Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Abnormality Defined

Izzat Mohammed Ghazzawi

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EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY: ABNORMALITY DEFINED

BY

IZZAT MOHAMMED GHAZZAWI

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EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY: ABNORMALITY DEFINED

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Professor Paul Witherington
Thesis Adviser Date

Professor Ruth Ann Alexander
Head, English Dept. Date
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Izzat Ghazzawi
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

As a romantic poet, Emily Dickinson was fascinated by nature, individualism, man's relation with God and the universe and the other unperceivable problems of love, pain and death. Emerson and Thoreau dwelt on "Transcendentalism" with great enthusiasm; they were absorbed in their pilgrimage into nature and with man's place in this ambiguous universe. Melville's literary interests revealed the tensions that existed in his mind and in the culture at large--tensions set up by the conflict between the will to believe and the need to be shown, between transcendentalism and empiricism in philosophy, between religion and science. Whitman was content with "democracy" in nature through its "Leaves of Grass"--looking with great pleasure at this brave new continent and gazing with deep admiration and love at man's calloused hands and his drops of sweat. Dickinson was also creating her own world: so private, so crowded and so turned into itself.

Her world was limited to the garden and its flowers, mushrooms, birds, insects, spiders and trees. Her window was her channel for the storm, sea, the aurora, the Amherst new train; the window was also her distinctive ear through which she heard the church bells, the birds' songs, the wind's lashes. Her window, too, was her medium to see the people plod along the streets with their hopes and fears. A large part of her world was reading which acquainted her with Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, the Brontes, Byron, Shelley, Keats,
the Brownings, and even her contemporaries such as Emerson and Helen Hunt Jackson. Reading was her magic carpet to Paris and Geneva, the Alps, and The Himalayas and Vesuvius.

It has often been held against Dickinson that she was limited in her response to the world. She did not go beyond her garden to sing of man's struggle with an indifferent universe. The Civil War, great event that it was, did not stir her as it stirred Whitman; she refused to document a house being divided or the Blacks being denied their freedom. Perhaps these matters seemed so far away from her that she acted indifferently towards them.

But Dickinson created a mythological personality through her poetry much more daring and much more attractive than that of Mark Twain's Huck or Stephen Crane's Maggie or even the pale, half-dying, Hellenic women of Edgar Allan Poe. Dickinson has given world literature a unique personality in her poetry where dread mingles with peace, hope with despair, success with failure; where the bee and the butterfly and the spider and the flower communicate their secrets to man. Her poetry yields a personality which will forever allure readers and teach them how "the human heart in conflict with itself"--as Faulkner put it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech--will always remain the center of all living literature.

Like Melville, Dickinson never tried to resolve such a conflict even at her deepest and most complex creative level; instead, she dramatized it. She had learned that the world was too complex to be pictured in black and white.
On reading the full body of Dickinson's work, 1775 poems in all, one finds incomplete poems, poems that amount to only two lines, and poems that are mere repetitions of previous attempts. She did not intend to be professional, neither did she intend to publish her poetry because she thought that "publication-is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man-"¹ as she made clear in one of her poems. She was not a philosopher, nor did she found any school, but she certainly pointed to that "endless and beginningless road"--as Whitman would say--which we have to travel on our own. That road represents everyone's conflict within himself: a blank sheet where all our psychology and psychiatry announce their defeat. Her poetry is a "stairway of surprise," to borrow one of her expressions and the title of Anderson's critical work on her poetry. Here, instead of befriending a heavy dictionary and Robert Grave's The Greek Mythology, the reader needs a portion of sympathy and affection for the speaker in Dickinson's poems.

There is a strong emotional quality in Dickinson's poetry. Henry Green once said,

Prose should be a long intimacy between strangers with no direct appeal to what both may have known. It should slowly appeal to feelings unexpressed, it should in the end draw tears out of the stone.²

A deep intimacy between the reader and the poem is essential for a full understanding of her poetry--an intimacy which will in the end "draw tears out of the stone."

Because her poems are a series of highly sensitive reverberations of the heart, they are as compact as brief telegrams. In order
to discover the meaning of her vision, she sought for new forms of poetry, fresh and striking. She worked carefully to select her words. It is this choice of the word that gave a special flavor and form to both her thought and experience. She wanted to give the word a unique meaning until it "crumbles with weight:"

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered syllable
'Twould crumble with weight. (1409)

It was the eternal fear that the word might not be adequate to convey her vision that made her so careful with the way words are put together, words of striking freshness.

Occasionally, she dropped the third person singular of the present tense to catch the pure root form of the word and take it beyond the laws of singular and plural, past or future in order to suggest the enduring quality of the action. In many of her poems, one feels her new experiment with words and syntax:

There are two Mays
The then a Must
And after that a Shall. (1618)

"A Must" and "a Shall" are not only new experiments of hers, but they are also agents of compression so that when the indefinite article "a" is omitted, a phrase must follow "must" and "shall" to convey the meaning. A few examples of such experiments are "Water grows / Sahara dies" (1291), "Zero at the bone" (986), "Among circumference" (798).

In other poems she was coining new words to make them mean as much as they could and take them out of the dull routine, and renew them when their connotative and etymological potential are fully absorbed:
"bridling" (39), "overtakeless" (282), "goer by" (283), "hostiler" (705), "kinsmanless" (1819), and "antique" (1068). In most of her poetry Dickinson used the mother "be" instead of is/was/are/were, to give her poems a sense of universality as well as religious and literary tones.

One of her amazing techniques of style is her frequent use of the dash as a punctuation mark. By the dash Dickinson suggests either one of two things: a pause which enables the reader or listener to connect the previous idea or vision with the following one, or a gap that suggests an open-ended vision that no words could express. Dashes also allow ambiguity within the poem. Therefore, most of her major poems on death end with a dash; these poems are "Because I could not stop for Death" (712), "I heard a Fly buzz-when I died" (465), "We dream-it is good we are dreaming" (531), and "A Clock Stopped" (287).

Her vehicle is the ordinary meaning which she transforms as if by magic into "amazing" and "immense" visions:

This was a Poet—It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings
And Attar so immense (448)

These visions are blended with "Attar"—the spirit of perfume. This is Dickinson at work trying to wring out the "Essential Oils:"

Essential Oils-are wrung
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns-along-
It is the gift of Screws— (675)

Her poems are like "Essential Oils" that are not attained easily, but "wrung" as the "Attar" from the "Rose." The creation of poetry is like
birth giving, patient and elaborate. This is clearly shown in her poem about the spider:

A spider sowed at Night
Without a Light
Upon an Arc of White.

If Ruff it was of Dame
Or Shroud of Gnome
Himself himself inform.

Of Immortality
His Strategy
Was Physiognomy. (1138)

This is a homely, ordinary vocabulary suddenly turned toward philosophy. The spider is a recluse insect always busy creating his webs. In this poem, the spider becomes an emblem for the craftsman spinning from within himself his own world. Though the spider works at "Night," he spins on "an Arc of White" because his vision is illuminated so that he does not need light; his material of creation is inward rather than outward; "Himself himself inform" because he is the source of his own creation. Yet, the web the spider weaves can be a fine muslin collar for a lady, or a grave coffin to veil an earthly sprite; it can be a poem to cautiously explore joy or to cover pain. The last stanza goes on to identify the job of the poet with that of the seer who uses "physiognomy" as his method of immortality.

The poem about the spider serves to illustrate Emily Dickinson's notion about the creation of art. The poem itself is compact but it explodes with meanings. The slow motion of the poem suggests a kind of incantation or ritual as if a spell is cast to make the spider yield a mystery. What is the mystery of the spider making a web? Identify it, and you know how a poet weaves his art. The triple
rhyme scheme throughout the three stanzas suggests meticulous elaboration. The fact that every stanza ends with a stop, with no commas or dashes used, suggests a kind of design and order brought about step by step.

The creation of a poem brings order to a chaotic world exactly as God's creation brought order to the universe:

A word is dead  
When it is said  
Some say

I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day (1212)

And so with Dickinson the word does not exist until it is said in a context; the word brings a design, a poem which becomes the poet's medium to excel himself and create his own paradise of everlasting beauty through art.

American writers have always had a feeling that literature in America needs a kind of "heritage"-a kind of mythology to endow it with roots. Perhaps Dickinson felt that she should give her poetry an archetypal meaning; she resorted to ritual and the primitive. Her poems of enduring beauty are rituals on love and death; love is sometimes associated with violence such as her poem "My Life had stood- a Loaded Gun" (754) where the gun imagery is present all through the poem. Images of rape are also frequent as in "Within my Garden, rides a Bird" (500) and "A Route of Evanescence" (1463). Her death poems are usually ceremonial and there is a stress on the mourner's sense of duty towards the dead.

Analogy and paradox are Dickinson's means of achieving a com-
prehensive vision and conveying it with striking freshness. She uses paradox and analogy to express the degree of feeling when things go beyond her vocabulary:

A wounded deer-leaps highest
I've heard the hunter tell  

or

To learn the transport-by the pain-
As Blind Men learn the sun. 

The pattern of Dickinson's poetry seems to go side by side with her own life. She led an almost unchanging life, and for a long time she lived as a recluse. Her poetry has no distinguishable periods of growth though there is a great deal of maturity. Her early poems are sharp in imagery, charged with denial concerning the facts of life, turbulent and sometimes ironic. Her later poetry is more condensed, calm and resigned. Two poems, which are always considered similar, can serve the purpose of explanation. The first poem is "Within my Garden, rides a Bird" (500), written in 1862, and the second poem is "A Route of Evanescence" (1463) written in 1874. The total effect of both poems leaves the reader with the image of a bird, possibly a hummingbird, and a flower. The second poem reads:

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving wheel-
A resonance of emerald-
A rush of Cochineal-
And every blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head-
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride-  

The images in the final four lines—which may be called the "flower lines"—can suggest the seduction of the flower by the bird. In the earlier version the seduction is dramatized wonderfully in the lines:
He never stops, but slackens
Above the Ripest Rose
Partakes without alighting
And praises as he goes (500/2nd stanza)

In this poem, however, the love scene is dramatized through the "passive"
reaction of the petals after being seduced --the gentle alightment
of the bird on them. "And every blossom on the Bush / Adjusts its
tumbled head--." "

The intensity of both poems is achieved by the fact that they
relate an after event--the focus being on the rapid flight of the bird
and its taking off. But while the first version concentrates on the
movement of the bird,

Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel-
Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill- (500/1st stanza)

the second version retains the beauty of the flight and at the same
time offers the overall effect of motion, sound and color which become
the force that stirs the imagination towards the creation of the poem.
The alliteration in "Route," "revolving," "Resonance" and "Rush" adds
to the impression of irresistible force of imagination. The natural
scene is transformed into a mental image; it is suspended and rehearsed
again and again exactly as a "revolving wheel," and the poem is created.

Both poems suggest a sexual image, as Rebecca Patterson notes.
Patterson also suggests a pun on the word "mail" for "male" which
seems likely since the original lines in Shakespeare's The Tempest--
(from which the final two lines are inspired)--mention the word "post"
rather than "mail." The suggestion is supported by the fact that in
various poems, Dickinson refers to flowers as an established metaphor
for the female (beauty and fragrance and attraction). At the same time, in both her letters and poems, Dickinson refers to flowers as poems such as in "I hide myself within my flower" (903). If this is rightly assumed, the rape is a dramatization within the "garden of the mind," as the earlier version states. It is the rapid explosion of the imagination which is likened to

The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride

that has the ability to "rape" a natural scene and "own" or "suspend" it with all its grandeur.

While the first version is made up of twenty lines divided into five stanzas, the second version is an eight-line poem undivided into stanzas. Most poems of her later life are characterized by this compactness and unity.

For subject matter, Dickinson dwelt on the inner actualities of the self and scanned the facts of pain, loss, love and death; in almost every poem she found something fresh to say. However, there is a fact that makes a unity of her whole poetry: every poem embodies an emotional or psychological state in neat, specific language and gives this state the life, the substance and the dramatic impact which makes it communicable.

Yet, a great deal of Dickinson's poetry leaves the reader in anarchy. There are no definite answers for the questions that a great number of her cryptic poems pose. The undefined "it" or "he" leaves more questions than answers. In such poems as "'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (414) or "'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates" (281) and many others, both critic and reader are left to arrive at their own
conclusions about this cryptic "it:" is it death or pain or despair? The only answer which seems satisfactory is that the "it" can be a "state of feeling" which goes beyond any definition. The "it" is certainly not a common feeling that we experience and because of that it cannot be explained in terms of nouns or adjectives. This is a center which holds the seeming anarchy of Dickinson's poetry. This study will try to show that while the structural patterns can be constant throughout Dickinson's poetry, the thematic patterns vary a great deal.

The structural patterns give a safe frame to the emotionally-charged content of the poem. She relies heavily on analogy, paradox and the metaphor as discussed above in order to suggest a kind of eternal combination between the word and the feeling. The collapse in syntax, which is likely to happen all of a sudden in any stanza, expresses the failure of language to convey a state of feeling which goes beyond all our power of expression. However, as Carrol D. Laverty points out there are eight basic structural patterns in her poetry:

1--A statement or a presentation of a situation followed by explanation or example and sometimes an application of the statement to the theme,
2--Parallelism in various forms, 3--Statements based on analogy, 4--A logical argument--inductive or deductive development of a thought,
5--Statement in the form of a definition, 6--Dramatic structure, 7--One single statement, and 8--The combination of two or more of the first seven.

Thematic patterns are not that easy. The possibility of any safe definition of her thematic patterns is marred by a number of
facts: 1--Her poetry is above all psychological rather than philosophers, 2--The compactness of the poem prevents the development of a sustained theme all through, 3--The reserved and enigmatic pronouns discussed above, and 4--The various endings in crucial poems which seem to break away from the whole poem and give the feeling of a loose ending.

However, whether the poet is speaking about death, knowledge, pain, love or loss, there is a certain center which gives unity to the whole. There is a relentless effort on the part of the speaker to get into a fuller perception of all these states of feeling. Her poems on God, pain, love and death can be considered a dramatization of the idea rather than a philosophical meditation; by means of this dramatization she incurs the presence of pain or love or death or God and brings herself into a state of compromise with each of them. In this sense, she resembles Edward Taylor and Jonathan Edwards who always dramatized the absence and remoteness of God only to achieve a nearer vision of God.

