

A READING OF EMILY DICKINSON

by

Ian Wilson

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I.C. Wilson

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<sup>1</sup> The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Third Printing, 1963) and The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson, Associate Editor Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Second Printing, 1965) have been used throughout this study. Unless specifically otherwise stated, all poem and letter numbers and footnotes have reference to these texts.

Where Emily Dickinson employs italicization, the words are underlined. Emily Dickinson's spelling and punctuation are frequently unorthodox and sometimes incorrect. Common usages are: it's, dont, does'nt, did'nt, cant - usages which also appear in some contemporary writing, e.g. the letters of Susan Gilbert, Emily Dickinson's sister-in-law. The many kinds of pause-marks which Emily Dickinson uses in her poems have been represented by a hyphen.

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## CHAPTER I

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(1) Even before the publication of The Poems of Emily Dickinson in the variorum edition by Harvard University in 1955, under the editorship of Thomas H. Johnson, there was a steadily growing interest in the work of this poet and in her position both in the sphere of American literature and in the larger field of English poetry. In 1957, The Letters of Emily Dickinson appeared, with Johnson as editor, and Theodora Ward as associate editor. With this publication critical literature received an incentive to increase and extend the exploration already undertaken.

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in the New England town of Amherst. Her father was a well-established lawyer, but little is known of her mother, who remains a shadowy figure in all accounts written about the family. Emily Dickinson was the second of three children, the eldest being her brother Austin, and the youngest her sister Lavinia.

The home life of the Dickinsons was in many ways typical of that of an educated Puritan family in the first half of the nineteenth century. Emily Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson, had close ties with the local university, was elected to Congress as Whig Representative for Massachusetts and played an important rôle in the extension of the Amherst Railway line. These activities resulted in many of the leading men of the town becoming his close associates.

The life led by the young people was, to modern eyes, serious, but never solemn. Religion and church attendance were matters of importance as many of the letters written by the young Emily Dickinson testify. Yet, in Edward Dickinson's home there was no

especial stress laid upon his children to become members of the church. He himself officially joined the church only late in his life, while Emily Dickinson was never to become a member.

Nature rambles, home entertainments, sledging parties and visiting all constituted part of the younger people's social activities.

The idea that academic education was not suited to young girls was noticeably absent in the Dickinson home. Both Emily and Lavinia Dickinson attended a local school before continuing their studies at boarding seminaries away from home.

After the completion of her schooling Emily Dickinson was to spend practically the rest of her life in Amherst, except for a visit to Washington and Philadelphia, and occasional trips to Boston where she had to visit an eye-specialist. Her life at home was concerned mainly with assisting her sister in the management of the house, especially with the baking of breads and puddings. Much of her time was also spent in the care and cultivation of her flowers, the blooms of which were often to accompany the notes and letters sent to friends. In later years Emily Dickinson nursed her mother through an illness of long duration.

All these activities were to find expression in the poems, and the simplest of household tasks gained universality in the lyrics. One of the finest examples of this fact is the poem "Dont put up my Thread & Needle -", the first stanza of which runs :

Dont put up my Thread & Needle -  
 I'll begin to Sow  
 When the Birds begin to whistle -  
 Better Stitches - so -. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 617, Vol. II, p.475. As Johnson remarks in his notes to the poem, the spelling of "Sow" in the second line "is undoubtedly a mistake" for "Sew".

Another poem explains why the most ordinary of actions were significant for Emily Dickinson:

I tie my Hat - I crease my Shawl -  
Life's little duties do - precisely -  
As the very least  
Were infinite - to me --<sup>1</sup>

The fact that "the very least/Were infinite" is of great importance for a real appreciation of Emily Dickinson's work. The most insignificant actions of everyday life were employed as means by which to tackle the larger problems of the mind.

This does not imply an unbalanced outlook; rather, that the unknown was approached through the medium of what was best known. It also means that the minutiae of life were not slighted or overlooked, and that Emily Dickinson inhabited a universe which was so filled with significance that it almost overwhelmed the responsive mind.

A further aspect which must be mentioned is Emily Dickinson's correspondence, for from the Amherst house letters went forth which, when the extant among them were collected, filled three volumes. In choosing her friends Emily Dickinson displayed something of a selective recklessness, the finest example of this being the extensive correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson. It was Emily Dickinson who originated the correspondence, after reading in the April 1862 edition of the Atlantic Monthly Higginson's article entitled "Letter to a Young Contributor" which offered suggestions to writers beginning their careers. This correspondence continued until the month of her death.

Higginson, an ordained preacher, resigned from the ministry, and became a champion of such causes as feminism, and the abolition

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 443, Vol. I, p. 341.

of slavery. In many ways a liberal thinker, he was yet unable to accept Emily Dickinson's poems in the form in which she wrote them, preferring the rhymes, punctuation and word usages of the more conventional poets of the time.

Despite the title "Preceptor" which Emily Dickinson bestowed upon him, it was not his advice in poetic matters which sustained their friendship, but Emily Dickinson's ability to respond to what was finest in his character.

Concerning her friendship with the Reverend Charles Wadsworth very little is known, and none of her letters to him survives. Emily Dickinson probably met Wadsworth in Philadelphia during her visit to that city in 1855. Their correspondence would seem to have been chiefly concerned with spiritual matters.

Of Emily Dickinson's early friendships, that with Benjamin Franklin Newton was undoubtedly the most significant. Newton was nine years older than Emily Dickinson and entered Edward Dickinson's office as a law student in 1847. He interested the young Emily Dickinson in literature, introducing her to the work of Emerson and the Brontë sisters, and encouraged her in her writing of poetry. In 1850 he left Amherst and died of consumption at the age of thirty-two.

Emily Dickinson mentioned Newton with gratitude and a sense of loss in her second letter to Higginson:

When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me  
Immortality - but venturing too near, himself - he  
never returned - Soon after, my Tutor, died - and  
for several years, my Lexicon - was my only companion -<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 261, Vol. II, p. 404.

In 1882 Emily Dickinson still remembered her debt to this early friend, for she wrote as follows to Judge Otis Lord:

My Philadelphia [Charles Wadsworth] has passed  
from Earth, and the Ralph Waldo Emerson - whose name  
my Father's Law Student taught me, has touched the  
secret Spring.<sup>1</sup>

Jane Humphrey and Abiah Root were two of Emily Dickinson's girlhood friends, but both friendships were terminated shortly after their respective marriages. Louise and Frances Norcross were Emily Dickinson's cousins, and the poet continued to correspond with them throughout her life. It was to the Norcross sisters that Emily Dickinson wrote her final letter a few days before her death:

Little Cousins,  
Called back.  
Emily.<sup>2</sup>

Judge Otis Phillips Lord was a close friend of Emily Dickinson's father, and he and his wife frequently stayed with the Dickinson family. Emily Dickinson greatly admired Otis Lord, and her surviving letters to him indicate a sincere devotion.<sup>3</sup>

Very little else is known about Emily Dickinson's life other than what can be gleaned from the letters. The friendship with her brother and his wife, Susan, who lived next door, although subject to periods of strain, continued throughout Emily Dickinson's lifetime. Susan was, in fact, the sole member of the family from whom Emily Dickinson was prepared to take occasional advice in

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 750, Vol. III, p. 727.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 1046, Vol. III, p. 906.

<sup>3</sup> See p.171.

connection with her poetry.<sup>1</sup>

The picture that can be formed from the letters and notes is one of gentle kindness and interest in the welfare of her friends and neighbours.

Emily Dickinson's especial love was for her nephew Gilbert, for whom several poems were written and included in her notes to the little boy. His death, in October, 1883, was a loss which she felt very deeply. After Edward Dickinson's death in June, 1874, Emily Dickinson's mother was bed-ridden for long periods, and the task of nursing fell upon her elder daughter's shoulders.

In 1884 Emily Dickinson suffered a collapse which was later diagnosed as being caused by the effect of nephritis. She died on May 15, 1886. The funeral service was austerely plain; the coffin

<sup>1</sup> See especially Poem no. 216, Vol. I, p. 151. Emily Dickinson evidently sent a transcript of the poem to Susan, who then replied:

"I am not suited dear Emily with the second verse - It is remarkable as the chain lightening that blinds us hot nights in the Southern sky but it does not go with the ghostly shimmer of the first verse as well as the other one - It just occurs to me that the first verse is complete in itself it needs no other, and can't be coupled - Strange things always go alone - as there is only one Gabriel and one Sun - You never made a peer for that verse, and I guess you [x] kingdom does'nt hold one - I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never can again - ..."

Notes to the poem, Vol. I, pp. 152-155.

Emily Dickinson then sent Susan an alternative second verse accompanied by the following note:

"Dear Sue -

Your praise is good - to me - because I know it knows - and suppose it means -

Could I make you and Austin - proud - sometime - a great way off - 'twould give me taller feet - ..."

was borne by six Irish workmen who were employed by the Dickinsons as groundsmen, and Thomas Higginson recited Emily Brontë's "No Coward Soul is Mine."

(ii) After her sister's death, Lavinia, acting on Emily Dickinson's instructions, destroyed most of the letters which the poet had received from her various correspondents, and other personal papers. In Emily's desk Lavinia discovered, but did not destroy, the booklets which Emily Dickinson had compiled of her poems, mostly fair copies, but many in a yet unfinished form and several which had not yet been developed beyond a rough draft.

The question of whether the discovery of this great number of poems revealed to Lavinia a fact of which she was unaware, has often been debated. The matter can be simplified to the ascertainable fact that Emily Dickinson's family and correspondents certainly knew that she wrote poetry, for her letters often contained poems which frequently elucidated a point made in the prose of the letter.

There is even the playful warning incorporated in a letter written to her brother as early as March, 1853:

And Austin is a Poet, Austin writes a psalm. Out  
of the way, Pegasus, Olympus enough "to him," and just  
say to those "nine muses" that we have done with them!

Raised a living muse ourselves, worth the whole  
nine of them. Up, off, tramp!

Now Brother Pegasus, I'll tell you what it is -  
I've been in the habit myself of writing some few  
things, and it rather appears to me that you're getting  
away my patent, so you'd better be somewhat careful, or  
I'll call the police! <sup>1</sup>

What might well have not been known was the extent of her labours, for the poetic oeuvre consists of no less than 1,775 lyrics.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 110, Vol. I, p. 234.

Lavinia delivered the poems to her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson, but, when two years had elapsed, and Susan had as yet done little to secure the publication of the poems, Lavinia gave them to Mabel Loomis Todd, a practical and capable neighbour who had been a friend of Emily Dickinson's. Mrs. Todd, in conjunction with Thomas Higginson, then proceeded to edit the first volume of the poems.<sup>1</sup>

More important than the tension which existed between Lavinia and Susan Dickinson, and later between Lavinia and Mabel Todd in connection with this publishing venture, is the process of 'creative editing' undertaken by Mrs. Todd and Colonel Higginson. This activity is described and commented upon by Millicent Todd Bingham, Mrs. Todd's daughter:

Emily placed a great responsibility upon her editors by leaving to them so often the choice of a key word.<sup>2</sup> For it authorized them to color her thought with their taste. Obligated so often to make a choice, they might be tempted to go further, to change a word to fit their own preference - a dangerous leeway, for the thought is timeless while taste may change. It is well to bear this in mind in connection with the efforts of both Mr. Higginson and Mrs. Todd to make Emily's poems rhyme. Her apparent indifference to it bothered them. In the nineties rhyme, particularly in a lyric, was the first necessity - as now it appears to be the last.<sup>3</sup>

Other matters which occasioned the editors difficulty were length of lines, quotation marks, punctuation and the poet's device of underlining certain words.

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the first editing and publication of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters has been fully related by Millicent Todd Bingham in Ancestors' Brocades (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967). (Copyright 1945 by Millicent Todd Bingham).

<sup>2</sup> In many of the poems Emily Dickinson had listed alternative word choices, often without indication as to her final preference.

<sup>3</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), p. 38.

Mrs. Todd and Colonel Higginson succeeded in ordering these problems to their satisfaction, and the first selection of the poems was published on November 12, 1890. The popularity of the poems, and the generally enthusiastic reactions among readers, resulted in several editions being published before the appearance of Poems by Emily Dickinson : Second Series on November 9, 1891. Poems : Third Series was published in September, 1896. A selection of Emily Dickinson's letters entitled Letters of Emily Dickinson had appeared on November 21, 1894. Soon after the publication of the Third Series of the poems, the lawsuit brought against Mrs. Todd by Lavinia Dickinson ended their relationship. No further collections appeared until 1914 when Emily Dickinson's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, published The Single Hound.<sup>1</sup>

This short discussion can now be concluded, for to trace the course of publication would entail examination and perusal beyond the range of this study.<sup>2</sup>

(iii) To return to the question of the critical interest shown in the poems, and the ever increasing output of work centred on them, one notes that much of the literature concerned with Emily Dickinson has been devoted to examination of, and frequent conjecture about, her life. Critics have been alert in discovering reasons for her seclusion, and applicants for the rôle of her "lover" are numerous. As Clark Griffith says:

Indeed, if the hypotheses of all her biographers were to be credited, Emily Dickinson would have to be thought of as a

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<sup>1</sup> The Single Hound, ed. by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. (Boston: Little Brown, 1914).

<sup>2</sup> For a list of the various collections of the poems and letters see pp. lxvii and lxviii of Johnson's introduction to Volume I of The Poems of Emily Dickinson.

libidinous monster, fatally unable to resist any married man who chanced to look her way. Attached to the assorted husbands who have been solemnly associated with her, she would have had scant time for poetry - or for any other productive enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

Griffith's tone of studied exaggeration may not be wholly successful, but he makes a point worth noting.

Another field of scholarship is that to be seen in the two-volume work of Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson.<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to convey the atmosphere of the Connecticut River Valley town of Amherst as it was during the lifetime of the poet, and also to place factual information on record, Leyda has compiled a large selection of letters, notes and memorabilia related to the Dickinsons, their relatives, their neighbours and the town. Some items of information can be illuminating, like this one:

Edward Dickinson acquires a set of Shakespeare, edited by Charles Knight, 8 Vols., Boston, 1853; Vol. 5 shows most use and at some later time E.D. marks Othello, Act 3, scene 3:

He that is robb'd, not wanting what is stolen,  
Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all.<sup>3</sup>

But listings of the annual registration of the Dickinson family, or the Dickinson's grocery orders, are less helpful.

Several works which concatenate the biography and the poetry have also appeared. One of the most interesting of this group is George Frisbie Whicher's This was a Poet, first published in 1938.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow : Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., I, p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> G.F. Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957). (Copyright 1938 by Chas. Scribner & Sons).

Whicher, it must be remembered, was working without access to the complete editions of the poems and letters; notwithstanding, he has produced a valuable work. The most eminent among the more recent works are perhaps Thomas H. Johnson's Emily Dickinson : An Interpretive Biography,<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson by Richard Chase<sup>2</sup> and David T. Porter's The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry.<sup>3</sup>

The last group to be mentioned is that which has the most relevance for what is to follow, namely, the books and articles which concern themselves only to a lesser degree with details of the life of Emily Dickinson and concentrate chiefly on the work. This approach will be used in the ensuing discussion. Speculation concerning biographical particulars will, it is hoped, be absent, and in most instances be replaced by references to, and extracts from, the letters and prose fragments of the poet.

The reasons for adopting this approach are various. The wealth of accumulated biographical facts hardly warrants supplementation from one who has no access to actual sources, holographs, etc., and is wary of employing interpretations of the poems to implement such a lack.

(iv) Having presented the outline given above in sections (i) to (iii), one is now better prepared to start moving slowly closer to the intended centre, by attempting a brief statement or assessment of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951).

<sup>3</sup> David T. Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

Emily Dickinson's position within the New England sphere of literature. In order to maintain some degree of level-headedness in this endeavour, one might begin by quoting Wellek and Warren:

Much that has been written on the role of New England, the Middle West, and the South in the history of American literature, and most of the writings on regionalism, amounts to no more than the expression of pious hopes, local pride, and resentment of centralizing powers.<sup>1</sup>

The problem which most critics attempt to solve is that of Emily Dickinson's relationship to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Griffith, advocating his thesis of Emily Dickinson as "the poet of the tragic man",<sup>2</sup> puts forward the following view:

It was the destiny of these writers [i.e. the post-Emersonians] to separate the Emersonian belief from the Emersonian hope. The results were psychologically painful, no doubt - but they also made for the greatest moments in nineteenth century American literature.<sup>3</sup>

George Whicher judges that:

Schoes of Emersonian ideas, if one chooses to call them that, may be detected in Emily Dickinson's poems as easily as in Whitman's, but it is not profitable to single them out. The implication that Emerson created a point of view which other writers adopted is simply untrue. The resemblances that may be noted in Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson and several other New England authors were due to the fact that all were responsive to the spirit of the time.<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely this "spirit of the time" which occasions confusion when analysed by critics in their attempts to examine its effects on Emily Dickinson. Griffith is adamant that one recognize

<sup>1</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1963), p.52. (First published 1949).

