic fascination over her; the power of the individual word, in particular, seems to have inspired her with nothing less than reverence. Such an attitude toward words is an important aspect of Emily Dickinson's approach to poetry in that it partially accounts for her method of composition and helps explain her use of poetic composition to discipline the mystical intuitions which involved her in both ecstasy and suffering of extreme intensity. This chapter is devoted to discovering the essential viewpoints of Emily Dickinson in regard to the power for communication of the individual word.

It seems certain that Emily Dickinson approached the writing of poetry inductively—that is, through the combining of words to arrive at whatever conclusion the word pattern seemed to suggest, rather than using words as subordinate instruments in expressing a total conception. Her amazing inconsistency of intellectual position may have resulted in part from the practice of starting with individual words and manipulating them into brilliant patterns regardless of the direction of thought, instead of always orienting her poems within an integrated philosophy. One notices how many of her poems seem less concerned with a total conception than with expressing a series of staccato inspirations occurring to her in the form of individual words. The following poem is remarkable in its use of words; its meaning, however, is somewhat obscured by the constant impact of

words which seem to be separate entities refusing to assume a subordinate position in the poem.

A nearness to Tremendousness  
 An Agony procures,  
 Affliction ranges Boundlessness.  
 Vicinity to laws  
 Contentment's quiet suburb,—  
 Affliction cannot stay  
 In acre or location—  
 It rents Immensity.<sup>1</sup>

The poem contrasts contentment with affliction. One is orderly, secluded, innocuous; the other is unrestrained, passionate, infinite. However, the excessive weight of such words as *Tremendousness*, *Boundlessness*, *Immensity* together with the extraordinary implications of the words *procures*, *ranges*, *suburb*, *rents*, all overflowing one small stanza is more than a reader can grasp without dividing the poem into its elements and studying each word individually.

Emily Dickinson herself gives us ample warrant for studying her poems a word at a time. Her constant practice of compiling a thesaurus of word choices for a single line, while constituting grave editorial difficulty, is at least an indication that each word was a veritable dynamo of implication and associations. Mrs. Bingham gives an interesting account in *Ancestors' Brocades* of the abundant presence of alternative words in the Dickinson manuscripts. She cites an example occurring in the poem "The Bible is an antique volume" of which the final lines read in manuscript:

Had but the tale a thrilling, typic,  
 hearty, bonnie, breathless, spacious,  
 tropic, warbling, ardent, friendly,  
 magic, pungent, winning, mellow  
 teller  
 All the boys would come—  
 Orpheus's sermon captivated,  
 It did not condemn.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the variant adjectives apparently occurred to her as refined gradations or aspects of her total conception. Her consequent reluct-

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, p. 453, No. cxxx.

<sup>2</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), p. 314.

ance to choose a single word now poses the almost insuperable editorial problem of determining which word she probably would have preferred. In the above instance, *warbling* was selected out of the possible fourteen choices. Many of the published poems themselves exhibit a similar concern with individual words. Note the accumulation of verbs in the following stanza.

'Tis this invites, appals, endows,  
Flits, glimmers, proves, dissolves,  
Returns, suggests, convicts, enchants—  
Then flings in Paradise!<sup>3</sup>

Emily Dickinson wrote one poem specifically about the choice of words.

“Shall I take thee?” the poet said  
To the propounded word.  
“Be stationed with the candidates  
Till I have further tried.”

The poet probed philology  
And when about to ring  
For the suspended candidate,  
There came unsummoned in

That portion of the vision  
The word applied to fill.  
Not unto nomination  
The cherubim reveal.<sup>4</sup>

This poem is extremely instructive in indicating Emily Dickinson's actual method of composition and in suggesting the relationship between rational labor and inspiration. The two instances of the numerous word “candidates” partly fulfill the poet's intention but also suggest new words which more aptly represent further aspects of the total conception. Soon the train of “candidates” has exhausted every facet and implication of the idea, and in doing so has securely established the fully developed idea in the poet's mind. But still no one word is adequate to the idea. As the poet attempts to choose the best alternative, the “cherubim” of artistic inspiration reveal the precise word which completes the “vision.” It is significant that the revealed word

<sup>3</sup> *Poems*, p. 352, No. cxxxii.

<sup>4</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 228, No. 436.

comes "unsummoned" in a flash of intuition. Such a word admits of no hesitation or doubt in the poet's mind. And yet the implication of the poem is that the revealing of the word must be preceded by the preparatory, conscious, rational effort of probing philology. Perhaps we can assume that the long series of "nominations" with no indicated choice which occur in some of her manuscript poems represent occasions when a portion of the vision was not filled by the revelation of the cherubim. She herself was well aware that inspiration, while all-sufficient when present, seldom came even to a great poet.

Your thoughts don't have words every day,  
 They come a single time  
 Like signal esoteric sips  
 Of sacramental wine,  
 Which while you taste so native seems,  
 So bounteous, so free,  
 You cannot comprehend its worth  
 Nor its infrequency.<sup>5</sup>

Even in friendly letters Emily Dickinson apparently could never escape the significance and implication of the words she used. In a letter in which she wrote the sentence, "Thank you for remembering me," there is the reflection immediately following it, "Remembrance—mighty word."<sup>6</sup> So conscious of particular words was she that the use of an especially significant word in a letter stimulated a parenthetical exclamation written perhaps with the desire to share with her friend something of her own intoxication with words.

The most evident characteristic of words, as far as Emily Dickinson was concerned, is their startling vitality. Her poems indicate that she regarded words as organic—separate little entities with a being, growth, and immortality of their own.

A word is dead  
 When it is said,  
     Some say.  
 I say it just  
 Begins to live  
     That day.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228, No. 435.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters*, p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> *Poems*, p. 42, No. lxxxix.

The life of the spoken word does not depend upon the duration of sound vibrations but is an inextricable part of the experience and being of the speaker and those to whom he speaks. Thus a word, no matter how simple, may be charged with imperishable significance because of its intimate relationship with human minds and souls. Connotations and symbolic extensions of meaning become inseparable from the word, so that its pronouncement will forever stimulate an entire "circumference" of meaning in addition to its denotative definition. In the following poem the idea of the immortality of words which are expressions of and inevitable associations with significant experience is clearly stated.

A little overflowing word  
That any hearing had inferred  
For ardor or for tears,  
Though generations pass away,  
Traditions ripen and decay,  
As eloquent appears.<sup>8</sup>

Eloquence, of course, did not mean for Emily Dickinson long-windedness, or unusual figures of speech, or any formal consideration; it meant the effective thrust of meaning stripped of everything that might qualify, ornament, or weaken it. Much of her imagery chosen to describe the effect of a word upon him who hears it supports the contention that, for her, communication consisted in transmitting or perceiving an immediate, overpowering vision.

There is a word  
Which bears a sword  
Can pierce an armed man.  
It hurls its barbed syllables,—  
At once is mute again.<sup>9</sup>

Communication is a *sword*. It *pierces*. *Barbed syllables are hurled*. There is no room here for slow comprehension, perception aided by illustration and analogy, and understanding based on a cautious consideration and analysis of a statement. There is only the overpowering immediacy of the piercing word. The sword imagery is elaborated in the following stanza.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269, No. cxxxvi.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148, No. xliv.

She dealt her pretty words like blades,  
As glittering they shone,  
And every one unbared a nerve  
Or wanted with a bone.<sup>10</sup>

Emily Dickinson testified that the concept of the “sword eloquence” of words was not a theoretical speculation for her, but was a personal, vivid reality. Consider, for example, how the sound of her lover’s name affected her.

I got so I could hear his name  
Without—  
Tremendous gain!—  
That stop-sensation in my soul,  
And thunder in the room.<sup>11</sup>

Eloquence, however, even in the sharpened sense in which she used the term, was not the real nature of words for Emily Dickinson. The eloquence was only the flash of light a calm ocean surface reflects. Deeper than light penetrates there is the turbulence of an unseen tide. Words seemed to her to embody some terrifying, mysterious power which approached omnipotence. She knew that such power was not suspected by most people who ordinarily used words glibly and thoughtlessly. And she apparently believed that even she herself could only sense the existence of this power and never fully perceive its extent.

Could any mortal lip divine  
The undeveloped freight  
Of a delivered syllable,  
‘Twould crumble with the weight.<sup>12</sup>

The power of words, while a great source of wonder and delight for her, was not regarded as wholly beneficial. No great power is entirely hazardless. “What a hazard an accent is! When I think of the hearts it has scuttled or sunk, I almost fear to lift my hand to so much as a punctuation.”<sup>13</sup> And in one poem she even compares words with malignant germs.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290, No. xxix.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370, No. clxvi.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45, No. xcvi.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters*, p. 364.

A word dropped careless on a page  
May stimulate an eye,  
When folded in perpetual seam  
The wrinkled author lie.

Infection in the sentence breeds;  
We may inhale despair  
At distances of centuries  
From the malaria.<sup>14</sup>

Emily Dickinson seems fascinated with the thought that words once expressed assume an existence of their own and can never be recalled by their "wrinkled author." In a letter she warns, "We must be careful what we say. No bird resumes its egg."<sup>15</sup> She then copies the first stanza of the poem just quoted, replacing the word *stimulate* with the word *consecrate* and the word *dropped* with the word *left*. The meaning of the stanza is now different but the fundamental expression of the potency and endurance of "a word" remains unchanged.

An interesting aspect of Emily Dickinson's reverence for words is the way in which she frequently uses terms of language and communication to describe or symbolize something entirely different from communication in the ordinary sense of the term. For instance in a poem beginning, "Step lightly on this narrow spot!" she says that a certain dead person's name is told as far as "fame export / Her deathless syllable."<sup>16</sup> In another poem the concept of love is symbolized by the phrases of endearment between lovers which eclipse all other communication.

Many a phrase has the English language,—  
I have heard but one

.....  
Breaking in bright orthography  
On my simple sleep;  
.....

<sup>14</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham, "Poems of Emily Dickinson: Hitherto Published Only in Part," *New England Quarterly*, XX (March, 1947), 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Letters*, p. 233.

<sup>16</sup> *Poems*, p. 176, No. xlv.



Say it again—Saxon!  
Hush—only to me!<sup>17</sup>

Even natural objects were described in terms implying human communication.

The hills in purple syllables  
The day's adventures tell  
To little groups of continents  
Just going home from school.<sup>18</sup>

Occasionally she uses language terms in writing about death. The mystery of death has often been called a "a riddle" by poets, but Emily Dickinson endows that word with unusual power by making it a separate, vital entity—a technique characteristic of her emphasis upon the individual word. One poem begins, "I have not told my garden yet," and the last stanza reads:

Nor lisp it at the table,  
Nor heedless by the way  
Hint that within the riddle  
One will walk to-day!<sup>19</sup>

The "riddle" becomes an existing locality or condition—something into which one can walk. After stepping within the riddle, Emily Dickinson suggests, one is still helpless without the power and the grace of the Divine. Such power is inevitably described in terms of language.

The quiet nonchalance of death  
No daybreak can bestir;  
The slow archangel's syllables  
Must awaken her.<sup>20</sup>

And in "Tis whiter than an Indian pipe," Emily Dickinson describes the awakened spirit as a "limitless hyperbole."<sup>21</sup> In the same type of metaphor she pictures herself as a syllable in the poem beginning, "I could suffice for Him."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422, No. lxxvii.

<sup>18</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 92, No. 166.

<sup>19</sup> *Poems*, p. 178, No. xlvihi.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159, No. v.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201, No. c.

“Would I be whole?” He sudden broached.  
My syllable rebelled . . .<sup>22</sup>

Her answer, or more generally, her powers of communication are identified with herself.

It seems likely that Emily Dickinson would have devoted herself to individual words of only because she keenly realized their vital power in both of its aspects—the sudden lightning flash, and the deep, undeveloped freight. Apparently she delighted in words for their own sake, as most of us do only as children. She admittedly was childlike in many respects and indeed consciously sought to maintain in herself the eagerness and wonder of a child. Thus it is not inconsistent with her attitude and general approach to experience that she should savor the sounds and meanings of words just as a child experiments and practices with his first syllables.

However, Emily Dickinson had a more serious objective in experimenting with words than the delight which this afforded. She was concerned with language as an instrument for communication. Her capacity to perceive the significant and her desire to express her perceptions in poetic form made this concern inevitable. To a mind brimming with acute impressions, observations, and speculations, the ambiguity of ordinary language must have seemed intolerable. The evidence is clear that she gave great care to the evaluation of not only lines but the very syllables of each word. In this way she apparently hoped to achieve a skill in the use of language which would preclude ambiguity and verbosity. Hypothetically, we can trace the reasoning which led her to her unique way of using words.

The tendency of human minds to interpret words in the light of their own prejudices, ignorances, and inclinations is easily apparent. Therefore the fewer words one used, the less opportunity he provided for misinterpretation—that is, if the words were chosen which in their denotative meanings and their connotative associations would most exactly convey one's intentions. Thus Emily Dickinson attempted to develop a shorthand system of poetic language which would combine the advantage of conciseness with the capability of connoting a rich complex of suggestions.