The ultimate consequence of this dramatization is that the achievement through the poem, the creation of the poem itself, becomes a force equal to pain or God or love or death. In other words, the act of creating of the poem becomes the vicarious feeling which gives the speaker the supreme opportunity of achievement through perception. If pain is utter, if God is remote and silent, if love is denied, if death is appalling...then the dramatization of each one of these through the poem is rewarding in itself. The facts of life are appalling or desirable because we are consciously aware of them; the conscious
creation of them through art can be ultimately equal to their reality in our psyche.

One must also take into consideration the endless possibilities that each poem provokes. Here there are no final truths:

I dwell in possibility
A fairer House than prose
More numerous of Windows
Superior—for Door— (657)

Because there are "numerous windows"—and no single window would ever yield the same vision—one should look for numerous possibilities.

A poem such as this suggests many possibilities:

A little madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King
But God be with the Clown
Who ponders this tremendous scene
This whole experiment of Green
As if it were his own! (1333)

Charles Anderson in his Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise sees this poem as a symbolic understanding of external reality to which human beings are limited. The poem can also suggest an ultimate separation between man and nature; man's inability to understand the mystery of nature or her vague plans. It can also be seen as a resort to nature, "Spring," to compensate for the painful reality of existence; the Lear-like situation in the poem might lead us to this possibility: "madness" is "wholesome" for the "King" (Lear) because it made him forget his unbearable pain, and "God be with the Clown" (the King's Fool) who still had his wisdom, looking thoughtfully at "This Whole Experiment of Green"—the cycle of life and death which brings up Gonerals and Regans—and "pondering" with pity and fear "As if it were his own." Another reading of the poem might see the "King" as...
God and the "Clown" as man being deceived when he thinks he is a part of Nature.

Throughout this study, the poems of Dickinson will be referred to as arranged in Thomas H. Johnson's edition, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 Vols., Boston, 1960. This edition contains all her poems with an honest attempt to document them as she originally intended them to be, with no alterations whatever. Sometimes, more than one version of the same poem is provided. Since Dickinson never dated her poems, Johnson provided dates of composition of almost every poem. However, the dates which Johnson provided are somewhat arbitrary. There are critical voices now challenging Johnson's accuracy in dating the poems. Johnson's heavy reliance on Dickinson's development in handwriting to specify a date for each poem cannot be the most accurate method. However, before Johnson's edition, it was the custom to arrange her poems according to subject matter; this might be dangerous because many of her poems are on more than one subject. Ironically, earlier editors took liberties in changing marks of punctuation and even words which they thought not suitable to convey the meaning.

Whenever needed, reference to Dickinson's letters will be made according to Johnson's edition of her letters, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 Vol., Cambridge, 1965. It should be noted that her letters are as brief and cryptic as her poems.
NOTES

Chapter I


3 Rebecca Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's 'Hummingbird'," The Educational Leader, XXII (July, 1958), 12-19.


CHAPTER II

The Great Compromise: Knowledge and Pain

In Dickinson's poetry, knowledge is obtained through various means: reading; instinctive and sudden encounter with things in the outside world and nature, and above all the primitive knowledge that arises from within, from the individual's own instincts. Furthermore, there is a certain emphasis on what David Porter calls "after knowledge:" "The crucial affair for her is living after things happen. It is a preoccupation with after knowledge, with living in the aftermath."¹

The voice the reader hears in Dickinson's poetry is that of a speaker almost obsessed by the desire to know. She sees both man and nature as haunted with secrets, and her poetry is a relentless effort to unveil these secrets. The desire to know has been tantalizing for her; knowledge, ultimately, is paradoxical: it illuminates the outside as well as the inside of nature of things, but at the same time it is a source of incredible pain.

Knowledge, in Dickinson's poetry, is both motivated by and directed toward the inner actualities of the self. Even the poems on God and his eternal absence arise from an inner need for self-assurance. That is why it is not enough to read her poetry on a philosophical level; one approaches it best as a psychological experience. Instead of yielding self-assurance, knowledge leads to uncertainty, turmoil, and frustration. It leads to a sharper feeling of loss and fear. But even this is circular;
if knowledge leads to pain, this same pain that hurts is also creative; it becomes the force that creates the poem. The feeling of loss works as a reminder of gain; fear acts as a reminder of safety, or rather as a protective psychological necessity for gaining mastery of the outside as well as the inside pressures that threaten her peace of mind:

I dreaded that first Robin, so,  
But He is mastered, now,  
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,  
He hurts a little, though- (348)

Whether "that first Robin" is the first lover or simply the arrival of spring, the fear it has brought with it is "mastered, now." Though "dread" is haunting in its presence, she has become "accustomed to Him." She is no longer afraid of "Daffodils" or "grass" or "Bees;" instead

Each one salutes me, as he goes,  
And I, my Childish Plumes,  
Lift, in bereaved acknowledgment  
Of their unthinking Drums-

The poem does not say how she has mastered "dread;" rather, it is an expression of after·knowledge, after pain. However, the "Childish Plumes"--her irrational fears--are gone as Charles Anderson suggests.² It becomes clear that the poem itself, as an expression is the force which frees her from "dread:" the poem becomes the emotional release which ultimately offers peace with the self.

In order to achieve this "emotional release," Dickinson writes poems which are characteristically sharp and explosive experiences rather than events. Even those poems that begin as a narrative such as "I Started Early-Took my Dog" (520) or "The Frost of Death was on
the Pane" (1136) turn suddenly into a deep psychological experience where the voice of the narrator is submerged under the power of the internal conflict. John Cody claims that

It has been argued that the 'I' in Emily Dickinson poems does not refer to herself but, as she said, to a 'supposed person.' But the poem depicts not an event, which can easily be invented, but an experience. We must ask ourselves whether anyone, even a poet, can portray a feeling state that he has not himself undergone. And if one grant this is possible, what could possibly motivate a person to attempt to express what he never felt?3

Undoubtedly Cody's comment puts down imagination; the "I" in Dickinson's poetry can refer to an imagined personality created by the poet. The experience shown in the poem is not necessarily "real," though; it can be a mere dramatization as has been asserted before--dramatization for pure psychological reasons such as self-assurance, fulfillment, peace of mind or a step towards compromise in times of conflict.

It has been suggested that Dickinson's probings for further knowledge of the self are revealed in the form of tense and sharp experiences told by a narrator overpowered by the "novelty" or "tensity" of the experience; the result is that the reader puts the narrator aside and becomes absorbed in the experience itself; this quality gives the poems of Dickinson a broad psychological dimension, and therefore opens wider opportunities for that vicarious feeling which is likely to break out on the part of the reader. Though the response might not be universal in every individual poem, the variety in subject matter and the fact that the main emphasis is on the spontaneous human reaction against certain states of feeling which
threaten the psyche, gives the poems of Dickinson a universal impression.

Narration then is used as a mask to give the poem that feeling of objectivity which works two ways: first, it allows the poet to get into the most intense feeling once she "masks" the "I" with the impersonal; second, the intensity of pain is reduced on the poet's part through the vicarious feeling which the poem invokes in the reader or listener. The narration creates in the poet's mind the "illusion" of a listener or a reader who is ready to share in the experience; narration succeeds in giving that feeling of interrelationship between poet and reader. Once this "illusion" is established, the inner self becomes the center of exploration: the inner self as a microcosm and the things that are related to it such as death and pain, love and ecstasy and the whole set of abstractions such as immortality, finity and God.

Reading was Dickinson's first approach to knowledge. Critics have studied her own readings and her deep respect for books. Jack L. Kapps has discussed her acquaintance with the works of Shakespeare, Milton, the English Romantic poets and many leading figures of the Victorian era with a certain emphasis on the Brontes and George Eliot. Her poetry reveals a great deal about the "worlds" she explored through her readings:

A precious-moulder ing pleasure-'tis-
To meet an Antique Book-
In just the Dress his Century wore-
A privilege-I think- (371)

One is tempted to think that Dickinson's relationship with "authority" through books is as ambiguous as her relationship with
the authority manifested by God. But it seems that, for Dickinson, books offer safer knowledge, and therefore, these poems are to be taken seriously. The lines in the above quoted poem express a warm and deep respect for the "Antique Book." The word "antique," however, as the poem proceeds, is meant to convey the ancient knowledge of man and his heart. The stanza is charged by strong words of deep intimacy--"precious," "mouldering" and "privilege." In the same poem, Dickinson goes on to say:

His quaint opinions-to inspect-
His thought to ascertain
On Themes concern our mutual mind-
The Literature of Man-

This stanza makes it clear why knowledge is sought; books contain the human heritage of all ages and therefore link past and present. The final stanza of the poem reads:

His presence is Enchantment-
You beg him not to go-
Old Volumes shake their Vellum Heads
And tantalize-just so-

The quest for knowledge is tantalizing. The "old volumes" cast the spell of magic on her because their mere presence is "Enchantment." Her humility in the presence of those "knowledge givers" is shown in two ways: first she "begs" them to stay, and second she feels "enchantment" which may tempt the reader to think of "volumes" as a symbol for a lover; the sexual connotation in "shake their Vellum Heads" sustains this interpretation.

Another poem which expresses the power of knowledge through reading, and which may be read as a celebration of books, says that
There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry-
This Traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll-
How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human Soul. (1263)

The book takes us "Lands away;" the richest and the poorest can
take this pleasant journey. The dream-like quality of the poem is
shown through its comparatively long lines and the slow pace of the
"frugal Chariot"--a metaphor for "Book"--because it carries "the
human soul." Dickinson's emphasis, however, is on the progress of
the journey which becomes a metaphor for the progress of the self in
obtaining knowledge. This progress is enhanced through the words
which express movement or vehicles for movement: "Frigate,
"prancing," "traverse," "Chariot" and "bears."

But the quest for knowledge will never be limited to books.
The natural springs of knowledge are our own puzzlement and curiosity:

Will there really be a "Morning"?
Is there such a thing as "Day"?
Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they? (101)

Both "Morning" and "Day" imply light and therefore knowledge or hope
of whatever else is enlightening. The fact that the whole stanza is
a series of questions reveals how much the speaker is eager to know.
The impersonal pronoun "it" in the third line intensifies the impression
of perplexity, of hunger for "light." Because nothing is certain,
questions follow and her inquisitive mind tries to provide possible
answers:
Has it feet like Water lilies?
Has it feathers like a Bird?
Is it brought from famous countries
Of which I have never heard?

The regular rhyme of the two stanzas suggests a kind of order brought in after chaos and complete ignorance. The speaker realizes that her complicated "it" is farfetched; whether it be hope or beauty or love, she herself does not know. The poem itself becomes a medium for definition, a hope for disclosing the mystery.

Yet, the road is never travelled completely because one cannot be sure of one's own answers. The speaker then bleeds for an answer which may support her own guessing; with deep humility she appeals:

Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!
Oh some Wise Man from the skies!
Please to tell a little Pilgrim
Where the place called "Morning" lies!

The questions are replaced by exclamations which reflect something more definite. The desire for pursuit is enthusiastic; this is shown in her plea for help first from a worldly "Scholar," then from a "Sailor" who understands the mystery of the sea and then from a heavenly "Wise Man." The word "Pilgrim" emphasizes the quality of the speaker as a person willing to venture and suffer whatever pains occur during her quest. The skillful use of the infinitive "to" after "please" suggests a gentle request for whoever would tell her the secret.

The pilgrimage for knowledge is often painful because "road leads to road" as Frost would say. Whenever she knows something, she
is pushed for further knowledge. The process brings her to more and more awareness of her finity, ignorance and insignificance. Knowledge, once sought for self-assurance, proves to be painful. But suffering does not quench her desire to know:

I shall know why—when Time is over—
And I have ceased to wonder why—
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky—  (193)

Her rebellion against some unsettled problems that she does not know is expressed very clearly through the irony which explodes in the fourth line, "In the fair schoolroom of the sky—." Once we understand she is being ironic, we cannot take for granted her announced cessation in line two, "I have ceased to wonder why."
The line expresses despair rather than resignation; the second stanza gives more intensity to her ironic tone:

He will tell me what "Peter" promised—
And I—for wonder at his woe—
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now—that scalds me now!

She repeats her impatience with a certain emphasis on "now;" the rising tone in "now" suggests rebellion and also that a present pain requires an immediate answer. The relatively long final line suggests the drawn-out quality of pain.

Because everybody fails her—"Scholar," "Sailor" and "Wise Man of the Skies"—the speaker has to go "The road not taken" as Robert Frost calls it. She has to absorb herself in definitions of abstractions. Psychologically, this may be a kind of self-defense against sheer bewilderment; it creates the illusion of full perception. The reader of Dickinson's poetry will be amazed by the number of poems
that are attempts to define abstractions. Among such poems are those which begin "Death is," "Doom is," "Denial is," "Faith is," "Fame is," "Exhilaration is," "Glory is," "Grief is," "Hope is," "Life is," "Love is," "Remorse is," and "Surprise is."

Such definitions are not to be taken as oversimplifications; they are attempts for a fuller perception:

"Nature" is what we see-
The Hill—the Afternoon
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumblebee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
Yet have not art to say—
So impotent our wisdom is
To her simplicity. (668)

In this poem there is the realization that, although we may not find it easy to define things and know them exactly, we can usually come around and touch the secret. The series of negations that follow with the word "Nay" are attempts to qualify her statements and to give the word being defined, "Nature," its due importance. As in Whitman's poetry, cataloging is used to move from uncertainty to certainty, from the simple to the complicated, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. The essential change from the first line—"Nature is what we see"—to the ninth line—"Nature is what we know"—brings the poem to its climax since the verb "see," which implies a single sense, is replaced by "know," which implies all senses.

