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Douglas Leonard  
*Gustavus Adolphus College*

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Leonard: "Chastisement of Beauty": A Mode of the Religious Sublime in Dick

# **"CHASTISEMENT OF BEAUTY": A MODE OF THE RELIGIOUS SUBLIME IN DICKINSON'S POETRY\***

Douglas Leonard

Emily Dickinson shared with other Romantic poets, American and European, the intuition that the age of reason had run its course and had failed to bring the hoped-for illumination and order. In the new century, as the focus turned toward self, the feelings of the individual tended to replace authority and schema in the measure of truth and beauty. From the beginning, Dickinson's poetry reflects the poet's awareness that emotional sensations occur in various dimensions within the consciousness, so that joy and grief, for example, or exultation and fear, may combine in single complex reactions. The most intense emotions, in fact, are frequently the most paradoxical. The combination of emotional opposites would become characteristic in Dickinson's poetry, and it is in fact the indivisible unity of terror and ecstasy which constituted what Dickinson considered the most intense emotion of all, what she called "awe."

Dickinson's expression of emotion, like that of other Romantics, has its roots in the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the sublime. There is no doubt that Dickinson was aware of the tradition, even if we cannot be certain whether she had studied Edmund Burke's influential *Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* or Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (Gelpi 124-5). At least two of Dickinson's Mount Holyoke textbooks summarize the sublime aesthetic: Samuel P. Newman's *Practical System of Rhetoric* and Thomas C. Upham's *Elements of Mental Philosophy* (Newman 42-47; Upham 300-09). Newman relates the sublime to his discussion of literary taste and style, citing examples; and Upham, following Burke, more lengthily explains characteristics which evoke sublime emotions: expanse, height, depth, color, light, darkness, sound, motion, and power. An immediate relevance can be seen in the passage in which Upham contemplates the sublimity of the sea.

In regard to the ocean, one of the most sublime objects which the human mind can contemplate, it cannot be doubted that one element of its sublimity is the unlimited expanse which it presents. . . . The sailor on the wide ocean, when, in the solitary watches of the night, he casts his eye upward to the lofty, illuminated sky, has a sublime emotion; and he feels the same strong sentiment striving within him when, a moment afterward, he thinks of the vast unfathomable abyss beneath him, over which he is suspended by the frail plank of his vessel. (302-03)

Upham's description of sea travel seems to underlie the sublime expression in this familiar early Dickinson poem (76).<sup>1</sup>

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Exultation is the going  
Of an inland soul to sea,  
Past the houses—past the headlands—  
Into deep Eternity—  
Bred as we, among the mountains,  
Can the sailor understand  
The divine intoxication  
Of the first league out from land?

Whether the sea represents passionate love, life, art, “circumference,” or, as the words “eternity” and “divine” seem to suggest, mystical union with God, the specific reference of the poem is not material for the present purpose (Sewall 2:522; Miller 66–7, 155–6; Cody 304; Ward, 42). The quality of the emotion is the poet’s first concern. Dickinson calls going out into “deep eternity” “exultation,” an emotion usually considered unadulterated bliss. But for Dickinson as for Upham, the “divine intoxication” of the adventurer is composed of dread as well as exultation. Dickinson’s own contribution to the sublime aesthetic in “Exultation is the going” is that her “going to sea” is symbolic of an inner voyaging.

In 1848, Austin Dickinson presented a translation entitled “From Longinus on the Sublime” at the Spring Exhibition of Amherst College (Leyda 1:142). Although there is no direct evidence that Emily and Austin shared their knowledge of the sublime, it is probable that they did since the two correspond frequently into the mid-fifties. Until Austin married Susan Gilbert in 1856, he was Emily’s closest intellectual companion. We know further that around the same time Austin sent her a book of poetry by Alexander Smith, a leader of the so-called “Spasmodic School” of poets which during the 1850’s practiced an extreme form of sublime expression. Dickinson replied in a letter to her brother that she enjoyed Smith’s “exquisite frensy” (Anderson 68; *Letters* 1:256).<sup>2</sup>

Dickinson’s reading of James Thomson and Ralph Waldo Emerson would also have made her familiar with the aesthetic of the sublime. Thomson’s *The Seasons*, cited as an example of the sublime poetic technique in Dickinson’s college rhetoric, was also in the Dickinson family library. She quoted from Thomson’s verse on at least two occasions (Capps 75, 111, 187; *Poems* #131). In addition, Dickinson certainly knew Emerson’s essay “The Oversoul,” which consciously employs the sublime in a way Dickinson would follow, if not precisely imitate. “The influx of the Divine mind into our minds,” Emerson writes, “agitates men with awe and delight” (Gelpi 126).