In conjunction with the development of a shorthand language arose an unshakable attachment to *frugality*, *economy*, *conciseness*, *reticence*, and *simplicity*. Any reader of the Dickinson poems will

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425, No. lxxxii.

recognize these concepts as typical and often recurring themes. One suspects that she admired frugality not only for its usefulness in poetic communication but also as a compelling concept in itself. At any rate, her poems show *economy* to have been a constant watchword. Even a rat is described as having “concise” characteristics and as being “a foe so reticent.”<sup>23</sup> Valuable or awesome things—books, lover’s words, nature, death—are all described in terms of frugality, simplicity, and reticence.<sup>24</sup> The human being in particular achieved stature and power in proportion to his reserve.

I fear a man of scanty speech,  
I fear a silent man,  
Haranguer I can overtake  
Or babbler entertain—  
  
But he who waiteth while the rest  
Expend their inmost pound,  
Of this Man I am wary—  
I fear that He is Grand.<sup>25</sup>

She felt, truly enough, that she herself was liberally endowed with the supreme virtue of reticence. In some poems she symbolically identifies her own existence as a form and practice of some type of economy.

Alone and in a circumstance  
Reluctant to be told,  
A spider on my reticence  
Deliberately crawled . . .<sup>26</sup>

Twice she refers to “my frugal eyes.”<sup>27</sup> And the following poem has autobiographical overtones even if she were not specifically talking about herself.

Superiority to fate  
Is difficult to learn.  
’Tis not conferred by any,  
But possible to earn

<sup>23</sup> *Poems*, p. 84, No. xxxv.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46, No. xcix; p. 83, No. xxxi; p. 233, No. xxxiv; and *Bolts of Melody*, p. 192, No. 356.

<sup>25</sup> *Poems*, p. 277, No. i.

<sup>26</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 102, No. 181.

<sup>27</sup> *Poems*, p. 47, No. cii; and p. 173, No. xxxvi.

A pittance at a time,  
Until, to her surprise,  
The soul with strict economy  
Subsists till Paradise.<sup>28</sup>

In respect to Emily Dickinson's concept of economy, one can trace the progression of her thinking from a reverence for words to a realization that "scanty speech" is the most effective means of communicating and to an emphasis upon the concept of frugality as a value in itself. "Oneness" is the essence of meaningful experience.

One and One are One,  
Two be finished using,  
Well enough for schools,  
But for inner choosing,  
Life—just, or Death—  
Or the Everlasting.  
Two would be too vast,  
For the Soul's comprising.<sup>29</sup>

From this position it was inevitable that Emily Dickinson would proceed to the logical conclusion that if economy and reticence of expression were more meaningful than the effusiveness and carelessness of most ordinary speech, then still more significant would be *silence*. This conclusion was apparently her final and unwavering position in regard to the efficacy of words and became one of her most pervasive themes. Two aspects of her experience supported such a conviction and probably contributed to its genesis.

First she saw that the most awe-inspiring and significant things experienced in the external world are wrapped in silence and mystery.

Aloud  
Is nothing that is chief,  
But still.<sup>30</sup>

Faced with this fact, Emily Dickinson could only adopt a "reverential face" and, in her idiom, not profane the time with the symbol of a word.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41, No. lxxv.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356, No. cxl.

<sup>30</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 249, No. 485.

<sup>31</sup> *Poems*, p. 133, No. xiii.

My best acquaintances are those  
With whom I spoke no word;  
The stars that stated come to town  
Esteemed me never rude  
  
Although to their celestial call  
I failed to make reply,  
My constant reverential face  
Sufficient courtesy.<sup>32</sup>

The essential element in this poem is Emily Dickinson's avowal that non-speaking, inanimate "things" are her best acquaintances. In this category would fall the sublime aspects of nature such as the volcano:

The reticent volcano keeps  
His never slumbering plan;  
Confided are his projects pink  
To no precarious man.<sup>33</sup>

And the sea which

Develops pearl and weed,  
But only to himself is known  
The fathoms they abide.<sup>34</sup>

And Nature as a total phenomenon:

We pass and she abides;  
We conjugate her skill  
While she creates and federates  
Without a syllable.<sup>35</sup>

Nature is what we know  
But have no art to say,  
So impotent our wisdom is  
To Her simplicity.<sup>36</sup>

Emily Dickinson's "best acquaintances" also included such intangible concepts as Melody:

<sup>32</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 122, No. 225.

<sup>33</sup> *Poems*, p. 49, No. cvii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136, No. xvii.

<sup>35</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 51, No. 92.

<sup>36</sup> *Poems*, p. 233, No. xxxiv.

The definition of melody is  
That definition is none.<sup>37</sup>

Life:

A still volcano—Life—  
That flickered in the night  
When it was dark enough to show  
Without endangering sight.<sup>38</sup>

the Future:

The Future never spoke,  
Nor will he, like the Dumb,  
Reveal by sign or syllable  
Of his profound To-come.<sup>39</sup>

Divinity:

Divinity dwells under the seal.<sup>40</sup>

or God:

Our little secrets slink away  
Beside God's "will not tell" . . .<sup>41</sup>

the Heavens:

The Heavens with a smile  
Sweep by our disappointed heads,  
But deign no syllable.<sup>42</sup>

and of course—Death:

The Living tell  
The Dying but a syllable;  
The coy Dead—none.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310, No. lvii.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292, No. xxxiii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232, No. xxxi.

<sup>40</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 249, No. 485.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280, No. 560.

<sup>42</sup> *Poems*, p. 321, No. lxxx.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 447, No. cxvii.

Like Death,  
 Who only shows his  
 Marble disc—  
 Sublimier sort than speech.<sup>44</sup>

All these “best acquaintances” have in common the characteristic, extremely significant for Emily Dickinson, of existing on levels incomprehensible to the human mind, of never yielding the secret of their nature. As I have already observed, Emily Dickinson probably concluded that the withdrawal from communication manifested by the mightiest things conceivable to the human mind was worth emulating, in so far as possible, by the mightiest human minds.

The second aspect of her experience which led her to a worshipful attitude toward silence was her intimate knowledge of human experience. She, perhaps as much as any other human being, was aware of the profound complexities of experience which accompany, like the submerged mass of an iceberg, the apparent superficiality and simplicity of daily life. These complexities, she knew, defied the limits of communication and made inevitable the fact that the essential nature of human beings must always remain secreted in the lonely isolation of the individual.

Growth of Man like growth of Nature  
 Gravitates within,  
 Atmosphere and sun confirm it  
 But it stirs alone.

Each its difficult ideal  
 Must achieve itself,  
 Through the solitary prowess  
 Of a silent life.<sup>45</sup>

Emily Dickinson noticed that it was the most significant aspects of the human being which seemed most removed from communication.

Best things dwell out of sight—  
 The pearl, the just, our thought . . .<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Poems*, p. 271, No. cxlii.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282, No. xiv.

<sup>46</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 274, No. 543.

Speech is a symptom of affection,  
And Silence one,  
The perfectest communication  
Is heard of none . . .<sup>47</sup>

Of the two symptoms of affection Emily Dickinson's preference is clearly for silence—not an empty, passive silence but one made electric by the energy of a powerful restraint.

There is no silence in the earth so silent  
As that endured  
Which, uttered, would discourage nature  
And haunt the world.<sup>48</sup>

The significance of silence is not comprised in a lack of something but in a tremendous excess existing within the human being. Extremes of emotion such as joy or grief, for instance, often underlie a meaningful silence. Emily Dickinson knew from her own experience that verbalization is hopelessly inadequate beyond a certain point to express joy:

If I could tell how glad I was,  
I should not be so glad,  
But when I cannot make the Force  
Nor mould it into word,  
I know it is a sign  
That new Dilemma be  
From mathematics further off,  
Than from Eternity.<sup>49</sup>

Or grief:

Best grief is tongueless—<sup>50</sup>

Her observation of other people indicated that the same was true for them.

Give little anguish  
Lives will fret.  
Give avalanches—  
And they'll slant,

<sup>47</sup> *Poems*, p. 261, No. cx.

<sup>48</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 250, No. 488.

<sup>49</sup> *Poems*, p. 267, No. cxxviii.

<sup>50</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 252, No. 493.



Straighten, look cautious for their breath,  
 But make no syllable—  
 Like Death,  
     Who only shows his  
     Marble disc—  
 Sublimer sort than speech.<sup>51</sup>

The words the happy say  
 Are paltry melody;  
 But those the silent feel  
 Are beautiful.<sup>52</sup>

She was mute from transport,  
 I, from agony!<sup>53</sup>

Emily Dickinson asked herself why it was that words, which ordinarily seemed almost infinitely capable of expressing thought and emotion, should on occasion become pitifully inadequate. "Is it that words are suddenly small, or that we are suddenly large, that they cease to suffice us to thank a friend? Perhaps it is chiefly both."<sup>54</sup> Apparently she regarded the expressive power of words and the perceptiveness of the human being as associated in an almost organic relationship. The increase of awareness in a person which made him "suddenly large" was accompanied by an apparent decrease in the effectiveness of words to express the newly acquired excess of thought or emotion. However, even though the deepest thought and emotion dwelled in inexpressible depths, there was, as Emily Dickinson knew, no reason to deny its real existence.

Gratitude is not the mention  
 Of a tenderness,  
 But its still appreciation  
 Out of plumb of speech.  
 When the sea return no answer  
 By the line and lead  
 Proves it there's no sea, or rather  
 A remoter bed?<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Poems*, pp. 270 f., No. cxlii.

<sup>52</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 249, No. 487.

<sup>53</sup> *Poems*, p. 176, No. xlv.

<sup>54</sup> *Letters*, p. 324.

<sup>55</sup> Bingham, "Poems of Emily Dickinson: Hitherto Published Only in Part," *op. cit.*, p. 38.

The conclusion, then, to which Emily Dickinson came was that words, powerful as they are, cannot encompass what is truly significant. As a result of this conclusion, her position as a poet who was concerned with molding thought and experience into language was indeed strange. The apparently logical thing to do would be to withdraw from all attempts at language communication and devote herself to a mystical experiencing of truth. Such a course of action would not have been foreign to her nature or inclination. Few persons have so completely withdrawn from human society as she did. However, Emily Dickinson was apparently not the type of person who could attain a completely mystical approach to life. She seemed to feel a desperate need for language communication, or at least the need to organize her experience to such a degree that it could be expressed on paper if only for herself to read. Thus, fully aware that she was attempting the exact thing which she considered impossible, she tried to find phrases for her thoughts.

I found the phrase to every thought  
I ever had, but one;  
And that defies me,—as a hand  
Did try to chalk the sun

To races nurtured in the dark;—  
How would your own begin?  
Can blaze be done in cochineal,  
Or noon in mazarin?<sup>56</sup>

This poem usually is interpreted as expressing Emily Dickinson's extreme confidence in her ability to express everything except perhaps the concept of immortality. And of course it is evident that she did possess great self-confidence in the use of words; however, this one poem should not make us forget her conviction, expressed repeatedly, that the truly significant things in human experience dwelled in the realm of silence and secrecy. The poem quoted above, furthermore, is not so much a contradiction as a confirmation of her position regarding the impotency of words. In the first place she is speaking of a specific, significant thought—most likely the concept of immortality which she habitually describes in terms of *blaze*, *noon*, *sun*. To emphasize the gigantic stature and inaccessibility of this concept, she uses a contrast based upon the clearest, most concise distinction

<sup>56</sup> *Poems*, p. 17, No. xxxi.

possible—a sharp dichotomy between the concept of immortality and all other concepts. The poem would lose much of its directness and power if she had made a general statement to the effect that she had difficulty expressing the thoughts which concerned her most. Secondly, the exaggeration in the first two lines is too apparent to be taken as literal truth. The one thought she could not express should be considered a symbol of the realm of thoughts which are too intrinsically a part of the human soul to be severed from it. Since such a realm of thoughts would naturally be associated with and probably epitomized by the concept of immortality, it was logical for Emily Dickinson to think of it as the representative “one” thought to which she could not find a phrase. Her desire to be concise, specific, and economic in poetry would inevitably lead her to this solution of a poetic problem.

I have shown how Emily Dickinson’s attitude toward words was something of a paradox. Her intellect and intuitive imagination told her that human communication was unavailing before the greatness of the universe and the complexity of man’s experience within it. But her emotional nature, her delight in a struggle, and her unlimited courage bade her make the attempt regardless of its futility. As long as her poetry could at least suggest the infiniteness and wonder of the universe, she thought the effort was justified. And if nothing else, she could vividly call attention to poetry’s inadequacy for the most significant communication by, paradoxically enough, communicating that very idea as profoundly as she could to any possible reader of her poems. Thus the awe-inspiring mysteries with which Emily Dickinson was concerned would be dramatically focused in the reader’s mind through a striking incongruity: powerful poems confessing their powerlessness. The paradox inherent in such a situation is the result of the poet’s attempt to bridge the gap between a mortal and superhuman consciousness.