In his Autobiography, W. B. Yeats suggests that we begin to live when we have conceived of life as a tragedy. The speaker in
Dickinson's poetry has come to such a perception; her incessant journeys into the self have revealed the conception of life as failure, loss and pain. The more she knows about herself, the more she feels that she exists in a world that inflicts pain and still more pain. It is only when the quest for knowledge turns repeatedly toward the interior self that this knowledge becomes illuminating, though painful:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{What mystery pervades a well!} \\
\text{That water lives so far-} \\
\text{A neighbor from another world} \\
\text{Residing in a jar (1400/1st stanza)}
\end{align*}
\]

This poem has been explained on many different levels. Richard Chase sees it as an attempt to give nature a real as well as a symbolic meaning; that the "simplicity of nature consists not in its essence but in its function, which is to act as the condition of man's death."\(^5\) Ferlazzo claims that Dickinson here tries to show her awareness that nature's real mystery is "that of existence itself,"\(^6\) while Sewall believes that the poem suggests that the mysterious "nature" appears to be human nature.\(^7\)

In addition to what the critics say, the "well" becomes a metaphor for the inner self deep in its mystery, so strange that it seems sometimes a "neighbor from another world." The knowledge of the inner self is never satisfactory because

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{To pity those that know her not} \\
\text{Is helped by the regret} \\
\text{That those who know her, know her less} \\
\text{The nearer her they get.}
\end{align*}
\]

The tragic failure of perception, even of the inner self, moves her in a Faust-like anguish to appeal to "Necromancy" in order to soothe
the incurable pain:

Ah, Necromancy sweet!
Ah, Wizard erudite!
Teach me the skill,
That I instil the pain
Surgeons assuage in vain,
Nor Herb of all the plain
Can heal! (177)

In Christopher Marlow's *Dr. Faustus*, Faustus resorts to necromancy and sells his own soul to the devil in order to receive the supreme knowledge that goes beyond all knowledge achieved by human beings. It has been his desire to see human knowledge at its full tide and link past, present and future. The speaker in Dickinson's poem wants to use "Necromancy" as an "herb" for a troubled soul. The tone becomes ironic once we realize that "Necromancy" is an illusion and never a therapy for pain. The word "instil" is very skillfully used to measure pain: it does not come all at once, but it is instilled drop by drop into the heart.

The acute sense of mystery of the "well" has pushed Dickinson into an obsession with "psychological knowledge." Her poetry is often an attempt to rise above her psychic "anguish"—whatever the causes might be—through the verbal analysis of this "anguish," through the "letting go" as she herself would say in her poem, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes—." (341) This "psychological knowledge" comes as a kind of intense experience, mostly a state of feeling where the "valves of attention"—to quote her own expression from "The Soul selects her own Society" (303) are centered on the actualities of the inner self. What is it really like to experience pain or loss or fear
or denial or loneliness when every one of these goes beyond itself and becomes too much for the psyche to understand or endure? It is only in this state when all "knowledge" becomes a lived experience, sometimes sought for as an illuminating force and sometimes rejected because it is a spring of pain. The results have been unique explorations into the inner self, tense, striking and overwhelming.

The "instilled pain" comes mostly from the ultimate extremity of loneliness. It is the horrible realization that when one suffers, one suffers alone; the mere realization leads her into a tragic frustration and a grave struggle within her own psyche:

```
I saw no Way-The Heavens were stitched-
I felt the Columns close-
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres-
I touched the Universe-

And back it slid-and I alone-
A Speck upon a Ball-
Went out upon Circumference-
Beyond the Dip of Bell- (378)
```

This poem is a picture of a person "caught" with no way whatever for escape. The speaker is lonely in her realization that there is "no way" since "The Heavens are stitched." Every line ends with a dash as if to give the reader a pause, a moment of imagination to perceive the full picture of endless suffering. The loneliness is made acute by the simile "A Speck upon a Ball," for she alone is thrown into this indifferent universe and there are no other "specks." The horrible enclosure in the poem is expressed when she finally "Went out upon Circumference." The circumference, suggests Henry Wells, is the limit of the thing; it is the absolute that no one can go beyond.
The poem is particularly characteristic of Dickinson in its reliance on the senses to convey abstractions. It is one of the poems where one "sees" suffering and loneliness embodied. Every single line in the poem appeals to the senses: "stitched," "close," "slid," "speck" and "Beyond" are extracted from their usual sensory meaning into the abstraction of "feeling;" "reversed" and "went out" involve motion to be perceived by the eye; "touched" involves one of our most important senses.

Sight becomes an established medium for the realization of pain or the cessation of it in most of Dickinson's poems. In a poem such as the following, the inner dimension of pain leads to the paralysis of the real self:

There is a pain-so utter-
It swallows substance up-
Then covers the Abyss with Trance-
So memory can step
Around-across-upon it-
As one within a Swoon
Goes safely-where an open eye-
Would drop Him-Bone by Bone. (599)

This is one of her poems which is not divided into stanzas, though there is the possibility of dividing it into two quatrains. The deliberate rush of the eight lines with a continuous flow suggests the continuity of pain. The indefinite article "a" before "pain" is an attempt to give her pain a special meaning or quality; it is "so utter" that its immediate effect is a "Trance." The mind--as if to protect itself against suffering--falls into the blackness of a "Swoon." Suffering is measured by consciousness or loss of consciousness; in a Lady Macbeth-like manner, she walks with an "open eye" just to fall down into the abysmal darkness, and crash there "Bone by
Bone-". Again, pain is conveyed through the medium of the senses. "Swallows," "covers," "Around," "across," "upon" and "drop" keep the eye busy in its perception of the "utter" pain. The eye acts as a cinematic camera which brings things together and offers a panoramic view.

Knowledge of the interior self has been substantial. It has established pain, loss and failure as the very facts of existence:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true...
The Eyes glaze once-and that is Death-
Impossible to Feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung. (241)

Because pain is so haunting in its presence, one gets familiar with it and even accepts it exactly as one adjusts oneself to the idea of death. "The Beads," which may be a metaphor for "eyes" as well as for sweat, are the main channels for perceiving pain, and they are "strung" by it. That Dickinson often refers to sight when she speaks about pain is understood by the fact that the human eye is our primary sense and normally very sensitive to suffering.

The quest for knowledge has yielded three distinguishable kinds of pain: pain through despair, pain through loss and pain through fear. As a result of pain, Dickinson's speaker is driven to indifference as if to defy the indifference of the world that surrounds her. One of her poems reads:

From Blank to Blank-
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet-
To stop-or perish-or advance-
Alike indifferent- (761)
The ultimate feeling of despair pushes her into an elegiac tone which starts and haunts the whole poem. "From Blank to Blank" reminds one of "From dust to dust" except that "Blank" is a stronger word to express despair; "Blank" conveys the meaninglessness which is reinforced in the second line by "A Threadless Way." Because she has not chosen this "meaningless" life, or at least has not "threaded" it her own way, she lives "mechanically" with no deliberate plan or purpose, exactly as the life she describes as "Threadless." Here, all the alternatives seem equal: "To stop-or perish-or advance-.."

It is the irony in this line that endows it with incredible despair: "stop-perish-advance" become equal in choice because all of them are "Alike indifferent-.." The second stanza of the poem takes the idea further:

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed-
I shut my eyes-groped as well
'Twas lighter-to be Blind-

The ultimate state of despair is expressed by "end I gained" which is very ironic; what kind of "gain" is this? The final loss and confusion is skillfully portrayed by the verb "groped" and the image of blindness. Sight is again stressed as the main cause of pain; to minimize it, she prefers to close her eyes and go "Blind," because "'Twas lighter." The word "lighter" itself—in this context—conveys the meaning of "less horrified" or "less aware;" it also gains a strong meaning from the fact that it is given the comparative degree.

Why does the journey inside the self bring out all that pain
and despair? The speaker in a large number of Dickinson's poems is haunted by failure and loss. Wherever she turns she is reminded that for everything gained, there is something lost; meeting brings in the sight of departure; life is a constant reminder of death. This anticipation intensifies the sense of loss, the sense of bereavement:

I lost a World— the other day!
Has anybody found?
You'll know it by the Row of Stars
Around its forehead bound. (181)

What she has lost is a whole "world." Her choice of "a World" to express her loss is intensified by the spell of majesty she gives to the (thing) she has lost by the expression "Row of Stars / Around its forehead." The impersonal possessive pronoun "its" gives a sense of mystery to her loss. David Porter takes the "Row of Stars" as an allusion to the crown of thorns around the forehead of Christ. Even with this possible interpretation the fact remains that this is the speaker's perception of her own suffering.

This acute sense of loss prevails in many of the best poems where the speaker ponders the fact of loss: where and whom and why:

Where I have lost, I softer tread—
I sow sweet flowers from garden bed—
I pause above the vanished head
And mourn. (104)

It is clear that the speaker has lost someone very dear to her and she is mourning her loss. The slow pace of the lines due to the long vowels and the regular rhyme of the first three lines suggests solemnity and sadness. The fourth line comes as an emotional release, a chaos of her affection coming into a sudden break-out "And mourn." The same technique is followed in the second and fourth stanzas in the poem:
Whom I have lost, I pious guard
From accent harsh, or ruthless word-
Feeling as if their pillow heard,
Though stone!

The sense of loss is further intensified by the solemnity with which she surrounds the grave; she "guards" her lost one from any "accent harsh" and speaks in whispers:

When I have Lost, you'll know by this-
A Bonnet black-A dusk surplice
A little tremor in my voice
Like this!

This is an ambiguous stanza, and the reader can be misled by the charged feelings of the speaker. We understand that the impact of loss has caused a "tremor" in her voice which might be taken as a kind of exhaustion of her vocal cords; as a result of mourning, her usually audible voice is changed into a whisper. This is suggested by the rhyme scheme for every individual line ends with the aspirated "s" sound. The ambiguity of the stanza arises from the meaning behind "you'll know by this-A Bonnet black-A dusk surplice," and it is the result of either her feeling of a loss so total that it blurs her method of expression and makes chaos in the stanza expressive of her internal tumult, or her intentional ambiguity in order to hide behind a private personal bearing. A safe explanation to account for such ambiguity is to take the words "A Bonnet black-A dusk surplice" as the speaker's own reaction to the loss; she is clad with a black "Bonnet" and a "dusk surplice." "Dusk," of course, is not to be taken as a qualifier of color for "surplice"--a white robe--but it indicates that the speaker is still at the beginning of a long dark night and so the "surplice" is to be worn for a whole lifetime. The sense of time
which the word "dusk" conveys is supported in the final stanza:

Why, I have lost, the people know
Who dressed in frocks of purest snow
Went home a century ago
    Next Bliss!

All through the four stanzas of this poem, "I have lost" is repeated after the inquisitives "where," "whom," "when" and "why." The perfect tense used in "I have lost" conveys the haunting presence of loss. The movement of the poem from place ("where") to object ("whom") to time ("when") and finally to cause ("why") gives a kind of unity and design to the whole poem. The mysterious sense of loss is expressed by the attempt of the speaker to explain it in terms of where and whom and when and why--all one needs to know about the fact of loss; it is ironic, however, that the attempt makes things more and more mysterious. We know "where" her lost one is, but suddenly the emphasis shifts from the lost to the loser; the focus is on her state of feeling, her reaction to the loss. Nothing is said about what she has lost or when or why she has lost it because the focus is on the loser as sufferer.

Poem after poem probes into the roots of pain through loss, dissecting the reaction of the loser and at the same time adding more mystery to the thing lost:

A loss of something ever felt I-
The first I could recollect
Bereft I was—of What I knew not  (959)

This acute sense of loss has been accompanied by fear and expectation of worse things happening. Fear may be caused by things as simple as a wild flower or an insect or any strange "inhabitant"
of nature. Sometimes fear is caused by anticipation of separation or impending loss. But mostly, fear is caused by the unknown—something she cannot put into words. This mysterious fear is sometimes introduced by her asking a series of questions only to negate them:

Afraid! of whom am I afraid?
Not Death—for who is He? (608)

It is not death then that she is afraid of. Can it be

Of Life? 'Twere odd I fear [a] thing
That comprehendeth me

It is not life, nor is it a fear

Of Resurrection? Is the East
Afraid to trust the Morn
With her fastidious forehead?

What is this fear, then? If "death" and "life" and "resurrection"—the greatest polarities—do not move her to fear, what causes this sheer terror? In one poem, she contrasts fear with despair:

The difference between Despair
And Fear—is like the One
Between the instant of a Wreck—
And when the Wreck has been— (305)

The simile in the first two lines helps to define "Despair" and "Fear" by means of the abstract; it is not a definition of "Fear" or "Despair" because the two have to be brought into balance. The metaphor in the second two lines gives further distinction; "Despair" is the "instant of Wreck—," "Fear" is the feeling after "the Wreck has been." This explanation suggests that "Fear" is the ultimate result of "Despair" which resembles destruction. It is only in this state when she—like a desperate sailor after a wreckage—is robbed of volition; all the scenes of despair and fear crumble in her mind and drive her into an extremity of pain that leaves her unconscious:
I felt a Cleaving in my Mind
As if my Brain had split-
I tried to match it-Seam by Seam-
But could not make them fit.
The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before-
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
Like Balls-upon a Floor. (937)

This is one of Dickinson's most powerful poems on the state
of a mind troubled by certain forces that surpass the mind's ability
to endure. Some critics like Cody have taken the poem as a clear
indication of psychosis, what Cody calls "psychotic thought disorder." 10
The metaphor in the first two lines--where the mind is compared to a
thing split apart--works on two levels: it suggests that though the
mind is potentially strong, it has been bereaved of its strength
under the pressure of fatigue. The chaos of the mind, on the other
hand, is fatal because even memory is out of order: "The thought be-
hind, I strove to join / unto the thought before."

Although despair, loss, fear and failure accompany her through-
out her journey inside the self, she has gained the experience which
is the essence of knowledge. She herself has arrived at this great
compromise:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I know not but the next
Would be the final inch-
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience. (875)

The poem is striking in its design and depth. "I stepped from Plank
to Plank" brings to mind the picture of a bridge covered by separate
"planks" where one has to walk "slow and cautious." The bridge
becomes the symbol for life. Though rarely used in her poems, "stars" in this poem may suggest fate, as in Renaissance poetry. She is haunted by her destiny, "stars about my Head" and by the troublesome "Sea" which recalls the sense of danger and mystery. However, the only thing she is certain of is that the next step may be the "final inch"--the ultimate end which renders nothing except the risky and much doubted "Gait" which is usually called "Experience." The poem is a kind of enclosure charged with despair, though the speaker has not tried to indulge herself in personal emotions.

What has been left is a matter of compromise. The mind may crumble under the pressure of surrounding despair, but there is always the invaluable experience gained through suffering--the experience which illuminates the mind and the heart and makes them act as a "refinery" for supreme art:

Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By-Paradox--the Mind itself-
Presuming the lead (910)

It is experience which triumphantly transforms life from its tragic sense into art. After all, the quest into the interior self has taught her something invaluable: that to overcome the conflict of her heart against itself, she has to seek a superior life, to create life through art. The mere perception is worthy enough:

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object's loss-
Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to its Price- (1071)

Is not the full "perception" of life a "Gain" in itself?