<sup>2</sup> Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 301.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>4</sup> George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 198.

that "those nineteenth century texts that most move us today are the texts which commence with the assumptions of Concord still intact - and then proceed to follow those assumptions into the darkest and most dismal crannies of human experience."<sup>1</sup> Allen Tate, on the other hand, argues that one of the major formulative forces in the creation of Emily Dickinson's poetry was her perception of the collapse of that control of the religious and intellectual order of the time. Inheriting the components of this order, but no longer accepting them as wholly valid, the poet had to re-examine the heritage in terms of the individual experience.<sup>2</sup> Albert Gelpi allies himself to Allen Tate when he speaks of the "fatal cleavage that split the Puritan mind,"<sup>3</sup> and also compares Emerson's serenity and "reliance on the intuitive vision of the man-god in a sinless Eden"<sup>4</sup> with "the complexity of [Emily Dickinson's] mind [which] is not the complexity of harmony but that of dissonance."<sup>5</sup>

A sympathy with the Whitherian viewpoint does not entail an opting for a middle-of-the-road course in the hope of avoiding the difficulties which other judgments bring with them. It is rather the embracing of an attitude which succeeds in clearing space for thought in the tangled question of Emily Dickinson and the Transcendentalist tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 226.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Gelpi, The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

(v) So much has been written about American Transcendentalism that one is often tempted to regard it as an organized movement when, in fact, it was a much looser thing, an attitude more or less common to a number of writers. The name was derived from Kant's Critique of Practical Reason (1788), and The Oxford Companion to American Literature supplies a brief definition of Transcendentalism in the following words: "A manifestation of the general humanitarian trend of 19th-century thought."<sup>1</sup>

Perry Miller in his foreword to The American Transcendentalists comments as follows:

... we may ... see in the Transcendentalists not so much a collection of exotic ideologues as the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization. Protestant to the core, they turn their protest against what is customarily called the "Protestant ethic": they refuse to labour in a proper calling, conscientiously cultivate the arts of leisure, and strive to avoid making money.<sup>2</sup>

The sources of Transcendentalism are so many and varied that it is not surprising that its adherents expressed such diverse opinions. Ideas were absorbed from German writers such as Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Heine, from the Greeks Plato and Plotinus, from the English neo-Platonists, from Swedenborg and Pascal, and from Eastern writings such as the Bhagavad Gita and Sufi literature, and the philosophies of Confucius, Mohammed and Buddha.

One of the strongest themes in Transcendentalism was the belief that every individual soul is identical with the soul of the world, or, as Emerson termed it, "the Over-soul."

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Hart, The Oxford Companion to American Literature (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 772.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Miller, ed., The American Transcendentalists (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), pp. ix - x.

The result was that:

Through belief in the divine authority of the soul's intuitions and impulses, based on this identification of the individual soul with God, there developed the doctrine of self-reliance and individualism, the disregard of external authority, tradition, and logical demonstration, and the absolute optimism of the movement.<sup>1</sup>

The more prominent writers who professed to Transcendentalist ideas were Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley and Theodore Parker. Much of the activity related to Transcendentalism emanated from the village of Concord, situated about twenty miles north-west of Boston, "whereof it is recorded that whoso is born there need not be born again", as a nineteenth-century introduction to Thoreau's Walden perhaps over-ardently describes the village.<sup>2</sup>

Concord was the birthplace and home of Thoreau, and later became the home of Emerson, Hawthorne, and of Alcott, who maintained his Concord School of Philosophy there from 1879 to 1888. The finest literary productions to show the influence of Transcendentalism are Thoreau's Walden and Civil Disobedience, Emerson's Nature and other of his famous essays, and Whitman's Leaves of Grass.

Transcendentalism gained a voice through the magazine The Dial which spanned the years 1840-1844, and to which most of the writers referred to above contributed. Other Transcendentalist ventures were co-operative communities such as "Brook Farm" (1841-1847) which was situated near West Roxbury, Massachusetts,

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Hart, The Oxford Companion to American Literature (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 773.

<sup>2</sup> H.D. Thoreau, Walden with an introductory note by Will H. Dircks (London: Walter Scott, 1886), p. vii. (First published 1854).

and Bronson Alcott's "Fruitlands" (1842-1843) at Harvard, Massachusetts. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about the former in The Blithedale Romance, and Louisa May Alcott was also to describe her father's attempts at creating a communistic society in "Transcendental Wild Oats" contained in Silver Pitchers (1876).

Emily Dickinson's letters prove that she had certainly read the writings of a few Transcendentalists. Emerson is frequently mentioned, and, at Christmas 1876, she sent a copy of his Representative Men to Higginson's wife. The book was accompanied by a letter which includes the following sentence: "I am bringing a little Granite Book you can lean upon."<sup>1</sup> Three years later Higginson sent the poet a copy of his own work, Short Studies of American Authors, which contained critical sketches of, among others, Hawthorne and Thoreau.<sup>2</sup> In a note to Susan Dickinson, written in 1866, Emily Dickinson makes reference to Thoreau: "Was the Sea cordial? Kiss him for Thoreau -".<sup>3</sup> In his notes to the letter Johnson suggests that this is an allusion to Thoreau's Cape Cod which was published in 1865. The Dickinson library contained copies of Thoreau's Letters to Various Persons, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack and Walden. It is also highly likely that Emily Dickinson read Thoreau's contributions to the Atlantic magazine.

Emily Dickinson had also read certain of Theodore Parker's writings, and, as is pointed out in Johnson's notes, she must have

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 481, Vol. II, p. 569.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 622, Vol. II, p. 649.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 320, Vol. II, p. 454.

known some of William Ellery Channing's work, for the first two lines of this single quatrain poem are the final line of Channing's poem "A Poet's Hope":

If my Bark sink  
'Tis to another sea -  
Mortality's Ground Floor  
Is Immortality - <sup>1</sup>

References such as the above do not prove an actual indebtedness to Transcendentalism on Emily Dickinson's part, and neither do the poems affirm any such debt. Even although Emily Dickinson might never have seen the writings of the American Puritans, their tradition was as strong an influence as Transcendentalism - if not stronger - for:

... because they were a highly articulate people, the New Englanders established Puritanism - for better or worse - as one of the continuous factors in American life and thought. It has played so dominant a rôle because descendants of the Puritans have carried traits of the Puritan mind into a variety of pursuits and all the way across the continent.<sup>2</sup>

To summarize, Transcendentalism was a literary movement active during Emily Dickinson's lifetime, but she could never be termed even a fringe member, for she preferred a lonelier and more rigorous course.

(vi) The poet's own statements on her reading can only with difficulty be made to yield any indication of possible influences. In the second letter to Colonel Higginson, written on April 25, 1862, she says: "You inquire my Books - For Poets - I have Keats -

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1234, Vol. III, p. 858.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Miller, ed., The American Puritans (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), p. ix.

and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose - Mr Ruskin - Sir Thomas Browne - and the Revelations."<sup>1</sup> References to the Brownings are frequent, and there are three commemorative poems on Elizabeth Barrett Browning.<sup>2</sup> Keats is referred to twice in later letters<sup>3</sup> but Ruskin is not mentioned again.

The letters and the poems present their almost constant relationship to the Scriptures in the many quotations from, paraphrases of, and allusions to, Biblical themes and characters. That the Old and New Testaments were sources to which she had completely natural entry is revealed in a letter written to a school-friend, Abiah Root, when Emily Dickinson was fourteen: "Excuse my quoting from the Scripture, dear Abiah, for it was so handy in this case I could'nt get along very well without it."<sup>4</sup> Johnson has deduced the order and identity of the books from the Bible which echo most frequently in her work, viz. Matthew, Revelations, Genesis, John I, II, Corinthians, Exodus and the Psalms.<sup>5</sup>

In the letter to Higginson which was referred to earlier, there stands Emily Dickinson's well-known statement about Walt Whitman: "You speak of Mr Whitman - I have never read his Book - but was told that he was disgraceful -".<sup>6</sup> There is nothing further

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 261, Vol. II, p. 404.

<sup>2</sup> Poems no. 312, Vol. I, p. 234; no. 363, Vol. I, p. 288; no. 593, Vol. I, p. 454.

<sup>3</sup> Letters no. 1018, Vol. III, p. 890; no. 1034, Vol. III, p. 897.

<sup>4</sup> Letter no. 8, Vol. I, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Letter no. 261, Vol. II, p. 404.

said of Whitman, either in the letters or poems, so that one is without the means to construct any type of theory as to her reading of this poet. Shakespeare's works she valued greatly, placing them almost pre-eminent in English literature, as can be seen from the following excerpts from letters: "While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm -"<sup>1</sup> and "Had I a trait you would accept I should be most proud, though he has had his Future who has found Shakespeare -".<sup>2</sup> Mention is also made of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Turgenev (who, on Higginson's recommendation, she desired to read) and several of the popular authors of the day.

Information such as the above is interesting, and even illuminating in the case of several poems (especially with reference to Shakespearean extracts which she occasionally employs), but is not finally successful in supplying answers to questions about her links with other writers. The purpose of this discussion is not that of sleuthing through the poems and letters for references to the works of various authors, a task which, incidentally, is frequently simplified by Emily Dickinson's scrupulous employment of quotation marks, but to present a brief reminder that the poet was in no way a recluse from the world of literature.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 368, Vol. II, p. 491.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 402, Vol. II, p. 516.

<sup>3</sup> See Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading : 1836 - 1886 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

## CHAPTER II

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The more general elements of the atmosphere surrounding Emily Dickinson's poetry having been introduced, an increase in detailed analysis can begin. The aim of this section will be to discover what is present in these lyrics to justify the high praises which have frequently been bestowed on them.

(i) The first matter to be discussed is that of New England influences, especially as related to the poet's statement about the "I" who saw "New Englandly".<sup>1</sup>

There is a tendency in certain critical writings devoted to Emily Dickinson to shape her life to match a pattern suggested by the poems. This is precisely what Emily Dickinson herself foresaw, for in one of the earliest of her letters to Thomas Higginson she wrote: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person."<sup>2</sup>

Ignoring this warning, there still exists a predilection for stressing her rebellion against the spirit of Puritanism as it was manifested in Amherst. The seminary which she attended in South Hadley has sometimes been viewed as an institution occupied more in witch-hunting the unconverted than in educating<sup>C</sup> the girls, an attitude which does not tally with the letters Emily Dickinson wrote while she was at the Academy. The longing for home is frequently expressed in these letters, but her admiration for the school is as obvious. The following excerpts emphasize this fact:

I love Miss. Fiske. very much & I think I shall love all the teachers, when I become better acquainted with them & find out

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 285, Vol. I, p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 268, Vol. II, p. 411.

their ways, which I can assure you are almost "past finding out." <sup>1</sup>

and:

When I left home, I did not think I should find a companion or a dear friend in all the multitude. I expected to find rough & uncultivated manners, & to be sure, I have found some of that stamp, but on the whole, there is an ease & grace a desire to make one another happy, which delights & at the same time, surprises me very much. <sup>2</sup>

It is also important that one look at what effects the spiritual atmosphere of Amherst had upon Emily Dickinson's poetry. John Pickard in his work Emily Dickinson : An Introduction and Interpretation says:

Emily Dickinson was born into a community where evangelical devoutness permeated every action. Though she was repelled by Calvinism's grim dogmas ... she never escaped its eschatological emphasis. <sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Pickard stresses unduly the notion of not escaping these influences. What Emily Dickinson did do was knowingly to employ such doctrines for her poetic purposes.

One of the clearest examples of the religious tradition of the Valley which appears in her work is that of the death-bed watcher. This is related to the belief that "... God's elect, as the solemn moment of dissolution approached, would reveal by hopeful signs their confidence in their soul's eternal welfare", <sup>4</sup> as Whicher expresses it. The many poems which include reference to, or are built around, this practice, have sometimes been alluded to

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 16, Vol. I, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 18, Vol. I, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> John B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1967), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 84.

as "morbid", but such a judgement neglects the tradition from which they stem.

One finds the strongest signs of the Puritan atmosphere in the moral earnestness with which Emily Dickinson undertook her poetic task. In her relentless search for that which she could term the truth, she displayed the indomitable resolution which typified the old Puritan faith.

There are, however, other traits inherited from the Valley present in her work. Such are the homely expressions which one so frequently encounters. The use of the form "dont" in place of "doesn't" seemed to be particularly dear to her:

It dont sound so terrible - quite - as it did -  
I run it over - "Dead", Brain, "Dead."  
Put it in Latin - left of my school -  
Seems it dont shriek so - under rule.<sup>1</sup>

In much of the direct speech and in the language close to that of conversation which appears in the poems, Emily Dickinson conveys the plainness of diction and the courteous tone of the nineteenth century New England speaking voice. One of the most successful instances is the following poem:

Bee! I'm expecting you!  
Was saying Yesterday  
To Somebody you know  
That you were due -  
  
The Frogs got Home last week -  
Are settled, and at work -  
Birds, mostly back -  
The Clover warm and thick -  
  
You'll get my Letter by  
the seventeenth; Reply  
Or better, be with me -  
Yours, Fly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 426, Vol. I, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1035, Vol. II, p. 734.

The success of the poem is that through these telegram-like phrases Emily Dickinson conveys the coming of summer in a way reminiscent of that in which the compact animal fable illustrates its moral.

The New England countryside, and especially the plants and flowers which grew there, were much loved by Emily Dickinson. In many poems she was to describe her affection for flowers, those which grew wild and those which she herself raised, and in the poem, "It's thoughts - and just One Heart -", assigned them an important function:

Flowers - to keep the Eyes - from going awkward -<sup>X</sup> .<sup>1</sup>

Another important background factor was the general absence of ornamentation which marked living conditions in the Amherst valley. Plainness of speech and dress, simplicity in the design of furniture, and many other manifestations of the Puritan heritage were cultivated. Lewis Mumford writes of the painter Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917) in terms which have a certain applicability to Emily Dickinson:

Ryder's compositions are often very simple, though they were studied out and readjusted with the same fine eye that the New England carpenter had used in making an aesthetic work out of the windows, walls, and roof-lines of the traditional farmhouse.<sup>2</sup>

One is perhaps cautious of using the word "centred" to describe Emily Dickinson's conviction of her own rootedness in New England, but it is this conviction which is referred to in the following poem:

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 495, Vol. II, p. 379.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1955), p. 224. (First published by Harcourt Brace and Company in 1931).

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune -  
Because I grow - where Robins do -

.....

Without the Snow's Tableau  
Winter, were lie - to me -  
Because I see - New Englandly -  
The Queen, discerns like me -  
Provincially -.<sup>1</sup>

There is no implied criticism of the limitation of the individual outlook in this lyric; instead there is a statement of Emily Dickinson's alertness to the effect of her environment.

(ii) An influence kept alive by the local newspaper was that of Yankee humour. The columns of The Springfield Republican provided Amherst with an outlet for this tradition. Its editors, Samuel Bowles and Josiah Holland, were both to become trusted friends of Emily Dickinson.

Bowles' father had launched the paper in 1824, and when, in 1844, Samuel suggested that the The Republican have a daily distribution in place of a weekly one, it was on his own shoulders that the chief managerial duties fell. Dr. Holland became associate editor in 1849, and he furthered the expansion begun by Bowles by introducing more book reviews and essays. Theodora Ward says of his work:

There was a robust quality in his writing which was free from the sanctimonious platitudes of the pulpit. Under the humorous comment that often gave a trivial surface to the matter, one felt the convictions of this man who loved God with the same fervor with which his ancestors had feared Him.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 285, Vol. I, p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> Theodora Ward, The Capsule of the Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 122.

In her first letter to Dr. and Mrs. Holland, Emily Dickinson indicated her witty appreciation of The Republican in a playfully macabre paragraph:

Who writes those funny accidents, where railroads meet each other unexpectedly, and gentlemen in factories get their heads cut off quite informally? The author, too, relates them in such sprightly way, that they are quite attractive. Vinnie was disappointed to-night, that there were not more accidents - I read the news aloud, while Vinnie was sewing.<sup>1</sup>

It was to The Republican that an anonymous friend sent an early valentine written by Emily Dickinson to William Howland, a tutor at Amherst College. Published on February 20, 1852, it is one of Emily Dickinson's longest poems, consisting of seventeen stanzas. The valentine shows a playful disrespect towards several traditionally sacrosanct subjects: "the Legislature" (stanza seven), "the brave Columbus" (stanza ten) and the Battle of Bunkers Hill (stanza twelve). The first two quatrains are drolly macaronic:

"Sic transit gloria mundi,"  
 "How doth the busy bee,"  
 "Dum vivimus vivamus,"  
 I stay mine enemy !

Oh "veni, vidi, vici!"  
 Oh caput cap-a-pie!  
 And oh "memento mori"  
 When I am far from thee!<sup>2</sup>

Of the seven poems published during Emily Dickinson's lifetime, five appeared in The Springfield Daily Republican.<sup>3</sup>

Whicher quotes Emily Fowler Ford, Emily Dickinson's school-mate at Amherst Academy, as saying:

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 133, Vol. I, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 3, Vol. I, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Appendix 9, Vol. III, p. 1207.

Emily Dickinson and Mary Humphrey were the wits of the school, and the humorists of the "comic column" ... Emily's contributions were often in the style of a funny little sermon... <sup>1</sup>

The "comic column" was part of a magazine Forest Leaves produced by a group of girls, of which Emily Dickinson was a member.

A humorous note was to continue to appear in Emily Dickinson's work long after she had left schoolgirl-magazines behind her.

Sometimes the humour was disguised, at other times it showed a verve close to that of the youthful valentine. This humour was also sharpened into satire, as in the following poem:

What Soft - Cherubic Creatures -  
These Gentlewomen are -  
One would as soon assault a Plush -  
Or violate a Star -

Such Dimity Convictions -  
A Horror so refined  
Of freckled Human Nature -  
Of Deity - ashamed -

It's such a common - Glory -  
A Fisherman's - Degree -  
Redemption - Brittle Lady -  
Be so - ashamed of Thee - <sup>2</sup>

These gentlewomen find "freckled" humankind so repellant that they lose for themselves any chance of earthly love, only in turn to be found unfitting by "Redemption". This point is expressed by the word "ashamed" in the concluding lines of the second and third stanzas.