It should be noted that Emily Dickinson did not regard the impotency of words as a total disadvantage. There was an attraction, even a fascination, in the imperfection of human language, for if communication was necessarily incomplete and vague, the human imagination was thus allowed more scope, given more importance, and developed more extensively. All poets by the nature of their calling depend upon and revere the imagination, and Emily Dickinson was no exception. She preferred the world of her own creation to the objective world of observable fact. The lady in the following poem knows that the “image” has advantages over the “interview.”

A charm invests a face  
Imperfectly beheld,—  
The lady dare not lift her veil  
For fear it be dispelled

But peers beyond her mesh,  
And wishes, and denies,—  
Lest interview annul a want  
That image satisfies.<sup>57</sup>

In another poem on the same theme Emily Dickinson uses erotic imagery in a highly unusual context.

Did the harebell loose her girdle  
To the lover bee,  
Would the bee the harebell hallow  
Much as formerly?

Did the paradise, persuaded,  
Yield her moat of pearl,  
Would the Eden be an Eden,  
Or the earl an earl?<sup>58</sup>

An image of a maiden who maintains her alluring mystery and attractiveness by preserving her chastity is here applied to a harebell, and then in a daring extension to Heaven itself. Heaven and God, if perceived and understood by men, would not retain their present status in men's thoughts and imagination. The implication is that incomunicableness in this case is a distinct advantage.

Perhaps Emily Dickinson's viewpoint concerning the inadequacy of the word to express the poet's deepest intuitions, and yet the value,

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142, No. xxviii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142, No. xxvii. Richard Chase (*Emily Dickinson* ["The American Men of Letters Series"; William Sloan Associates, 1951], p. 139) comments on this poem as follows:

"The poem beginning 'Did the harebell loose her girdle' asks, in terms of a rather confused nature allegory, whether female creatures (the category seems extensive) lose caste by yielding to their lovers, and also whether the lovers lose caste (for 'Eden' read 'the innocent sexuality of women,' and for 'earl' read 'lover'): [Mr. Chase quotes here the second stanza of the poem.] There is no specific idea of sin in this poem. The specification is of status, though the exact kind of status in question is, as frequently happens, not very clear."

Why not accept the obvious meaning of "Eden" and "earl" as Heaven and God? Emily Dickinson frequently used terms of royalty to designate God, and she used the words "Eden," "Paradise," "Heaven," "Eternity" as more or less synonymous. See, for example, *Poems*, p. 191, No. lxxiii, and p. 216, No. cxxxvi; pp. 295 f., No. xxxvii, and pp. 309 f., No. lvii.

notwithstanding, of struggling to express the inexpressible is summed up in the following poem.

To tell the beauty would decrease,  
To state the Spell demean,  
There is a syllableless sea  
Of which it is the sign.

My will endeavours for its word  
And fails, but entertains  
A rapture as of legacies—  
Of introspective mines.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *Poems*, p. 266, No. cxxiv.

### 3 / *The Mystical Tendency*

**T**HE most desultory reading of the poems of Emily Dickinson reveals their remarkable divergence from the customary approach to the problems of human experience. Ordinarily one thinks of life in terms of the facts of environment, the interrelationship of persons within a social situation, and the possibilities of various courses of action. All this can be found in Emily Dickinson's poems, but there is something more. This "something more" most often takes the form of a pervasive atmosphere—not precisely definable, yet felt as a real, indispensable aspect of her poetry. The essence of this aspect appears to be an attitude which permeates her poetry, and which I should call a mystical attitude.

The danger in using the term *mystical* in any critical treatment of literature is almost prohibitive. The careless use of a term which has a specific, religious meaning can only lead to ambiguity. I do not intend to say that Emily Dickinson was, in the theological sense, a mystic. However, I should like to use the term "mystical attitude" to express a certain characteristic of many of her poems. I would gladly avoid terminology likely to be controversial if I thought another term would describe as adequately the attitude exhibited in her poems. One can adopt a scientific attitude or approach to a problem without being a scientist by occupation. One can also engage in athletic activities without being a professional athlete. Then is it not possible to assume a mystical attitude without, technically speaking, being a mystic?

The principal objection to this argument is, I suppose, that one becomes a mystic not voluntarily through a deliberate act of will, but necessarily through an unalterable nature of a certain type, and that one must be a mystic to know what a mystical attitude is. Thus, many

people object to considering the possibility of what might be called a neophyte or dabbler in mysticism. They see that Emily Dickinson's poems exhibit several different viewpoints and apparently originate from a variety of motives. In view of this fact they attempt to discount the aspect of Emily Dickinson which seems unmistakably mystical as being a hodgepodge of attitudes springing from various environmental factors.

It is not mysticism itself. It is an attitude composed partly of the English Hymnal, partly of instinctively apprehended Puritan Theology, and partly of human sensibility bred with experience to the point of insight. There is besides an element of composition at work, which is the most important of all the distinguishable elements. . . .<sup>1</sup>

This analysis seems true enough, if one may add that in human considerations the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts—a fact which analyses seldom point out. Any attitude, conceivably, may be broken up into elements and derivations. Such analytical divisions, however, do not prevent one from speaking of the attitude itself. I believe Genevieve Taggard is right when she makes the following conjecture: "If the voice of heavenly vision had spoken alone in Emily, she would have been a mystic poet. She is not a mystic poet. . . . The real mystic experiences an ecstasy, and his invariable report is that life is single and divine; he abhors a double."<sup>2</sup> Thus, since Emily Dickinson's multiple reactions to the world deny the singleness which has characterized the lives of the greatest mystics, many critics attempt to call the mystical aspect of her reactions anything but a mystical attitude. They maintain that it is not possible, or perhaps proper, for a mystical attitude to coexist with any other manner of thinking and feeling. As a result they tend to regard mysticism as a secret and exclusive cult wrapped in mystery. It is obvious that the great mystics do indeed form a unique and restricted group and are, by their remoteness from ordinary experience, enigmatic and awe-inspiring. Most mystics, however, have attempted to communicate the deep significance of their experiences and to influence others to attempt the Mystic Way. Critics of and commentators on mysticism, on the other hand, occasionally exhibit a peculiar piety which seems to concentrate on excluding various people from any connection with

<sup>1</sup> Richard P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," *The Expense of Greatness* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1940), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Genevieve Taggard, *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 320.

mysticism. For example when confronted with an evidently mystical poem written by a non-mystic—Emily Dickinson—they engage in strenuous semantic gymnastics in an attempt to explain such a poem:

. . . [if her poems confront the supersensible] it is always on the plane of the rational imagination, never in the incomprehensible terms of the mystical act.<sup>3</sup>

. . . Death and heaven were the objects of constant speculation by Miss Dickinson, almost to the point of obsession, but the speculation was not that communion with the Divine which the mystic longs for; it was imaginative and entirely based upon sensory experience.<sup>4</sup>

. . . This [Great Streets of Silence] 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 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.<sup>5</sup>

. . . Our poet understood the mystic experience, the totally engaged contemplation of the eternal beatific light, and she sometimes wrote about it as an idea—as when she speaks of the “rapt attention” to immortality. But she never tries directly to render the experience itself. She is no St. Catherine, or John of the Cross. A true product of New England Puritanism, her vision of the Godhead never entirely transcends the gross facts of experience and never entirely eludes the intervention of ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently to qualify as mystical, a poem must take the form of an actual experience, but foreign to all human experience, and be set forth in incomprehensible terms which carefully avoid the facts of experience, the imagination, and the intervention of ideas. Such a poem, likely, would satisfy everyone as being “mystical,” but has such a poem ever been written? Perhaps there is some discernible difference between rendering an experience and dramatizing an idea. However, when we are asked to believe that “rapt attention” to immortality con-

<sup>3</sup> Blackmur, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Sister Mary Humiliata, “Emily Dickinson—Mystic Poet?” *College English*, XII (November, 1950), 144.

<sup>5</sup> Yvor Winters, “Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgement,” *Maule's Curse* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1938), p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 184.



stitutes an idea rather than an experience, then it seems to me that the distinctions and qualifications made in the above quotations become meaningless.

It seems to me more worthwhile to attempt to discover what attitudes and viewpoints which characterize the mystic may be shared by those who are not completely mystical and what value these may have. Therefore I intend in this chapter to trace the mystical tendency which is exhibited in Emily Dickinson's poems and to compare her attitudes with traditional mysticism. In the remaining chapter I shall explain the relationship and importance of Emily Dickinson's mystical tendency to her conception of poetry.

Perhaps the most concise and usable definition of mysticism was written by Evelyn Underhill. She wrote that mysticism is "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit toward complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood."<sup>7</sup>

It is apparent that mysticism must be defined in terms of certain common tendencies or approaches rather than in rigid formulas for behavior or doctrines for belief. The many variations of behavior and thought among the great mystics of history make an inflexible classification impossible. In Evelyn Underhill's definition one notes that she considers mysticism an *innate* tendency of the human spirit. This statement implies that the possibility for mystical experience in some degree is open to anyone.

Just as genius in any of the arts is—humanly speaking—the final term of a power of which each individual possesses the rudiments, so mysticism may be looked upon as the final term, the active expression, of a power latent in the whole race; the power, that is to say, of so perceiving transcendent reality.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it seems entirely justified and reasonable to examine the poems of Emily Dickinson for evidence of a mystical attitude, even though she obviously never became a mystic in the sense of achieving complete harmony with a transcendental order.

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism; A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (11th ed.; London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1926), p. x. Most writers on mysticism seem to regard Evelyn Underhill as an authority upon the subject. Mention of her works as standard references occur frequently in the following books: Mary Anita Ewer, *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1933); Charles Morris Addison, *The Theory and Practice of Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1918); and Joseph B. Collins, *Christian Mysticism in the Elizabethan Age* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1940).

<sup>8</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 87.

One great danger in the term *mysticism* as it is loosely used in literary criticism is pointed out by Mr. Blackmur:

By making ultimate apprehension of God—or matter—free in words, it relieves the poet of the necessity to make his words first apprehend the *manifestation*—what is actually felt—in this world; and it relieves the reader of the obligation to apprehend anything at all when everything may always be apprehended at once.<sup>9</sup>

Meaningless jumbles of generalizations, Mr. Blackmur says (in spite of his statement previously quoted about “incomprehensible terms”), do not constitute mystical poetry. This warning must be kept in mind in regard to certain poems of Emily Dickinson which seem to be mere riddles or experiments in the kind of language often found in mystical poetry.

Numerous reviewers, critics, and readers have called Emily Dickinson a mystic. Most of these people used the word *mystic* simply to designate any unusual style of writing and did not intend a precise historical reference to any mystical tradition. Emily Dickinson herself probably did not know or care a great deal about traditional mysticism. She uses the word *mystic* four times in her poems.

These are the signs to Nature's inns,  
Her invitation broad  
For whomsoever famishing  
To taste her mystic bread.<sup>10</sup>

A dead friend is

The absent, mystic Creature,  
That but for love of us,  
Had gone to sleep that soundest time  
Without the weariness.<sup>11</sup>

There is a “morn by men unseen” where go the “birds” that sought the sun.

Like thee to dance, like thee to sing,  
People upon that mystic green,  
I ask each new May morn.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Blackmur, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Poems*, p. 313, No. lxvi.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443, No. cix.

<sup>12</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 223, No. 429.

And lastly:

Whether my bark went down at sea,  
 Whether she met with gales,  
 Whether to isles enchanted  
 She bent her docile sails;

By what mystic mooring  
 She is held to-day,—  
 This is the errand of the eye  
 Out upon the bay.<sup>13</sup>

The first poem uses the word in a sacramental sense. A communion with or a partaking of nature constitutes a mystical experience. The second poem seems almost to equate *mystic* with *mysterious*. "Mystic green" in the third poem signifies Heaven or Immortality, and the "mystic mooring" of the fourth seems to be a thread of divine life which sustains and anchors mortals. In each case *mystic* is used as a rather flexible adjective which connotes some experience or object removed from ordinary human perception. Such a use of the word is now, and undoubtedly was then, the popular usage as opposed to the more precise, limited usage which applies the word *mystic* to the individual human being who seeks to achieve a union with a divine, transcendental order.

Even though Emily Dickinson may not have been well acquainted with the history or principles of mysticism, it is quite possible that she nevertheless developed a mystical attitude. I think it can be demonstrated that this approach developed from an original organization of her own private resources and was not dependent upon an understanding of any particular mystical tradition.

In brief, my argument is as follows: Emily Dickinson was able to contemplate and experience aspects of human existence which ordinarily escape notice. Furthermore, her concern with religious thought, with death and immortality, gave her the stimulus to attempt to comprehend a greater, more complete, knowledge than is possible for the rational intelligence. Thus she had both the capability and incentive to attempt a mystical development.

Mystics of all ages have been deeply concerned with knowledge and truth. Evelyn Underhill points out that this concern is common to all men but intensified and satisfied in the mystics:

<sup>13</sup> *Poems*, p. 14, No. xxiv.