This is the moment of illumination where the soul perceives life as a
game of loss and gain. At his best, the human being can lose something but gain the experience— the precious perception. No other compromise seems feasible. In Dickinson's poetry, the speaker has come to realize that life is a "waiting" and so she must transform it into art to triumph over it:

I sing to use the Waiting
My Bonnet but to tie
And shut the Door unto my House
No more to do have I (850)

Since life is "the waiting," she sings to make it bearable, and in the duration does the mechanical things imposed upon her by the routine, "My bonnet but to tie." Once she "shut[s] the door unto [her] House"— which suggests her poetry— she waits

Till His best step approaching
We journey to the Day
And tell each other how We sung
To keep the dark away.

Who is it that she refers to in "His best step approaching?" It might be inferred that it is "night" with whom she journeys into the day. At night she sings, weaves her art like a "spider," "seam by seam," to "keep the dark away." The journey is metaphorical for the poem itself: it begins with doubt, chaos and pain until it is finally born with the light of day.

The same faculty that has brought the incredible pain of the human life to her has taught her that she is alive beyond a merely mechanical existence. William Sherwood argues that the same faculty that makes her aware of the interior forces pushed her incessantly into the re-creation of life through art.12 Because only those who are endowed with life can create life, the speaker in Dickinson's poetry has been able to arrive at a great compromise with pain.
NOTES

Chapter II


10 Cody, *After Great Pain*, p. 293.

11 Dickinson usually liked to think of poetry and prose as houses. See her poem, "They shut me in Prose" #(613) and "I dwell in possibility" #(657).

CHAPTER III

TWO BEGGARS AT THE DOOR OF GOD

A very controversial subject that has attracted almost every scholar interested in Dickinson's poetry is her "one sided" dialogue with God. No subject seems more clear and yet more enigmatic in individual poems than this relationship.

A few points must be stressed at the outset of this chapter. Dickinson's relationship with God throughout thirty years of writing poetry is rarely constant and often contradictory. The early poetry is undoubtedly affected by the Puritan teachings she had absorbed from her immediate environment and notably from her father, Edward Dickinson. In her thirties, and especially during the years running from 1860 to 1863, Dickinson is doubtful about God, restless and inquisitive. Her later poems on God are much more resigned and perhaps more cryptic because the voice is that of a person being silenced rather than convinced: the "reality" of God has never risen to the occasion of her deep psychological needs.

A crucial point, and perhaps the most important, is that Dickinson's conception of God is personal and not theological. "Belief" for her, is more of a psychological need than an ideological position. Dickinson is known for her hostility to convention; she refused publication, refused to imitate the current form of writing poetry, and refused to go to church as other women of the time did because she thought that these women were simply victims of habit.
She criticized the women of her day for their naivety and their relentless search for imitation in her poem "What Soft-Cherubic Creatures-" (401).

The previous chapter on "Knowledge and Pain" shows that Dickinson is dramatizing her feelings in an effort to master them artistically as well as emotionally; that is to say, she attempts to hold the experience in a moment of complete stasis and "translate" it into art. Like Edward Taylor, she speaks of the "coolness," "silence," and "remoteness" of God as she edges closer to him. Dickinson is always fond of paradoxes: intimacy is arrived at through remoteness.

For Dickinson, God is a kind of "Father" whom she expects to act as a moral center for her life, to act as a muse to stimulate artistic creation, and above all act as a scapegoat who is responsible for her failure or loss or fear or frustration. God is her own personal image of a father lost just when needed; her poetry about God is a dramatization as if to regain this image of the lost or rather "absent" father who could--had he wished--"reimburse" her with every single loss she experienced; who could make up for denial, failure and separation. The result of this dramatization is not necessarily "weaker" or "stronger" faith but an emotional satisfaction through the verbal creation of the poem itself.

The roots of this complex personal image of God arise as a result of a conflict between two opposite ideas and a necessity to compromise between them. In Dickinson's case the first idea is to be found in the established teachings of Puritanism which were asso-
ciated in her mind with an aloof, absent, remote God demanding in his might and power. God is merciful and yet vengeful; he is patient and yet wrathful. Dickinson must have read about the "thorny way" to heaven of this wrathful God in the writings of John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, and Gerard Manly Hopkins: there is a great deal of "grandeur" about this mighty God, but yet, he has not given enough proof of his existence. Perhaps the harshness of the Puritanical teachings as well as the hypocrisy in religion which existed in her time, made Dickinson reject this Puritan God.

It was as if this God was too much for Dickinson and so she endeavored to create her own personal God who serves a more purely psychological purpose, of the sort that man-made Gods have always served: a handsome lover, a tough hero, an artist, a muse invoking artistic creation, a kind of father, a shower of gold or any other form that satisfies vicarious feelings. However, a psychological God can be remote or near, judgmental or forgiving exactly as a Puritan God. What she needed was an imagined God to fix experience, thereby erasing doubt or transforming it into the absolutes of art. Because it was impossible for her to forget the conventional God, her poetry came as a compromise between a personal God where he is felt by the heart and thus brought down to live with his "children" and the Puritan idea where God must be probed by the mind. This compromise is obvious in one of Dickinson's poems where she argues in the third stanza,

If God could make a visit-
Or ever took a Nap-
So not to see us—but they say
Himself—a Telescope (413)

The first two lines show a primitive warmth and informality with
God; he is wished for as a visitor. He is envisioned as a man who
sleeps and thus gives his children an outlet for their mischievous
acts and playfulness. The third line introduces the learned "con-
ception" of God who is described as a "Telescope." A telescope,
however, suggests a scientific term which involves the head rather
than the heart; it also suggests the watchful eye of a God who is
ready to jot down our own "little" mistakes. The shift in tense
from past to present within the same stanza suggests the two images
of God fused into one: the personal image where God is a father, and
the Puritan image where God is a "Telescope."

Another poem which illustrates almost the same idea discussed
above is

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentleman can see—
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency. (185)

The poem is usually read as a statement about two ways of under-
standing reality: the macrocosmic way of religion and the micro-
scopical way of science. "Faith" is a "fine invention" if felt through
the heart, the primitive psychological need where the individual is
not strained to look through the microscope in order to feel. The
microscope suggests consciousness rather than spontaneity. The irony,
as Paul Witherington says, lies in the fact that "instead of giving
a clearer perception of God, the microscope narrows one's perception."²

This paradoxical image of God is always at the heart of Dick-
inson's poetry. George Whicher arrives at the conclusion that evidence from her writing shows "unresolved dilemma both as to her belief in immortality and the larger one encompassing it, belief in the existence of God." Whicher goes on to say that she has not been able to find a solution in her inherited religion. The tension between faith and doubt is constant throughout her life.

The letters too show that Dickinson was haunted by doubt and could never settle down into firm "faith." In one of her letters to Louise and Frances Norcross, Dickinson ironically tells them that

There is that which is called an "awakening" in the church and I know of no choice than to see Mrs. [Sweetser] roll out in crape every morning, I suppose to intimidate anti­christ; at least it would have that effect on me.

But the problem lies in this elusive term "faith." Textual evidence reveals that the "faith" she doubts is the inherited Puritan belief in an exacting God who presides over and punishes a depraved and sinful mankind. As Richard Chase argues, her poetry shows a person rejecting the idea of sin; the identification is with Pearl rather than with Hester. Richard Chase goes on to state that

Like Pearl she is the only person in her milieu totally lacking in reverence for respectable society and its institutions and, like Pearl, she embodies the newly creative energy released by the collapse of the Puritan theocracy.

This argument, of course, does not mean that Dickinson has no belief in a supernatural power. The ebb and flow of belief is an essential force in Dickinson's poetry. An unbeliever would settle things down as soon as possible and forget everything about it. But the fact that "belief" is a recurrent theme all through Dickinson's poetry
explains the nature of her crisis. "Doubt" is used as a dramatic device, a kind of psychological challenge to her artistic creativity which paves the way for more exploration on the subject.

Albert J. Gelpi likes to use the expression "nightmare" when he speaks about Dickinson's poems about God. He argues that those poems show rebellion against the authoritarianism of religion in terms of the more positive myth of the romantic or transcendental poet. If Gelpi means that Dickinson has tried to substitute the quest for art for the quest for God, then he has arrived at a credible conclusion. This is the "skill of life" that Dickinson refers to in one of her letters addressed to Louise and Frances Norcross in April, 1873:

I hear robins a great way off, and wagons a great way off, and rivers a great way off, and all appear to be hurrying somewhere undisclosed to me. Remoteness is the founder of sweetness; could we see all we hope, or hear the whole we fear told tranquil, like another tale, there would be madness near. Each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person, for each of us has the skill of life.

Doubt, then, is an artistic as well as a psychological necessity; "Remoteness" is intentional because it is a spring of "sweetness." Certainty, or full knowledge, is avoided because if things are laid bare, "there would be madness near."

The most radical judgment on the subject comes from the psychological study of John Cody who describes Dickinson as the victim of "relentless and merciless" pressure, subject to humiliation, threats, indignation, seductive persuasion, and histrionics. Religion is also personified as a threatening force that she finds inseparable from the image of her parents. Her rebellion against
their religion is a rebellion against an authoritarian father and a guilt-inducing mother. John Cody does not go further to show the quest for religion being replaced with any other positive myth; he says that Emily Dickinson never did transcend her "psychosis;" art--for her--was completely compensatory.8

The fact that there are very contradictory opinions about religion in Emily Dickinson's poetry invites new suggestions and studies. In fact the only thing that most critics seem to agree upon is the tone and sense of rebellion and irony that prevail in her poems. However, this rebellion is not so much against the existence of a certain "Faith" as it is a rebellion against God's aloofness from man, or God's severe principles and ways with man. The result is two poetic points of view of God: the one dramatizing him as a Father, close and intimate, the other looking with awe and unsettled belief on an omnipresent "tyrant" power threatening to destroy her own identity.

According to the first point of view, the relationship with God is open. The speaker here puts on the mask of the "child" as if to assume an innocent approach. For a "child," a satisfactory relationship with God can only be convincing and intimate if this God is perceived by the senses. He has to be touched and heard and seen. Only a child can conceive of heaven as easily as the voice we hear in such a poem as:

I went to Heaven-
'Twas a small Town-
Lit-with a Ruby-
Lathed-with Down- (374)
In this first stanza of the poem the journey to heaven is so easy and casual that it needs no previous preparation. The speaker is certainly not Bunyan's Pilgrim filled with doubts as to whether he would ever finally arrive at the Celestial City even after the disastrous and horrible experiences he went through. Our speaker is much more sure of her way. The childlike perception of heaven, however, is strongly felt through the words "went," "a small Town" and "lit."

In a substantial number of Dickinson's poems, God is regarded as a distant father. The barrier of dread is abolished in these poems, and the voice we hear is that of a person impatient with a father who is sometimes unjustly indifferent to our suffering. The first stanza of poem (61) reads:

Papa above!
Regard a Mouse
O'erpowered by the Cat!
Reserve within thy kingdom
A "Mansion" for the Rat!

The familiarity of addressing the deity is shown by the informal "Papa" and the structure of the first line which seems exactly like a prayer to invoke closeness or the beginning of a letter to a friend or a relative. The lines that follow are a kind of complaint to this "father" that man is trapped like a mouse in the presence of an ominous cat. The quotation marks used with "Mansion" may reveal a sarcastic tone through which she expresses her indignance at the indifference of the father.

In such ironic poems, there is often a peculiar strain of familiarity. It is as if the speaker is turned down after pinning
her heart on a great hope. This sense of familiarity sometimes extends
to the brinks of rebuke:

"Heavenly Father"—take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid Hand
In a moment contraband—
Though to trust us—seems to us
More respectful—"We are Dust"—
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity— (1461)

This poem is a kind of protest against the "father's" strategy of
give and take; he endows man with life and hope and then denies him
goodness and immortality. The mocking tone is very obvious in the
last line where God is rebuked for his "Duplicity" which might refer
to his double nature both as God-Jesus and giver-taker. The fami-
liarity of addressing God is introduced by a subtle equation where
we of the "Dust" stand firmly to "apologize" to the "Heavenly Father"
for his own "Duplicity:"

The childlike voice, however, helps establish a sense of
"duty" on the part of the "Father" toward his child. He is responsible
for her loss or failure. When he takes more than he gives, the child
cries:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God! (49)

God is remembered during the moments of loss; the speaker stands
before his door like "a beggar" asking for compensations and

Angels—twice descending
Reimbursed my store—
Burglar! Banker—Father!
I am poor once more!
The rebellious tone in this stanza only affirms the speaker's faith in the power of the "Burglar-Banker-Father" to give and take. In fact, the faith is even more understood by the more submissive tone of the last stanza where the speaker announces her bankruptcy.

In moments of comparative satisfaction and peace, the speaker's faith in her father is sustained. These are the moments when all shadows of doubt sink away with the illumination of the soul:

Those not live yet
Who doubt to live again-
"Again" is of a twice
But this-is one- (1454)

Faith in immortality is final, and those who doubt it are already spiritually dead. Immortality is emphasized by the word "Again" repeated twice and set in quotation marks, and the affirmative statement in "But this-is one-". "This," however, refers to life on earth. This rare settled faith sometimes seems to be very sincere:

God made no act without a cause,
Nor heart without an aim,
Our inference is premature,
Our premises to blame. (1163)

If we fail to understand God's ways, it is our "premature inference" that is responsible for this failure. In another poem, Dickinson argues:

Behind Me-dips Eternity-
Before Me-Immortality-
Myself-the Term between-
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin- (721)

The stanza is a kind of realization. Death comes as a
"Drift" pushing the speaker toward the hope of immortality which "dips" before her. She has left "Eternity" behind. By "Eternity" Dickinson may have meant the status of achieving love and happiness on earth. Immortality, however, is associated with heavenly rest--the stasis after death which puts an end to our suffering.

The above mentioned poem, "Behind Me-dips Eternity" is one of the most representative individual poems where the two points of view of God are mixed together.