Although the external evidence that Dickinson understood the concepts of the sublime is persuasive, the evidence within the poems is compelling.<sup>3</sup> A poem of 1862 (582) demonstrates especially well Dickinson’s use of Burkean elements of the sublime.

Inconceivably solemn!  
Things so gay  
Pierce—by the very Press  
Of Imagery—  
Their far Parades—order on the eye  
With a mute Pomp—  
A pleading Pageantry—

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Flags, are a brave sight—  
But no true Eye  
Ever went by One—  
Steadily—  
Music's triumphant—  
But the fine Ear  
Winces with delight  
Are drums too near—

The poem's subject is the emotional response of consciousness to a "parade" of imagery in the natural world, and Dickinson here identifies a number of aspects of the sublime: color, brightness, intensity, arrangement, motion, and loudness. Bright "imagery" is piercing; its arrangement viewed from afar affects one like "pomp" and "pageantry"; flags are so "brave" that a "true eye" cannot steadily look at one; and triumphant music makes the "fine ear" wince with "delight." Dickinson seems to echo Burke in her reference to a "true eye" and "fine ear," for Burke states that sublime perception requires "finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination and perhaps the other mental powers act" (135).

Such examples of Dickinson's sublime response to things in the natural world could be multiplied, but I want to concern myself especially with her use of an inner sublime. As in "Exultation is the going" (76), Dickinson often evokes the sublime to describe the internal landscape of her own consciousness. The vastness, loudness, power, suddenness, brightness, obscurity, difficulty, and infinity of the consciousness elicit the delightful terror which constitutes the sublime. In "It's hour with itself" (1225), written about 1872, Dickinson looks into the interior sublime.

It's Hour with itself  
The Spirit never shows.  
What Terror would enthrall the Street  
Could Countenance disclose  
The Subterranean Freight  
The cellars of the Soul—  
Thank God the loudest Place he made  
Is licensed to be still.

The isolated self-scrutiny of consciousness is represented as sublime by use of the metaphor of a gothic cellar, complete with the screams of tortured captives or insane inmates. The terror must remain a secret because it would "enthrall"—either in the sense of delight or enchant—any who discovered it. Yet this "loudest place" is also simultaneously "still."

Another poem depicting the interior sublime, "'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates" (281) is exactly the kind of poem by Dickinson which is condemned by some critics as being too vague, meaninglessly obscure.

'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—  
So over Horror, it half Captivates—  
The Soul stares after it, secure—  
To know the worst, leaves no dread more—

To scan a Ghost, is faint—  
But grappling, conquers it—  
How easy, Torment, now—  
Suspense kept sawing so—  
The Truth, is Bald, and Cold—  
But that will hold—  
If any are not sure—  
We show them—prayer—  
But we, who know,  
Stop hoping, now—  
Looking at Death, is Dying—  
Just let go the Breath—  
And not the pillow at your cheek  
So Slumbereth—  
Others, Can wrestle—  
Your's, is done—  
And so of Woe, bleak dreaded—come,  
It sets the Fright at liberty—  
And Terror's free—  
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!

Some attempt to “salvage” this “obscure” poem by interpreting it by Dickinson’s life. Richard B. Sewall, for example, considers the poem the “obverse” of “I felt a funeral in my brain” (280) in that it is a healthier response to the departure of her alleged would-be lover, Samuel Bowles. “In the therapeutic view,” Sewall explains, “she has come near mastering her affliction and is on the way to health. . . . The Truth of the third stanza is her failure to elicit response from Bowles (or whomever or whatever); the Death of the fourth stanza is the death of her hopes” (2:503). Instead, what really creates unity and coherence in “’Tis so appalling—it exhilarates” is its steady concern with describing the emotive consciousness facing the prospect of death. Prayer, suspense, torment, dying, a ghost, and “woe”—none of these things is the true subject of the poem; they are metaphors for sublime emotions evoked by the contemplation of death.

“He fumbles at your soul” (315) is a description of spiritual intercourse between the persona and God, and Dickinson makes full use of sexual imagery to convey the emotional intensity of the relationship, its extremes of pleasure and pain.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, besides further amplifying the intensity of the sensations, Dickinson’s use of the sublime serves to indicate the persona’s profound ambivalence in response to the experience of intimacy between the self and God.