All men, at one time or another, have fallen in love with the veiled Isis whom they call Truth. With most, this has been but a passing passion: they have early seen its hopelessness and turned to more practical things. But if we may trust the reports of the mystics—and they are reports given with a strange accent of certainty and good faith—they have succeeded where all these others have failed, in establishing immediate communication between the spirit of man, entangled as they declare amongst material things, and that “only Reality,” that immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God.<sup>14</sup>

In her conception of reality, Emily Dickinson shows evidence of a similar “strange accent of certainty and good faith,” which Evelyn Underhill mentions as characteristic of the reports of the mystics. Some Dickinson poems refer directly to the certainty of her intuitions.

You'll know it as you know 'tis Noon—  
By Glory! As you do the Sun—  
By Glory! As you will in Heaven  
Know God the Father and the Son!

By intuition mightiest things  
Assert themselves, and not by terms.  
“I'm Midnight,” need the Midnight say?  
“I'm Sunrise,” need the Majesty?

Omnipotence had not a tongue:  
His lisp is Lightning and the Sun,  
His conversation with the Sea.  
“How shall you know?” Consult your eye!<sup>15</sup>

The certainty of her intuition was not disturbed by the contrasting standards of reality which society approved. Probably she knew that—

Such standards [of reality] as exist are conventional: and correspond to convenience, not to truth. It is no argument to say that most men see the world in much the same way, and that this “way” is the true standard of reality: though for practical purposes we have agreed that sanity consists in sharing the hallucinations of our neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

Although Emily Dickinson did apparently give some thought and even worry to the question of her sanity, she could not accept the

<sup>14</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Poems*, p. 419, No. lxxii.

<sup>16</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 11.

hallucinations of her neighbors. Seeing beyond the conventions of ordinary speech which permit persons to conceal from one another what Evelyn Underhill calls "the unique and lonely world in which each lives,"<sup>17</sup> Emily Dickinson realized that the truth for each person must be sought in the reservoir of the individual self.

The Soul's superior instants  
Occur to Her alone,  
When friend and earth's occasion  
Have infinite withdrawn.

Or she, Herself, ascended  
To too remote a height,  
For lower recognition  
Than Her Omnipotent.

This mortal abolition  
Is seldom, but as fair  
As Apparition—subject  
To autocratic air.

Eternity's disclosure  
To favorites, a few,  
Of the Colossal substance  
Of immortality.<sup>18</sup>

Most of the great mystics of the past have developed their mysticism as an extension of some theological creed. Emily Dickinson, however, seems to have developed her incomplete mysticism as an extension of her intense devotion to artistic creation. She speaks of the God and Bible of the Puritan tradition with impiety, ridicule, and frank disbelief. She never became a church member, and though she regretted the loss of faith—

Those, dying then, knew where they went,  
They went to God's right hand;  
That hand is amputated now  
And God cannot be found.

The abdication of belief  
Makes the behavior small—  
Better an *ignis fatuus*  
Than no illumine at all.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Poems*, pp. 232 f., No. xxxiii.

<sup>19</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 294, No. 599.

—there is no doubt that she rejected all belief in the *ignis fatuus* of the Puritan theology. Nevertheless, Emily Dickinson was deeply concerned with the problems which were left unanswered by her rejection of Puritanism. A disavowal of a theological dogma could not resolve a deeply felt emotional need for religion. In a slightly ironical poem beginning “My period had come for prayer,” she states her inability to locate the God to whom she was supposed to pray. The poem ends

But awed beyond my errand  
I worshipped—did not pray!<sup>20</sup>

Though the Puritan God could not be found, Emily Dickinson would not abandon her faith.

My faith is larger than the hills,  
So when the hills decay,  
My faith must take the purple wheel  
To show the Sun the way.

'Tis first he steps upon the vane  
And then upon the hill;  
And then abroad the world he goes  
To do his golden will.

And if his yellow feet should miss,  
The birds would not arise,  
The flowers would slumber on their stems,—  
No bells have Paradise.

How dare I therefore stint a faith  
On which so vast depends,  
Lest Firmament should fail for me—  
The rivet in the bands.<sup>21</sup>

A faith that regarded itself as an essential rivet in the eternal bands of the universe was beyond the possibility of being stunted. She would keep the Sabbath not by going to church but by staying home amid the beauty of nature.<sup>22</sup>

Her faith was not just an emotional compulsion with no intellectual anchorage despite her abandonment of Calvinism. She was convinced that

<sup>20</sup> *Poems*, p. 299, No. xli.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305 f., No. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95, No. lvii.

This world is not conclusion;  
A sequel stands beyond,  
Invisible, as music,  
But positive, as sound.<sup>23</sup>

She also firmly believed the Biblical precept—the Kingdom of Heaven is within you.

Who has not found the heaven below  
Will fail of it above.  
God's residence is next to mine,  
His furniture is love.<sup>24</sup>

At times she wrote in a completely solipsistic manner that

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.<sup>25</sup>

The emphasis upon the necessity for a personal experiencing of the Divine is obvious.

The problem that faced her, then, was how to reconcile the emotional reality of a spiritual faith with her frankly skeptical intellectual position regarding religion. Her solution seems to have been a process of synthesis. She sought to synthesize the emotion of her religious yearning with her highly sensitive artistic perception into a unified and profound intuitive power. The power of these combined emotional and rational elements afforded Emily Dickinson a method of obtaining truth that to her seemed infallible. Of course, the emotional and rational elements of a human personality are always related in some degree in everyone. But in Emily Dickinson, the two elements are so indistinguishable in some of her best poems that they seem to constitute a synthesis into a new faculty for a higher form of perception.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195, No. lxxxiii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46, No. c.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330 f., No. xcvi.

The synthesis, of course, was not a conscious, deliberate act on Emily Dickinson's part. Rather, it took the form of a gradual evolution energized by her constant attempts to "feel" deeper and to "see" more.

The content of many poems suggests that the gradual evolution of this new faculty culminated in a dramatic climax in which a new spiritual awareness suddenly became possible for her and struck her with the force of a lightning bolt.

The farthest thunder that I heard  
Was nearer than the sky,  
And rumbles still, though torrid noons  
Have lain their missiles by.  
The lightning that preceded it  
Struck no one but myself,  
But I would not exchange the bolt  
For all the rest of life.  
Indebtedness to oxygen  
The chemist may repay,  
But not the obligation  
To electricity.  
It founds the homes and decks the days,  
And every clamor bright  
Is but the gleam concomitant  
Of that waylaying light.  
The thought is quiet as a flake,—  
A crash without a sound;  
How life's reverberation  
Its explanation found!<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50, No. cix. Richard Chase (*op. cit.*, p. 149) explains this poem as follows:

"The most complete statement she made about the immediate bequest of grace is the uneven poem called 'The farthest thunder that I heard.' In the thunder she hears 'life's reverberation' and she understands that the 'explanation' of life—its meaningfulness—is to be seen in 'that waylaying light' of which the reverberation constantly reminds the fortunate recipient."

Mr. Chase's curious statement, "The critic who tries to explicate Emily Dickinson's ideas cannot help making her sound more speculative and theoretical than she actually was," (*op. cit.*, p. 131) may have been inspired by his own attempts at explication. The simpler and more logical interpretation of the poem's closing lines, it seems to me, is that Emily Dickinson thought of the human being as the vibrations of the force of life which gradually slow and finally cease in death—a "reverberation," in other words, which is conscious and can thus find the "explanation" of itself. A human being described as a reverberation of the life force is an image which is consistent with the "thunder and lightning" imagery of the poem.



The unique, Dickinsonian syntax of this poem makes the line of thought difficult to follow but the central impression of a personal, shattering revelation is clear. The expression *torrid noons* in the third line is an often-used symbol for the Divine which she envisaged as brilliant and incandescent. The supreme, personal value of the experience is expressed in the next lines. The meaning of the figure involving a chemist, oxygen, and electricity is perhaps two-fold. Although a chemist in his laboratory can prepare and liberate oxygen—normally regarded as an essential element for life—he can never deal with that most essential element, the life-giving electricity of the Divine. Also, the human being, symbolized by the chemist, inhales breath but does not usurp it permanently. Carbon dioxide is exhaled immediately and even the oxygen eventually returns to nature. But the divine electricity is beyond the human being's capacity for transaction. All life and all things depend upon it for existence. In the last lines Emily Dickinson symbolized her own being as "life's reverberation." The explanation of life which was found was a direct intimate revelation from the world beyond which soundlessly crashed upon her.

Another poem which supports the contention that the growth of her spiritual and poetic sensibilities culminated in a climactic, mystical experience is the following:

I heard as if I had no ear  
 Until a vital word  
 Came all the way from life to me,  
 And then I knew I heard.<sup>27</sup>

The experience of the ordinary human existence is here contrasted with the enlightened state that results from the mystical experience. *Life* is the realm of the Divine; the implication being that ordinary human existence is a form of death. She did not "hear" until she became her true self as a result of the *vital word* of the mystical experience.

After the initial experiencing of the mystical vision, Emily Dickinson demonstrates the paradoxical, two-fold attitude which seems characteristic of her relationship to all experience. One aspect of her thought emphasized the incompleteness and the transitoriness of the mystical experience. She retains a somewhat vague memory of the mystical vision and an arid sense of frustration caused by her new awareness of the discrepancy between her present experience and that

<sup>27</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 124, No. 230.

which she now knows is possible. In the poem beginning "The soul has bandaged moments," she contrasts the ecstasy of the soul's "moments of escape"

When, bursting all the doors,  
She dances like a bomb abroad,

with the despondency—intensified by the contrast—of the subsequent time.

The soul's retaken moments  
When, felon, led along  
With shackles on the pluméd feet  
And rivets in the song,  
The horror welcomes her again—  
These are not brayed of tongue.<sup>28</sup>

She had become

Unfitted by an instant's grace  
For the contented beggar's face  
I wore an hour ago.<sup>29</sup>

The experience of a mystical enlightenment was not in Emily Dickinson's case the permanent "unitive life" of the great mystics—only a momentous but brief interview.

Image of light, adieu.  
Thanks for the interview  
So long—so short.  
Preceptor of the whole,  
Coeval Cardinal,  
Impart, depart.<sup>30</sup>

However, she reasoned, perhaps it was just as well that such experiences did not last.

Did our Best Moment last  
'Twould supersede the Heaven.  
A few,—and they by risk,—procure,  
So this sort are not given

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 244 f., No. 473.

<sup>29</sup> *Poems*, p. 37, No. lxxvii.

<sup>30</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 222, No. 428.

Except as stimulants  
In cases of despair  
Or stupor. The reserve  
These heavenly moments are—  
  
A grant of the Divine—  
That certain as it comes,  
Withdraws, and leaves the dazzled Soul  
In her unfurnished room.<sup>31</sup>

The rationalization of the first two stanzas is made apparent by the tone of regret in the last stanza. In this poem, as in much of her poetry, she is trying to construct a rational explanation of an emotional experience which, while a profound satisfaction and fulfillment momentarily, in the long run only arouses an intense dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, the dissatisfaction has its own value.

The moments of dominion  
That happen on the Soul  
And leave it with a discontent  
Too exquisite to tell . . .<sup>32</sup>

And:

There is another Loneliness  
That many die without,  
Not want or friend occasions it,  
Or circumstance or lot.  
  
But nature sometimes, sometimes thought,  
And whoso it befall  
Is richer than could be divulged  
By mortal numeral.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the proper course of action, in Emily Dickinson's opinion, is the following:

Let me not mar that perfect dream  
By an auroral stain,  
But so adjust my daily night  
That it will come again.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Poems*, pp. 384 f., No. xviii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303, No. xlvi.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227 f., No. xviii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152, No. liii. This stanza, published as a complete poem by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, is often interpreted as being a comment upon a love affair. I

She apparently thinks that any ordinary joy (the "auroral stain" of sunrise) would profane the memory of "that perfect dream"; so she will prefer complete darkness to halfway measures. She will, however, remember her own admonition:

The soul should always stand ajar  
That if the heaven inquire,  
He will not be obliged to wait,  
Or shy of troubling her  
Depart, before the host has slid  
The bolt upon the door,  
To seek for the accomplished guest--  
Her visitor no more.<sup>35</sup>

The second aspect of Emily Dickinson's paradoxical attitude resulting from her mystical experience is found in her abiding sense of intimacy with the supernatural presence, which she designates by several different terms.

Conscious am I in my chamber  
Of a *shapeless friend*,  
He doth not attest by posture  
Nor confirm by word.<sup>36</sup>

He joins me in my ramble,  
Divides abode with me,  
No friend have I that so persists  
As *this Eternity*.<sup>37</sup>

*Eden* is that old-fashioned House  
We dwell in every day . . .<sup>38</sup>

think the interpretation I suggest is more likely in view of the second stanza, also published as a complete poem (*Poems*, p. 256, No. xciv), which reads:

Not when we know  
The Power accosts,  
The garment of Surprise  
Was all our timid Mother wore  
At Home, in Paradise.