'Tis Kingdoms-afterward-they say-
   In perfect-pauseless Monarchy-
   Whose prince-is Son of None-
   Himself-His Dateless Dynasty-
   Himself-Himself diversify-
   In Duplicate divine-

"They say" acts as a qualification of the previous stanza. She matures as she is reminded that the secret of immortality is something learned. This stanza stresses the rootlessness of this "pauseless" Monarchy, the king of which is the "Son of None" rather than the son of Man. His dynasty is "Dateless." The third stanza further develops her expression of confusion:

'Tis Miracle before Me-then-
'Tis Miracle behind-between-
   A crescent in the sea-
   With Midnight to the North of Her-
   And Midnight to the South of Her-
   And Maelstrom-in the Sky-

Both eternity and immortality become "miracles" for the child, confusing in their uncertainty. The stanza offers a picture of a trapped person standing in the center of things; eternity (East, birth of the sun and, therefore, life) is behind her and, therefore, she cannot see it; immortality (West, death of the sun and, therefore,
physical death) is before her, and being unsure, she also cannot see. The two other poles (South and North) are in constant midnight. However, total chaos is suggested by the "Maelstrom in the Sky."

This chaos does not necessarily mean loss of faith. The last stanza can be explained as a sudden birth of faith; it seems an overwhelming account of the creation when everything was dark, the earth in a state of chaos ruled by the sea. The greatness of the event is accompanied by a "Maelstrom" in the sky; the "crescent in the sea" represents the flicker of the moon amidst total darkness.

The speaker takes the role of reasoning, putting things together, questioning prevailing common beliefs about God and immortality. It represents the rational self separated from the heart. This gives her the power of protest on logical grounds as in the case of the "innocent child:"

I prayed, at first, a little Girl,
Because they told me to-
But stopped, when qualified to guess
How prayer would feel-to me- (576)

The voice heard is the voice of a person who inherited a religion from her childhood. She stopped praying when she was "qualified" to use her mind and question the faith she used to take for granted.

The second and third stanzas of the poem introduce the innocent child with her eagerness to pin her hopes on a compassionate "father" who is ready to communicate and reveal his mysterious plans to her:

If I believed God looked around,
Each time my Childish eye
Fixed full, and steady, on his own
In Childish honesty-
And told him what I like, today,
And parts of his far plan
That baffled me—
The mingled side
Of his Divinity—

The two stanzas show a desperate longing for a mutual relationship between God and the speaker. She longs to look proudly, with "Childish honesty"—or with childish innocence—into his face. She wants to tell him of her immediate feelings, while he would tell her of the secret that surrounds "The mingled side / of his Divinity" to settle the questions which "baffled" her about him. The time then shifts from past to present, and the mature child awakens to reject the idea of a wrathful God who plans to rule all that threatens her own volition, her own integrity:

And often since, in Danger,
I count the force 'twould be
To have a God so strong as that
To hold my life for me

However, the innocent child and the "initiated" one would go hand in hand, the one modifying the other

Till I could take the Balance
That tips so frequent, now...

Though no one poem can be representative of a whole genre in Dickinson's poetry, "I prayed at first, a little Girl" explains a great deal about the nature of these two contradictory views of God. The two views complete each other, qualify each other and accompany each other lest one of them might go to an extreme; in this way, the "drama" goes on, the ultimate triumph belonging to the poem itself rather than to stronger or weaker faith. The maturing child
might go further in an opposite direction to express her faith that man is responsible for creating his own paradise:

God is indeed a jealous God—
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play. (1717)

The quatrain suggests a drastic separation between God and man. The separation is initiated by man, not God, as if in a human effort to transcend finity and total reliance on a superhuman power. The separation, however, is to be understood as a kind of rebellion against a God who keeps himself away from those who stand as "beggars" at his door:

The Maker's cordial visage,
However good to see,
Is shunned, we must admit it,
Like an adversity. (1718)

Dickinson's poems on God provide us with two points of view: one is sure, the other is doubtful. One of the most widely quoted poems of Dickinson begins with the voice of the innocent child:

I know that He exists.
Somewhere—in Silence—
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes. (338)

The first line is a complete statement suggesting a final resolution, a final statement of faith. But the fact that God keeps himself in complete "silence" because of "our gross eyes" sounds ironic. The irony explodes in the second stanza where the mature child deplores this game of God: the game of hide and seek.

But—should the play
Prove piercing earnest—
Should the glee-glaze—
In Death's-stiff-stare—
What if her faith proves hollow in essence? What if there is nothing beyond the "stiff-stare-" of death? The alliteration in "glee-glaze" and Death's-stiff-stare" suggests the horror of such a realization. But, both voices—to avoid such horror—join forces and firmly state that

This World is not Conclusion.
A species stands beyond-
Invisible, as Music-
But positive, as Sound-
It beckons, and it baffles-
Philosophy—don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
To guess it, puzzles scholars—
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown— (501)

In this poem, the affirmative first line states that this life cannot be a "conclusion"—an end. At least, it is not an answer for our hope of immortality. But at the same time, as John Pickard indicates, the poem expresses the failure of philosophers, scholars and saints to prove adequately the truth of immortality. Most critics who write about this poem agree that it is typical of Dickinson's doubt; Robert Weisbuch makes a very strong statement about the poem, saying that it "begins with a buoyant statement of confidence in a continuing consciousness [but] concludes with an eschatological version of Karl Marx's denunciation of religion as our opiate." So, what is that "species" which "stands beyond?" The mere description of it as

Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—
suggests the poem itself. Is it possible that Dickinson is suggesting "Art" as a "conclusion" if a belief in an afterlife is denied? It
is the poem, after all, that dramatizes this dilemma and stands
distinguished when

Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul—

The poem itself becomes a psychological compromise. The two voices
have been all through two beggars before the door of God, knocking
relentlessly for a "crumb" of certainty. His arrogant distance and
defarness to her prayers make her cry out

Of course—I prayed—
And did God care? (376)

This is an early poem of Dickinson. Toward the end of her
life, she wrote:

There comes an hour when begging stops,
When the long interceding lips
Perceive their prayer in vain. (1751)

Does the Father fail his daughter then? Has it come time to quit
the door and stop begging?
NOTES ON CHAPTER III

1 See her poem "Some Keep the Sabbath going to Church" (324).

2 Paul Witherington, "Dickinson's "Faith is a Fine Invention"
The Explicator, 26, no. 8 (April, 1968), item 62.

3 George F. Whicher, This Was A Poet: A Critical Biography of
Emily Dickinson (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1957),
pp. 256-257.


CHAPTER IV

THE LEAF AT LOVE TURNED BACK

A great deal of criticism has been written on Dickinson's love poetry. Those who have written autobiographies—such as Richard Sewall, George Whicher and Theodora Ward—have spoken confidently of her love affairs with Benjamin Newton, Charles Wadsworth, Samuel Bowles and Judge Otis Lord. Clark Griffith, who has made an interesting study of her love poetry, believes that some unrequited love must have existed in her life and that the unhappy affair with its thwarted hopes and bitter renunciation was transformed into the most moving and powerful themes of her poetry.

Dickinson's letters point to incredibly intense feelings for the men who are supposed to exist in her life. But it seems that none of them had been able to understand this intensity and respond equally. Except for Newton, the men she loved were all married and older than herself and this fact suggests Dickinson's frustrations and perhaps her strategy of unfulfillment.

In addition to this lack of response, Dickinson also suffers from inner doubts which may relate to her ambiguous ideas about God and freedom. Griffith believes that Dickinson views man as strong and dangerous and views masculinity with "awe and bitterness." 1 In his lengthy chapter on Dickinson's love poetry, Charles Anderson concludes that the idea of attraction—repulsion is a ruling theme: the speaker is taken by love but at the same time tries to get loose
from it; this is why love is mingled with death and immortality.²

For some time Benjamin Newton lived with the Dickinsons as an apprentice to Edward Dickinson. He was a poor student of law with a clear appetite for poetry and literature, and most biographers agree that he was the man who introduced Emerson's writings to Emily Dickinson. Four years after he left the Dickinsons with the intentions of running a law-office, Newton died of consumption. Wadsworth, a minister, left Amherst for good, being given a post in another part of the country; however, he made only one visit to the Dickinsons sometime later. For Samuel Bowles, editor of the "Springfield Republican," Dickinson must have had the greatest love; many of her love poems were sent to him together with brief intense letters. Dickinson knew Otis Lord, a famous man of law, late in life and it was only when his wife died that he suggested they should marry. Dickinson said "no" to marriage then: she was over fifty and her mother was seriously ill.³

In Wadsworth, Dickinson saw a fellow sufferer; he himself was a recluse, completely devoted to his sermons and meditations. Sewall suggests that she sent him her poem "Two swimmers wrestled on the spar" (201) some time after he left Amherst. One of the swimmers dies in the anguish of separation while the other achieves his goal of salvation:

Two swimmers wrestled on the spar-
Until the morning sun-
When One-turned smiling to the land-
Oh God! the Other One!
The stray ships-passing-
Spied a face-
Upon the waters borne-
With eyes in death-still begging raised-
And hands-beseeching-thrown! (201)

Some critics believe that this poem expresses the speaker's loss of faith which would contrast with Wadsworth's certainty of immortality and resurrection. The second stanza may be an expression of the anguish of loss through separation. The final word, "thrown," can be a pun on "throne," her best symbol for the achievement of status through union in love.

The love poems which Dickinson sent Bowles are numerous. A few of these are "Would you like summer" (961), "Title Divine-is mine" (1072), "Should you but fail at sea" (226), and "Why do I love you" (480). The later poem was written in the year 1862, a troubled year in Dickinson's life during which she wrote, on the average, a poem per day. Richard Sewall believes that she was deeply in love with Bowles during this period. He cites a great number of details and documents to prove that the third (and last) "master" letter was addressed to Samuel Bowles. The contents of the letter, as Sewall argues, show her deep humility:

Master-open your life wide, and take me in forever, I will never be tired-I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be [glad] [as the] your best little girl-nobody else will see me, but you-but that is enough-I shall not want any more-and all that heaven only will disappoint me-will be because it's not so dear.4

Dickinson's love relationship with Judge Otis Lord seems beyond doubt. Though late in life, and hopeless in every possible way, it reveals a great deal of mutual affection. Among the poems
Dickinson sent Lord is "I thought the Train would never come" (1449). The poem has the air of a love coming late:

I thought the Train would never come-
How slow the whistle sang-
I don't believe a peevish Bird
So whimpered for the Spring-
I taught my Heart a hundred times
Precisely what to say-
Provoking Lover, when you came
Its Treatise flew away
To hide my strategy too late
To wiser be too soon-
For miseries so halcyon
The happiness atone— (1494)

The "Train," which may suggest the meeting after long absence and anticipation, has arrived late. The fact that the poem itself is not broken into stanzas may symbolize the unbroken flow of the "Train." The "peevish bird" may stand for the speaker herself—stubborn in her plea for love, singing sadly for a coming spring. The bird imagery is pervasive: "peevish bird," "flew away" and "halcyon." This fosters the sense of movement, the sudden recognition or renewal of love. Her "miseries" have been the "halcyon," a bird which, as ancient mythology tells us, has the power during incubation to calm the waves of the sea. The final three lines with their regular rhyme may suggest the satisfactory compensation alluded to with the word "atone."

Dickinson's love poems—as her poems on the deity and pain and death—may be considered a dramatization of love rather than an actual experience of it. The poems are attempts to incur the presence of the Lover. If there is a real experience to be understood from her poems, the experience then is in the mind. That is why the
addressed lover or "master" is forever absent or indifferent or unidentified: the whole thing may be an imaginary dramatization—a revolving around the idea of love again and again in a kind of ritual until the poem itself brings love and satisfaction. The very absence of the lover and the usage of "he" or "it" intensifies the sense of the ritual.

The ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian and Babylonian rituals were characterized by the presence of the bride or the female lover and the total absence of the male lover or the deity. In the poems of Dickinson the lover is almost always given a symbolic representation: a "bee," a "sea," a "volcano," a "storm," or even the "wind." This may have given the speaker in her poems the ability to choose the life in the world of her imagination where she could live with complete fullness and intensity.

Many critics have suggested that Dickinson withdrew from society and lived as a recluse most of her life as a result of frustration through her various tragic love affairs. At least, this is the message to be understood through the whole psychoanalytic study of John Cody. But the fact that she wrote love poetry up to the end of her life supports the various critical voices—Allan Tate's being one—which affirm that Dickinson's withdrawal was more an artistic choice than a psychological crutch; her renunciation of society was "a piercing virtue" as she argues in one of her most well known poems. Salamatullah Khan, in his discussion of her poem "The soul selects her own society" (303), suggests that:
As a consequence of this seclusion, she took refuge in the world of her imagination and sought the things which were denied to her in life. This withdrawal into the cloud-land of her dreams was the reflex action of her self-denial. She had closed the "doors" of her soul and jammed the "valves" of her attention only to escape in a larger world where she had a greater measure of freedom to live her dreams. It was necessary for her to imagine her dreams come true to preserve their freshness and enchantment and also to protect her from becoming morbid.?

Any attempt to categorize Dickinson's love poetry too rigidly would be foolish. Even Richard Chase's well-known study of Dickinson's love poetry fails to explain a great number of poems which don't fit his theory of status. However, Chase's conclusion might be helpful as to the interpretation of many of her poems:

Her love poems show a persistent impulse to establish lover and loved in a kind of legalized hierarchy, instead of picturing the ecstatic fusing of souls or weeping at the swift passage of time.8

Her love poetry is a laying bare of various intense experiences--real or imaginary. There is the voice of unfulfilled love, the voice of yearning for love, the voice of a tragic love affair coming into a memory or springing from a dream; and sometimes, there is the voice of fulfillment and satisfaction. The cycle moves on and on since each voice is repeated again and again: no actual love knocks at the door, but the poem itself becomes the compensation; it acts as an emotional release, an intended design which offers satisfaction and fulfillment.

In some of her poems, the voice heard is that of a woman searching for unique love, where she is able to resist and yet eventually, coyly, to accept that her lover subdues her. On the one hand, she rebels against complete submission and on the other hand yearns for complete loyalty:
He was weak, and I was strong-then-
So He let me lead him in-
I was weak, and He was strong then-
So I let him lead me-Home. (190)

She wants to be elected and fought for and then "trained" and loved uniquely as befits her status as a "queen." Both she and her lover stand on equal terms. Both of them experience those moments of strength and weakness which demonstrate mutuality and intimacy. She leads him "in," which may suggest her being as a woman: the affection she is able to offer him. He leads her "Home" which may symbolize a status and perhaps a desirable place through marriage.