He fumbles at your Soul  
As Player at the Keys  
Before they drop full Music on—  
He stuns you by degrees—  
Prepares your brittle Nature  
For the Etherial Blow  
By fainter Hammers—further heard—  
Then nearer—Then so slow  
Your Breath has time to straighten—

Your Brain—to bubble Cool—  
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Deals—One—imperial—Thunderbolt—  
That scalps your naked Soul—  
When Winds take Forests in the Paws—  
The Universe—is—still—

The metaphoric fabric of this unusual sonnet is richly interwoven from the first line. The word “fumbles” suggests an ineptitude of overly-eager passion on the part of God, but of course it is the soul, not the body, which is here being “undressed.” Immediately, though, the sexual metaphor is set aside temporarily in favor of a musical one. But the players’ “fumbling” at the keys implies not clumsiness so much as the gentle fluttering of skillful hands as they play very softly in that moment just before they abruptly “drop” the “full music on.”<sup>5</sup> The musical metaphor is also temporarily suspended as Dickinson now compares the increasing intensity of the spiritual encounter with a physical attack. God “stuns” the soul “by degrees,” in order to prepare it for the “etherial blow.” The soul is “brittle” because it is mortal, limited, and fallen, and therefore needs to be “prepared” for intimacy with the divine. So God approaches the soul gradually, like the “fainter hammers” of the piano heard from a distance. At the same time, the “hammers” God wields associate him with Thor in violence, even while their faraway music suggests his gentleness.

Now the sublime suspense builds as the music approaches nearer and then slows so that the persona’s breathing returns to normal and her temperature cools. These physical references set up the climax of the spiritual experience, which is again described in sexual terms. God, like Thor or Zeus, now “deals—one—imperial—thunderbolt,” which “scalps” the “naked soul.” Surely Dickinson was not unaware of the sexual connotations of her imagery or of her references to the lustful gods of mythology. Thus Dickinson’s poem reaches a terrible climax of violence, a climax all the more shocking because it is the objective correlative of the spiritual union between God and the soul.

The final two lines are set apart from the rest of the sonnet to indicate the stillness which follows the boom of the thunder. Here Dickinson employs another metaphor from nature to convey this peaceful aftermath: “When Winds take Forests in their Paws—/The Universe—is—still—.” This image is difficult, but it follows that the “winds” refer to the spirit of God, while the “forests,” as they are material, refer to the human being who has been visited by God. The “paws” of the wind, like a cat’s, can be gentle as well as violent. At the end the “universe” of the persona’s consciousness is stilled, both because it is enervated after its painfully intense communion with God, and because God himself has fulfilled and quieted the soul in visiting it.

In sum, “He fumbles at your soul,” in order to convey the complex nature of spiritual intimacy between the soul and God, compares God successively with a lover, a musician, the music itself, a scalping attacker, a wielder of thunderbolts, the wind, and a cat. To do this in fourteen lines while maintaining unity is an astonishing achievement. This rare sonnet expresses the ambivalence of the soul’s response to communion with God. Consciousness plainly desires that communion as the body desires sexual love, and the soul enjoys communion with God as one’s aesthetic sensibility enjoys music. Both experiences combine gentleness and violence. At the same time, because of its “brittle nature,” its humanness, consciousness

fears and resists being "isolated" by the sovereign will of the divine spirit. What is finite cannot contain the infinite, yet the soul can receive God. It is not appropriate, then, to read "He fumbles at your soul" as an explicit or even "sublimated" rape fantasy, just as it is not appropriate to dismiss the mystical experience of Teresa of Avila, for example, as a rape fantasy.<sup>6</sup> Have critics accused John Donne of indulging in rape fantasy in his Holy Sonnet 14 because he asks God to "take," "enthral," and "ravish" him? Dickinson, like Donne, has simply put to use a number of things from the natural world, including human sexuality, in order to communicate a supernatural experience which is both anguish and bliss.

Whenever Dickinson desired to characterize the most intense emotions—sexual, aesthetic, or spiritual—she usually did so in terms of the sublime. In Burke's phrase, the sublime is "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). A final poem will take us the last step in Dickinson's emotional consciousness. She considered awe the highest of all emotions, and in fact the essence of the sublime response is awe. "My period had come for prayer" (564) also treats the sublime experience of the soul encountering God, but this time the metaphor is a cosmic quest, in which the persona now becomes the aggressive partner in the relationship.

My period had come for Prayer—  
No other Art—would do—  
My Tactics missed a rudiment—  
Creator—Was it you?  
God grows above—so those who pray  
Horizons—must ascend—  
And so I stepped upon the North  
To see this Curious Friend—  
His House was not—no sign had He—  
By Chimney—not by Door  
Could I infer his Residence—  
Vast Prairies of Air  
Unbroken by a Settler—  
Were all that I could see—  
Infinite—Had'st Thou no Face  
That I might look on Thee?  
The Silence condescended—  
Creation stopped—for Me—  
But awed beyond my errand—  
I worshipped—did not "pray"—

Here Dickinson presents prayer as a difficult journey through the cosmos into God's presence. The childlike persona travels beyond the physical horizon of the "North" to seek the "house" of the Creator, and finds only "vast prairies of air," or what Inder Nath Kher has called "the landscape of absence." The infinitude of space, itself a sublime image, is extended in its sublime quality by the suggestion of the persona's solitude and lostness. Finally, when she has cried out to God in desperation, "the silence condescended." As in the poem which begins "I know that he exists" (338), God is here described as removed, dwelling in "silence," until suddenly he "surprises" the seeker with bliss.<sup>7</sup> This supernatural visitation is the

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most sublime experience of all, again because it involves the union of the human with the divine, the finite with the infinite, and the personal with the universal. The persona, now no longer a child, is "awed" by the experience. No longer interested in addressing God in petitionary prayer, she simply worships. After all, what most she sought from God was communion with himself.