Mrs. Bingham has shown in her article, "Poems of Emily Dickinson: Hitherto Published Only in Part," *op. cit.*, p. 44, that the two stanzas were written as one poem.

<sup>35</sup> *Poems*, p. 209, No. cxxi.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335, No. civ. Italics in this quotation and those immediately following are mine.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227, No. xvi.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261, No. cviii.

We felt how neighborly a thing  
Was *the invisible*.<sup>39</sup>

*The Infinite* a sudden guest  
Has been assumed to be,  
But how can that stupendous come  
Which never went away?<sup>40</sup>

In this mood Emily Dickinson shows no frustrations, no restless vacillation—only the quiet certainty and composure of a fully developed, mystical consciousness. Consider the hushed tone and solemn, assured mood of the following poem.

There is a zone whose even years  
No solstice interrupt,  
Whose sun constructs perpetual noon,  
Whose perfect seasons wait;  
  
Whose summer set in summer till  
The centuries of June  
And centuries of August fuse  
And consciousness is noon.<sup>41</sup>

The preceding evidence indicates that Emily Dickinson, at least part of the time, discovered, as a result of mystical experience, a sense of complete and lasting fulfillment of her nature as a human being and as a poet. Thus we might expect the effects of her mystical approach to extend beyond the limits of her purely mystical poetry. For example her nature poetry is distinctive for its spiritual overtones. The bee, the butterfly, the robin are often personified to some degree as spiritual creatures partaking of an eternal divinity. She even concludes a poem, which pictures the passing of summer as a funeral, with the benediction:

In the name of the bee  
And of the butterfly  
And of the breeze, amen!<sup>42</sup>

The larger aspects of nature are treated in an almost pantheistic vein as in the following two poems:

<sup>39</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 25, No. 36.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223, No. 431.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218, No. 417.

<sup>42</sup> *Poems*, p. 90, No. xlvii.

Spring is the period  
Express from God.  
Among the other seasons  
Himself abide,

But during March and April  
None stir abroad  
Without a cordial interview  
With God.<sup>43</sup>

Like mighty footlights burned the red  
At bases of the trees,—  
The far theatricals of day  
Exhibiting to these.

'Twas universe that did applaud  
While, chiefest of the crowd,  
Enabled by his royal dress,  
Myself distinguished God.<sup>44</sup>

In connection with the many poems of this type we should notice Evelyn Underhill's statement: "Where we received hints, he [the mystic] would have communion with certainties. The freshness of eternal springs would speak to him in the primrose and the budding tree . . . spirit find Spirit in the lilies of the field, no less than in the Unknowable Abyss."<sup>45</sup>

Another statement by Evelyn Underhill is pertinent to a further aspect of the mystical attitude found in Emily Dickinson's writings. "From first to last he [the mystic] exhibits all the characteristics of youth; never loses—as that arrested thing, the normal adult must—the freshness of his reactions on the world. He has the spontaneity, the responsiveness, the instability of youth; experiences all its struggles and astonishments."<sup>46</sup> A great many of Emily Dickinson's poems maintain a child's point of view or speak directly of a childhood experience. One whole section in *Bolts of Melody* is devoted to poems dealing with childhood. The "childhood" poetry often degenerates into simple childishness and insipidity but the best of it does indeed maintain the childlike freshness and wonder which characterize the mystics.

<sup>43</sup>*Bolts of Melody*, p. 34, No. 52.

<sup>44</sup>*Poems*, pp. 87 f., No. xli.

<sup>45</sup>Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1913), pp. 31 f.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

The much-publicized love poetry of Emily Dickinson also has significant relevancy to her mystical attitude. Rebecca Patterson has said: "Masculine readers have spoken of the 'intellectual' quality of her love poems. They have shown awareness that the poems were not addressed to them. . . ."47 Mrs. Patterson then presents the thesis and supports it with much evidence that Emily Dickinson developed a homosexual attachment to another woman. This thesis may be true; however, one should realize that a personality like Emily Dickinson—surely one of the most complex of human beings—cannot be explained by a treatment of one small aspect of her life. She may have loved one, all, or none of the many "secret lovers" that have been championed by critics and biographers. What is important is what her writings say about love. In the usual sense in which we speak of "love poems," most of Emily Dickinson's poems on this subject appear abstract and artificial. Love seems to be closely associated with the spiritual aspect of her mystical attitude. Indeed she explicitly says as much.

Unable are the loved to die  
For love is immortality,  
Nay it is deity.

Unable they that love, to die,  
For love reforms vitality  
Into divinity.<sup>48</sup>

Love is like life, merely longer;  
Love is like death, daring the grave;  
Love is the fellow of the resurrection  
Scooping up the dust and chanting "Live!"<sup>49</sup>

Love makes us "heavenly" without our trying in the least. 'Tis easier than a Saviour—it does not stay on high and call us to its distance; its low "Come unto me" begins in every place. It makes but one mistake, it tells us it is "rest"—perhaps its toil is rest, but what we have not known we shall know again, that divine "again" for which we are all breathless.<sup>50</sup>

In connection with Emily Dickinson's conception of love Evelyn Underhill's statements concerning the relationship of the mystic to

<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Patterson, *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Bingham, "Poems of Emily Dickinson: Hitherto Published Only in Part," *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 178, No. 336.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters*, p. 188.

love should be noticed. "Pure love is the only driving power of the soul on its path toward the Spiritual Life. It is the mainspring of all its responsive acts, its growth and its fecundity."<sup>51</sup> One must conclude that many of Emily Dickinson's love poems are much closer to the mystical concept of divine love than to the ordinary concepts of earthly passion and marriage. Any doubt of this conclusion will surely be resolved by the following poem which perhaps epitomizes her mystical love poetry.

Given in marriage unto thee,  
Oh, thou celestial host!  
Bride of the Father and the Son,  
Bride of the Holy Ghost!  
  
Other betrothal shall dissolve,  
Wedlock of will decay;  
Only the keeper of this seal  
Conquers mortality.<sup>52</sup>

As nearly every aspect of Emily Dickinson's work recalls certain characteristic features of mysticism, so does her frequent use of symbolic language. "The mystic, as a rule, cannot wholly do without symbol and image, inadequate to his vision though they must always be. . . ."<sup>53</sup> Mary Anita Ewer goes so far as to say: "Explicit or implicit belief in mystical analogy is almost a distinguishing criterion of mysticism."<sup>54</sup> Although a study of Emily Dickinson's symbolism would require a long essay, I can at least give a few examples which demonstrate the use of traditional mystical symbols in her poetry. The use of colors in symbolic relationships to Heaven and earth is frequently noted in her poems:

Mine by the right of the white election!  
Mine by the royal seal!  
Mine by the sign in the scarlet prison  
Bars cannot conceal!<sup>55</sup>

Light, Life, and Love in symbolic senses are recurring themes.

<sup>51</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, pp. 20 f.

<sup>52</sup> *Poems*, p. 197, No. lxxxix.

<sup>53</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 94.

<sup>54</sup> Mary Anita Ewer, *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> *Poems*, p. 127, No. i.



Image of Light, adieu.<sup>56</sup>

Between the form of life and life  
The difference is as big  
As liquor at the lip between  
And liquor in the jug;<sup>57</sup>

Love is anterior to life,  
Posterior to death,  
Initial of creation, and  
The exponent of breath.<sup>58</sup>

And Evelyn Underhill says:

Transcendent Light, intangible but unescapable, ever emanating Its splendor through the Universe: indwelling, unresting, and energizing Life: desirous and directive Love—these are cardinal aspects of Reality to which they [the mystics] return again and again in their efforts to find words which will express the inexpressible truth.<sup>59</sup>

Further uses of symbols in Emily Dickinson's poems include the progress of the spirit as a "journey," Divinity represented as the sea, the heart or essence of Nature as music, and the Divine represented as a passionate, earthly lover. These symbols are all discussed by Mary Anita Ewer in *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* as being characteristic of mystical expression. Thus, in turning to the language of figurative indirection and symbolism, Emily Dickinson was putting into effect her belief that "Best things dwell out of sight."<sup>60</sup> Her messages, carrying the "undeveloped freight" of implication, were designed to stimulate the maximum response from her readers. That her symbolism took a form similar to the symbolic language of traditional mysticism is a further demonstration of Emily Dickinson's sympathy with the mystical approach to life.

It would require much more space to enumerate all the evidence of mystical overtones that could be found in Emily Dickinson's poetry and letters. The most striking examples, however, should be mentioned. Evelyn Underhill speaks of "that quality of timelessness, that

<sup>56</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 222, No. 428.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269, No. 528.

<sup>58</sup> *Poems*, p. 146, No. xxxvii.

<sup>59</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 137.

<sup>60</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 274, No. 543.

sense of an Eternal Now, which is a peculiarity of the ecstatic consciousness."<sup>61</sup> And Emily Dickinson says:

Forever is composed of Nows—  
'Tis not a different time,  
Except for infiniteness  
And latitude of home.<sup>62</sup>

Other poems speak of receiving bulletins from immortality, of the high tension in the very act of living, of the necessity of learning the transport by the throe, of the overpowering joy of life, and of the deep mysteries of the external world—all of which are treated as characteristic mystical themes by Evelyn Underhill.

Regardless of the mystical characteristics in Emily Dickinson's poems, one cannot accord to her the rank of mystic in the sense in which St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross were mystics. According to Evelyn Underhill, the true mystical achievement is at once an act of supreme perception, an act of love, and an act of union. There is the vision or consciousness of the Absolute and there is the inward transmutation to which that vision compels the mystic.<sup>63</sup> Evelyn Underhill goes on to say: "Unless this impulse for moral perfection be born in him, this travail of the inner life begun, he is no mystic: though he may well be a visionary, a prophet, a 'mystical' poet."<sup>64</sup> Thus Emily Dickinson's situation may be summed up by saying that she experienced the first stage of the Mystic Way—the profound vitalizing perception of an Absolute Power—and that she undoubtedly felt to some extent the permanent, inward glow of what the mystics call spiritual love or adoration, but she failed to achieve the goal of the Mystic Way—the unitive life or the feeling of oneness with the Divine. "Not to *know about*, but to *Be*, is the mark of the real practitioner,"<sup>65</sup> and Emily Dickinson was by temperament incapable of channelling her entire personality in a single, unified direction. Throughout her complete work, one detects the paradoxical duality of her attitudes and her constant attempt to maintain a detached point of view in order to observe and record objective truth. These characteristics preclude a true mystical development, although they allow her to profit from a new awareness and new comprehension of the human being in relation to

<sup>61</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, p. 232.

<sup>62</sup> *Poems*, p. 287, No. xxii.

<sup>63</sup> See Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 100, 108.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

the transcendent force in the universe. The pervasive force of this new comprehension illuminates much of her best poetry and gives it the vividly unique "mystical" atmosphere which we think of as Dickinsonian.

## 4 / *The Position of the Poet*

A FAMILIAR Dickinson characteristic—her failure to orient her thought in relation to a fixed intellectual position—almost precludes the possibility of finding a logical, self-contained theory of poetry in her writings. Nevertheless, there is much value in studying her numerous statements upon poetry and its creation if for no other reason than to understand an interesting and unique way in which one artist has regarded her art. However, there is a more important reason. Inconsistent, incomplete, and individualistic as her theories are, they provided her with an intellectual framework within which was created some of America's greatest lyric poetry. Such a framework should not be ignored. Rather, we should search for the significant elements in those attitudes toward art which served her as informal guiding principles throughout the process of poetic creation. An understanding of these guiding principles will be necessary, certainly, to a thorough study of Emily Dickinson and in addition will reveal certain essential aspects of the artistic process which are applicable and valuable to any study of art.

The basic concept of Emily Dickinson in regard to poetry seems to be a synthesis of the two aspects which I have discussed in the preceding chapters—her attitude toward the communication of words and her mystical tendencies. An examination of Emily Dickinson's attitude toward the position of the poet will, I think, explain and illustrate this synthesis. In this chapter, then, I shall specify and discuss some of the apparent beliefs and attitudes with which Emily Dickinson approached the writing of poetry. To do this I shall first attempt to account for the impulse in Emily Dickinson which led to the writing of poetry by showing that the development of her emo-

tional and imaginative resources not only made the writing of poetry possible, but also furnished her with a sensibility so perceptive that the exercise of her creative power apparently became necessary to preserve her sanity. I shall then discuss her view of poetry itself, and the position of the poet in relation to poetry. I shall point out also her conception of the relationship of the poet to such various subjects as nature, arts other than poetry, truth and beauty, and the reading public. Finally, I shall examine in detail a particular poem which illustrates many of the characteristic results of Emily Dickinson's unique approach to poetry.