The erotic connotations of the verbs "assault" and "violate" in the first verse are never allowed to become predominant. The poem concentrates instead on words reminiscent of the sphere and

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<sup>1</sup> George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), pp. 175 - 176.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 401, Vol. I, p. 314.

conversation of these "Cherubic Creatures". Thus an accumulating weight of satire surrounds such words as "a Plush", "Dimity", "refined", "freckled", "ashamed" and "common".

A poem frequently interpreted as showing Emily Dickinson posing as a young girl, when in reality she was already a grown woman, is " 'Arcturus' is his other name -".<sup>1</sup> What one suspects that Emily Dickinson is trying to do in this poem is not to deny her adulthood, but to convey adult emotions through the mask of a child. That this aspect of the poem is not intended to be the functioning centre of the lyric is made obvious in the constant breaking through of exclamations quite foreign to the child's viewpoint. Such exclamations can be seen in the second and fifth stanzas:

I slew a worm the other day -  
 A "Savan" passing by  
 Murrured "Resurgan" - "Centipeds" !  
 "Oh Lord - how frail are we" !  
 . . . . .  
 What once was "Heaven"  
 Is "Zenith" now -  
 Where I proposed to go  
 When Time's brief masquerade was done  
 Is mapped and charted too.

The final stanza is undoubtedly part of that group of poems which, in the view of John Brinnin, "makes a sophisticated reader writhe with discomfort".<sup>2</sup> Brinnin has more to say about what he considers to be the less admirable aspects of Emily Dickinson's character and the resultant poems:

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 70, Vol. I, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Laurel Poetry Series Emily Dickinson, ed. by John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), p. 13.

This Emily Dickinson is the writer of verses as quaintly flowered and full of jingles as a rack of greeting cards. She is the coy Emily who holds to an eternally protracted girlhood, whose childish postures have never been outgrown, who assumes the histrionic or culturally pious attitudes of her time and who flirts with all the creatures of the earth and air as if she were the inhabitant of a nineteenth century Disneyland. This is the Emily Dickinson who makes God "a noted clergyman," who reduces the figures of history and literature to the plaster bathos of the Rogers Group...<sup>1</sup>

Quoted below is the concluding stanza of " 'Arcturus' is his other name":

I hope the Father in the skies  
Will lift his little girl -  
Old fashioned - naughty - everything -  
Over the stile of "Pearl".

The gentle raillery of these lines, seen in the changing of the pearly gates to "the stile of Pearl" over which those entering heaven must be hoisted, in itself works against the idea that such poetry be termed maudlin.

Brinnin's comments concerning the nature poems appear to be somewhat unconsidered. Some of Emily Dickinson's finest lyrics fall into this very category, for instance, those about grass-snake/ and humming-bird:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass<sup>2</sup>

and

A Route of Evanescence.<sup>3</sup>

Of the many excellent poems about flowers, the following is an example:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 12 - 13. John Rogers (1829-1904), Massachusetts sculptor, began during the 1860's to produce small, realistic, story-telling statuettes of bronze or plaster, known as Rogers Groups, which depict contemporary life and events of the Civil War. James D. Hart, The Oxford Companion to American Literature (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 648.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 986, Vol. II, p. 711.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1463, Vol. III, p. 1010.

Through the Dark Sod - as Education -  
 The Lily passes sure -  
 Feels her white foot - no trepidation -  
 Her faith - no fear

Afterward - in the Meadow  
 Swinging her Beryl Bell -  
 The Mold-life - all forgotten - now -  
 In Extasy - and Dell - <sup>1</sup>

The complete confidence of the flower in its passage towards "Extasy" is shown in the first verse in words and phrases such as "sure", "no trepidation", and "no fear". The "Dark Sod" is reminiscent of the grave, but the temporality of this abode is emphasized:

The Mold-life - all forgotten - now -

so that it becomes merely an aid to achieving greater joy.

Whicher judges as follows concerning Emily Dickinson's humorous abilities:

A way of speaking that might afford amusement if applied to light or indifferent subjects remained her constant manner even when she dealt with her most piercing memories and profound reflections. She was able to separate any circumstance or idea at will from the sentiment normally attached to it, and thus make available for artistic use what otherwise would shock or dazzle the mind into inarticulateness. <sup>2</sup>

In performing this function the element of humour helps elucidate some of the poet's most important themes.

Emily Dickinson's letters, especially the earlier ones, frequently sound a humorous note, sometimes for the effect itself, but more often as a following out of her own advice to tell the

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 392, Vol. I, p. 308.

<sup>2</sup> George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 181.

truth "slant".<sup>1</sup> In a letter to her brother in 1853, she wrote:

Father said he never saw you looking in better health, or seeming in finer spirits. He didn't say a word about the Hippodrome or the museum, and he came home so stern that none of us dared to ask him, and besides Grandmother was here, and you certainly don't think I'd allude to a Hippodrome in the presence of that lady! I'd as soon think of popping fire crackers in the presence of Peter the Great!<sup>2</sup>

There is a lightness of touch present in these lines which is also frequently found in the lyrics. This pleasing deftness is apparent in the letters written many years later as well. The following extract is from a letter written to Mrs. J.G. Holland in September, 1884:

We have no Fruit this year, the Frost having barreled that in the Bud - except the "Fruits of the Spirit," but Vinnie prefers Baldwins - .<sup>3</sup>

The juxtaposition~~ing~~ of a portion of a Biblical text (Galatians 5:22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith.") with her sister's fondness for apples, is typical of Emily Dickinson's manner of allowing the interplay of two concepts to create their own peculiar illumination.

The use of the word "Fruit" in the above paragraph shows Emily Dickinson's fondness of the pun. One of the most remarkable

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1129, Vol. II, p. 792:

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant - "

Jack L. Capps considers these lines to be an echo of Robert Browning's "Art may tell a truth / obliquely." Capps writes:

"This Browning passage is one of several marked by light pencil lines parallel to the outer margins in Sue's copy of The Ring and the Book, a copy more than likely shared with Emily."

Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading: 1836-1886 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 130, Vol. I, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 936, Vol. III, p. 839.

instances of this usage is found in the opening line of the poem:

Death is the supple Suitor .<sup>1</sup>

In reading the poem one is alert to the importance of this adjective and to the artistry which dictated that it should be used. But a further revelation comes with the realization that from "supple" is emanating a second meaning, namely, "subtle". The appearance of words such as "stealthy", "innuendoes", "bisected" and "divulgeless" in the poem strengthens the possible connotation of "subtle".

Later in the poem there is another instance of what can be more easily recognized as a pun; this is to be found in the seventh line:

But brave at last with Bugles.

On a first reading, "Bugles" signifies the instruments which provide the fanfare for the triumphal procession taking place within the poem. A further consideration brings to light the fact that the word might also be interpreted as bugle beads. Such an idea is in the tradition of the many poems devoted to the ceremonial garbing for the occasion of death, as well as working along similar lines to the associating of Baldwin apples with the "Fruits of the Spirit".

The pun is, in fact, a useful example of the type of attitude found in many of Emily Dickinson's poems. Adjectives and adverbs with a double applicability, images which shuttle between the concrete and the abstract, apparently diverging directions which the poem appears to be taking, and other elements, testify to this Janus-quality. At its finest, this is unrelated to any notion of the deliberate creation of ambiguity, the contrived grafting on of the ambiguous as a means of securing "complexity" for the poem.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1445, Vol. III, p. 1001.

There is an unforcedness about it which would indicate that this was often the manner in which Emily Dickinson's mind quite naturally found expression.

(iii) Another viewpoint of the poet's was that of the mental traveller,<sup>1</sup> which phrase is being used in the Blakeian sense for the one who not only could summon the forces of possibility and experimentation to the upstairs bedroom of the large house on Main Street, but who was also constantly in their presence. It is in this sense that the following stanzas can best be understood:

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -  
 For - put them side by side -  
 The one the other will contain  
 With ease - and You - beside -

The Brain is deeper than the sea -  
 For - hold them - Blue to Blue -  
 The one the other will absorb -  
 As Sponges - Buckets - do .<sup>2</sup>

References to the enormous power of the human brain are, in fact, frequent in Emily Dickinson's poetry, and the dislocation of the brain is not a matter easily righted:

The Brain, within it's Groove  
 Runs evenly - and true -  
 But let a Splinter swerve -  
 'Twere easier for You -

To put a Current back -  
 When Floods have slit the Hills -  
 And Scooped a Turnpike for Themselves -  
 And trodden out the Mills -<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Blake, "The Mental Traveller" in Blake: Complete Writings, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 424.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 632, Vol. II, p. 486.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 556, Vol. II, p. 425.

The unnatural changing of the course of the brain is associated, in the above quotation, with the chaos and upheaval of great floods; in a later poem it is linked to unnatural suffering and mutations:

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!  
 When they dislocate my Brain!  
 Amputate my freckled Bosom!  
 Make me bearded like a man! <sup>1</sup>

The suffering brain can become a source and repository of horrors infinitely more terrifying than those of a material or supernatural nature. The following are the first, fourth and fifth verses from a five-stanza poem written in 1863:

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

.....

Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed -  
 Should startle most -  
 Assassin hid in our Apartment  
 Be Horror's least.

The Body - borrows a Revolver -  
 He bolts the Door -  
 O'erlooking a superior spectre -  
 Or More - . <sup>2</sup>

The reason for the horrific strength exerted by the brain is here shown to be the fact that the suffering involves

Ourselves behind ourselves, ...

It is a feeling more intimate even than those which Emily Dickinson attempted to convey by images relating to the marrow and bones of the human body:

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1737, Vol. III, p. 1168.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 670, Vol. II, p. 516.

I tried to think a lonelier Thing  
 Than any I had seen -  
 Some Polar Expiation - An Omen in the Bone  
 Of Death's tremendous nearness - .<sup>1</sup>

It is a natural step from this topic to the theme of madness in Emily Dickinson's work. The allure of the notion of madness seems to have hovered like a blight over much of the commentary devoted to the poems. Those critics who wish to find autobiographical equations do not usually commit themselves to the statement that Emily Dickinson once passed through a period of insanity, but make references to a time when she feared its onslaught. This may be true, but it is unlikely that evidence will ever be forthcoming to substantiate these opinions. What can, however, be verified is that those poems in which madness is mentioned are not the products of an unbalanced mind.

The actual number of poems in which madness features is comparatively small, and even amongst these there are some where the word is intended to convey an abundance of joyous delight, as in the lyric containing these lines:

A little Madness in the Spring  
 Is wholesome even for the King, .<sup>2</sup>

The ~~word~~<sup>idea</sup> is often used in a similar way in Emily Dickinson's letters:

... in thinking of those I love, my reason is all gone from me, and I do fear sometimes that I must make a hospital for the hopelessly insane, and chain me up there such times, so I wont injure you. <sup>3</sup>

Again, in a letter to Dr. Holland written about twenty-six years later than the above, she employs a quotation from King Lear:

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 532, Vol. II, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1333, Vol. III, p. 921.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 77, Vol. I, p. 181.

We hope that you are happy so far as Peace is possible,  
to Mortal and immortal Life - for those ways "Madness  
lies." <sup>1</sup>

Other poems express a sense of thoughts being without  
sequence, of matters which usually correspond or correlate  
frustrating the brain by their refusal to do so:

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 unravelled out of Sound  
Like Balls - upon a Floor. <sup>2</sup>

The poem exhibits a firm thematic construction, for the first two  
lines present the dramatic horror of the situation in a manner  
which strives to render the horror comprehensible. The opening  
line announces the awful fact, the second then expresses it more  
acutely in the form of a simile. These two lines show the "I" as  
the sufferer, a state which is changed in lines three to six, where  
the "I" strives to join the two halves. The two concluding lines  
of the poem describe the breaking up of sequence. The image is  
one of a ball of wool unrolling, yet the idea of mercury dis-  
persing itself seems also to be implied.

It is interesting to note that the phrase "out of Sound" in  
the seventh line was originally "out of reach". The former  
increases the distance between sequence and its now dissipated parts,  
for a state beyond sound implies a greater distance and  
irretrievability than do the words "out of reach."

The idea of separation which has been presented throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 544, Vol. II, p. 605.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 937, Vol. II, p. 682.

poem - "Cleaving", "split", "could not make them fit" and "strove to join" - is thus reinforced in the final lines, so that the frustrated attempts at uniting the segments become a metaphor for the agony of what might be termed madness.

Another poem, "Dont put up my Thread & Needle - ",<sup>1</sup> presents the realization that, when "sight" is "crooked", the performance of the most ordinary tasks becomes an impossibility. The ostensible work here mentioned is the sewing of seams, but the final stanza indicates that this period of inactivity is one of not being able, but of still yearning, to participate in life:

Till then - dreaming I am sowing  
Fetch the seam I missed -  
Closer - so I - at my sleeping -  
Still surmise I stitch - .<sup>1</sup>

This is one of those periods of time which Emily Dickinson referred to in a letter written shortly after the death of her father: "Though it is many nights, my mind never comes home."<sup>2</sup>

A poem written in 1862 relates the strain of maintaining some form of mental equilibrium amidst threatening forces:

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  
  
Till I could take the Balance  
That tips so frequent, now,  
It takes me all the time to poise -  
And then - it does'nt stay - .<sup>3</sup>

What emerges from these poems is the sense of trying to find fitting expression for this mental stress and feeling of divorce between

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 617, Vol. II, p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 414, Vol. II, p. 526.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 576, Vol. II, p. 440.

parts of the self which would normally operate in conjunction. In presenting this dislocation there is a high degree of organization in the poems, an organization which results in a stanza as lucid as the following:

And Something's odd - within -  
 That person that I was -  
 And this One - do not feel the same -  
 Could it be Madness - this? <sup>1</sup>

The careful positioning gives to the question an air of speculation, a standing aside and a tone of objectivity.

For matters of comparison, the following poem, the work of a twentieth century poet, can be usefully examined:

#### Ringing the Bells

And this is the way they ring  
 the bells in Bedlam  
 and this is the bell-lady  
 who comes each Tuesday morning  
 to give us a music lesson  
 and because the attendants make you go  
 and because we mind by instinct,  
 like bees caught in the wrong hive,  
 we are the circle of the crazy ladies  
 who sit in the lounge of the mental house  
 and smile at the smiling woman  
 who passes us each a bell,  
 who points at my hand  
 that holds my bell, E flat,  
 and this is the grey dress next to me  
 who grumbles as if it were special  
 to be old, to be old,  
 and this is the small hunched squirrel girl  
 on the other side of me  
 who picks at the hairs over her lip,  
 who picks at the hairs over her lip all day,  
 and this is how the bells really sound,  
 as untroubled and clean  
 as a workable kitchen,  
 and this is always my bell responding  
 to my hand that responds to the lady  
 who points at me, E flat;  
 and although we are no better for it,  
 they tell you to go. And you do. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 410, Vol. /I, p. 319.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Sexton, Selected Poems (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 21.

This poem, written by Anne Sexton, recounts an incident from the time spent by the poet in a mental hospital. The sense of distress which emerges from these lines, concerned as they are with the mentally deranged, is very different from that experienced in the Emily Dickinson poem. A point which must of necessity be established at the outset is that no statement is being made as to the mental state of the poet, and that it is only with the poem that this discussion is concerned.

One of the first aspects to arrest the reader is the sense of the narrator's pointing at people and things:

And this is the way ...  
 and this is the bell-lady...  
 and this is the grey dress ...  
 and this is the small hunched squirrel girl  
 and this is how the bells really sound  
 and this is always my bell responding.

Amidst the regularity of the music lesson - "each Tuesday morning" - certain things are indicated as an assurance of their being there, although the lesson has the sameness of futility about its every occurrence.

The circle of patients is first compared to "bees caught in the wrong hive" which implies an imprisonment in a mode of living which can in no way be related back to one's self. The next development is the viewing of people as things, as the clothes they wear:

and this is the grey dress next to me,  
 as their fidgeting actions:  
 and this is the small hunched squirrel girl,

and as the instruments clutched in their hands:

who points at me, E flat; .

But the chief horror which the poem conveys is the perverse causality of events:

and because the attendants make you go  
and because we mind by instinct,

and:

and this is always my bell responding  
to my hand that responds to the lady  
who points at me, E flat;  
and although we are no better for it,  
they tell you to go. And you do.

There is an absence of reason behind the actions, seen in the senseless grinning of the patients:

we are the circle of the crazy ladies  
who sit in the lounge of the mental house  
and smile at the smiling woman.

The harrowing nature of the Emily Dickinson poem arises from frustrated attempts to achieve something, i.e. to "take the Balance". In the Anne Sexton poem, however, one is within an endlessly repeating cycle which leads nowhere. Instead of the many "and's" having an accumulative function, they result in nothing more than the despairing resignation of the final lines:

and although we are no better for it,  
they tell you to go. And you do.

Every action described within the poem is repetitive but aimless:

and this is the grey dress next to me  
who grumbles as if it were special  
to be old, to be old,  
and this is the small hunched squirrel girl  
on the other side of me  
who picks at the hairs over her lip,  
who picks at the hairs over her lip all day, ...