The love poems where the deepest affections are felt are those in which the speaker feels security: the feeling of being wanted and desired; very often, these love poems are pregnant with religious symbolism:

Come slowly-Eden!
Lips unused to Thee-
Bashful-sip thy Jessamines-
As the fainting Bee- (211)

The speaker is a "fainting Bee," eager to possess his lover who invites her to his being. The first line flows as a prayer to express the intensity of his emotion. The second line, "Lips unused to Thee," gives his love the quality of uniqueness and brings to mind the first discovery of love through Adam and Eve. The second stanza intensifies the affair,

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums-
Counts his nectars-
Enter-and is lost in Balms.

He reaches his lover late (late at night or late in life) and
performs the ritual of going around her "chamber" as if to court her; the "chamber," however, may stand for his lover's body where he "hums" and finally enters and "is lost in Balms"--the balsam ointment which has both an incredibly beautiful fragrance and a healing power.

Such poems of complete harmony in love are rare enough, though powerful. But the idea that the speaker wants equal stature with her lover is recurrent. She wants to love and to be loved equally: this granted, affection would flow as nowhere else in poetry.

Did the Harebell lose her girdle
To the lover Bee
Would the Bee the Harebell hallow
Much as formerly? (213)

The very question suggests an overwhelming affection. Both the "Bee" and the "Harebell" need each other by necessity and therefore mutuality is indicated by an active sexual act: the "Harebell" loosens her girdle, and the lover "Bee" hallows her. The second stanza further ponders on this mutual relation: is it distorted by submission?

Did the "Paradise"-persuaded-
Yield her moat of pearl-
Would the Eden be an Eden,
Or the Earl-an Earl?

Does she lose her respectability through "submission" to her lover?

Now that she has given up, can she preserve her love as she has formerly envisioned it? Does the "Earl" belong to his "Eden?"

The stress, then, is on the oneness of love:

Circumference thou Bride of Awe
Possessing thou shalt be
Possessed by every hallowed Knight
That dares to covet thee (1620)
This is the sublime culmination that the speaker longs for: to possess and to be possessed. "Circumference"—which suggests complete enclosure—symbolizes the limits of verbal expression in the presence of affection. The words "hallowed" and "covet" suggest equal activity on both sides: for the speaker, he is the "hallowed Knight," and for him, she is the woman he "covets." "Covet," however, has the meaning of both "to desire" and to want "to possess." Awe originates from the fact that she does not want her feelings to be demonstrated or to be as public as a "frog" as she says in her poem "Publication is the Auction" (709). A volcano might be within but she would not open the lid:

How red the Fire rocks below-
How insecure the sod
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude (1677)

Love acts as a volcano, but she avoids its eruption and keeps the lava deep down in her being because, as she says in another poem,

The reticent volcano keeps
His never slumbering plan-
Confided are his projects pink
To no precarious man. (1748)

Love is always there, unrevealed and turbulent. As she identifies herself more and more with the volcano, there is a quick shift from the masculine to the feminine pronoun:

Admonished by her buckled lips
Let every babbler be
The only secret people keep
Is immortality.

Together with the longing for equality in love comes a relentless hope of achievement through status in marriage and union. "Mar-
riage" is a misleading and perhaps an ambiguous word in Dickinson's poetry; by marriage she often means a more mystical state such as the marriage of Christ and the church. In many of her poems, she chooses a union with Nature and God:

I could suffice for Him, I Knew-
He-could suffice for Me-
Yet Hesitating Fractions-Both
Surveyed Infinity-

"Would I be Whole" He sudden broached
My syllable rebelled-
'Twas face to face with Nature-forced-
'Twas face to face with God- (643)

Albert Gelpi assumes that Dickinson here expresses her need for "union extended beyond passion and possibility to a craving for universal love, for all life and all being." However, the poem expresses a rejection of limitation which may be imposed through an actual love relationship. But one basic idea that must be kept in mind while handling Dickinson's notion of marriage and union is that, for her, marriage is a psychological need and not a biological necessity: it is the idea of it that she cherishes. Her notion of a marriage with God therefore can be to a great extent a kind of frustrated effort to replace a union with man. In 1862, a troubled year in her life, she wrote:

It was too late for Man-
But early, yet, for God-
Creation-important to help-
But Prayer-remained-Our Side-

How excellent the Heaven-
When Earth-cannot be had-
How hospitable-then-the face
Of our Old Neighbor-God- (623)

This is the voice of a woman who has given up hope in a mutual
union with man because it is too "late." Because she cannot have the "earth," she looks for a union with God. The sarcastic tone of the second stanza is emphasized through the exclamatory mode which runs over in the second stanza.

On the literal level, marriage seems to be the final culmination of love. Even in her letters, Dickinson has always expressed her idea that one begins to find oneself only through love and marriage. In her poetry, her speaker is engaged in a quest for this unity. In "The Night was wide" she draws a fond picture of two married lovers cozy beside the parlor stove:

To feel if Blinds be fast-
And closer to the fire-
Her little Rocking Chair to draw-
And shiver for the Poor- (589)

The stanza provides a picture of two "blind" bodies coming closer to the fire and then

The Housewife's gentle Task-
How pleasanter-said She
Unto the Sofa opposite-
The Sleet-than May, no Thee-

The time is cold winter: the husband on the opposite sofa searches for warmth and the wife tells him how "pleasanter" is a night of sleet and storm with him at home than the loveliest night of May without him. It is this "gentle Task" that makes a unity of the two and makes them envision May in Winter.

The theme of achieving status and happiness through marriage is recurrent and might be best shown in her poem "I'm ceded-I've stopped being theirs:"
I'm ceded—I've stopped being Theirs—
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And they can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading—too— (508)

This poem has long been held as a religious poem, a conversion experience. But Charles Anderson sees the poem as an achievement of status and he believes that "Two kinds of status emerge from the poet's comparison of the sacrament of baptism and marriage."\(^\text{10}\) Paul Ferlazzo holds the opinion that the poem emphasizes the "transferring effects" of baptism and marriage and "captures a woman's exuberent happiness as she contemplates the day of her marriage."\(^\text{11}\)

However, this first stanza of the poem shows the ecstasy of the change from girlhood to womanhood. The speaker has stopped being the property of her family; she does not need now the name they gave her in church. The "Dolls" may symbolize her girlhood, the period of innocence before being married. "I've finished threading—too," may suggest the fact that marriage has put an end to her dreams and fantasies, as Penelope stopped weaving with the arrival of the long-absent husband. Richard Chase assumes that the threading of the "spools" symbolizes a ritualized sexual act.\(^\text{12}\) The second and the third stanzas are a glorification of her second "rank;" again the poem is heavy with religious symbolism:

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace—
Unto supremest name—
Called to my full—The Crescent dropped—
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.
The fulfillment through "marriage" is suggested by her choice of the words of royalty: "Grace," "Supremest," and "Diadem." Through "marriage," the speaker arrives at full realization of the self: the metamorphosis of the crescent into full moon. John Cody sees in the "crescent" a violent sexual symbol; however, the image of the moon carries the implication of mutual love through a new status. Her existence, either because of unfulfillment or of an imposed faith, used to be an empty "Arc," but now it is "filled up." The third stanza reveals harmonious satisfaction:

My second Rank-too small the first-
Crowned-Crowing-on my Father's breast-
A half conscious Queen-
But this time-Adequate-Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown-

The second rank is associated with the "Crown," the first with "my Father's breast" which may suggest a complete dependence on her "father." In "marriage," she achieves the "Adequate-Erect" state with the pride of satisfaction. Being a queen of her own self, she is the person to "choose or reject," not her "father."

The main body of Dickinson's love poetry is a dramatization of love, condensed and compressed to the minimum. Clark Griffith complained of what he called the "loss of erotic details" in her poetry. In fact, in Dickinson's love poems narration gives way to highly intense feelings and the span of time and place is neglected. The focus is on the interiority of the speaker herself rather than on any particular outer experience. The critics who like to stress the strain of fear and renunciation in Dickinson's
love poetry forget something very essential to her form and style: the compactness in form to convey a highly complicated state of feeling charged with the power of imagination. The transition from stanza to stanza, and even from line to line is a transition in form rather than a transition in time: that is to say that Dickinson drops out the details and concentrates on the artistic shape of the experience: too many details deform the poem and in consequence deform the experience. Time has to be measured through the reader's mind; the poem becomes a painting rather than a series of lines forming stanzas. The reader has to "fathom" the painting and understand what lies in between the lines. Therefore, each of these poems can be divided into three formal parts: the initial conflict, the achievement of love and finally the cessation of love through death or separation. "Death" or "immortality" acts as a kind of "tragic flow"--the common potential which reminds the human being of his finity, and puts an end to all our dreams of an endless love.

The achievement of love is a very elusive conception in the poetry of Dickinson. It doesn't have to be a physical achievement. Usually, it is the imaginary dramatization of love revolving around itself in a kind of ritual until the ritual itself, the dramatization itself, becomes the achievement. It is the verbal achievement through the poem that becomes the object achieved--the final mood which prevails with the release of emotion through art. The experience, however, doesn't need to be actual; reality of the experience may be measured by its intensity and impact on the psyche whether the intensity comes as a result of an actual experience or an imaginary
Dickinson's emphasis on the "artistic achievement" of love gives her poetry a very intense quality since the focus is on the psychic metamorphosis inside the self and not on a momentary joy or exultation. Her love poems are not a documentation of certain isolated experiences; they are universal in the sense that they are not limited to a certain time or place; the "drama" in her love poems is not acted by certain or known men and women. Hers are telegramic versions of Romeo and Juliet, Wuthering Heights, Medea, Antony and Cleopatra or whatever masterpieces of love and death world literature has rendered. The poems are not necessarily autobiographies; the "she" does not have to be "Emily" in disguise. If we now accept the fact that Catherine in Wuthering Heights is not Emily Bronte, this also should be the case with the "she" or "Butterfly" or "Harebell" in the poems of Dickinson.

Such poems as "There came a Day at Summer's full," fit under the above mentioned division:

There came a Day at Summer's full,
Entirely for me-
I thought that such were for the Saints
Where Resurrection-be- (322)

The "full Summer" can be a suggestion for ripeness in love, and the speaker is overwhelmed by her emotion that she puts herself side by side with resurrected "saints," happy that their faith has come true.

The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new-

The time was scarce profaned, by speech-
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament
The Wardrobe-of our Lord-

The whole atmosphere is that of purity and complete fulfillment as if paradise were a human invention:

Each was to each The Sealed Church
Permitted to commune this-time-
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The previous four stanzas elaborate on the idea of rebirth through love: everything is "new" and communication is silent as love needs no expression, "The time was scarce profaned, by speech." The culmination of the emotional release is achieved with "Each was to each The Sealed Church" which refers to the metaphorical relationship of human marriage to the divine marriage.

Some critics believe that the Biblical imagery in this poem clothes a love affair. David Porter suggests that the poem embodies the "intricate agony of the encounter between ill-fated lovers." In fact, biographers of Dickinson seem to agree that the poem has been elucidated by the closing words in a letter to her friend Mrs. Holand, April 1, 1863, on the first anniversary of the death of Charles Wadsworth. Dickinson writes:

All other surprise is at last monotonous. But the Death of the loved is all moments...now. Love has but one day...
"The first of April" Today, Yesterday, and Forever.

The last stanza of the poem supports this suggestion:
Another love poem which has been debated in more than twenty individual studies is "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun". This poem poses extreme difficulty because of its increasingly cryptic expressions. The first stanza of the poem reads:

My Life had stood a Loaded Gun-
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away— (754)

The life of the speaker as a "loaded Gun" probably stands for all of her potential as a person, perhaps creatively as well as sexually. She is relieved of her tension when the "owner" comes and carries her away. The expectation of his arrival together with the eagerness for union are expressed by the description of her former life: she has been charged with tension, wasting her life in "corners"—which may suggest trivial matters.

One of the main problems of this particular poem lies in the word "owner." Is this "owner" a man lover or Jesus Christ or the poem itself? If we assume that the owner is a lover, as many critics do, then the whole poem is an attempt to "close the lid" on a volcanic state of feeling where the speaker is violently aware of her emotional and sexual needs. John Cody thinks that the poem is a portrait of the speaker when "so closely were rage and desire comingled in her mind that she depicted" her relation with her love "in terms of the loyalties existing between a hunter and his preferred
The second and third stanzas give an account of their ecstasy in love:

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods-
And now We hunt the Doe-
And every time I speak for Him-
The Mountains straight reply-

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow-
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through-

Charles Anderson has taken these two stanzas to express the loss of communication between the two lovers, on the ground that the lover does not answer her but the mountains or the valleys do. However, the unity of the relationship is adequately indicated by "We roam" and "We hunt." The loss of communication suggested by Anderson cannot account for the flood of pleasure expressed in the third stanza.

The fourth stanza can be interpreted as the decrease of physical love, the release of sexual passion, "its pleasure through," on behalf of a more spiritual or Platonic relationship:

And when at Night-Our good Day done-
I guard My Master's Head-
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's Deep Pillow-to have shared-

This is the idealization of love through the dedication of the woman, or her realization that since she is the major part of rebirth and recreation of life, it is her duty to guard her man and pursue him, as George Bernard Shaw would argue in his *Man and Superman*.

The fifth stanza carries on the gun imagery but also stresses
the idea of loyalty and devotion:

To foe of His-I'm deadly foe-
None stir the second time-
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye-
Or an emphatic Thumb-

The "Yellow Eye," as Anderson assumes, may refer to the flash of the gun or the jealousy of the speaker for her lover. The strong expression in this stanza, "deadly foe," "None stir," "Yellow Eye" and "emphatic thumb" can be psychic exaggerations resulting from her sense of an oncoming danger of separation. That is why Frederick Morey sees the whole poem as "a psychological narrative" involving aspects of the self: the power of the self is great and "only to be used when necessary for survival or privacy." However, the introduction of the metaphors "eye" and "thumb" minimizes and confuses the gun image and introduces the human considerations that are strengthened in the final stanza:

Though I than He-may longer live
He longer must-than I-
For I have but the power to kill,
Without-the power to die-

As Thomas Johnson says, the lines stress the fact that "the body is function only, as the function of a gun is to kill." The irony of the situation comes as a result of her realization that she can control the outside world but she cannot control her own inner demands.