From what origin or impulse in the poet does poetry come? An answer to this question necessitates a brief glance at the poet herself. To any reader of her poems or letters, the emotional resources of Emily Dickinson seem boundless. She exhibits the capacity to experience the fullness and variety of an emotional life which the great mystics testify exists beyond the horizons of ordinary experience. Evelyn Underhill indicates the supreme value of the intense emotional life for the most significant experiences: "At the touch of passion doors fly open which logic has battered on in vain: for passion rouses to activity not merely the mind, but the whole vitality of man."<sup>1</sup>

In conjunction with a rich emotional nature can usually be found a highly imaginative life. The letters as well as the poems of Emily Dickinson testify to her imaginative powers. Richard Chase affirms that to her correspondents

. . . she repeatedly affirms a strong and enduring love of illusion, memory, and imagination as against the meager mentality of shallow realism. Mr. and Mrs. Bowles, she believes, must share with her the opinion that if one is to arraign the *Arabian Nights*, it is for "their understatement," for their underestimation of the wonder and magical quality of life. Illusions, so she thinks, should never be surrendered to merely prudential cunning or vulgar realism. They have no formidable enemies except experience and reality itself: "test's severe repairs are permitted all."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, though she kept "test's severe repairs" in mind as a disciplinary instrument for unhinged fantasy, she allowed the heat of her imagination to transform and enliven her existence.

Two salient characteristics of Emily Dickinson's mind as exhibited in her poems and letters seem to be a result of her abundant emotional

<sup>1</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

and imaginative resources. As we might expect, these characteristics display a typical counterbalance in point of view. There is first of all the supremely intense joy of life. The evidence of this ecstatic joy could be accumulated from innumerable poems and letters. Such comments as the following are typical.

To live is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Dare you see a soul at the white heat?<sup>4</sup>

A transport one cannot contain  
May yet a transport be,  
Though God forbid it lift the lid  
Unto its ecstasy!<sup>5</sup>

And her oft-quoted extravaganza:

I taste a liquor never brewed,  
From tankards scooped in pearl;  
Not all the vats upon the Rhine  
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,  
And debauchee of dew,  
Reeling, through endless summer days,  
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee  
Out of the foxlove's door,  
When butterflies renounce their drams,  
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,  
And saints to windows run,  
To see the little tippler  
Leaning against the sun!<sup>6</sup>

Such a "divine intoxication," as she called it,<sup>7</sup> approached the intensity of the mystic's rapture and was perhaps too "intimate with madness" for an ordinary person.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, p. 266.

<sup>4</sup> *Poems*, p. 17, No. xxxiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419, No. lxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12, No. xx.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160, No. vii.

Had we our senses—though perhaps  
'Tis well they're not at home,  
So intimate with madness  
'Tis liable with them—

Had we the eyes within our heads—  
How well that we are blind!—  
We could not look upon the earth  
So utterly unmoved.<sup>8</sup>

The speculation in the preceding poem gives an indication of the intensity of feeling of which Emily Dickinson was capable. Although she says “we,” the perception revealed in the poem demonstrates that she was not among the “blind.”

The second and probably more significant direction taken by her intense emotional and imaginative nature is a thorough awareness of the suffering in life. Suffering seemed to be a basic, unavoidable element of human life, and this fact weighed heavily on a person as capable of profound feeling as Emily Dickinson. Even nature, which at times could give rise to the ecstatic overflow of merriment found in “I taste a liquor never brewed,” could also inspire the gloomy observation:

How good to be safe in tombs,  
Where nature's temper cannot reach . . .<sup>9</sup>

Nature was coldly indifferent:

Ah, brig, good-night  
To crew and you;  
The ocean's heart too smooth, too blue,  
To break for you.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently with no surprise  
To any happy flower,  
The frost beheads it at its play  
In accidental power.

<sup>8</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 35, No. 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Poems*, p. 163, No. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26, No. li.

The blond assassin passes on,  
The sun proceeds unmoved  
To measure off another day  
For an approving God.<sup>11</sup>

And at all times inscrutable:

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 who know her not  
Is helped by the regret  
That those who know her, know her less  
The nearer her they get.<sup>12</sup>

Even when nature is at her most beautiful and benign, Emily Dickinson finds cause for sorrow.

When they come back,  
If blossoms do—  
I always feel a doubt  
If blossoms can be born again  
When once the art is out.

When they begin,  
If Robins may—  
I always had a fear  
I did not tell, it was their last  
Experiment last year.

When it is May,  
If May return—  
Had nobody a pang  
Lest on a face so beautiful  
He might not look again?<sup>13</sup>

Her relationship to religion was also a source of suffering for Emily Dickinson. God as the smiling, mighty merchant, so “economical,” or as a “physician” with “medicine posthumous,” was

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106, No. lxxvi.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116, No. xcvi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311, No. lix.



envisioned at times as a callous being.<sup>14</sup> She threw away her prayers<sup>15</sup> because of her conviction that they were unanswered.

Prayer is the little implement  
Through which men reach  
Where presence is denied them.  
They fling their speech

By means of it in God's ear;  
If then He hear,  
This sums the apparatus  
Comprised in prayer.<sup>16</sup>

And the Bible itself offered no solace for a heart hungry for certainties.

The Bible is an antique volume  
Written by faded men,  
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres . . .<sup>17</sup>

Related to the "abdication of belief" in traditional religion was Emily Dickinson's inconsolable despair at the death of loved ones. Several of her better poems directly confront the dreadful experiencing of the aftermath of death.

And we, we placed the hair,  
And drew the head erect;  
And then an awful leisure was,  
Our faith to regulate.<sup>18</sup>

The bustle in a house  
The morning after death  
Is solemnest of industries  
Enacted upon earth,—  
The sweeping up the heart,  
And putting love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until eternity.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8, No. xii; p. 26, No. lii; p. 24, No. xlvii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21, No. xxxix.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39, No. lxxx.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259, No. civ.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165, No. xx.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166, No. xxii.

Whatever the cause of suffering, the poems of Emily Dickinson give ample evidence that she had a capacity for experiencing suffering far beyond that of the ordinary person.

They say that "time assuages,"—  
Time never did assuage;  
An actual suffering strengthens,  
As sinews do, with age.

Time is a test of trouble,  
But not a remedy.  
If such it prove, it prove too  
There was no malady.<sup>20</sup>

Such an awareness of and capacity for suffering recalls the emphasis upon suffering (the "Dark Night of the Soul," in the words of St. John of the Cross) of the mystical tradition. Evelyn Underhill explains that the highest types of human beings have accepted suffering willingly: "[They] have found in Pain the grave but kindly teacher of immortal secrets, the conferrer of liberty, even the initiator into amazing joys."<sup>21</sup> In the light of this statement, the following poem becomes highly significant.

Despair's advantage is achieved  
By suffering,—despair  
To be assisted of reverse  
One must have previous borne.

The worthiness of suffering,  
Like the excellence of Death,  
Is ascertained by tasting—  
As can no other mouth

Of savours make us conscious,  
As did ourselves partake.  
Affliction feels impalpable  
Until ourselves are struck!<sup>22</sup>

Here, clearly stated, is the mystical view of the "worthiness of suffering" which "educates" the human soul just as the dark sod must be passed through for the lily to achieve its growth.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196, No. lxxxv.

<sup>21</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Poems*, p. 451, No. cxxvi.

Through the dark sod  
 As education,  
 The Lily passes sure . . .<sup>23</sup>

One can conclude from the evidence in her poems that Emily Dickinson's emotional and imaginative life was developed to an amazing extent. Joyous ecstasy and the antithetic bleak despair—not to mention the other shades of emotional feeling for which she is noted—possessed her life and gave to it a direction which resulted in a dedication to poetry.

The question which was probably unexpressed but was nevertheless an essential one to Emily Dickinson can now be asked. What course of action was necessary for such a person to achieve some sort of realization of her nature? First of all we must note that history has shown that artists act as if they were under a tremendous compulsion to express whatever vision they have seen. More especially is the artist who has experienced a mystical absorption into new worlds compelled to attempt communication:

On him [the artist] has been laid the duty of expressing something of that which he perceives. He is bound to tell his love. In his worship of Perfect Beauty faith must be balanced by works. By means of veils and symbols he must interpret his free vision, his glimpse of the burning bush, to other men. He is the mediator between his brethren and the divine, for art is the link between appearance and reality.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, for Emily Dickinson, poetry was undoubtedly an unavoidable necessity. Still there were certain rational justifications for turning to poetry. The following two excerpts from her letters are illuminating in this connection.

And when, far afterward, a sudden light on orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention, I felt a palsy, here, the verses just relieve.<sup>25</sup>

Don't be afraid of my imprecations—they never did any one harm, and they make me feel so cool, and so very much more comfortable!<sup>26</sup>

Richard Chase maintains that Emily Dickinson regarded poetry as “one of the stratagems by which she was empowered to endure life,”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314, No. lxxviii.

<sup>24</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> *Letters*, p. 255.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

and this view is supported by the above-quoted excerpts from her letters. She strove to raise bloom on the bleakness of her lot, as one of her poems expresses it.<sup>28</sup> She once told Thomas Wentworth Higginson that he unknowingly saved her life. Concerning this, George F. Whicher comments:

Later she told him that he had saved her life. If he did not, poetry did. It was her one outlet. She gave it all her energy, cutting herself off more and more from the outside world in order that she might have time for the work she was carrying on in secret. In projecting her intensest feelings on paper she was finding a form of relief in action; she was, in Emerson's phrase, "grinding into paint" her burden of despair."<sup>29</sup>

The strenuous labor of finding the precise words to express the utmost implication of a real, personal sensation purged her of the explosive excess of feeling. The almost automatic turn to poetic expression after any significant experience is demonstrated by the following poem. She is enraptured by the sight of snowflakes falling.

I counted till they danced so  
Their slippers leaped the town,  
And then I took a pencil  
To note the rebels down . . .<sup>30</sup>

Still more acute experiences required a "severer service."

Severer service of myself  
I hastened to demand  
To fill the awful vacuum  
Your life had left behind.

I worried nature with my wheels  
When hers had ceased to run;  
When she had put away her work  
My own had just begun.

I strove to weary brain and bone,  
To harass, to fatigue  
The glittering retinue of nerves,  
Vitality to clog.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Poems*, p. 50, No. cx.

<sup>29</sup> Whicher, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>30</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 95, No. 174.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155, No. 283.

If, however, poetry for Emily Dickinson began as an anodyne for life, it soon developed into something infinitely more important to her—so important in fact, that after Emily Dickinson's maturity, it would scarcely be possible to separate any aspect of her life and personality from her poetry. Poetry became the meaning, the very essence, of life.

Several of her poems speak specifically of poetry. The opening poem in Madame Bianchi's volume is a significant comment.

This is my letter to the world,  
That never wrote to me,—  
The simple news that Nature told,  
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed  
To hands I cannot see;  
For love of her, sweet countrymen,  
Judge tenderly of me!<sup>32</sup>

Nature's simple news, of course, inspired more than just her so-called nature poems. All her poetry was dependent upon the secrets she thought of as coming from nature. But what, exactly, is poetry?

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.<sup>33</sup>

This was a Poet—it is that  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary meanings,  
And attars so immense  
From the familiar species  
That perished by the door,  
We wonder it was not ourselves  
Arrested it before.

Of pictures the discloser  
The Poet, it is he,  
Entitles us by contrast  
To ceaseless poverty.

<sup>32</sup> *Poems*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Letters*, p. 265.

Of portion so unconscious  
The robbing could not harm,  
Himself, to him, a fortune  
Exterior to Time.<sup>34</sup>

And:

To pile like Thunder to its close,  
Then crumble grand away,  
While everything created hid—  
This would be poetry:  
Or Love,—the two coeval came—  
We both and neither prove,  
Experience either, and consume—  
For none see God and live.<sup>35</sup>

And finally, in relation to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a revered idol  
of Emily Dickinson's:

I think I was enchanted  
When first, a little girl,  
I read that Foreign Lady—  
The dark felt beautiful!

And whether it was noon at night,  
Or only heaven at noon,  
For very lunacy of light  
I had not power to tell.

The bees became as butterflies,  
The butterflies as moons  
Lit up the low inferior grass;  
And just the common tunes

That Nature murmured to herself,  
To keep herself in cheer,  
I took for Giants practising  
Titanic opera.

The days to mighty metres stept,  
The homeliest adorned  
As if unto a Jubilee  
'Twere suddenly confirmed.

<sup>34</sup> *Poems*, p. 281, No. x.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271, No. cxliii.

I could not have defined the change—  
 Conversion of the mind,  
 Like sanctifying in the Soul,  
 Is witnessed, not explained.