The Emily Dickinson poem is concerned with inability to reach a goal, but here there is no goal, only human beings whose

lives are forced along and activated by the "bell-lady" and the asylum attendants.

(iv) To move from the disordered brain to one whose richly imaginative functionings are the source of boundless experiences, one finds the clearest indications of the mental traveller there in the frequent mention of places geographically very far from Amherst. Emily Dickinson uses these place names as symbols of things utterly different from those to which she is accustomed, and also of the yearned for; or, in exactly the opposite way, to show that the fame of these faraway places can be surpassed by the achievements taking place within the human mind.

India or the Indies is often associated with fantastic wealth, as in the following lines:

The Sackcloth - hangs upon the nail -  
The rock I used to wear -  
But where my moment of Brocade -  
My - drop - of India? <sup>1</sup>

The same place name is used to emphasize the fact that love is of greater stature than such fabulous riches:

How destitute is he  
Whose Gold is firm  
Who finds it everytime  
The small stale Sum -  
When Love with but a Pence  
Will so display  
As is a disrespect  
To India <sup>2</sup>

This manner of expressing the power of love is found in the work of many poets, the most famous example being perhaps Donne's line

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 430, Vol. I, p. 333.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1477, Vol. III, p. 1022.

"O my America! my new-found-land".<sup>1</sup> The following example is taken from Elizabeth Smart's By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept, a work of fiction which could be described as poetic prose. Whereas Donne was using a place name to give stature to his love, Elizabeth Smart employs the names of discoverers <sup>to</sup> ~~which~~ magnify her love by diminishing their achievements:

Take away what is supposed to be enviable: the silver brushes with my names, the long gown, the car, the hundred suitors, poise in a restaurant - I am still richer than the greediest heart could conceive, able to pour my overflowing benevolence over even the tight-mouthed host. Take everything I have, or could have, or anything the world could offer, I am still empress of a new-found land, that neither Columbus nor Cortez could have equalled, even in their instigating dream.<sup>2</sup>

Emily Dickinson also employs the Indies metaphor when praising George Eliot's Daniel Deronda: "Thank you, dear, for the "Eliot" - She is the Lane to the Indies, Columbus was looking for."<sup>3</sup> On other occasions Emily Dickinson uses adjectives such as "African" or "Asiatic" so that they swell out with implication an otherwise brief quatrain:

No Autumn's intercepting Chill  
Appalls this Tropic Breast -  
But African exuberance  
And Asiatic rest.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, "Elegie XIX To His Mistris Going to Bed", Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. by John Hayward (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1962), p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Smart, By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept (London: Panther Books, 1965), pp. 48 - 49. (First published in 1945 by Editions Poetry London, Nicholson and Watson).

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 456, Vol. II, p. 551.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1516, Vol. III, p. 1046.

This type of usage expands the nouns "Breast", "Exuberance" and "rest", so that the adjectives - and in the case of "Tropic", a noun with an adjectival function - fulfil, on a visual level as well, their primal rôle of contributing towards the stature of a noun.

A similar employment of faraway places is found in the lyric "I think the Hemlock likes to stand",<sup>1</sup> of which these are the final two verses:

The Hemlock's nature thrives - on cold -  
The Gnash of Northern Winds  
Is sweetest nutriment - to him -  
His best Norwegian Wines -

To Satin Races - he is nought -  
But Children on the Don,  
Beneath his Tabernacles, play,  
And Dnieper Wrestlers, run.

In addition to the references to Norway and Russia in these stanzas, the second verse alludes to Lapland:

An instinct for the Hoar, the Bald -  
Lapland's - necessity - .

One notes the stating of the qualities "the Hoar, the Bald", and then their assimilation into, and expression through, the word "Lapland".

An interesting tale is attached to an early review of this poem. On December 11, 1890, an article appeared in The Independent, reviewing Poems - First Series in which this lyric was first published. The writer of the article, intent on introducing further proper nomenclature into the poems, suggested that the "Satin Races" of the final stanza was a misprint for "Latin Races". Mrs. Todd commented as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 525, Vol. II, p. 403.

"To satin races he is nought." Ah ha! gloated this critic, there is a mistake! For he thought that Emily must have meant, as well as written, "Latin" races! ... If any of them had studied Emily as I had, they would have known that to use the phrase "Latin races" would have been as impossible for her as to refer to "Nordic facial characteristics" or to "Aramaic culture." She was never pedantic. <sup>1</sup>

Despite the alterations which she herself made to Emily Dickinson's poems, Mrs. Todd did make her statement from an informed position, having been immersed in a study of the manuscripts for more than a year. But her declaration as to what was not possible for Emily Dickinson to write is perhaps a shade too certain, for the suddenness of the wholly unexpected was a gesture which Emily Dickinson was subtly adept at making.

In general, one notices in the use of proper names a predilection for mountains, especially the "Himmalehs"; for volcanoes such as Etna, Vesuvius and Popocatepetl and for the Caspian Sea. The continent most mentioned is South America, with allusions to Brazil, San Domingo, Manzanilla, Chimborazo, Potosi, Buenos Aires and the Cordilleras.

It is too crude a judgment merely to say that the appearance of these names gives a universality to the poems of Emily Dickinson. They do, to a certain extent, achieve this, but they also justify that statement once made in a short poem:

Perception of an object costs  
 Precise the Object's loss -  
 Perception in itself a Gain  
 Replying to it's Price -  
 The Object Absolute - is nought -  
 Perception sets it fair  
 And then upbraids a Perfectness  
 That situates so far - <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1071, Vol. II, p. 757.

These countries, rivers, mountains and seas are like icebergs in the poems, with an undertow of implications which, because they are not fully "perceived" in the sense of being classified into some compartment of knowledge, exist in continual possibility.

(v) The link between the usage of foreign names and the characteristic to be examined next, namely, experiment, is that they both imply the idea of exploration. This is invariably an exploration of the self, though in one of the earlier poems the fervour of the emotion of rejoicing is seen as a journey into the ocean:

Exultation is the going  
Of an inland soul to sea,  
Past the houses - past the headlands -  
Into deep Eternity -

Bred as we, among the mountains,  
Can the sailor understand  
The divine intoxication  
Of the first League out from land? <sup>1</sup>

Of the poems dealing with exploration of the self, one is detailed for closer examination in a later chapter, namely, "Soto! Explore thyself!". <sup>2</sup> Another belonging to the same group is also worth further study:

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind -  
The Mind is a single State -  
The Heart and the Mind together make  
A single Continent -

One - is the Population -  
Numerous enough -  
This ecstatic Nation  
Seek - it is Yourself. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 76, Vol. I, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 832, Vol. II, p. 631. See pp. 240 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1354, Vol. III, p. 935.

The first stanza shows a nicety in linking together the ideas in a step-by-step construction to arrive eventually at the word "Continent". The second verse opens with the paradox that the population is but a single being, and the puzzle works itself out in the two concluding lines in relating the "Nation" back to the "population" and "Yourself" to "One".

It is this theme which is returned to in poem after poem, the fact that:

No Romance sold unto  
 Could so enthrall a Man  
 As the perusal of  
 His Individual One - .<sup>1</sup>

If the attitude of the mind is one of experiment, there is the consequent possibility of an ever-present realization of new facts. This attitude implies the readiness to confront all manner of discoveries, with the hope that the reward will help to conquer the fear which must, of necessity, assault the adventuring mind. There are several poems in which the word "experiment" is used, and the following seems best suited to exemplify the point in question:

Experiment to me  
 Is everyone I meet  
 If it contain a Kernel?  
 The Figure of a Nut  
  
 Presents upon a Tree  
 Equally plausibly  
 But Meat within, is requisite  
 To Squirrels and to Me <sup>2</sup>

The idea which emerges most distinctly from this poem is that without experiment one may be unmindful of the essence of things, the "Kernel" and the "Meat within".

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 669, Vol. II, p. 516.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1073, Vol. II, p. 759.

These ideas might at first be thought of as being in direct opposition to those expressed in the poem

Perception of an object costs  
Precise the Object's loss -

and to a certain extent they are. One should recognize the fact that within Emily Dickinson's work many contradictions are present. Skilful juggling of concepts may secure a type of alliance between certain of these oppositions, but this would be a labour detrimental to a true understanding of the poems.

The relating of the idea of perception's price being the loss of the object and the idea that "Meat within, is requisite" lies in the tone of the poems in which these thoughts are given utterance. Perception of the quiddity of an object does not imply a wish to compartmentalize the knowledge gained, but rather a desire to recognize the uniqueness of the thing, thereby granting it a greater individuality.

One poem in particular - that about the humming-bird - exhibits the union of this search for the quiddity and the suggestions evoked by a place name:

A Route of Evanescence  
With a revolving Wheel -  
A Resonance of Emerald -  
A Rush of Cochineal -  
And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts it's tumbled Head -  
The mail from Tunis, probably,  
An easy Morning's Ride - <sup>1</sup>

The first four lines are concerned with the incredible swiftness of the bird's flight, the images combining the visual, "Emerald" and "Cochineal"; the kinesthetic, "revolving Wheel" and "Rush"; and the auditory, "A Resonance". The "r" alliteration of the

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1463, Vol. III, p. 1010.

whirring wings is built up mainly through the phrases "A Route of ...", "A Resonance of ..." and "A Rush of ...." Lines five and six tell how one can detect the presence of the bird only by the blossoms which are left nodding in the wake of its flight. The hyperbole of the two concluding lines expresses the bird's amazing speed:

The Mail from Tunis, probably,

In his footnotes to the poem Johnson makes the following point:

A possible reason for E[mily] D[ickinson]'s selection of Tunis (line 7) is set forth in Frank Davidson, "A note on Emily Dickinson's Use of Shakespeare", New England Quarterly XVIII (1945), 407-408, which cites Antonio's comment to Sebastian about Claribel, in The Tempest (II, 1, 246-248):

She that is queen of Tunis; she that dwells  
Ten leagues beyond man's life; she that from Naples  
Can have no note, unless the sun were post -

Another poem written fifteen years earlier than the above makes the point that timidity to experiment entails the loss of a world of undreamed of wonderment. If one does not dare to dare, one is left with only the dross:

Herein a Blossom lies -  
A Sepulchre, between -  
Cross it, and overcome the Bee -  
Remain - 'tis but a Hind.<sup>1</sup>

In the poems of Emily Dickinson, experiment is enduring, and finally becomes another name for the experience of death:

Experiment escorts us last -  
His pungent company  
Will not allow an Axiom  
An Opportunity<sup>2</sup>

If living is to be regarded as an experiment, so too is death, to which one must go with the comfort of lessons learned from life.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 899, Vol. II, p. 661.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1770, Vol. III, p. 1184.

It is this attitude which lies behind the writing of the many death poems, which are experimental soundings of what lies ahead.

To have experiment as a constant mental companion brings rewards, notably, an alertness in outlook. But it also makes great demands on the one who accepts it as a way of life, in that all axioms must be examined before being accepted.

(vi) The idea of possibility is obviously related to that of experiment, which can, in one sense, be viewed as the releasing of the possibilities inherent in the unexplored. It is useful to emphasize the fact that Emily Dickinson sees experiment as allied to the power of imagination. In a one stanza poem, to which no date can be assigned, there being no known autograph copy, and the Johnson text deriving from a transcript made by Susan Dickinson, Emily Dickinson states this belief:

The gleam of an heroic Act  
Such strange illumination<sup>o</sup>  
The Possible's slow fuse is lit  
By the Imagination<sup>1</sup>

The radiating influence, the "strange illumination<sup>o</sup>" as it is termed in the poem, must indeed be immense when the bounty of the possible is exploited by the imagination.

The most explicit statement on possibility is to be found in the following poem:

I dwell in Possibility -  
A fairer House than Prose -  
More numerous of Windows -  
Superior - for Doors -  
  
Of Chambers as the Cedars -  
Impregnable of Eye -  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky -

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1687, Vol. III, p. 1146.

Of Visitors - the fairest -  
 For Occupation - This -  
 The Spreading wide my narrow Hands  
 To gather Paradise - <sup>1</sup>

The opening line endows the word "Possibility" with the aura of a statement such as "I live in a state of grace". Of the many courses open to her at this point, Emily Dickinson chose to use the metaphor of a house, and then allowed various attributes of the building each to render a particular significance.

A natural question to ask is/ why possibility is:

A fairer House than Prose -

and also why prose was chosen to constitute the second member of the contrast. The answer to the first question is seemingly laid down for one in the poem, yet there remains a quality of elusiveness in one's response to this matter. This experience of the meaning of the poem sliding away from the comprehension of the reader is brought under a little more control when one realizes that, like so many of the poems, this one too has a parallel interpretation, which is the expression of ideas relating to the nature of poetic creation. On the primary level of interpretation one may say that possibility has a greater accessibility than prose. But the former also provides a privacy:

Of Chambers as the Cedars -  
 Impregnable of Eye -

and a durability:

And for an Everlasting Roof  
 The Umbrels of the Sky - .

The beginning of the final stanza continues the metaphor of the house with the mention of "Visitors" and "Occupation", but the two

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 657, Vol. II, p. 506.

concluding lines cause the whole carefully wrought house metaphor to be demolished, for the occupation is:

The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise - .

What finally emerges is the continuous interchangeability of possibility and paradise, for each is the other. In other words, the mind which is "open" can at any moment enter paradise.

Perhaps "Prose" was used as an antithesis to possibility because, for Emily Dickinson, it lacked the complete naturalness with which she felt herself respond to poetry. To enter the realms of possibility, poetry or paradise, one had merely to stretch forth one's hands - mental or physical - and gather the ever-awaiting splendour.

Before concluding this section, one other aspect of the notion of experiment should be discussed. This is its occasional dramatization in the metaphor of gambling. The metaphor intensifies the thrill of gaining "an all" or being utterly deprived as the result of the throw of the dice. In the final stanza of the following poem, Emily Dickinson hints at the idea of good and evil forces standing in readiness to take possession of the soul:

Soul, wilt thou toss again?  
By just such a hazard  
Hundreds have lost indeed -  
But tens have won an all -

Angels' breathless ballot  
Lingers to record thee -  
Imps in eager Caucus  
Raffle for my Soul! <sup>1</sup>

In another poem in which the gambling metaphor is also employed, she notes a further possibility, that the excess of bliss, the

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 139, Vol. I, p. 99.

actuality of Heaven, might prove to be overwhelming:

And if I gain! Oh Gun at Sea!  
 Oh Bells, that in the Steeples be!  
 At first, repeat it slow!  
 For Heaven is a different thing,  
 Conjectured, and waked sudden in -  
 And might extinguish me! <sup>1</sup>

Experiment and possibility have thus the elements of forethought and calculation, but can also contain the almost irrational chance of one's destiny.

What is constant about possibility and experiment is that their implications, demands and effects are almost invariably present in Emily Dickinson's poems, giving to the oeuvre a sense of mobility, of anticipation in awaiting the discoveries which are always being made.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 172, Vol. I, p. 126.

## CHAPTER III

### TIME IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

(i)	A further discussion of Emily Dickinson's viewpoint and her consciousness of the word	54
(ii)	Immortality, eternity, infinity	58
(iii)	Sunrise, noon, sunset, spring, autumn	64
(iv)	Death	89
(v)	Circumference	111

The previous section was concerned with an exploring of certain elements present in Emily Dickinson's viewpoint, such as sources of strength in the New England atmosphere and in the concepts of travelling, possibility and experimentation inter alia. To claim that Emily Dickinson's outlook on the subjects treated in her poems was New England-like and little else, is to do injustice to her particular achievement as a poet.

This chapter is intended to be a further examination of her unique viewpoint. This viewpoint has been said to be double, a statement which in itself requires some expansion. The first step towards such an attempted definition was measured in the preceding chapter. This was the fact that Emily Dickinson could regard nearly everything both as unique in itself and also as containing a significance as yet unrealized. This idea is explicitly enunciated in the following poem:

To hear an Oriole sing  
 May be a common thing -  
 Or only a divine.

It is not <sup>of</sup> the Bird  
 Who sings the same, unheard,  
 As unto Crowd -

The Fashion of the Ear  
 Attireth that it hear  
 In Dun, or fair -

So whether it be Rune,  
 Or whether it be none  
 Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree -"  
 The Skeptic - showeth me -  
 "No Sir! In Thee!" <sup>1</sup>

The "divine" of the first stanza is both an adjective with the noun "thing" understood from the preceding line, and a noun.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 526, Vol. II, p. 404.

The noun elements in this word are felt even more strongly when one encounters "Rune" in the first line of the third stanza. Working together, these two words establish the idea of something archetypal and sacred. "A divine" may even be interpreted as meaning "a clue", for Emily Dickinson was fond of the archaic meanings of words, so that the bird's song becomes a hint of, or a cipher for, a greater, hidden beauty.

The sceptic is the person who will not believe that the ostensibly ordinary thing is also divine. The resulting loss is occasioned by a poverty within himself, for there is no "Tune" in his being to respond to the bird's song. The attitude of the viewer, and how it affects what he experiences is, in fact, the main subject of this lyric:

So whether it be Rune,  
Or whether it be none  
Is of within.

It is significant that terms related to the sphere of magic and portents are used as metaphors of the oriole's song. This song is shown to be part of the landscape within which it is heard, and as belonging to a realm to which the listener can gain entrance by his response to this music.

With this starting point established, namely, the great stress laid on the attitude of the viewer, one can begin to single out further elements which help create Emily Dickinson's viewpoint. This course involves a danger; ~~namely~~ the tendency to schematize a progression by using extracts from the poems to create an easily comprehensible picture of poetic development.