In this group of poems goes the famous "I started Early-Took my Dog." The poem has long been debated and discussed. Explications have ranged from considering the poem "a study in fear, fear of love, of which the sea is a symbol," to the "fluid fantasies of the id." The poem may be considered as a recollection of love or rather
a psychological dramatization of it:

I startedEarly-Took my Dog-
And visited the Sea-
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me-  (520)

As in "My river runs to thee" (162), the speaker makes a visit to her lover, the "sea." The "Mermaids" rise to look at her, indicating perhaps her self-consciousness. This self-consciousness is intensified in the second stanza where

And Frigates-in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands-
Presuming Me to be a Mouse-
Aground-upon the Sands-

The use of "Frigates" seems to contradict the tone of "Mermaids" of the first stanza. The "Mermaids," with their incomplete mysterious beauty, represent her repressed sexual desire, while the "Frigates" are of more help: they urge her to transcend her self-consciousness or coyness. The image is associated with timidity, the self represented as a mouse overpowered by oncoming threat:

But no Man moved Me-till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe-
And past my Apron-and my Belt
And past my Bodice-too-

This stanza can be a powerful expression of the first awakening of the woman quality in the speaker; "But no Man moved Me" she says, because she has been totally innocent; it has been time for the "Tide" to awaken her. The lines that follow are a naked sexual experience haunted by fear:

And made as He would eat me up-
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve
And then-I started-too-
The threatening sea gathers forces with the threat of the man and she is prepared for flight. She loses her identity exactly as a "Dew" loses itself in the sea. Is it the stark fear of losing her identity that makes her escape? Is it this fear of losing identity that makes her prefer a life of creative imagination to a life of total submission to passion? Perhaps her choice of an imagined world has helped the "drama" of creation continue

And He-He followed-close behind-
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle-Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl

"His" role now is that of a motivator for creation, the creation of the poem. Had he totally taken power over her, the "drama" would end. The verb of action in the previous stanza "went past my simple Shoe" is changed into a verb of feeling, "I felt His Silver Heel." And with "feeling" goes on the poem

Until We met the Solid Town-
No One He seemed to know-
And bowing-with a Mighty look-
At me-The Sea withdrew-

It is as if she has awaken from a "horrible" dream to face the dull, but safe, reality of the "Solid Town." The "Mighty look," however, reminds one of the powerful snake in "In Winter in my Room" (1670), an acknowledged power of sex and passion.

The absence of the lover remains the most striking feature in the love poetry of Dickinson, as the absence of God in her poems on the deity. The lover is puzzling in his absence and the speaker goes round and round as if to "conjure" his presence; the poem becomes a kind of spell to be cast and revolve around itself and take
different shapes in the mind of the speaker to the extent that the lover is lost with the colors and shapes the poem provides; the lover becomes more of a "motivator" for the creation of the poem exactly as God and pain and death and nature are mere motivators for a lively beautiful "drama" of creation:

Because the Bee may blameless hum
For Thee a Bee do I become
List even unto Me.

Because the Flowers unafraid
May lift a look on thine, a Maid
Alway a Flower would be.

Nor Robins, Robins need not hide
When Thou upon their Crypts intrude
So Wings bestow on Me
Or Petals, or a Dower of Buzz
That Bee to ride, or Flower of Furze
I that way worship Thee. (869)

She changes shapes because the true depth of her feelings can be safer. She is once a "Bee," then a "Flower," and finally a "Robin." This is the fantasy that creates the poem itself rather than the one that brings the lover in. Her anticipation of his arrival gives her an outlet for creative imagination, "wings-bestow on Me."

In her letters, Dickinson speaks of her poems as "Flowers." She once has stopped before the door of God because God has failed her: He remained veiled in His silence and antipathy. Has it also been the time to hide herself within her "Flowers" and dramatize her love there, "blameless" and "unafraid?" How would this be different from the portrait she majestically made in the previous poem: that of a robin and a flower and a bee? Is the robin destined to "sing"
the eternal love scene between the flower and the bee? Is not the poet essentially a "reporter" of beauty?

    I hide myself within my flower,
    That fading from your Vase,
    You, unsuspecting, feel for me-
    Almost a loneliness. (903)

The lover may be a "vase" that contains her being, but the scent is never contained in a vase. He may feel for her a sense of "loneliness" but nothing more. He might be indifferent as any other person and exclaim:

    Wait! Look! Her little Book-
    The Leaf at love-turned back- (433)


21 Kate Flores, "Dickinson's 'I Started Early-Took My Dog'" The Explicator, 9 (May, 1951), item 47.

22 Cody, After Great Pain, p. 402.
CHAPTER V

THE WHEEL IN THE DARK

My wheel is in the dark!
I cannot see a spoke
Yet know its dripping feet
Go round and round (10)

In Dickinson's poetry the "wheel" is an established metaphor for process: the process of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual involvement in death. Her greatest poetry gathers its full force at this ultimate point where the "wheel" revolves on and on in the dark until the heavy mud of reality brings it into a stop. The majority of critics agree that she is obsessed with the idea of death. Poem after poem she attempts to illuminate the unanswerable questions of why people die, how they die and what is beyond death.

Dickinson's poems on death are as striking as the meditations of John Donne and other metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. But while the metaphysical poets addressed death stoically, Dickinson "journeyed" with it and tried to unmask it, to show its various faces, to poke fun at it, challenge it and even haunt it rather than being haunted by it. Death for her is not a taboo that is not to be mentioned; it is a subject she finds a great deal of courage to encounter, to live with and even to master.

Dickinson's obsession with death should be viewed in the light of her attempt to arrive at the most transparent perception of "Death" in order to minimize it, or to make it familiar. Robert Weisbach claims that nearly every poem she wrote has to do with death, with ending.
The relationship between "Death" and the other subjects Dickinson discussed in great length such as pain, despair, fear, immortality and even love is complex. In one way or another, all these subjects are blended; they are the "brooks" that flow into the sea of death:

My River runs to thee-
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?
My River waits reply-
Oh Sea—look graciously—
I'll fetch thee Brooks
From spotted nooks—
Say-Sea—Take Me! (162)

Though the poem is usually explicated as a love poem, the "sea" being a symbol for "man," some critics see it as a wish for death. (This will be discussed below.) However, the poem can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the idea of death—an attempt to approach it and enter its mysterious world as the waters of the rivers enter the mysterious world of the sea. The attempt for a better perception of death takes the form of a "supple suitor" as she says in one of her poems. Perhaps the sea wants her to offer him something so she can be admitted into his world: she is ready with her "brooks" which may suggest her poems.

As in the case of her poems on pain, God and love, the abstraction itself is absent and therefore it has to be "incurred" through the poem. The ritual of death is characterized by the absence of "Death" and the presence of the dying person. That is why the dying person seems to be remembering death rather than experiencing it. Sharon Cameron has noticed that the poems on death show the capacity
to remember death rather than anticipate it, to make it a past experience. The very absence of death also stresses the fact that Dickinson is dramatizing death with the aim of achieving an ultimate mastery over it. As Hyatt H. Waggoner says,

"Her personal situation and her psychic necessities joined forces with her religious and philosophic heritage to make the experience of living in constant awareness of the coming of death, and the imaginative realization of dying as the climactic experience of living become the subject that increasingly preoccupied her and that give her verse its special quality."

Dickinson's quest for the nearest and fullest "encounter" with death takes various shapes. First, it is the acute observation of scenes where death occurred to members of the family or in the neighborhood:

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today-
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have-alway- (389)

The indefinite article "a" with "Death" suggests either a single death or the dual nature of death as physical and spiritual. The setting is an actual death scene in a neighboring house; the time is fresh in her memory, "As lately as Today." Her knowledge about death is limited to the expression of "numb look" which can suggest loss of consciousness on the part of the dying person. Very significant is the reduction of the word "always" into "alway" to suggest the reduction of the categorical "always" and to stress the fact that death reduces the human being, makes him less.

The rest of the poem is a description of the mourners, their bewilderment in the presence of death and their quick movements
to perform the ritual of death as if to rid themselves from the horrible presence of it on the face of the dying person.

Another poem that approaches death from the outside and keeps the "wheel" in a kind of static confrontation is "The last Night that She lived." In the above mentioned poem, her emotional involvement is so intense that it becomes almost an identification with the dying person:

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying-this to Us
Made Nature different (1100)

As in the previous poem, the setting is that of a dead woman surrounded by mourners. The fact that the poem is written in second person plural stresses the physical presence as well as the shared emotions of the witnesses at the death-bed. The past tense shows that the experience is completed but its effect and details are remembered keenly. The commonness of the "Night" is disturbed by the sight of death which makes "Nature different."

We noticed smallest things-
Things overlooked before
By this great light upon our Minds
Italicized-as'twere.

The metaphoric light of "Death"--which can mean the moment of illumination--has imposed itself on the observers. The senses become telescopic as if the fact of death adds acuteness and awareness to them,

As We went out and in
Between Her final Room
And Rooms where Those to be alive Tomorrow were, a Blame
That Others could exist
While She must finish quite
A Jealousy for Her arose
So nearly infinite-

In their aimless movements between the "Room" of the dead woman
and the "Rooms" of the living, the minds of the observers are occupied.

They are resentful because this woman will die while others are
going to live. "A Jealousy for Her arose" indicates that the observers
are jealous of her because she is near to immortality--"So nearly
infinite."

We waited while She passed-
It was a narrow time-
Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot-
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce-
Consented, and was dead-

The immense irony in these stanzas lies in the fact that
the dead woman is considered lucky; as soon as the "notice" comes,
she "mentioned" and "forgot" while the observers are left for the
anguish of expecting such a moment. Ironically, too, the woman
withers as a "Reed" and is "bent to the water," images suggesting
rebirth and regeneration.

And We-We placed the Hair-
And drew the Head erect-
And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate-

The repetition of "We" adds further intensity to the situation
of the puzzled observers. The "We" reminds them of their existence:
it is as if the power of death leaves them in doubt as to whether
they belong to its domain or to life's domain. The final two lines
express the fact that the observers have been so shaken that it has taken them some time, "leisure," to regain their faith, or that there has been enough time to modify their faith in line with the cruel reality of man's destiny.

For the speaker, death is a mystery that has to be fathomed. But to fathom death, there needs to be an identification which is produced by meticulous observation of the dying person:

I've seen a Dying Eye
Run round and round a Room-
In search of Something-as it seemed-
Then Cloudier become-
And then-obscure with Fog-
And then-be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be
'Twere blessed to have seen- (547)

Only those who have seen people dying can tell how authentic the description is. The inquisitive "Eye" remains active until the very last moment. The sensitive identification enables the speaker to see through the eye of the dead person; the eye becomes "cloudier" and then is obscured with "Fog" until it "cannot see to see" as Dickinson says in "I Heard a Fly buzz" (465). With the eye of the dead "soldered down"—when sense is a mere blank—the envy of the speaker arises. She is sarcastic that the "Dying Eye" becomes completely incommunicative without "disclosing what it be / 'Twere blessed to have seen." The dead has been "blessed" by the "sight" of death: the knowledge of the nature of death which only gives its secret to those who die. The ultimate irony in the poem is that one dies once and so the mystery remains undisclosed forever.

Since the dead do not "disclose" the secret, the wheel has
to move and explore another facet of death which may reveal its secret. A great number of Dickinson's poems on death are attempts for definition with the aim of coming nearer to it. The mystery wraps itself in further mystery. The question may function as a way for getting an answer:

What inn is this
Where for the night
Peculiar Traveller comes?
Who is the Landlord?
Where the maids?
Behold, what curious rooms!
No ruddy Aires on the hearth-
No brimming Tankards flow-
Necromancer! Landlord!
Who are these below? (155)

Although death is absent, its effects are real. The poem is a kind of puzzled statement on the utter destructive effect of death. The graves are ghostly "inns" visited by a "peculiar Traveller." The impatience of the speaker as to the stubborn mystery of death is intensified with her final cry

Necromancer! Landlord!
Who are these below?

Is this a question that she wants an answer for or is it an angry protest against the "Necromancer! Landlord!" and his law of life and death?

It is as if her impatience has blocked a clearer perception. It is a mistake to deny the fact of death especially as the aim in mind is to "know" death and not to question its existence or effect. After denial comes acceptance:

What harm? Men die-externally-
It is a truth-of Blood-
But we-are dying in Drama-
And Drama-is never dead-  (531)

Physical death is no "harm" since it is the tragedy of the flesh.
Death exists within the "Drama" of life and the drama never dies.
What remains is a further investigation into death in order to see
how is it related to this drama.

Where would seeing through death lead? The mind is never at
rest; questions lead to further questions but the fact of death is
still never disclosed:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers-
Untouched by Morning-
And untouched by Noon-
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection-
Rafter of Satin-and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the years-in the Crescent-above them-
Worlds scoop their Arcs
And Firmaments-row-
Diadems-drop-and Doges-surrender-
Soundless as dots-on a Disc of Snow
(216) sec. version.

The poem opens with the ironic "Safe" since the meaning here
is that the dead are incapable of feeling. The irony is intensified
with the repeated "untouched" which suggests that they belong to a
- totally different domain beyond touch and feeling. Their graves
are solid "Alabaster" and this keeps them under the strong hold of
death. The "Resurrection" looks meaningless with the solid structure
of the graves; the "Alabaster" is further given the emphasis of
solidity by "Roof of Stone," against the weakness--"meek"--of the
"Members of Resurrection." The years move "Grand" and insensitive
to time, yielding more and more power to death through the fall of
kings--suggested by "Diadems." "Drop" and "surrender" add to the
tragic sense of fall through death. The silence and inactivity is suggested by the final line's stress on the "s" sound which may suggest the continuous fall of snow flakes. However, no answer is given; it is only doubt that haunts the poem. The total inactivity together with the solidity of the graves suggests that resurrection is meaningless. Immortality remains a question and death remains in its mystery: silent and incommunicative.