'Twas a divine insanity.  
 The sorrow to be sane  
 Should I again experience,  
 'Tis antidote to turn

To tomes of solid witchcraft.  
 Magicians be asleep,  
 But magic hath an element  
 Like Deity to keep!<sup>36</sup>

Emily Dickinson is consistent in regarding the poet as a divine magician, dealing with familiar things, but transforming them into piercing, ravishing “pictures” that so overpower the human imagination that they can only be described in terms of “thunder,” “immense attars,” and “divine insanity.” Words, the mighty, electric elements of poetry, fuse into the incandescent instruments of the divine which one experiences as poetry. It is the use of *words* which effects the magical transformation of existence from “ordinary meanings” into “divine intoxication.” But notice also the implication that no one may completely experience poetry, for poetry, like love, has for Emily Dickinson the mystical significance of God. We can prove either love or poetry by the effects they have upon us; yet there remains the awareness that the essence of love or of poetry, their ultimate potentiality, is forever denied us. Thus poetry, for Emily Dickinson, in spite of the almost illimitable power of words, offers a challenge and a medium by which one can attempt to transcend the normal limits of perception (even highly-developed artistic perception) and enter into the transcendent, mystical awareness that is “intimate with madness.” The supreme worth of poetry, consequently, is self-evident.

This is a blossom of the brain,  
 A small italic seed  
 Lodged by design or happening—  
 The spirit fructified.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 394 f., No. xxxiii.

Shy as the wind of his chambers,  
Swift as a freshet's tongue,  
So of the flower of the soul,  
Its process is unknown.

When it is found, a few rejoice,  
The wise convey it home,  
Carefully cherishing the spot  
If other flower become.

When it is lost, that day shall be  
The funeral of God,  
Upon His breast a closing soul,  
The flower of our Lord.<sup>37</sup>

The brain, spirit, soul are all involved in the creation of a poem; indeed, a human being himself is but the poem (flower) of God and when poetry ceases—that day shall be the funeral of God, for each depends upon the other.

The further refinements of Emily Dickinson's conception of the position of the poet can perhaps best be made clear by an examination of her relationship as a poet to various aspects of her environment. For example, what is the relationship of the poet to nature? The natural world, one finds, is the supreme and unsurpassable example for the poet.

Butterflies from San Domingo  
Cruising round the purple line  
Have a system of aesthetics  
Far superior to mine.<sup>38</sup>

Convicted could we be  
Of our minutiae,  
The smallest citizen that flies  
Has more integrity.<sup>39</sup>

All the letters I can write  
Are not fair as this [a flower] . . .<sup>40</sup>

Poetry, in infinite variety, exists in nature.

<sup>37</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, pp. 230 f., No. 442.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, No. 80.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78, No. 146.

<sup>40</sup> *Poems*, p. 316, No. lxxii.



Musicians wrestle everywhere:  
All day, among the crowded air,  
I hear the silver strife . . .<sup>41</sup>

They have a little odor that to me  
Is metre, nay, 'tis melody,  
And spiciest at fading indicate  
A habit of a laureate.<sup>42</sup>

Poetry, then, while occurring in its most abundant and supreme form in nature, can still be present to a great degree in the individual human being. Each can strive to imitate nature's superlative poem.

The one that could repeat the summer day  
Were greater than itself, though he  
Minutest of mankind might be.  
And who could reproduce the sun,  
At period of going down—  
The lingering and the stain, I mean—  
When Orient has been outgrown,  
And Occident becomes unknown,  
His name remain.<sup>43</sup>

The relationship of poetry to the other arts is a subject upon which Emily Dickinson has very little to say. When she does mention arts other than poetry she places them on a scale below poetry or more usually includes them in her concept of poetry. Prose is a prison in comparison with the fair possibilities of poetry.

They shut me up in prose—  
As when, a little girl,  
They put me in the closet  
Because they like me "still."<sup>44</sup>

I dwell in Possibility,  
A fairer house than Prose,  
More numerous of windows,  
Superior of doors.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40, No. lxxxii.

<sup>42</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 50, No. 88.

<sup>43</sup> *Poems*, p. 82, No. xxix.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392, No. xxix.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289, No. xxvii.

Drama on the stage is inferior to that personal, inner drama of the human heart with which poetry deals.

Drama's vilest expression  
Is the Common Day  
That arises, sets about us;  
Other tragedy  
Perish in the recitation,  
This the more exert  
When the audience is scattered,  
And the boxes shut.

Hamlet to himself were Hamlet  
Had not Shakespeare wrote,  
Though the Romeo leave no record  
Of his Juliet,  
It were tenderer enacted  
In the human heart—  
Only theater recorded  
Owner cannot shut.<sup>46</sup>

Fiction, likewise, is inferior to the inner drama.

No romance sold unto,  
Could so enthrall a man  
As the perusal of  
His individual one.

'Tis fiction's to dilute  
To plausibility  
*Our* novel, when 'tis small enough  
To credit,—'tisn't true!<sup>47</sup>

Pictorial art is mentioned several times; it is always compared unfavorably with the "fine arterial canvas" of the human soul<sup>48</sup> or with nature's majesty.

These are the visions baffled Guido;  
Titian never told;  
Domenichino dropped the pencil,  
Powerless to unfold.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288, No. xxv.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225 f., No. xii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410, No. lx.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123, No. cx.

How mean, to those that see,  
 Van Dyke's delineation  
 Of Nature's Summer day!<sup>50</sup>

To my knowledge, only one indirect reference to architecture occurs in her poems. And in this case she speaks of her poems as "temples."<sup>51</sup> One might assume that architecture, sculpture, and any of the plastic arts had no personal value to her except as symbols.

The dance apparently seemed rather artificial and ineffective to her in comparison with poetry.

I cannot dance upon my toes,  
 No man instructed me,  
 But often times among my mind  
 A glee possesseth me  
 That had I ballet knowledge  
 Would put itself abroad  
 In pirouette to blanch a troupe,  
 Or lay a Prima mad!  
 And though I had no gown of gauze,  
 No ringlet to my hair,  
 Nor hopped for audiences like birds,  
 One claw upon the air,—  
 Nor tossed my shape in eider balls,  
 Nor rolled on wheels of snow  
 Till I was out of sight in sound,  
 The house encored me so—  
 Nor any knew I know the art  
 I mention easy here—  
 Nor any placard boast me,  
 It's full as opera!<sup>52</sup>

The irony is directed slightly toward opera as well as ballet apparently because in her opinion these arts do not allow human imagination and passion to reach their full potentiality. Ballet and opera are cold, formal, and "full"—but not full in the sense in which a human heart is full. In another reference to opera which has already been quoted<sup>53</sup> she says *titanic* opera is produced by nature's "common tunes."

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402, No. xliii.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411, No. lxii.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278 f., No. vi.

<sup>53</sup> See p. 61.

Music, in general, is used interchangeably with poetry. She thinks of herself as the lark who has “bulb after bulb” of music stored within, or as dying at her music,<sup>54</sup> or as putting up her lute

Since the sole ear I cared to charm  
Passive as granite laps my music . . .<sup>55</sup>

However, one poem unmistakably speaks about music per se.

Better than music, for I who heard it,  
I was used to the birds before;  
This was different, 'twas translation  
Of all the tunes I knew, and more;  
  
'Twasn't contained like other stanza,  
No one could play it the second time  
But the composer, perfect Mozart,  
Perish with him that keyless rhyme!<sup>56</sup>

Even here, however, she speaks of music in terms of stanzas and rhymes and then proceeds in the last stanza of the poem to relate her own art to Mozart's in musical terminology.

Let me not lose its smallest cadence,  
Humming for promise when alone,  
Humming until my faint rehearsal  
Drop into tune around the throne!<sup>57</sup>

Thus it seems that any art was significant for Emily Dickinson only in the degree of its approximation to poetry. Poetry, as the supreme art—indeed the supreme fact of life—included and transcended all other art.

Emily Dickinson made a few significant references to the relationship of the poet to truth and beauty.

I died for beauty, but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.

<sup>54</sup> *Poems*, p. 147, No. xli; *Bolts of Melody*, p. 234, No. 453.

<sup>55</sup> *Poems*, p. 449, No. cxxii.

<sup>56</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 235, No. 454.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

He questioned softly why I failed?  
"For beauty," I replied.  
"And I for truth,—the two are one;  
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,  
We talked between the rooms,  
Until the moss had reached our lips,  
And covered up our names.<sup>58</sup>

The great power of this poem, as Richard Chase points out, "lies in the remarkable feeling of impotence and limitation of the human condition and of man's consciousness and the inevitable engulfment of man in the natural world."<sup>59</sup> However, my present concern is with the relationship of truth and beauty which this poem suggests. Emily Dickinson says, in effect, that her life was dedicated to beauty. But truth and beauty are one, she learns, and who looks upon beauty also discovers truth. Some comments from other writings may clarify the relationship.

In a world too full of beauty for peace, I have met nothing  
more beautiful.<sup>60</sup>

How vast is the chastisement of beauty, given us by our  
Maker! A word is inundation, when it comes from the sea.<sup>61</sup>

The earth has many keys.  
Where melody is not  
Is the unknown peninsula.  
Beauty is nature's fact.<sup>62</sup>

Estranged from beauty none can be  
For beauty is infinity,  
And power to be finite ceased  
When fate incorporated us.<sup>63</sup>

Two things become significant in the preceding quotations. Beauty pervades the natural world, and the perception of beauty is disquieting, even an affliction.

<sup>58</sup> *Poems*, pp. 160 f., No. x.

<sup>59</sup> Chase, *op. cit.*, pp. 197 f.

<sup>60</sup> *Letters*, p. 337. This is the entire body of a letter to Mrs. J. S. Cooper.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>62</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 75, No. 139.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232, No. 446.

So gay a flower bereaved the mind  
As if it were a woe,  
Is Beauty an affliction, then?  
Tradition ought to know.<sup>64</sup>

I suspect that "tradition" would not likely be familiar with the concept of beauty as affliction. It appears that to Emily Dickinson's intensely active imagination, the perception of beauty was so startlingly keen that it actually caused pain—not in the sense of a physical pain like a toothache, but the exquisite, ravishing sensation of great emotion whose severe grip completely possesses the body. Such an emotion cannot be described as joy or happiness; it is an ecstasy which seems to exceed the body's capacity for endurance and can only be described in terms of pain or anguish. In the presence of beauty, Emily Dickinson perhaps was aware of the relationship between the object and herself, her own attempts to create beauty, her own mortality, the mortality of all things beautiful, the impossibility of securing beauty, the unknowable, divine essence of beauty, and probably an infinite number of variations of these thoughts all uniting in an indescribable intensity of feeling.

Beauty is not caused,—it is;  
Chase it and it ceases . . .<sup>65</sup>

The definition of beauty is  
That definition is none,  
Of heaven, easing analysis,  
Since heaven and he are one . . .<sup>66</sup>

Beauty crowds me till I die,  
Beauty, mercy have on me!  
But if I expire today,  
Let it be in sight of thee.<sup>67</sup>

Truth also is associated with pain.

<sup>64</sup> *Poems*, p. 228, No. xix.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305, No. xlix.

<sup>66</sup> Bingham, "Poems Hitherto Published Only in Part," *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> *Poems*, p. 236, No. xliii.

Miseries of conjecture  
Are a softer woe  
Than a fact of iron  
Hardened with "I know."<sup>68</sup>

I like a look of agony,  
Because I know it's true;  
Men do not sham convulsion,  
Nor simulate a throe.

The eyes glaze once, and that is death.  
Impossible to feign  
The beads upon the forehead  
By homely anguish strung.<sup>69</sup>

Invaluable, inevitable as truth is, it still produces such shattering effects upon her (because truth seems forever to occur to her in its most forcible, significant forms—the truth of suffering, the truth of decay and death) that she is forced to the following revealing statement.

The second half of joy  
Is shorter than the first.  
The truth I do not dare to know  
I muffle with a jest.<sup>70</sup>

The stratagem of the jest, however, might muffle but would never conceal the truth from her penetrating vision.

Beauty and truth are one, then, in the sense that they both are experienced by the human being in the same way. They both produce the agonizing intensity of feeling which accompanies a person's sudden realization of his destiny. To die—but to have lived—to have had the awareness of life and the perception of approaching death—that is the destiny revealed by the experiencing of truth and of beauty.

By death's bold exhibition  
Preciser what we are  
And the eternal function  
Enabled to infer.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 211, No. 401.

<sup>69</sup> *Poems*, pp. 161 f., No. xii.

<sup>70</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 119, No. 217.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208, No. 394.

And from such an inference, in Emily Dickinson's case at least, great poetry might well have its inspiration.

Essential oils are wrung:  
The attar from the rose  
Is not expressed by suns alone,  
It is the gift of screws.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the poet submits to the "gift of screws" by dedicating himself to poetry—the most complete human embodiment of truth and beauty—and in spite of the rending anguish, or indeed because of it, sings unto the stone by which he dies.

Magnanimous of bird  
By boy descried,  
To sing unto the stone  
Of which it died.<sup>73</sup>

Emily Dickinson's unusual conception of the nature of truth would quite naturally condition her manner of dealing with it.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant,  
Success in circuit lies,  
Too bright for our infirm delight  
The truth's superb surprise;  
As lightning to children eased  
With explanation kind,  
The truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.<sup>74</sup>

If truth is regarded as revealing one's destiny, providing a perspective by which one views his life and approaching death, it is little wonder that truth would be a "superb surprise too bright for our infirm delight." As the lightning blinds a dark-accustomed eye, so a great truth overloads and escapes the understanding unless this truth is absorbed little by little while the human sensibility extends and develops itself.