There are several reasons why such a practice presents itself as inviting. The first is that quotation from the poems is obviously necessary to illustrate the points being raised; but

quotation, because necessarily selective, may be misleading.

A reading of a poem which neglects the movement taking place in the poem as a whole, or the direction towards which the lyric is orientating itself, tends to overstress the aphoristic quality of Emily Dickinson's work. The point is not that these epigrammatic characteristics - which make important contributions to those poems in which they appear - should be glossed over as detracting from more noteworthy qualities, but that they should be used with some caution to support the various arguments being advanced.

(i) One has always to remember with Emily Dickinson, as with many poets, that the mood varies, and to fix a meaning onto a certain word, however frequently that word may appear in the poems, is a dangerous practice. Emily Dickinson's reverence for the power of the individual word is shown not only in the several poems devoted to this matter,<sup>1</sup> but also in the language of all the poems.

Among the poems footnoted under 1 there is one which deals with the immediate effect of the word:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades -  
How glittering they shone -  
And every One unbarred a Nerve  
Or wantoned with a Bone -

She never deemed - she hurt -  
That - is not Steel's Affair -  
A vulgar grimace in the Flesh -  
How ill the Creatures bear - <sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the adjective "pretty" is the horrific imagery of the effects of these words. They are barbed with malevolent

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<sup>1</sup> Poems no. 479, Vol. I, p. 367; no. 1126, Vol. II, p. 790; no. 1212, Vol. III, p. 845; no. 1261, Vol. III, p. 878; no. 1409, Vol. III, p. 978; no. 1651, Vol. III, p. 1129.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 479, Vol. I, p. 367.

intentions, and have a licentious action, for we are told that they "wanton'd with a Bone -". These words are being used merely to ramify the speaker's self-superiority:

She never deemed - she hurt -

and:

How ill the Creatures bear - .

To use words to these ends is to commit a crime in Emily Dickinson's sphere of word ethics.

Words, whether spoken or written, have for Emily Dickinson a radiating influence. The saying aloud of a word is a way of breathing life into it:

A word is dead,  
When it is said,  
Some say.

I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day. <sup>1</sup>

Another lyric emphasizes the power of the written word:

A Word dropped careless on a Page  
May stimulate an eye  
When folded in perpetual seam  
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds  
We may inhale Despair  
At distances of Centuries  
From the Malaria - <sup>2</sup>

The word outlives the author and forever continues to express its influence. This fact imposes an awesome burden on the dedicated writer, or, as he is here termed, the "Maker". Committing words to paper, uttering them or encountering them, are experiences of a deep and mighty import.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1212, Vol. III, p. 845.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1261, Vol. III, p. 878.

One of the poems warns that:

Could mortal lip divine  
The undeveloped Freight  
Of a delivered syllable  
'Twould crumble with the weight.<sup>1</sup>

The fact is further emphasized when in one of her letters Emily Dickinson practises the caution she advises:

I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but few  
and each must be the chiefest, ...<sup>2</sup>

The individual word can be so weighted with significance that the meaning of the poem "is somewhat obscured by the constant impact of words which seem to be separate entities refusing to assume a subordinate position in the poem", as Donald Thackrey says.<sup>3</sup> Emily Dickinson's consciousness of the word is thus a vital factor in her poetic outlook, and the word is seen in a dual manner, as a tool of the utmost usefulness, and also as something whose influence extends into areas at which the user can never guess.

Another reason why the schematization referred to earlier presents itself as attractive is that it can help assure the reader or critic that he has not become lost in the poems. It can be made to serve as a path for the reader himself, and in so doing can even undermine the complexity and subtlety of Emily Dickinson's poetic vision and the expression of this vision in her lyrics.

There must obviously be a searching for trends and developments within the oeuvre, for otherwise one might incline towards the view that the body of work is directionless and is composed

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1409, Vol. III, p. 978.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 873, Vol. III, p. 802.

<sup>3</sup> Donald E. Thackrey, "The Communication of the Word" in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 51.

solely of isolated impulses. But this search can be more rewardingly pursued through the study of the larger tendencies implied by the poems ~~rather~~ than by forcing the lyrics to yield an interpretation corresponding to the reader's preconceived ideas.

With the main danger no longer an unknown quality, one can begin the examination of Emily Dickinson's view of objects, experiences and emotions, and of how these are expressed in the poems.

There exist several ways of approaching this problem, and that chosen here has as its starting point two characteristics found in the poems. One is Emily Dickinson's concern with the question of time; the other is a feature of many of the poems and is stated by Porter as follows:

Her tendency is first to establish an equivocal locus of meaning in a poem through imagery that has more than one possible symbolic extension. The poet then proceeds to base her line of thought in only one of the symbolic extensions. The result is that, while the central argument of the poem unfolds, the other symbolic possibilities are held in suspension, functioning as complicating commentary or subdued background texture.<sup>1</sup>

Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with the problem of time shows itself in various forms. A profitable beginning is to look at examples from two large groups of poems, firstly, those dealing with concepts such as immortality, infinity and eternity, and, secondly, those concerned with more specific moments of time. Discussion of the related topic of death, and Emily Dickinson's complex attitudes towards it, is deferred to a later section of this chapter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 89 ff.

(ii) The poet's ideas about immortality are best expressed in those poems whose subject matter is fame. The most obvious contrast between fame and immortality is not difficult to establish. The ephemeral nature of the former is shown in a poem such as that below:

Fame is a bee.  
     It has a song -  
 It has a sting -  
     Ah, too, it has a wing.<sup>1</sup>

The ambiguous nature of fame is expressed particularly through the indenting of the second and fourth lines, which encourages the reader to relate the words "song" and "wing". One of the effects of this quatrain is a sense of moving in and out of concepts, almost as if one is following the flight of the insect, so that the favourable images of fame ("bee" and "song") as also the adverse ("sting" and "wing") are perceived kinesthetically.

Another poem emphasizes the invidious effect that fame can have upon human beings:

Fame is a fickle food  
 Upon a shifting plate  
 Whose table once a  
 Guest but not  
 The second time is set  
 Whose crumbs the crows inspect  
 And with ironic caw  
 Flap past it to the  
 Farmers Corn  
 Men eat of it and die<sup>2</sup>

Here, too, the ambiguous nature of fame is illuminated, especially through the adjectives "fickle" and "shifting". The crows ironically survey the morsels and "Flap past" to enjoy more natural foodstuffs, but the human being does not so discriminate, and must pay the price.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1763, Vol. III, p. 1182.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1659, Vol. III, p. 1132.

The most balanced attitude towards fame is this one:

To earn it by disdaining it  
 Is Fame's consummate Fee -  
 He loves what spurns him -  
 Look behind - He is pursuing thee.

- - -  
 So let us gather - every Day -  
 The Aggregate of  
 Life's Bouquet  
 Be Honor and not shame - 1

An absorption into the continuous present will thus bring finer rewards than the devotion of a lifetime to the pursuit of renown.

The two ideas of fame and immortality are brought together in the following well-known lyric:

Some - Work for Immortality -  
 The Chiefest part, for Time -  
 He - compensates - immediately -  
 The former - Checks - on Fame -

Slow Gold - but Everlasting -  
 The Bullion of Today -  
 Contrasted with the Currency  
 Of Immortality -

A Beggar - here and there -  
 Is gifted to discern  
 Beyond the Broker's insight -  
 One's - Money - One's - the Mine - 2

Whereas the previous poem contained images relating to food, here there are monetary phrases and images: "compensate<sup>s</sup>", "Slow Gold", "Bullion", "Currency", "Broker's insight" and

One's - Money - One's - the Mine - .

This imagery functions as a filter for the contrasting of different time cycles. Fame must always be limited to the more immediate return, as that of money, while the cycle of immortality is slower,

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1427, Vol. III, p. 990.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 406, Vol. I, p. 316.

vaster, and infinitely less comprehensible. Immortality is the plummetless, never diminishing "Mine", beside which "Money" must appear paltry and insufficient.

To be numbered among those who

... Work for Immortality -

one must attempt to stand "outside" the passage of time as it is ordinarily conceived. As clear as the "Mines"/"Money" contrast of the final stanza, is the "Today"/"Immortality" comparison of the second stanza. If one is not the slave of time, the reward will proliferate like a crystalline growth, slowly enlarging over periods of time.

The problem of fame was linked, in the case of Emily Dickinson, with the question of her almost total opposition to the publication of her work. She stated her position in one of the earliest letters to Higginson:

I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish" - that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin -

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase - and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me - then - My Barefoot - Rank is better - .<sup>1</sup>

To these ideas Emily Dickinson always remained faithful. Those few poems which were published during her lifetime were invariably incorrectly reproduced, a fact which strengthened her own beliefs on this matter.

The best known incident in connection with the early publication of the poems is that relating to the appearance of the poem, "Success is counted sweetest" - the opening line of which is made even more ironic by the context of events - in A Masque of Poets in

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 265, Vol. II, p. 408.

1878. The collection was part of a "No Name Series" (in which all the poems were printed anonymously) undertaken by Roberts Brothers. Emily Dickinson's friend, the poet and novelist, Helen Hunt Jackson, was determined that at least one of Emily Dickinson's poems should be included in the volume, and a personal visit and several letters testify to this determination. Eventually Mrs. Jackson submitted the poem referred to, probably without securing Emily Dickinson's permission. The result was even worse than Emily Dickinson had anticipated, as no less than five alterations were made to the text. Never again in any of her correspondence with Helen Hunt Jackson did she allude to the question of publication.<sup>1</sup>

The bridge between the concepts of immortality and eternity is made by a two stanza poem written in 1863, wherein the poet states that love can confer immortality. This is a manner of upsetting time's usual course, for it is the attainment of timelessness amidst the passage of time:

Two - were immortal twice -  
 The privilege of few -  
 Eternity - obtained - in Time -  
 Reversed Divinity -

That our ignoble Eyes  
 The quality conceive  
 Of Paradise superlative -  
 Through their Comparative. <sup>2</sup>

The implications of immortality and eternity are obviously similar, but Emily Dickinson sees the former as more intimately related to the idea of fame, and the latter as gaining its fullest meaning in

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<sup>1</sup> See Introduction to Vol. I of The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson, pp. xxx - xxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 800, Vol. II, p. 605.

a context concerned with the course of time. In the above poem, the obtaining of eternity causes a dislocation of time's sequential passage. This is a

Reversed Divinity -

because it is obtained through a beatification experienced not in future ages, but in the present. In Emily Dickinson's poems, eternity is not solely the vast and distant expanse of time forever unrolling before one, but also every moment constantly responded to, for:

The Blunder is in Estimate  
Eternity is there  
We say us of a Station  
Meanwhile he is so near  
He joins me in my ramble  
Divides abode with me  
No Friend have I that so persists  
As this Eternity <sup>1</sup>

Eternity is not to be designated as some distant timeless future; it is a companion of the same type as immortality is shown to be in the following lines:

Because I could not stop for Death -  
He kindly stopped for me -  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -  
And Immortality. <sup>2</sup>

These abstract companions are attitudes of mind whose constant presence is affirmed in the lyric quoted below:

Alone, I cannot be -  
The Hosts - do visit me -  
Recordless Company -  
Who baffle Key -  
  
They have no Robes, nor Names -  
No Almanacs - nor Climes -  
But general Homes  
Like Gnomes -

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1684, Vol. III, p. 1144.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 712, Vol. II, p. 546.

Their Coming, may be Known  
 By Couriers within -  
 Their going - is not -  
 For they're never gone - 1

Eternity is a manner of regarding time; in addition to this, it is the present instant both as itself and as an element in the creating of the continuum. The first two lines of a lyric written in 1862 stress this fact:

Forever - is composed of Nows -  
 'Tis not a different time - 2

Infinity is also a constantly present state of mind, and the following quatrain exposes one of the misapprehensions regarding this matter:

The Infinite a sudden Guest  
 Has been assumed to be -  
 But how can that stupendous come  
 Which never went away? 3

One is born into infinity as into a natural inheritance, for:

Estranged from Beauty - none can be -  
 For Beauty is Infinity -  
 And power to be finite ceased  
 Before Identity was creased. 4

The "creased" of the final line is more readily understood as meaning something like "brought about" when one observes that in the rough draft of this poem the word "leased" was tried, and that at one stage in the writing of the lyric Emily Dickinson had intended the fourth line to read:

When Fate incorporated us - .

"Creased" gives the sense of the final folding of the paper which decrees the existence of humanity. Alternatively, it can be taken

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 298, Vol. I, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 624, Vol. II, p. 480.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1309, Vol. III, p. 908.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1474, Vol. III, p. 1020.

as meaning "besmirched" or "soiled", and thus as a reminder of the sin of Adam.

What is common to each of the concepts of immortality, infinity and eternity is their being felt as incorporated into the flow of time as experienced by the human being. This incorporation is part of what has earlier been referred to as Emily Dickinson's attempt to conquer, or get outside time. It is not a diminishing of the stature of such concepts so as to render them manageable to the human mind, but rather an investing of each moment of time with momentousness. Such an outlook will also result in the viewing of objects which exist in time with an awareness of their simultaneous participation in the "now" and the "forever".

(iii) The second group of time poems to be discussed consists of those which make mention of three specific moments during the day, namely, dawn, noon and sunset.

Of those words which denote measurable time it is "Noon" which appears most frequently in Emily Dickinson's poetry. As the instant between two clearly demarcated periods, the word indicates time achieving timelessness. One of the finest examples of this usage is contained in the poem "A Clock stopped -":

A Clock stopped -  
 Not the Mantel's -  
 Geneva's farthest skill  
 Cant put the puppet bowing -  
 That just now dangled still -

An awe came on the Trinket!  
 The Figures hunched, with pain -  
 Then quivered out of Decimals -  
 Into Degreeless Noon -

It will not stir for Doctor's -  
 This Pendulum of snow -  
 The Shopman importunes it -  
 While cool - concernless No -

Nods from the Gilded pointers -  
 Nods from the Seconds slim -  
 Decades of Arrogance between  
 The Dial life -  
 And Him - <sup>1</sup>

The time of clocks has "quivered" out of the system of hours and minutes and cannot be measured, for it is "Degreeless", as the two hands of the clock, lying exactly upon each other, form one straight line.

This moment is rendered gravely important by the language which is used to express it. The clock pauses momentarily, summoning up its power before it strikes the momentous chimes, and the time-piece is transmogrified into a vehicle which portends immortality. The greatest and most specialized human knowledge in this field:

Geneva's farthest skill

cannot rectify the situation. The sixth line juxtaposes the overwhelming nature of this moment - "An awe" - with the presence of the actual protagonist - "The Trinket" - and, to intensify the dramatic atmosphere, the line concludes with an exclamation mark, the only one to appear in the entire poem. Immediately preceding the final triumphant act, the trinket figure undergoes a death spasm, and one realizes that this is both a statuette on a clock and a dying human being challenging the forces of time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 287, Vol. I, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> The line:

"The Figures hunched, with pain - "

also indicates the moment of effort which the numerals on the clock-face must undergo before the hour is struck.

The final two verses stress the irrevocability of what has occurred. The science of medicine<sup>1</sup> and the entreaties of the jeweller are alike answered by a "cool - concernless No -", for this trinket has achieved a state of "snow", which may be cold and rigid, but is also sanctified and indifferent to appeals belonging to a realm now left behind.

The "Him" of the final line is most meaningful when taken as referring to the "Pendulum" of line eleven and thus to the "Trinket" of the sixth line. This puppet is now beyond any molestation from the world of time, and can regard the "Dial life" with arrogance. The elegance of this new state is expressed in the two adjectives "Gilded" and "slim", which are related to the "cool - concernless No -" of the third stanza. The lines create so close a fusion of the mechanical and the human that to attempt any hard and fast division of these elements of the image would be to destroy one of the most important achievements of the poem.

Emily Dickinson's most frequent and expressive use of the noon concept coincides, chronologically speaking, with her middle period of writing.

In the poem "The Soul has Bandaged moments"<sup>2</sup>, noon is a moment equivalent to paradise, when ecstatic enjoyment mounts to its zenith:

The soul has moments of Escape -  
When bursting all the doors -  
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,  
And swings upon the Hours,

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<sup>1</sup> The habit of editors is to delete the apostrophe in "Doctor's" (line 10) and to treat the word as a plural. However, "Doctor's" can be read as a genitive followed by "skill" (understood) in a construction retrospective of "Geneva's farthest skill" (line 3).

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 512, Vol. II, p. 393.

As do the Bee - delirious borne -  
 Long Dungeoned from his Rose -  
 Touch Liberty - then know no more,  
 But Noon and Paradise - .

In this joyousness of release the hours become mere playthings,  
 for the soul flies untrammelled above such hindrances.

In the first stanza of "I had been hungry, all the Years -"<sup>1</sup>  
 noon is used to indicate the moment of overwhelming revelation in  
 the spiritual progress of a human mind:

I had been hungry, all the Years -  
 My Noon had come to dine -  
 I trembling drew the table near -  
 And touched the Curious Wine - .