"My period had come for prayer," though I think not a great poem, shows the primacy of awe in Dickinson's consciousness. Awe was her consummate emotion, combining qualities like beauty and terror, faith and doubt, into a sublime whole. In a poem of 1874, "Wonder is not precisely knowing" (1331), Dickinson calls the paradoxical sensation of awe "a beautiful but bleak condition," as the consciousness, which sees and believes but is never certain, experiences a fundamental suspense at once both "delightful" and "mangling."

A year before her death, in thanking an unknown correspondent for the gift of a book (presumably a Bible), Dickinson expanded on the paradoxical character of awe.

I thank you with wonder—Should you ask me  
my comprehension of a starlight Night, Awe  
were my only reply, and so of the mighty  
Book—It stills, incites, infatuates—  
blesses and blames in one. Like  
Human Affection, we dare not touch it, yet  
flee, what else remains? . . . How vast is the  
chastisement of Beauty, given us by our  
Maker! A Word is inundation, when it comes  
from the Sea—Peter took the Marine Walk at  
great risk (*Letters* 3:858).

This passage, as it reveals how Dickinson associated awe and the sublime, also manifests the convergence in Dickinson's thinking of things awe-inspiring. These things had become as one in her consciousness: the infinity of the night sky, beauty, the Bible, human love, the ocean of divine love, and the walk of faith. Dickinson's poems frequently express an awareness of the multifold miracle of existence, and her own circumscribing consciousness of it all was itself both part and whole of the awful miracle. Manifestly, Dickinson considered the ecstatic terror of such consciousness the appropriate subject for a great many poems. In her emphasis and insights she was well ahead of her time, while also conscious of the long tradition of mystical poetry behind her.

Gustavus Adolphus College



- 1 All references to Dickinson's poems are to the numbers of the Thomas H. Johnson edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955).
- 2 An obscure comment in a letter to T.W. Higginson might lead to a speculation that he had suggested to Dickinson that her verse savored too much of the "spasmodic school," but Dickinson's opaque reference to his supposed suggestion cannot be offered as a firm proof: "You think my gait 'spasmodic'—I am in danger—sir—You think me 'uncontrolled'—I have no tribunal" (*Letters* 2:409). The letter from Higginson is missing.
- 3 Gelpi in *Emily Dickinson* lists some poems he classifies as "natural sublime," p. 192, n. 55: 1609, 210, 1171, 1677, 1678, 1419, 1217, 1486.
- 4 "He fumbles at your soul," has a confused history of explication. George F. Whicher, *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938) p. 101, started it by saying that the "he" in the poem is the preacher Wadsworth, the alleged lover of Dickinson. Anderson, in *Stairway of Surprise*, p. 17, agrees "he" is a preacher, but a "hell-fire preacher," not Wadsworth. Chase, in *Emily Dickinson* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951) pp. 204–05, thinks "he" is a lover like Wadsworth and that Dickinson's ambiguity is "bad" or vague. Johnson, in *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955) p. 237, restricts his interpretation of "he" in the poem to Wadsworth. William R. Sherwood, who makes reference to all the readings above in *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Act of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) pp. 108–09, and 255, notes 116–118, thinks Dickinson's "he" is God, as do Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), II, 1238. Sewall in *Life*, II, 451, note 703, argues that the "he" in "He fumbles at your soul" is *not* Wadsworth.
- 5 Music is sublime for Dickinson. See *Letters*, Letter 390, II, 507, in which Dickinson says to her cousin Frances Norcross: "Glad you heard Rubinstein . . . He makes me think of polar nights Captain Hall could tell! Going from ice to ice! What an exchange of awe!"
- 6 St. Teresa's account of her famous "ecstasy": "Besides me, on the left hand, appeared an angel in bodily form, such as I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely. Though I often have visions of angels, I do not see them . . . But it was our Lord's will that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame to be all on fire. They must be of the kind called cherubim, but they do not tell me their names . . . In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God in His goodness, to grant him some experience of it." *Life of St. Teresa*, tr. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, 1957), p. 210 and *passim*.
- 7 The awful "silence" dominates more ambiguously in "I felt a funeral in my brain" (280), where the persona ends up her cosmic voyage of consciousness "wrecked, solitary" with her companion a personified "silence."

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