The thought beneath so slight a film  
Is more distinctly seen,—  
As laces just reveal the surge,  
Or mists the Apennine.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *Poems*, p. 187, No. lxxv.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151, No. 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 233, No. 449.

<sup>75</sup> *Poems*, p. 21, No. xl.



If the germ of a thought is implanted and the opportunity left the reader to supply his own organization and extension of the thought; then such a thought will be received with the impact and effect which the poet desired.

The position of a poet in relation to the reading public is always interesting and especially so in Emily Dickinson's case because of the unusual manner in which her poems were written, stored away, and finally edited and published. It has often been assumed that Emily Dickinson secluded herself from the world and turned to writing poetry because of an unhappy love affair. To assume that frustrated love was the sole genesis of Emily Dickinson's unusual life and work is, I think, to underestimate her. Emily Dickinson herself suggests that her retirement may have been prompted, in part, by a desire to escape the shallow loquaciousness of ordinary social intercourse.

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown,  
and a dog large as myself, that my father bought me. They are  
better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the  
noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.<sup>76</sup>

Of "shunning men and women,"—they talk of hallowed things,  
aloud, and embarrass my dog.<sup>77</sup>

It may be added, from the general tenor of her work, that the seclusion was not only to avoid certain things but also to gain a positive advantage. Her withdrawal from the world brings to mind again her ever-present tendency toward a mystical view of life. It is well known that mystics are eager to sacrifice their whole lives to a certain object, a certain vision of truth. Such sacrifices are not self-denial in the mystical philosophy, but rather self-fulfillment. Whatever rationale Emily Dickinson conceived for her seclusion, it is certain that this privacy allowed her the time and opportunity to nourish and maintain her poetic genius.

In connection with Emily Dickinson's position in relation to her contemporary potential reading public arises the question of her attitude toward future generations of readers. Two well-known verses deal directly with one aspect of her attitude.

<sup>76</sup> *Letters*, p. 254.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Publication is the auction  
Of the mind of man,  
Poverty be justifying  
For so foul a thing.<sup>78</sup>

I'm nobody! Who are you?  
Are you nobody, too?  
Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!  
They'd banish us, you know.  
How dreary to be somebody!  
How public, like a frog  
To tell your name the livelong day  
To an admiring bog!<sup>79</sup>

These famous poems, however, should not be allowed to usurp more than their justified share of the total picture. First of all, it should be noted that Emily Dickinson is writing of a situation in which a living author (or a person of any profession) becomes a public figure and thereby loses the prerogative of his own "mind." The patent irony of the concepts of "somebody" and "nobody" is convincing evidence that it was undeserved popularity rather than the recognition itself which Emily Dickinson condemned. She apparently gave much thought to the idea of fame, as evidenced by her many poems which speak of it. Fame, for her, was definitely a concept applicable only to the dead.

The first we knew of him was death,  
The second was renown;  
Except the first had justified  
The second had not been.<sup>80</sup>

All men for honor hardest work  
But are not known to earn,  
Paid after they have ceased to work,  
In infamy or urn.<sup>81</sup>

Thus her concern with fame and her abhorrence of publication (for someone still living) are not contradictory. Realizing the worth of her own poetic achievement, Emily Dickinson probably felt a twinge of

<sup>78</sup> *Poems*, p. 277, No. ii.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15, No. xxvii.

<sup>80</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 238, No. 462.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238, No. 463.

bitterness that she herself would never know recognition as a great poet. Indeed, as Mrs. Bingham suggests in the introduction to *Bolts of Melody*, Emily Dickinson was so conscious that she deserved fame that she had to keep continually reminding herself that the poet must not become too concerned about it.

Fame is a bee.  
It has a song—  
It has a sting—  
Ah, too, it has a wing.<sup>82</sup>

Worthwhile fame must be, she felt, her own approval of her work.

Fame of myself to justify!  
All other plaudit be  
Superfluous, an incense  
Beyond necessity.

Fame of myself to lack, although  
My name be else supreme,  
This were an honor honorless,  
A futile diadem.<sup>83</sup>

Following this precept, Emily Dickinson consistently ignored the possibilities of her own immediate fame knowing that “if fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better.”<sup>84</sup> After all, as she says in a short but profound poem, it is poetry rather than poets which is worthy of eternal recognition:

The poets light but lamps,  
Themselves go out;  
The wicks they stimulate,  
If vital light

Inhere as do the suns,  
Each age a lens  
Disseminating their  
Circumference.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> George F. Whicher, “Some Uncollected Poems by Emily Dickinson,” *American Literature*, XX (1949), 438.

<sup>83</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 237, No. 461.

<sup>84</sup> *Letters*, p. 255.

<sup>85</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 227, No. 432.

The position of Emily Dickinson as a poet, then, was this: to utilize the tremendous resources of her emotional and imaginative energy to create poetry which in turn provided her with an outlet or an anodyne for this energy which might otherwise have destroyed her sanity. Words, the powerful agents of thought, became the instruments by which she projected herself into first one relationship and then another with the natural world and with that other more elusive world of her mystical intuitions. She felt "a dim capacity for wings"

So I must baffle at the hint  
And cipher at the sign,  
And make much blunder, if at last  
I take the clew divine.<sup>86</sup>

Out of sight? What of that?  
See the bird reach it!  
Curve on curve, sweep on sweep,  
Round the steep air.  
Danger! What is that to her?  
Better 'tis to fail there  
Than debate here.<sup>87</sup>

Her goal was sometimes obscured, but she nevertheless was determined to approach a complete comprehension of the mysteries of life and death by means of mystical experience recorded and examined through the discipline of the communication of words in the framework of poetic creation. A mystical vision first experienced and then assimilated into her understanding by the expression of it in poetry established the foundation for further exploration of her consciousness which in turn led to new levels of mystical experience. Perhaps her mystical experiences may be thought of as the climb of a giant mountain slope reaching ever upward but interrupted by frequent ledges upon which she paused for orientation, a view of the ground covered, and the gathering of forces for the next ascent. Her ultimate goal will be achieved at death when she becomes the bride of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Until then her position as a poet must reflect the "compound vision" which depends upon the awareness of death.

<sup>86</sup> *Poems*, p. 159, No. vi.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310, No. lviii.

The admirations  
And contempts of time  
Show justest through an open tomb—  
The dying, as it were a height,  
Reorganizes estimate,  
And what we saw not  
We distinguish clear,  
And mostly see not  
What we saw before.  
'Tis compound vision—  
Light enabling light—  
The Finite furnished  
With the Infinite—  
Convex and concave witness,  
Back toward time,  
And forward toward  
The God of him.<sup>88</sup>

It seems to me that one can best conclude a discussion of Emily Dickinson's approach to poetry by an examination of a result of that approach.

One of the very best lyric poems which Emily Dickinson wrote, it seems to me, is the following:

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.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 336 f., No. cvi.

When it comes, the landscape listens,  
Shadows hold their breath;  
When it goes, 'tis like the distance  
On the look of death.<sup>89</sup>

This poem is frequently found in anthologies of American poetry but has seldom been discussed, as far as I know. Perhaps the explanation is to be found in the poem itself, which is unquestionably beautiful in its sound, and striking in its imagery, yet resists definition in terms of a logical, comprehensive statement. This poem, certainly, is one of those rare poems which are experienced, never completely understood. It seems to me impossible to read the lines without feeling a tragic, serene emotion which must be akin to the melancholy about which Keats writes. Emily Dickinson's poem is much less specific than the "Ode on Melancholy" in describing the nature of the emotion, but her poem captures and transmits the experience itself.

In regard to the poem's meaning, one finds himself perplexed at first. The poet experiences a profound affliction in the presence of something normally regarded as cheerful—a ray of light. If, however, one remembers the mystical approach which characterizes much of Emily Dickinson's writing, the poem assumes a new meaning. This is not a mystical poem, but it derives its ethereal quality from the influence of the mystical aspect of Emily Dickinson's viewpoint. Light, itself a characteristic mystical symbol of the Divine, and perhaps also the natural splendor of the world which the light reveals and enhances in its afternoon, fading glow, strikes Emily Dickinson with the irresistible force of an Eternal Power. Not mere speculation is stimulated; an emotional ecstasy of such intensity that it is an affliction possesses her. Furthermore, it is an *imperial* affliction sent us of the air. It is again the mystical concept of the worthiness of painful ecstasy to promote the complete fulfillment of one's nature. No other education is comparable; only the experiencing of "despair" sets the enduring "seal" upon the soul. One recalls that beauty and truth, alike in their effect, are for her the agents of supreme human fulfillment and are accompanied by the complex sensations indescribable except in such paradoxical terms as rapturous pain. The slant of light, its illumination epitomizing the glorious sublimity of nature, would symbolize for Emily Dickinson the ultimate realization of truth and beauty. The immensity of light's compass, the intangibility of its substance, the mystery of its origin, the all-pervasive immediacy of its

<sup>89</sup> *Poems*, pp. 108 f., No. lxxxii.

presence would create in her the sudden awareness of her own relationship to the natural world and yet of the inevitable change of this relationship at death. The awareness that she must cease to see the light gives her present vision its searing acuteness.

By a departing light  
We see acuter quite  
Than by a wick that stays.

There's something in the flight  
That clarifies the sight  
And brims the rays.<sup>90</sup>

The deepest appreciation of life is dependent upon the awareness of its flight.

That it will never come again  
Is what makes life so sweet.<sup>91</sup>

An examination of the images in "There's a certain slant of light" reveals their extraordinary degree of consistency and appropriateness. The light is presented in its most effective form. The *slant* indicates that the light is refracted so that one may see the beam or ray itself and not just an illuminated surface. The slant is explained by *afternoons*. Sunset is near, for "winter afternoons" are short. The terms *winter* and *afternoon* both are suggestive of the end of life. The lustre and yellow warmth of the light stand out in striking relief in austere winter. Light compared with cathedral tunes demonstrates a consummate use of imagery in which the profoundest impressions of one sense are called forth to describe equally profound impressions of another sense. The senses of sight and hearing, as well as an emotional tone and a feeling of muscular tenseness in opposing weight, are all involved in the brief stanza. The nature of the paradoxical "Heavenly hurt" is made evident by the image of cathedral tunes. Most people are sensible of the sober disquietude that may be stimulated by great, solemn music, if not by the beauty of nature. The "internal difference" is, of course, the essential difference for Emily Dickinson rather than any outward change.

To hear an oriole sing  
May be a common thing,  
Or only a divine.

<sup>90</sup> *Bolts of Melody*, p. 275, No. 545.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265, No. 518.

It is not of the bird  
Who sings the same, unheard,  
As unto crowd.

The fashion of the ear  
Attireth that it hear  
In dun or fair.

So whether it be rune,  
Or whether it be none,  
Is of within;

The "tune is in the tree,"  
The sceptic showeth me;  
"No sir! In thee!"<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the significance of the slant of light is also within. The sudden, inward change is so thorough that the poet, holding her breath and listening, sees her own emotional state reflected in the very landscape and shadows. The emotion, too intense to last, subsides as the slant of light lengthens and lowers into the gray of twilight. Then "tis like the distance / On the look of death." The feeling of softened, lengthened distances as seen at dusk, the poignancy in the departure of something precious, the resigned awareness of death—not felt with the acute sensations of before but contemplated dispassionately—all are included in this solemn final image.

The mechanical details of the poem are, to my mind, flawless. The second and fourth lines of each stanza end in perfect rhyme, and the first and third lines of each stanza exhibit the incomplete sound-rhymes for which Emily Dickinson has been alternatively praised and damned for something over fifty years. The recurrence of sounds in the complete and incomplete rhymes is not obvious and blatant; it has the effect of music lightly assuring the listener of its key by sometimes stating the tonic, but frequently only pausing on the dominant. The key or tone of the poem is maintained throughout by the preponderance of "s" sounds. The poem seems to demand to be read in a subdued tone ending with the whispered last two lines. There is not a jarring sound present; the liquid "l's" and the vowels add to the hushed, lyric quality.

The trochaic meter in this poem is much more skillfully handled than the majority of Emily Dickinson's meters. Even in the terse

<sup>92</sup> *Poems*, pp. 71 f., No. xii.



seven-syllable, five-syllable lines there is present much subtle metric variation, as reading the poem aloud will verify.

The simplicity of the organization of this poem is art which conceals art. The stanzas are self-contained, precise units, each one an extension of the basic meaning. The poem ends with the symmetrically balanced phrases "when it comes . . . when it goes . . ." and the final images of sound and sight complete in reverse the pattern created by the sight and sound imagery of the first stanza.

This poem exhibits none of the childishness, the self-conscious mannerisms, which mar some of her poetry. The characteristics which are present—the introspective analysis of the second stanza, the mystical implications of the third, and the supreme mastery of words and imagery throughout—contribute to make this poem one of the best products of Emily Dickinson's unique poetic genius.

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