The following poem is to be discussed more fully because of  
 its particular relevance to the issues raised in this chapter:

The Love a Life can show Below  
 Is but a filament, I know,  
 Of that diviner thing  
 That faints upon the face of Noon -  
 And smites the Tinder in the Sun -  
 And hinders Gabriel's Wing -

'Tis this - in Music - hints and sways -  
 And far abroad on Summer days -  
 Distils uncertain pain -  
 'Tis this enamors in the East -  
 And tints the Transit in the West -  
 With harrowing Iodine -

'Tis this - invites - appalls - endows -  
 Flits - glimmers - proves - dissolves -  
 Returns - suggests - convicts - enchants -  
 Then - flings in Paradise - 2

The poem is concerned with manifestations of what the poet realizes  
 is unnameable and indefinable. In the third line she terms it

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 579, Vol. II, p. 443.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 673, Vol. II, p. 520. It is interesting to note  
 that the metre of the first two verses is that used by Chaucer in  
 "The Tale of Sir Thopas" and by Christopher Smart in "A Song to  
 David" - a metre which could be described as Common Particular or  
 Romance Stanza.

For a further discussion of Emily Dickinson's metres see  
 pp.127 ff.

"that diviner thing", a hint at eternity which, protean-like, is able to be experienced in different forms. The first of these forms to be mentioned is "the Face of Noon", and in the second stanza it is found to be present in both dawn and sunset. Intent on exploring the multiplicity of this experience, lines four, five and six show three very different actions which it performs. If it "faints" in the first of these, it can also exhibit the precise opposite of such passivity, being that element which makes the splendours of the sun appear even more intense. It tempers the heavenly judgment as well, a fact which is expressed synecdochally by the image of the wing of the Archangel.

The second stanza emphasizes the intangibility of this phenomenon in the words "Kints", "uncertain pain" and "tints". This "diviner thing" is experienced in such different things as the ephemerality of music and the intense, unnameable emotion which a summer's day awakens within the "I". The fact that the distress is an element as important as the joy is stressed by the adjective "harrowing". The effect created by this word, especially in conjunction with the noun it qualifies, is peculiarly pun-like. The phrase is an example of the emotive and the pictorial forged into a strong and striking combination. It is a description of the sky at sunset, and of the effect of this scene on the beholder. Much of the strength of the phrase arises from the fact that the deliberate use of the word "Iodine", as a noun denoting the colour of the evening sky, forces the reader to extract from the word in its normal usage the element required for this particular context (i.e. the pain experienced when iodine is applied to a wound), and then to effect the transposition.

The final verse shows just how successfully Emily Dickinson could handle rhetorical effects. The accumulation of verbs builds up a high pitch of tension, which is then, despite its power, shown to be feeble and insufficiently expressive, so that the final line overtops all that has gone before. This swell of verbs should be examined in more detail and not seen merely as a cumulative effect. Within this list there are juxtaposition<sup>s</sup> of conflicting actions which create the ambiguity the poet is attempting to describe. This "diviner thing" "invites" and at the same time "appalls", it "proves" and "dissolves", "convicts" and "enchants". And finally, in a state of seeming desperation to convey everything that is involved, Emily Dickinson reveals the greatness of this phenomenon in the concluding line:

Then - flings in Paradise - .

If the state of supreme bliss is flung in as an added fillip, then the nature and proportions of this experience become immeasurably vaster by comparison.

The last noon poem to be examined was written in 1865, and consists of two stanzas of Common Metre:

There is a Zone whose even Years  
No Solstice interrupt -  
Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon  
Whose perfect Seasons wait -

Whose Summer set in Summer, till  
The Centuries of June  
And Centuries of August cease  
And Consciousness - is Noon. <sup>1</sup>

The "Zone" described is a sphere of perfect equilibrium, a place of perpetual sunlight, where the passage of time is excluded because it has been superseded. But the sense of everything being crystallized

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1056, Vol. II, p. 745.

into perfection and of a security against change ("No Solstice interrupt -") is undermined by the sense of expectation which emerges in the "wait" and the "till" of the fourth and fifth lines respectively. All this wonderment remains only until the consciousness has attained its zenith. What changes will occur thereafter it is not possible to predict.

The "perpetual Noon" of the third line conveys the idea that night will never fall and that the sun will remain fixed at its meridian. But the "Noon" of the final line has reference to the spiritual state of the "I", for, when the consciousness has reached its highest peak, insight and vision are increased to a degree beyond imagination and an even more perfect "Zone" will be attained.

In several of these poems "Noon" is developed into an image not only of the apex of anything, but also of a state of mind, a special type of emotional atmosphere when insight of a deeper kind is possible.

Two other points in the passage of the day constitute the subject matter of several lyrics, and these are dawn and sunset. Some of these poems contain examples of descriptions of a type combining the visual and the emotive. One of the most interesting of the sunset poems is that quoted below:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple  
 Leaping like Leopards to the Sky  
 Then at the feet of the old Horizon  
 Laying her spotted Face to die  
 Stooping as low as the Otter's Window  
 Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn  
 Kissing her Bonnet to the Meadow  
 And the Juggler of Day is gone <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 228, Vol. I, p. 163.

What is notable on a first reading of the poem is the intensity of colour, the sumptuousness suggested by "Gold", "Purple" and the spotted leopard. But what also emerges is a vivid sense of movement - experienced not only in participles such as "Leaping", "Laying" and "Stooping", but also in "quenching", "Touching" and "Kissing". These present participles create a nimbus of activity as far as the eye can see or the mind comprehend, all of which is suddenly erased by the tense with which the poem ends. The use of the noun "Juggler" and of the verb "is gone" gives an air of a conjurer's performance which inexplicably concludes, leaving the spectator breathlessly non-plussed.

The sunset which had seemed able to illuminate everything, from the distant horizon to the concealed "Otter's Window", and which had beautified the man-made ("the Roof and ... the Barn") and the natural ("the Meadow") disappears as suddenly as it had begun. Whereas the idea of eternity could, to an extent, be mastered, the moment of sunset cannot. This is an emotion similar to that which confounds the "I" when the advent of spring is perceived:

I cannot meet the Spring unmoved -  
 I feel the old desire -  
 A Hurry with a lingering mixed,  
 A Warrant to be fair -

A Competition in my sense  
 With something hid in Her -  
 And as she vanishes, Remorse  
 I saw no more of Her. <sup>1</sup>

Even a brief examination of certain of Emily Dickinson's seasonal poems can be instructive, and is germane to the present discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1051, Vol. II, p. 741.

In the poem just quoted, part of the remorse arises from the fact that the "I" feels a kinship to the "— something hid in Her", but is unable to define what this is. The emotions involved in this experience are imprecise and there is an almost archetypal quality present - "the old desire" - which is the feeling awakened annually at the reappearance of spring.

The response to the seasonal cycle is very marked in Emily Dickinson's poetry. An early poem, the main theme of which is also the coming of spring, uses imagery of pain and suffering which might appear to be a deliberate attempt to adopt an attitude contrary to that usually associated with the season. Here are the first three stanzas of the poem:

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

I thought if I could only live  
Till that first Shout got by -  
Not all the Planos in the Woods  
Had power to mangle me -

I dared not meet the Daffodils -  
For fear their Yellow Gown  
Would pierce me with a fashion  
So foreign to my own - .<sup>1</sup>

The final verses of this poem make it clear that the new season is a reminder of some past event:

They're here, though; not a creature failed -  
No Blossom stayed away  
In gentle deference to me -  
The Queen of Calvary -

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

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 348, Vol. I, p. 278.

Spring is painful when its manifestations reincarnate past suffering, when new life reminds one of old deaths.

Autumn is frequently described as the season of deceit, especially the brief period of the Indian summer. A poem written in 1859 attempts to celebrate this phenomenon in religious terms:

These are the days when Birds come back -  
A very few - a Bird or two -  
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume  
The old - old sophistries of June -  
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee -  
Almost thy plausibility  
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear -  
And softly thro' the altered air  
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of summer days,  
Oh last Communion in the Haze -  
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake -  
Thy consecrated bread to take  
And thine immortal wine! <sup>1</sup>

The "I" is almost persuaded to accept this aspect of autumn as a renewal of summer, but is rescued from delusion by the truer instincts of the birds and insects. The acceptance of the Indian summer comes in another form, in the conversion of these days into a sacramental service and the yearning to participate in this communion, to immerse the "I" in the stream of time and its vicissitudes.

The poem is not wholly successful. Perhaps the bread and wine of the final stanza, although symbols which are intimately connected with the idea of communion, are too deliberately grafted onto the

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 130, Vol. I, p. 92.

main idea which is being expressed. They remain rather inert, over-conscious of the rôle they are playing, and are not really working with the remainder of the poem.

A lyric on the same theme, but written seventeen years later, shows interesting likenesses and dissimilarities:

How know it from a Summer's Day?  
 It's Fervors are as firm -  
 And nothing in the Countenance  
 But scintillates the same -  
 Yet Birds examine it and flee -  
 And Vans without a name  
 Inspect the Admonition  
 And sunder as they came - <sup>1</sup>

The wisdom of the birds enables them to distinguish this time from true summer, although the skies may be similar. Not only do the external attributes resemble those of a summer day, but the emotions ~~it~~<sup>+</sup> awakened in an onlooker also correspond. It is no feeble imitation, for:

It's Fervors are as firm -  
 And nothing in the Countenance  
 But scintillates the same - .

The human being is deluded, but can be guided by the reactions of natural creatures towards this phenomenon. The birds flee, and the "Vans without a name", presumably the falling leaves of autumn, respond to this atmosphere, not with summer-like activities of growth and fecundity, but with disintegration. The delusiveness of this period is discovered, not through one's own response, but by observance of those creatures which also participate in the passage of time.

To return, however, to those poems concerned with the moment of sunset, one finds that the earliest instance of this theme is a

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1364, Vol. III, p. 943.

poem beginning with a conventional four line stanza<sup>1</sup>, rhyming a-b-c-b, and chiefly occupied with a description of the coloured clothing worn by the personified sunset. The second stanza of the poem continues this idea of the guest who has departed by morning, and in the concluding verse there is an intensifying of the lyric impulse:

Who looks for him at morning  
I pray him too - explore -  
The Lark's pure territory -  
Or the Lapwing's shore! <sup>1</sup>

The idea of time as related to the sunset is only touched on by the mention of "nightfall" and "morning": the final point of emphasis is the exhortation in the closing lines.

In many of these poems Emily Dickinson associates the vast and changing nature of the sunset with that of the ocean, which brings to the fore the idea of flux. The following lyric was written in 1861:

Where Ships of Purple - gently toss -  
On Seas of Daffodil -  
Fantastic Sailors - mingle -  
And then - the Wharf is still! <sup>2</sup>

Lines one and three of the quatrain seem at first reading a delightful whimsy with the concluding line supplying the deft rounding off of the stanza. But what this final line actually achieves is a distillation of that moment when the richness of the skies - here expressed in the colours "Purple" and "Daffodil", and in the verbs "toss" and "mingle" - suddenly vanishes. The exclamation mark of the fourth line functions like a mirror, reflecting the interaction between the heart of the watcher - abruptly deprived of its joy - and the drama of the skies. The whole poem works

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 15, Vol. I, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 265, Vol. I, p. 189.

towards the idea of the moment of beauty's being a comingling of action and awareness, emerging through stillness.

One of the most interesting of the sunset poems is that quoted below:

An ignorance a Sunset  
 Confer upon the Eye -  
 Of Territory - Color -  
 Circumference - Decay -

It's Amber Revelation  
 Exhilarate - Debase -  
 Omnipotence' inspection  
 Of Our inferior face -

And when the solemn features  
 Confirm - in Victory -  
 We start - as if detected  
 In Immortality - <sup>1</sup>

Here the sunset is heightened to an occasion of spiritual experience. One seems to pass completely beyond the time of clocks into a sphere both thrilling and overwhelming:

It's Amber Revelation  
 Exhilarate - Debase -

The awesomeness of this experience is exemplified in the gigantic face, which first inspects, and then assumes a mien of unchangeable solidification, as if what was once mobile has become ossified into eternal austerity. Sunset becomes thus a preparation for immortality; the moment of change between the cycles of day and night is an equivalent for the great mutation which the human soul must undergo.

Poems devoted solely to sunrise are considerably fewer in number. They stress most frequently the transmogrifying powers which the sun brings with it. The single example of this group which is to be discussed follows below:

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 552, Vol. II, p. 422.

The Sun - just touched the Morning -  
 The Morning - Happy thing -  
 Supposed that He had come to dwell -  
 And Life would all be Spring!

She felt herself supremer -  
 A Raised - Ethereal Thing!  
Henceforth - for Her - What Holiday!  
 Meanwhile - Her wheeling King -  
 Trailed - slow along the Orchards -  
 His haughty - spangled Hems -  
 Leaving a new necessity!  
 The want of Diadems!

The Morning - fluttered - staggered -  
Felt feebly - for Her Crown -  
 Her unannointed forehead -  
Henceforth - Her only One!<sup>1</sup>

When first published in 1891, the poem was called "The Sun's Wooing", a title which attributes a note of coyness to the lyric. The poem is, in fact, the reaction, on meeting, of the sun and the morning, which are designated the male and female rôles respectively.

Although the verbs do not really denote action of an intense degree, with the possible exception of "staggered" (line thirteen), the poem nevertheless conveys a great deal of activity. This is achieved partly through the five exclamation marks, but chiefly by means of giving verbs, comparatively inactive in themselves, a weight of suggestion which enables them to render the passion of this drama.

The first three lines of the second stanza are devoted to the ecstatic effect of the sun upon the morning, while the remaining five describe the continued passage of the sun. It is from this verse that much of the force and tension in the poem arise. Emily Dickinson is regarding the morning and the sun as disparate, whereas the conventional attitude is that without the sun the morning

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 232, Vol. I, p. 168.

could not be morning.

That the poem is not purely a celebration of the nascent morning is made clear by the idea of deprivation which emerges in the conclusion of the second stanza:

His haughty - spangled Hems -  
Leaving a new necessity!  
The want of Diadems!

In the third verse the morning is described in terms of one despoiled: "fluttered", "staggered", "Felt feebly" and "Her unannointed forehead". She has been changed, altered, even robbed, and this change is irrevocable:

Henceforth - Her only One!

The effect of time and the element of disillusionment which is wrought by the passage of time are shown as working in one of the very things which the human mind uses to measure the flow of days. The hope of permanence and continuing joy which is expressed in lines three and four:

The Morning ...  
Supposed that He had come to dwell -  
And Life would all be Spring!

is diminished in the course of the poem. The most significant idea to emerge from this appraisal of various sunrise and sunset poems is that moments of time are, in themselves, important, but that their rôle of simultaneously operating as communicators of many things should never be forgotten.

To live means to live in time and Emily Dickinson's poetry shows an acute awareness of this fact, for, without this response to the question of time, much of the striving to stand outside of time would be of little worth. This problem constitutes the subject matter of the following poem:

Time feels so vast that were it not  
 For an Eternity -  
 I fear me this Circumference  
 Engross my Finity -

To His Exclusion, who prepare  
 By Processes of Size  
 For the Stupendous Vision  
 Of His Diameters - 1

The opening verse presents a collection of concepts in all of which Emily Dickinson was deeply interested. To have each line of a quatrain devoted to time, eternity, circumference and finity in turn might seem as if the poet either is expecting too great a weight of content to be borne by a single stanza, or is being too ambitious in attempting to convey an idea which includes such vast abstractions by means of so brief a medium. The answer lies in the fact that the poem makes the concepts of circumference and the other named abstractions, to a certain extent manageable, by simply placing them together within the stanza without any unnecessary elaboration. There is thus a process of exclusion at work, but simultaneously, by not deliberately stating which of the many facets of the concept she wishes to emerge, Emily Dickinson brings into action what in another poem she calls the "undeveloped Freight"<sup>2</sup> of the word.

In the first stanza, the vastness with which time impresses itself upon the "I" is subjugated by the thought of something even vaster, namely, eternity. The comfort to be gained from this ordering of ideas is the immersion of the "I" in something so immeasurably huge that there is a sense of joyous defeat.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 802, Vol. II, p. 607.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1409, Vol. III, p. 978.

The third and fourth lines of this stanza created the impression of ever widening circles of time, and of the fear of the "I" of being limited to the circle closest to human experience. This emerges particularly through the use of the demonstrative adjective "this". The feeling which reigns in the stanza is that one should strive against the absorption or monopolization of one's being ("my Finity") by the closest of time's circumferences, and instead struggle towards the further circles of time.

The break between these two verses is of a peculiar nature, for there is both a hiatus and an enjambement. The former is represented by the pause-mark after "Finity", and the latter by the fact that the lines are intended to be read as:

I fear me this Circumference  
Engross my Finity  
To His Exclusion ...

When the poem is viewed as a whole, the result is that the hiatus enables the sense of the first stanza to reverberate, in its own, separate sphere. With the reading of the second stanza, however, there is a reversal of what is stated in the first verse, and this reversal gains in import by the fact of the enjambement which keeps the whole lyric intact as one entity.

Emily Dickinson has achieved a unity of expression by the seemingly precarious manoeuvre of driving her lyric along two tracks. The suppleness and the rigidity fuse in the creation of a poem which is constantly in movement. In the verses themselves there is much evidence of enjambement. Lines one and two are run-on lines, and there is a strong sense of enjambement existing between the second and third lines. The presence of the run-on line in the remainder of this verse has already been remarked upon,

but one should note its continued action in the second stanza, where each of the lines is run onto the following one.