What is death then? Can the senses perceive it? Can the poem rise to "rehearse" it and capture it artistically? Definition after definition follows and death becomes an achievement through the poem. Dickinson has undertaken the task of unveiling death. Among the cluster of poems that attempt a definition of death are "Death is a dialogue between" (976), "Death is like the insect" (1716), "Death is potential to that man" (548), and "Death is the supple suitor" (1445). In "Death is a dialogue between," Dickinson expresses her desire to believe in immortality, while in "Death is like the insect" there is the image of an insect destroying a tree exactly as death destroys the human being. In her poem "Death is potential to that man," death is weighed against immortality, but while she is certain of death as a "potential," immortality is questionable. In "Death is a supple suitor" Dickinson discusses three stages of death: our awareness of it, its inevitable occurrence and the state after death.

Seeing death from the outside has not been satisfactory indeed. To "incur" death, one must accompany it as if in a journey. The "Wheel" has to move into another state: it has to revolve with
death. The speaker attempts the journey and feels the presence of death:

Our journey had advanced-
Our feet were almost come
To that odd Fork in Being's Road-
Eternity-by Term-

Our pace took sudden awe-
Our feet-reluctant-led-
Before-were Cities-but Between-
The Forest of the Dead-

Retreat-was out of Hope
Behind-a Sealed Route
Eternity's White Flag-Before-
And God-at every Gate- (615)

The poem may be an adventure of the mind as well as an actual death. The whole poem works in terms of progress and retreat, but the impersonality of expression ("Our journey had advanced-") shows her indifference against the overwhelming power of death. It is the "journey" that "advanced," not the speaker or the vehicle carrying her. By the end of the journey, their "feet were come to..." as if they both walked without a previous thought or volition. The speaker imagines herself being led. This gives her the double role of being part of the experience and at the same time a witness of her own journey. The reduction of time into one single moment heightens the sense of irony as, in Cameron's words, the "self appears double or disjoint." 5

The journey leads them to "that odd Fork in Being's Road-". The line can suggest that the journey is inside the self, since the "odd fork" is in "Being's Road." The "Fork" however, gives the meaning of various roads, but all of them are "odd" since they are mere
extensions of the self, though they cannot be travelled at the same time by the same traveller. This may symbolize two things: that while alive one sees death as a "Fork" which can lead either to mere death or to immortality. It may also symbolize the speaker's awareness of the dilemma between faith in immortality and doubt of it.

The second stanza expresses the speaker's recognition of sheer horror of the journey. It is as if the sudden awareness has sprung with sudden "awe." The progress suggested in the first stanza by "advanced" is slowed down--"Our feet-reluctant-led." With this thoughtful awareness, the speaker finds herself heading toward the "Forest of the Dead." The "Forest" is the graveyard with its great numbers of tombs.

The third stanza may hint at a guarded acceptance of death; though she wishes to "retreat," she finds it impossible. It may even suggest that once death reveals its face, the other way back becomes impossible. What has seemed a "Fork" is now a "Sealed Route," and escape becomes "Out of Hope." The speaker is left to wonder whether the journey will end in "The Forest of the Dead" or go further to "Eternity's White Flag"--the celestial city of God: immortality.

Another journey poem which may be read as a second version of the one just discussed above is "Because I could not stop for Death" which is considered by many outstanding critics as Dickinson's finest poem. Allen Tate says that it is one of the best poems written in the English language because it blends successfully the
two notions of love and death—a major theme in nineteenth century American poetry. The poem begins:

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The carriage held but just ourselves—
And immortality. (712)

It has been Dickinson's device to use wheeled vehicles in her poems to suggest the progression of the journey. Death comes as a gentleman caller to take her on a journey. In the carriage, she is accompanied by "Immortality," perhaps to give the feeling that the voice heard is beyond death;

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

The horror of death is reduced by its gentility. Because "Death" is certain of its final triumph, he drives "slowly," and the innocent speaker—as if gradually losing consciousness—becomes preoccupied with the journey.

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

The third stanza is a recollection of her stages of life: childhood, which reminds her of school, maturity which is suggested by "Gazing Grain" and then old age which is understood by "Setting Sun." Three lines out of four in the third stanza begin with the plural pronoun "We" to suggest a unity between Death, Immortality and
the speaker. The repetition of "We" suggests also that everyone is making the journey some day: the company is ultimate, unpreventable. As for the westering sun, Charles Anderson suggests that it is a symbol for the passing soul.\(^7\) As the journey goes on, the movement is very slow, almost to a stop:

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We passed before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground-
The Roof was scarcely visible
The Cornice-in the Ground-

Since then-'tis Centuries-and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horse's Heads
Were toward Eternity-
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Of all the scenes, the graveyard is the most horrible. Each grave seems a "swelling of the Ground," so insignificant and humiliating in its groundiness. The word "Ground" is repeated in a prominent position. The first two lines of the last stanza express the indifference of the dead as to the passage of time and therefore centuries "Feel shorter than the Day." For the living, time is crucial, perhaps as Cameron argues, because the fact of death makes them sensitive to time.\(^8\) The final two lines of the stanza are a catastrophic collapse in both sight and insight. "I first surmised" conveys the meaning of imagined knowledge with no certainty; she is unable to see beyond that point.

In such poems, imagination is given the role of "courting" death to bring it around, and hence the poem is created. The "wheel" revolves around itself again and again: the journey has been suspended around a verbal axis, gathering speed with every moment of life: the elegant, enchanting movement attracts death: death has
to stop the "wheel" in order to see it in its full shape when motionless.

The "harmless" journey in the company of Death" has not brought the complete satisfaction of a full perception. The speaker has to call "Death" and experience it; she has to see her own funeral with all its extremity of pain, and all its active presence. This might be a bolder attempt for conjuring Death and capturing it:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading-treading-till it seemed
That sense was breaking through- (280)

It is not an outsider who is dying. It is the speaker herself. Although critics like to explain the poem as a sign of madness, or as a symbolic death for a repressed knowledge, the poem can be read as Henry Wells says as "...a little poem wherein Emily imagines herself in a stunned condition attending her own funeral." The extremity of imagined pain leads the speaker into a loss of consciousness, though "sense was breaking through,"

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum-
Kept beating-beating-till I thought
My Mind was going numb-

This stanza stresses the gradual loss of consciousness: "My Mind was going numb." The ritual is emphasized by the sound of the "Drum" together with the presence of the mourners watching the dead person,

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space-began to toll,

The sound is intensified by "heard," "creak," "Boots of Lead,"
and the tolling of "space." The whole stanza is a typical description of a funeral procession. The lifting of the "Box" suggests putting the coffin in a hearse, and the "Boots of Lead" may designate the sound of the horses' feet pulling the hearse, or the sound of the people's feet following the hearse. The funeral proceeds.

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here-

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down-
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing-then-

The sound image is heightened to its climax in the fourth stanza when the speaker is minimized into an "Ear," able to hear the slightest sound but never to communicate. The placement of the coffin in the grave is likened to a wreckage, "Wrecked, solitary, here-". The final stanza ends with a total loss of consciousness signifying the final border of the poem, the ultimate verbal soaring.

This is a closer approach to death than seeing it from the outside or even going with it on a journey. It is a deliberate "death in life" envisioned in the shape of extreme pain. Clark Griffith maintains that Dickinson died every moment of her life. George Whicher dwelled in a lengthy chapter on Emily Dickinson's experiment with death, the feeling of frustration which death imposed on her, and the familiar death-scene within the family. It is not surprising that, in many of her poems, she wanted to experience death herself: this was only possible through the verbal imagination of the poem:
I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm— (465)

The situation is similar to that of the previous poem except for having the "Fly" as a focal point. By describing the moment of her death, the speaker lets us know that she has already envisioned her death. The stillness in the death room contrasts with the Fly's "buzz;" the tension haunting the scene is likened to pauses within a storm. The crossing point between life and death is seen from a new perspective when the speaker remembers her own death:

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

The emphasis shifts to the mourners who seem to sympathize with the dead speaker. The breath taking moment comes with the expected arrival of the "King"—Death—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

Various critics have seen the "Fly" as a symbol of death's decay because flies swarm on carrion. But the "Fly" can also be seen as a symbol of triviality, the weakness of human beings and their vulnerability. On another level, the final appearance of the "Fly" is completely ironic: instead of seeing angels in the final moment,
she sees a "Fly." The "Fly," however, stands between the symbolic light of death and the dying person. This might be a final contemplation on how hard it is to escape the human. The failure of the senses, --"the windows"--brings with it the ultimate unconsciousness; the sight is blocked, "I could not see to see."

Again, the poem's debate reaches its final limit. The failing sight puts an end to both the poem and to consciousness. The poem has won the victory over "Death" by bringing it around. To push the "wheel" further into the domain of death, some poems come as a wish for death. This may be the final step to arrive at a fuller perception of so intriguing a phenomenon. After all, "Death" is a means to an end: it can never be a conclusion:

I had no Cause to be awake-
My Best-was gone to sleep-
And Morn a new politeness took-
And failed to wake them up- (542)

Is it total despair that makes the speaker lose the desire "to be awake?" What are the "Best" that went "to sleep?" Are they her hopes? The beautiful morning is no more attractive to her; the "sunset" has more attraction, and when she was to choose,

So choosing but a Gown-
And taking but a Prayer-
The only Raiment I should need-
I struggled-and was There-

The "Gown" can be the shroud, and the "Prayer" is her religious faith which serves as a consolation. The final line suggests that the wish for death is fulfilled: "I struggled and was There."

Once death is "granted," the speaker can have the full experience, "finished feeling" as she says in one of her poems:
There is a finished feeling
Experienced at Graves-
A leisure of the Future-
A Wilderness of Size.

By Death's bold Exhibition
Preciser What we are
And the Eternal function
Enabled to infer. (856)

It is not the physical attraction of death that works; it is the fact
that death is a stage which may lead to another phase of life. What
death offers is a vision from which she can "infer" what lies
beyond it. Death achieves this standpoint, perhaps, because it is
so closely associated with pain—that familiar feeling which, in its ex-
tremes, rises to embrace death and long for it as a reliever:

There is a Languor of the Life
More imminent than Pain—
'Tis Pain's Successor—When the Soul
Has suffered all it can— (396)

The "Languor of the Life" is something she cannot describe; it is a
pain that goes beyond pain and its immediate effect is

A Drowsiness-diffuses—
A Dimness like a Fog
Envelops Consciousness—
As Mists-obliterates a Crag.

Because pain is overwhelming, like death, it needs words beyond
words to describe it; the result is an elevation of language to cope
with unnameable feelings:

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing its boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyped coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem—
And you dropt, lost,
"'Twas" suggests a remembered state of being: a dramatization of mortal agony, or rather—though more ambiguous—sickness "unto death," as Soren Kierkegaard says:

The torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the situation of the moribund when he lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. When the danger is so great that death has become one's hope, despair is the disconsolateness of not being able to die. 14

The best description of the poem is made by Cameron who says:

Since the task of Dickinson's poem is to distinguish between process and conclusion, intimation and knowledge, the dread of terror and its safe arrival, it rests its case on the implicit assertion that you cannot top or bottom a superlative. The content of the superlative thus matters very little; what must be appreciated is the consequence of mastering it. 15

This superlative is mastered through the elaborate achievement of the poem: what seems to be beyond control is brought into order. The "boiling Wheel," which seems to close on her, is being narrowed, mastered until its movement is confined to its axis: it becomes an object of attraction rather than of fear:

My wheel is in the dark!
I cannot see a spoke
Yet know its dripping feet
Go round and round round (10)

It is her "wheel," not she that is in the dark. Though she cannot see a "spoke" she is certain that the "wheel" revolves around itself. Is it the urge that drives her to write as the water wheel of the mill drives the millstone? If anything, Emily Dickinson's poetry is a unique portrait of a "wheel in the dark." The speed of the wheel eliminates the tops and downs and leaves her with one
essential thing: progress with no certainty. Is that Death?

If Dickinson's vision is tragic, that is because the tragic deals ultimately with the individual. To ward off danger and despair, she devoted herself to art which offered her relative safety without exposing herself to the frustration and ugliness of the outside world. If she is dramatizing her feelings to fill any gap that might impose itself on her being, she knows for sure that

We dream—it is good we are dreaming—
It would hurt us—were we awake—
But since it is playing—kill us,
And we are playing—shriek— (531)

Instead of storing the tragic experiences of life so that they "would hurt," Dickinson transforms them into poetry. The poem becomes her message to the world: her artistic gift to a world that puzzled her by its bitterness. The poem also becomes the healer: the psychological outlet which brings relief. The artistic mind which cried

My Portion is Defeat—today—
A paler luck than Victory— (639)
is the same mind that convinced her that

Her spirit rose to such a height
Her countenance it did inflate
Like one that fed on awe. (1486)

On awe Dickinson fed, but her real triumph was her ability to control awe through the expression of the poem: the poem magnifies "awe" to its fullest shape and by doing so this awe and its attendant despair are controlled. In poetry, she could "let herself go" by controlling forces which are within her emotional as well as mental capacity. Her encounters with herself made up for the en-
counters she did not have with others:

One need not be a Chamber-to be Haunted-
One need not be a House-
The Brain has Corridors-surpassing
Material Place- (670)

Perhaps this belief in the richness of inner life had endowed Dickinson with a broad human vision: the vision which made her able to speak to millions of people. It was this vision which led her to understand the nobility of the heart when it is in conflict with itself:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend-
Or the most agonizing Spy-
An Enemy-could send- (683)

or

The Battle found between the Soul
And No Man-is the One
Of all the Battles prevalent-
By far the Greater One- (594)

How different is this from Faulkner's speech on receiving his Nobel Award? The man said in prose what the woman, long ago, had said in verse. The woman practised the "conflict" and achieved nobility through her art; the man "theorized" the way to noble art.

For Dickinson, the poem is the vehicle to suspend this "conflict" and transform it into something meaningful, something worth the debate with the self. The areas she has been able to endow with meaning--areas such as pain and love and God and death--yielded to the pressure of her sincerity to explore them. If her vision of each of those seems inconsistent or self-contradictory, that is because, as humans, we assign degrees of intensity to the abstract: the pain
felt at the loss of a wife is not the same pain felt at the loss of a casual friend. The vision of God in times of distress is never the same vision in times of rest. The greatness of the poem is its ability to establish the difference in intensity—its ability to make the slightest distinctions and point to them. It is just here that Dickinson's greatness begins.
NOTES ON CHAPTER V


2 See her poem "Death is the supple suitor" (1445).


5 Cameron, p. 98.


8 Cameron, p. 103.

9 Cameron, p. 105.


12 George Whicher, *This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).


15 Cameron, p. 100.
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