It must be remembered that the fact being stressed is not merely that "this Circumference" should engross the "Finity" of the "I", but that it should engross it to the extent of "His Exclusion". Such an exclusion entails the loss of comprehension, for these time experiences are preparations for "the Stupendous Vision". In this stanza is expressed the realization that the seemingly endless circles will, eventually, resolve themselves into a vision of "Diameters". The emphasis is on the inherent difference between a circle and a diameter. The former is without beginning or end, continuing endlessly in describing its self-contained circularity, while the latter is the line which passes from side to side of a body or geometrical figure. A diameter has thus points of contact with other bodies, moving from one point and attaining another, and is usually associated with circles or curves. An important part of this "Vision" is thus the fact that the circumferences, now so seemingly vast, will be brought under control by a power infinitely greater than the "I".

The poem is one of encouragement, proposing a course of discipline and steadfast belief to the bewildered self. The poet states the necessity for a disciplined belief to counteract the feeling of being lost amidst the vastness of time. The fact that, from the present viewpoint, a resolution seems impossible accounts for the adjective "Stupendous" which qualifies "Vision". There must be a determination to view "this Circumference", however boundless it may appear to the human consciousness, in the context of those "Processes of Size" which precede revelation and understanding.

One should be wary of immediately assuming that the "His" of the fifth line refers exactly to either Christ or God. This pronoun without an antecedent has a nebulous quality; it can be linked only to the one who prepares the vision which awaits the "I". It is possible that this word refers to Christ, but the capitalization of the "H" is in no way proof of the matter, and it is equally likely that "His" indicates a personified abstraction such as infinity. One could of course argue that in Emily Dickinson's poetry an equation is sometimes constructed between infinity and God, but this would be pursuing a by-path from the point here being made, namely, that the "His" has possible applicability to both Christ or God and to a time concept as well.

What one learns is that time's vastness is exemplified in the poems sometimes in the wide terms of infinity and eternity, and on other occasions in a particular moment during the course of the day, such as sunrise, noon or sunset. There are also many poems on time units such as centuries, years, days, hours and minutes, but, as was the case with experiment, so is it with time; the preoccupation remains constant, but the nature of the approach or enquiry varies.

Emily Dickinson only rarely sees time as a balm which, by virtue of its greatness compared with the limitations of human perception, can reduce grief and anguish. The converse side of this matter is examined with more relish, as in the poem "They say that 'Time assuages' -", which reverses the notion of time as the healer:

They say that "Time assuages" -  
 Time never did assuage -  
 An actual suffering strengthens.  
 As Sinews do, with age -

Time is a Test of Trouble -  
 But not a Remedy -  
 If such it prove, it prove too  
 There was no Malady - 1

The same idea is expressed in a quatrain written in 1879,  
 and addressed by the poet to her nephew Ned:

Time's wily Chargers will not wait  
 At any Gate but Woe's -  
 But there - so gloat to hesitate  
 They will not stir for blows - 2

In Emily Dickinson's poetry one notices not so much the traditional emphasis on the soul imprisoned within the body, as a dwelling on the mind trapped in time. Thus man is prevented from attaining a divine truth and beauty. He can continue to strive towards this attainment, encouraged by the feeling of the "nearness" of this "Tremendousness",<sup>3</sup> and even perhaps gain glimpses of it, as in the poem:

If I'm lost - now -  
 That I was found -  
 Shall still my transport be -  
 That once - on me - those Jasper Gates  
 Blazed open - suddenly -

That in my awkward - gazing - face -  
 The Angels - softly peered -  
 And touched me with their fleeces,  
 Almost as if they cared -  
 I'm banished - now - you know it -  
 How foreign that can be -  
 You'll know - Sir - when the Savior's face  
 Turns so - away from you 4

Despite the fact that the glorious visage has now turned away, and that the "I" no longer enjoys the blazing beauty of "those Jasper Gates", this experience can still serve as a source of

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 686, Vol. II, p. 530.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1458, Vol. III, p. 1008.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 963, Vol. II, p. 697.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 256, Vol. I, p. 183.

strength and joy. Another poem on the same theme expresses a certain disillusionment, comparing the vanishing of the glory to the silent and undetected packing up of a travelling circus:

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -  
 To wrap it's shining Yards -  
 Pluck up it's stakes, and disappear -  
 Without the sound of Boards  
 Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter -  
 But just the miles of Stare -  
 That signalize a Show's Retreat -  
 In North America - . 1

What in the previous chapter has been termed Emily Dickinson's doubleness of vision is related to precisely this problem of the mind trapped in time. The poet is working towards a point where, to the greatest degree possible, she can free herself from time's trammels, to achieve that prismatic, endowed state described in the following lyric:

'Tis Compound Vision -  
 Light - enabling Light -  
 The Finite - furnished  
 With the Infinite -  
 Convex - and Concave Witness -  
 Back - toward Time -  
 And forward -  
 Toward the God of Him - .2

The poem expresses a yearning for a unique form of vision or outlook. It is "prismatic" in that any light, or insight, gives rise to further light. It is the ability to see all things as forever existing both finitely and infinitely, the hope to attain a position where the "I" sees things in their full

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 243, Vol. I, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 906, Vol. II, p. 666.

dimensionality.<sup>1</sup>

If one is to bear witness, and for Emily Dickinson this is an extremely important part of living and being a poet, one must attempt to view everything in both its smallness and greatness, to be:

Convex - and Concave Witness - .

This is, in fact, a reference to the attitude of the artist towards the subject matter of his art. The need to attain a position which prejudices neither the nearness nor the farness in the artist-object relationship is comparable to looking through both lenses of a telescope simultaneously, although this simile coarsens the idea which the poem expresses.

This vision allows one to see from a position above time, to view events as:

Back - toward Time -  
And forward -  
Toward the God of Him - .

This is to say that the one who reaches this state of "Compound Vision" is aware of the duality of everything in its time relationship, as being both in time, a state of incomplete fulfilment, for Emily Dickinson terms it retrogressive:

Back - toward Time -

and also imbued with the capacity to go forward and realize the quiddity inherent in itself:

<sup>1</sup> Hans Meyerhoff in Time and Literature quotes William James as saying almost the same thing, when the latter writes that the present moment has "a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched and from which we look in two directions into time."

Hans Meyerhoff, Time and Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 17.

William James, Principles of Psychology (New York: Holt, 1899), I, chap. 17.

And forward -  
Toward the God of Him - .

From this position, or state of mind, looking both backwards and forwards, being the one involved in the experience, but also the witness and recorder of events, Emily Dickinson writes her poem. The fact that the lyrics are frequently without any concluding full stop places them within the continuum of time, but also expresses the urge to be free from the strict bondage imposed by imprisonment in the temporal.

The notion of time has given rise to a great deal of writing and theorizing, and it would not be a particularly difficult task to find points of correspondence between the problems being studied here and those encountered in other spheres of literature. André Maurois in The Quest for Proust says: "All human beings, whether they accept the fact or not, are plunged into the dimension of Time, are carried away by the current of the moving days. Their whole life is a battle with Time."<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson states a similar predicament in the final stanza of the poem "As Summer into Autumn slips":

So we evade the charge of Years  
On one attempting shy  
The Circumvention of the Shaft  
Of Life's Declivity. <sup>2</sup>

There is thus a certain similarity between the idea of the "I" who attempts to stand outside time and so to record or bear witness to events, and the attempts of time to escape from itself, to become a precursor of immortality and not be bound to the

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<sup>1</sup> André Maurois, The Quest for Proust, trans. by Gerard Hopkins, (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1962), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1346, Vol. III, p. 929.

unending course of the hands around the clock-face. It is because dawn and sunrise cannot be registered by the clock on the mantel that Emily Dickinson sees them as moments of time opening out into, or indicative of, something greater<sup>than,</sup> or beyond, the time which the clock can tell.

What has, of course, to be admitted, is the element of impossibility inherent in both these actions, but this apparent obstacle can act as a challenge to the powers of imaginative projection.

Emily Dickinson realized the existence of this problem to the extent of making it the subject matter of the following poem:

Me from Myself - to banish -  
 Had I Art -  
 Invincible my Fortresse  
 Unto All Heart -

But since Myself - assault Me -  
 How have I peace  
 Except by subjugating  
 Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch  
 How this be  
 Except by Abdication -  
 Me - of Me? <sup>1</sup>

This poem also explores the theme of the lover who has become so absorbed into the "I" that there can be no separation of the "I" from the "You". Tension is built up by the opposition of "Me" and "Myself" combined in each case with a powerful verb (i.e. "banish" and "assault") in the opening lines of the first and second stanzas. This pattern is altered and intensified in the concluding line of the poem by the exclusion of a verb, and the changing of the reflexive pronoun to a personal pronoun, which creates the emphatic

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 642, Vol. II, p. 494.

repetition:

Me - of Me?

The line expresses the knowledge that this action can result only in an endlessly repetitive cycle of futility.

Of the knowledge that these activities could lead to an experience of appalling consciousness and loneliness the following poem is proof:

There is a solitude of space  
 A solitude of sea  
 A solitude of death, but these  
 Society shall be  
 Compared with that profounder site  
 That polar privacy  
 A soul admitted to itself -  
 Finite Infinity. <sup>1</sup>

After naming three instances of great loneliness, Emily Dickinson brings forward one which completely overshadows the rest. What is submitted as the ultimate loneliness is

A soul admitted to itself

and the consequent experience of that very thing for which she has yearned:

Finite Infinity.

That the longed for is also the object of awe is in no way a contradiction. What is here termed "that polar privacy" is a sensation which Emily Dickinson was again and again to attempt to convey. It appears as "Zero at the Bone",<sup>2</sup> a "Stop-sensation - on my Soul -"<sup>3</sup> and:

Some Polar Expiation - An Omen in the Bone .<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1695, Vol. III, p. 1149.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 986, Vol. II, p. 711.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 293, Vol. I, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 532, Vol. II, p. 409.

But the poem is not one of terror or despair, the tone is calm and rises from the basis of experience. It is as if the "I" has gone through this, and, with the balanced resolution that one can see in the poem, is prepared to undergo it again.

The immensity of Emily Dickinson's goal demanded a moral courage which would help her weather the many difficulties encountered while questing it. This sense of awareness of the dangers, combined with a steadfastness, even an eagerness and gratefulness for the experience, is to be discovered in her treatment of several favourite themes, notably, experiment, circumference, love and death. It is to be felt in Emily Dickinson's almost constant usage of the Common Metre stanza and the variations upon it.<sup>1</sup> For this was the unwavering base of firmness, or, to employ a more appropriate metaphor, the tough and solid craft in which she ventured on her voyage of exploration and discovery.

(iv) The main body of discussion in the preceding section has been devoted to Emily Dickinson's interest in, and manner of tackling, the problem of time. Not to include a discussion of death would be to present an amputated version of the matter. Death cannot remain unrelated to problems connected with an escape from the bondage of time, for it is the prime example of passing from time into the timeless. Death, like noon, can never be registered on a clock-face, yet it contains the possibility of a vision deeper and more profound because not restricted by hours and minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 127 ff.

While Emily Dickinson viewed the eternal life as one different from the life lived out on earth, many of the images in the poems relate this future life back to the human existence. It is as if death is the agent whereby she will be enabled to participate, unhindered, in both spheres, whereas, while she is still alive, participation in a sphere other than that of the earthly life can only be the result of imaginative projection. Death is not a cutting off of man from this world, but a means of gaining a more experienced viewpoint.

An awareness of the fact of death was present in Emily Dickinson's writing even as a young girl. Her letters, especially those to her brother, frequently mention the names of Amherst citizens who are ailing or who have died. This habit can, however, be seen merely in the light of her passing on news to Austin, who would know the people concerned. More illuminating is a letter written to Abiah Root when Emily Dickinson was fifteen, in which she first mentions the funeral of an Amherst woman and then sympathizes with Abiah *on* the death of a friend:

Yesterday as I sat by the north window the funeral train entered the open gate of the churchyard, following the remains of Judge Dickinson's wife to her long home. <sup>[1]</sup> His wife has borne a long sickness of two or three years without a murmur. She is now with the redeemed in heaven & with the savior she has so long loved according to all human probability. I sincerely sympathise with you Dear A. in the loss of your friend E. Smith. Although I had never seen her, yet I loved her from your account of her & because she was your friend.

Several more sentences are devoted to Abiah's deceased friend, but it is only after this introduction that the really important point is reached. This is the death in April, 1844 (nearly two years

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<sup>1</sup> This can be explained by the fact that the Amherst cemetery stood directly behind the house which the Dickinson family occupied from 1840 to 1855.

earlier than the date of this letter) of Emily Dickinson's friend, Sophia Holland.

I have never lost but one friend near my age & with whom my thoughts & her own were the same. It was before you came to Amherst. My friend was Sophia Holland. She was too lovely for earth & she was transplanted from earth to heaven. I visited her often in sickness & watched over her bed. But at length Reason fled and the physician forbid any but the nurse to go into her room. Then it seemed to me I should die too if I could not be permitted to watch over her or even to look at her face. At length the doctor said she must die & allowed me to look at her for a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly to the sickroom.

There she lay mild & beautiful as in health & her pale features lit up with an unearthly - smile. I looked as long as friends would permit & when they told me I must look no longer I let them lead me away. I shed no tear for my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin & I felt I could not call her back again I gave way to a fixed melancholy.

I told no one the cause of my grief, though it was gnawing at my very heart strings, I was not well & I went to Boston & stayed a month & my health improved so that my spirits were better. I trust she is now in heaven & though I shall never forget her, yet I shall meet her in heaven. I know what your feelings must have been at her death, & rejoice that you have consolation from on high to bear it with submission. <sup>1</sup>

Quoting this extract in its entirety enables one to observe the organization in presenting her material of which Emily Dickinson was seemingly already conscious. The first section creates the link between the deaths of the two young girls and develops the narrative to just the point of final entry into the sick-room. The second paragraph mingles descriptions of the dying girl's face with the emotions of the young Emily Dickinson. There is even an attempt at heightening the intended effect by the use of a dash before the word "smile".

The concluding paragraph deals with the consequent depression created by the death, but the final sentence returns to Abiah's

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 11, Vol. I, p. 30.

grief, and moves to a message of optimism, at which point the writer ends the letter. One notices a vocabulary and phraseology probably typical of the time: "She was too lovely for earth", "stole softly to the sick room", "a fixed melancholy", "it was gnawing at my very heart strings" and "consolation from on high".

When, in 1884, Emily Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Samuel E. Mack, she had suffered a series of bereavements in the deaths of her mother (November 14, 1882), her nephew Gilbert (October 5, 1883), and of two dear friends, Reverend Charles Wadsworth (April 1, 1882) and Judge Otis Lord (March 13, 1884). The portion of the letter referring to the effects on herself of these deaths has a bareness and a chiselled quality, indicative of her growth as a writer and a person:

The Dyings have been too deep for me, and before I could raise my Heart from one, another has come - and I fear I might not have dared to see you, even could you have come, but fidelity never flickers - it is the one unerring Light.<sup>1</sup>

In the five to six hundred poems into which the subject of death is woven, there are several distinguishable groups, such as death as <sup>a</sup>the suitor or bridegroom, death as a king, and death as an illusion. The predominating factor is that most of the poems provide in the theme of death an opportunity to search for a meaning which the poet felt to be hidden from her. A few of the early poems in this category incline to <sup>a slight</sup>sentimentality,<sup>2</sup> but this direction was soon abandoned.

The following lyric has been chosen for examination, not only because it belongs to one of the above groups, but also because it

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 939, Vol. III, p. 843.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Poems no. 53, Vol. I, p. 40; no. 78, Vol. I, p. 63; no. 79, Vol. I, p. 64; no. 146, Vol. I, p. 104.

is a particularly fine example of Emily Dickinson's craft:

Death is the supple Suitor  
That wins at last -  
It is a stealthy Wooing  
Conducted first  
By pallid innuendoes  
And dim approach  
But brave at last with Bugles  
And a bisected Coach  
It bears away in triumph  
To Troth unknown  
And Kinemen as divulgeless  
As throngs of Down - <sup>1</sup>

"Death is the supple Suitor" was probably written in 1878, and what most intrigues one after a first or second reading of the poem is the choice of adjectives, which might seem to be the real stimulators to searching for a better understanding. The "bisected" (a participle with an adjectival function) might appear to be the most striking, but there is also the presence of "supple", "pallid" and "divulgeless" which agitates the mind into further response. These adjectives elude one in the sense that one cannot grasp them as being concrete referents, nor yet as having full application to an abstraction. One might be prepared to respond with pleasure to words which gain new connotative power from their poetical context, but the feeling that one is losing much of the worth of the poem because of one's inability to grasp an adjective is often troubling. It is as if one must really struggle with these adjectives and their significance, in order to achieve a basis for understanding the logic of the poem.<sup>2</sup>

The entire poem is written in the present tense. ~~which, despite~~  
The idea put forward by James Reeves, that "We may say that the use

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1445, Vol. III, p. 1001.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P.N. Furbank's statement on the image, p. 212.

of the indicative implies confidence, the use of the subjunctive uncertainty",<sup>1</sup> in no way solves the real problem of time as it exists in the poem. As in so many of Emily Dickinson's poems, there are words which seem to indicate a time level which one can only approximately describe in critical terms.

The "is" of the opening line might mean that the wooing of death is an ever continuing process. Although this line has the feeling of a generalization ("the supple Suitor"), and although nowhere else in the poem is there any introduction of a personal pronoun, the whole lyric has, nevertheless, a deeply personal tone. Death is both the one to whom the poet addresses so many poems<sup>2</sup> and the wooer of every living person. Another striking aspect of the poem is the amount of activity and change which is stated and implied, in its lines. Lines four to six convey the muted overtures of death by means of the enjambement and the adjectives "stealthy", "pallid" and "dim", and especially through the noun "innuendoes":

It is a stealthy Wooing  
Conducted first  
By pallid innuendoes  
And dim approach .

The apparent uncertainty of this process is also sensed in the rhythm of these lines, with each of the longer seven syllabled ones constituting a sweep forward, followed by a backward movement created

<sup>1</sup> James Reeves, Introduction to Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1963), p. xlvi. (Reprint).

<sup>2</sup> One is tempted to make mention of Emily Dickinson's own ideas on the importance of letters, and to see something of the letter in certain of these poems on death, keeping in mind especially a lyric such as Poem no. 487, Vol. I, p. 372:

"You love the Lord - you cannot see -  
You write Him - every day - " .

by the alternating line of four syllables. This pattern is employed throughout the poem with only one exception, namely the hexasyllabic eighth line. This 7-4-7-4 scheme creates, gently and almost imperceptibly, the effect of one statement followed by another which is made after further consideration and which succeeds in filling in the details of the first. But to say that there are two voices would be forcing the notion to bear a responsibility for which it is not intended. The previously mentioned enjambement tends to make this counterplay less obvious, but it soon establishes itself again. To make these somewhat tenuous suggestions more explicit, one can offer another example of a somewhat similar antiphonal effect in these lines from Herbert's poem, "Discipline":

Throw away thy rod,  
 Throw away thy wrath:  
           O my God,  
 Take the gentle path.

For my hearts desire  
 Unto thine is bent:  
           I aspire  
 To a full consent. <sup>1</sup>

Another interesting fact is the "break" between the sixth and seventh lines. A great deal must have occurred between the "dim approach" of line six and that point in time ("at last") when death can appear with the panoply of a conqueror. Conjecture concerning what the poet has deliberately left unsaid might prove intriguing, but could equally well result in hazardous and unfounded abstractions. The most appropriate approach would be to consider this omitted stage strictly in relation to the poem. It

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<sup>1</sup> The Works of George Herbert, ed. by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 178.

See p. 181, Footnote 1 on Emily Dickinson's reading.

is perhaps the period of courtship when not only death, but also the "I" of the poem, become greater in stature. The "I" has attained a higher degree, the "pallid innuendoes" are no longer necessary, for it can participate in the triumph of this ceremony which is both the wedding ritual and the triumphal procession of the emperors of antiquity.

What was foretold in the second line:

That wins at last

has been achieved:

But brave at last with Eagles  
And a bisected Coach  
It bears away in triumph . (Italics mine.)

"Bisected" is indeed one of those words which the reader engages in adjectival-battle; for instance, Charles Anderson says:

As a hearse it separates her body in the glass enclosure from the driver on his seat above, as a wedding-coach it divides the wife-to-be from the virginal life left behind, as a heavenly chariot the mortal from the immortal. <sup>1</sup>

The life which lies ahead is "unknown" and "divulgeless"; nevertheless, one must not forget that it is a "Troth" and that "Kinsmen" will be present. To suggest the possession of a slight knowledge and even an eagerness for this future state, Emily Dickinson rejected a phrase which stunted the expression of the emotion of looking forward bravely to this experience, namely:

And Pageants as impassive  
As Porcelain .

In the concluding line of the poem one discovers one of the poet's favourite turns of mind, the linking of death with the colour white. The word "pallid" does not set up this relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, (Frome and London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 248.

as strongly as does "Throngs of Down". The reader must remember that this final line does refer to death, for the presence of intervening nouns such as "Bugles", "Coach", "Troth", "Kinsmen" and "throngs" might dim the connections. The words work so actively in illuminating each other that one can quite easily forget to which sphere they have application.

"Throngs of Down" is empowered to serve "Kinsmen" with all the suggestions of massed heavenly beings, but further consideration makes one realize that this phrase is also concerned with the mystery of "Down". Contemplation of this soft, white, smothering substance leads one quite naturally to think of falling snow, and, with this concept in mind, the word "divulgeless" becomes a little more meaningful. Down or snow conceals or blankets what it falls upon, familiar objects assume a strange shape and can no longer be recognized properly.<sup>1</sup> It is to a world like this that death "bears away" his bride.

Charles Anderson in his final summing-up of this poem claims that:

The three stages of this poem, which also transform the suitor into bridegroom and prospective husband, correspond to the awareness of death, the act of death, and the state after death. The last, in relation to the Christian concept

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<sup>1</sup> Compare what Emily Dickinson herself says of <sup>snow</sup> ~~the~~ in an earlier lyric, Poem no. 311, Vol. I, p. 231:

"It sifts from Leaden Sieves -  
 It powders all the Wood.  
 It fills with Alabaster Wool  
 The Wrinkles of the Road -  
 It makes an even Face  
 Of Mountain, and of Plain -  
 Unbroken Forehead from the East  
 Unto the East again -"

of entering heaven as the bride of Christ, is rendered with typical Dickinsonian obliqueness. <sup>1</sup>

One can agree that this tripartite construction and development is present in the poem, but to submit this and the specifically Christian ideas as the most relevant points to emerge from a study of this lyric, is limiting. There is a remarkable quietude which not only stands behind the poem but is very present in it. One is told in the second line that death "wins at last"; the poet foreknows this fact, and the changes which she ascribes to death are perhaps an oblique expression<sup>2</sup> of those undergone by the unnamed protagonist of the poem. Part of this quietude of tone is created by the distance Emily Dickinson employs in order that the reader gain a balanced view of this suitor. Notice should thus be taken of the two phrases in which, by using the pronoun "It", the speaker describes her lover more as a process than as a personified wooer:

It is a stealthy Wooing

and

It bears away in triumph/ .

One may say that the poet has laid down some kind of firm statement and then set about proving its validity; she has endowed this proof with richness, mystery and a great deal of spontaneity and activity. Perception of this action, and response to its tremendousness through these twelve lines of diligently honed words, constitute a very important part of the exhaustion and exhilaration

<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -  
Success in Circuit lies" .  
Poem no. 1129, Vol. II, p. 792.

which come with the reading of the poem.

Death in this lyric, as in many of the death poems, is a journey to a place as yet not fully known, and the attitude is typically Dickinsonian, a lovely balance between eagerness and apprehension.

A thorough reading of Emily Dickinson's work would seem to exclude the idea that the death poems belong to what has been derogatively termed the literature of escapism. Emily Dickinson's response to life was an intense and deeply felt one, though quite unlike that of the renowned, or notorious, Margaret Fuller, the famed woman Transcendentalist.<sup>1</sup> While only infrequently embracing the theme of death's inevitable closeness which renders life more precious, the response to life included a response to the idea of death.

The poetic tradition of transience was explored in a number of poems, eventually giving way, however, to themes which interested the poet more deeply. These themes can be viewed as extensions of the idea of transience, for in many of these poems one meets the annulment of transience through rebirth, and the cyclical movements

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Fuller was born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, in 1810, and, as a child prodigy, was reading Ovid at the age of eight. She became famous for the conversational classes which she organized between 1839 and 1844, and exerted a strong influence on the more cultured ranks of Boston society. From 1840 to 1842 she was editor of the Transcendentalist magazine, The Dial, and in 1846 went to Italy where she became a staunch follower of Mazzini. As Gelpi points out, the publicity surrounding her life was the exact counterpart of the privacy which Emily Dickinson so valued. The ship in which Margaret Fuller, her Italian husband and their baby were returning to America was wrecked off Fire Island. Emerson, W.H. Channing and J.F. Clarke collaborated in writing her Memoirs in 1852.

Margareta Fuller's vibrant personality partly accounts for her being the model for the heroine in Holmes' Elsie Venner (1861) and Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance (1852).

in human life and nature to which Emily Dickinson was particularly alert.

As this discussion of death is intended to form only a subsidiary portion of this thesis, the matter will not be examined with the amount of detail which a study centred on the concept of death would warrant. However, it is relevant to this study to note the interesting fact that several of the death poems use language terms such as "Hyphen" or "Asterisk", a tendency which is related to Emily Dickinson's wider preoccupation with the idea that the terms of language are filled with latent possibilities. The following quatrain illustrates the point:

Of Glory not a Bean is left  
But her Eternal House -  
The Asterisk is for the Dead,  
The Living, for the Stars - <sup>1</sup>

It is in this stratum that some of the most fruitful discoveries about the topic of death can be made, for here runs the vein of poems embodying that viewpoint of death as a hyphen or bridge which can unite mortality and the human yearning for immortality. Consolidation of these ideas is best achieved by practical appraisal of poems, and for this purpose a much neglected lyric, "Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord,"<sup>1</sup> can serve as an introduction:

Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord,  
Then, I am ready to go!  
Just a look at the Horses -  
Rapid! That will do!

Put me in on the firmest side -  
So I shall never fall -  
For we must ride to the Judgment -  
And it's partly, down Hill -

But never I mind the steepest -  
And never I mind the Sea -  
Held fast in Everlasting Race -  
By my own Choice, and Thee -

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1647, Vol. III, p. 1127.

Goodbye to the Life I used to live -  
 And the World I used to know -  
 And kiss the Hills for me, just once -  
 Then - I am ready to go! <sup>1</sup>

This poem was probably written in 1861, and was found in packet number 32, which also contained the better-known "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain". The poem has not been the subject of as much critical appreciation as is its due, being invariably relegated to a minor position beside Emily Dickinson's more renowned poems in which death is the dominant theme.

The first stanza opens with a firm imperative:

Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord,

a verbal mood which appears more than once in the verses which follow, for example:

Put me in on the firmest side -

and

... kiss the Hills, for me, just once - .

These imperatives convey a fixity of purpose and steadfastness in a poem which strives to reach a sphere beyond that of human rationality. They play a considerable rôle in anchoring the poem to a steady base, but at the same time never hindering its taking flight.

The image contained in this first line is one which operates meaningfully in several different ways. It implies the idea of the lord as the person assisting the bride - by tying her bonnet strings - to dress for her great betrothal. The image of going to meet death, the suitor, in bridal attire is one encountered in poems, such as "Because I could not stop for Death":

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 279, Vol. I, p. 199.

For only Gossamer, my Gown -  
My Tippet - only Tulle - .<sup>1</sup>

A further example is to be found in the first stanza of a poem written in 1883:

Dropped into the Ether Acre -  
Wearing the Sod Gown -  
Bonnet of Everlasting Laces -  
Brooch - frozen on .<sup>2</sup>

In this last poem, the specific garments are named to convey not only a symbolic, but also an horrific, effect.

To return to the poem under discussion, the "My Lord" is the usual Christian appellation, as well as being another instance of Emily Dickinson's predilection for the notion of death as a king or nobleman, of which there are many examples in her work, for instance:

Riding to meet the Earl -<sup>3</sup>

and

For that last Onset - when the King  
Be witnessed - in the Room - .<sup>4</sup>

There exists yet another possible interpretation of this line, related to the wry turn of mind which Emily Dickinson so often exhibits, namely, the idea of a parcel's being neatly completed. This last mentioned aspect fits in with her frequent dehumanizing of the "I". She implies at times that one must go through such a stage to reach one of greater animation.

These first four lines are filled with an eagerness, a desire to begin the journey, which is expressed in several ways, one being

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 712, Vol. II, p. 546.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 665, Vol. II, p. 512.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 665, Vol. II, p. 512.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 465, Vol. I, p. 358.

the marked alliteration of the brisk "t" sound:

Tie the Strings to my life, my Lord,  
Then, I am ready to go!  
Just a look at the Horses -  
Rapid! That will do!

In this connection, the "d" of "Rapid" is working along the same lines as the "t" alliteration.

There are only three words of more than monosyllabic length: "ready", "Horses" and "Rapid", and the first and third are specifically connected with time and this urgency to depart. Other time words working towards the creation of this feeling are "Then" and "Just".

The striking ring of the opening line undergoes a change in the three lines which follow and which assume a markedly everyday tone:

Just a look at the Horses -

and:

... That will do!

These are the words of a person completing the final check that all is in readiness for the trip. But this change in tone is in no way jarring; lines two, three and four have their own particular strength, related to the poet's frequent employment of the ordinary to convey her theme. And, as has already been noticed, the first line, for all its portentousness, has its main reservoir of strength in an image drawn from the sphere of the home: "Tie the Strings..."

It is at this stage in the development of the poem that one begins to feel a tonal undercurrent, that is, the sense that the poem is also dealing with the speaker's farewell to land and territory dearly loved. Carried even further, one might suggest that there is something peculiarly American about it. Although Emily Dickinson felt deeply her kinship to the New England valley

and the Holyoke mountains, certain phrases seem to hint at the ballads dealing with a cowboy's farewell.<sup>1</sup> One could not point to particular phrases and claim that they define this feeling, but it seems to be present in lines such as the following:

Just a look at the Horses -  
 Put me in on the firmest side -  
 Goodbye to the Life I used to live -

and:

... kiss the Hills for me, just once - .

As in many of her poems, Emily Dickinson shows here her ability to create lines and use words which have the power of working, simultaneously, in more ways than one. This is especially evident in the "So" of line six, which can be understood as firstly: "In order that...", and secondly: "For in that position...". Her turn of mind appeared to delight in punning techniques such as the above, and they are related to the manner in which many of her poems as a whole function, namely, that the logic of the poem seems to point to a particular interpretation, but, simultaneously, while apparently strengthening this direction of meaning, it can also spin the entire poem around, so that it becomes activated and vivified with other possible interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Cowboy's Lament" is an adaptation of an eighteenth century Irish homiletic ballad, "The Unfortunate Rake". The chorus of a version known as "The Dying Cowboy" is quoted below:

"O beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly,  
 Play the Dead March as you carry me along;  
 Take me to the graveyard, there lay the sod o'er me,  
 For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong."

William Peterfield Trent, and others, eds., The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. II (Cambridge: at The University Press, 1933), p. 514.

The opening imperative of the second stanza is spoken by a voice which is paradoxically both living and deceased, for the instructions seem to relate to a corpse, or even a coffin. The "I" has become a voice which can speak from the realms of the living and the dead.

In line six one notices the introduction of the word "never." In the stanza following it will gain further import, but here its chief work is to convey the great length of the journey to be undertaken. In the closing lines of this verse something of the previously mentioned folk element is again experienced. "Riding to the Judgment" is not an uncommon religious motif, and it was one towards which Emily Dickinson felt a particular attraction.<sup>1</sup>

The final line of this stanza is worth detailed attention. On one level, its almost homely reference to the nature of the road ahead seems to mitigate somewhat the length of the ride to judgment. It also gives the reason why the coffin should be installed on "the firmest side". There is too the apparent dislocation of the rhythm which conveys marvellously the awkward jolting of the descending wagon. The disyllabic "partly", followed by a comma, gives the effect of this passage which is made up of jogs and halts.

The rhythm of the opening lines of the third stanza seems almost to take flight in lyrical sweeps in comparison with that of line eight. There is an uplifted strength in the declaration that none of the hazards ahead can deter the speaker, an ability to surmount, almost to discard carelessly, the difficulties which bar the

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<sup>1</sup> See Poems no. 1053, Vol. II, p. 743; no. 1445, Vol. III, p. 1001.

way to the long awaited judgment.

One is again within a sphere of Janus-faced words when the eleventh line is reached:

Held fast in Everlasting Race - .

Part of the suggestive range of the "Held fast" has application to the embrace of the bridegroom-Lord, while a line such as:

Held fast in thy Everlasting Arms <sup>1</sup>

might very well have occurred in a hymn-book of the time. This line could indicate the relentless grip with which the speaker's companion maintains her involvement in this race without end; conversely, it might even have a reference to a secure arm which prevents her from falling, for here the coffin image has receded somewhat from the reader's vision.

There exist several other equally plausible interpretations, namely, that the combination of the two figures (her Choice, personified as a type of shadow companion, and the Lord) holds her fast; or that, despite all rational objections, since she has, of herself, chosen to be in this race, the immensity of this decision, coupled with the nature of her Lord, exerts a force which she knows can never be released. One is not falling back on a too easily gained solution to this problem when claiming that all these interpretations are, in varying degrees, present, and that it is the last mentioned which perhaps emerges as the most dominant.

The "I" has a curious floating quality when it speaks the first three lines of the final stanza. The voice has the ring of something much higher than the earth, and this strangely disembodied

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." Deut. 33:27.

sound conveys the suggestion that the "I" really has escaped from its earth-bound body.

A strictly biographically orientated critic might wish to relate lines thirteen and fourteen:

Goodbye to the Life I used to live -  
And the World I used to know -

to the poet's own withdrawal, but this has no real relevance in the present discussion. What is of importance is that she has commanded the "Strings" to her life to be tied, in other words, she has finally felt herself to be ready for the voyage away from the "World I used to know", and it is Emily Dickinson's poetic greatness that she has prevented these lines, as also those following them:

And kiss the Hills, for me, just once -

from having about them any taint of mawkishness.

There is a human sentiment and also a lovely simplicity in the progression of the farewells. To the vastness of life and the world only a brief "Goodbye" is addressed, and the more heartfelt kiss is reserved for the hills. There is a moving quality in the "just once", related perhaps to a slight catch in the speaking voice and resulting in a curiously human tone being bestowed on this voice which issues from somewhere above the human level.

A variant reading for the final line proposes "Now" in place of "Then". The former word would be a more obvious manner of expressing the fact that the journey is about to begin, perhaps even too explicit a manner. On a cursory reading, the "Then" might appear awkward, but throughout the poem Emily Dickinson has deliberately employed tenses, which, in combination, create a time which man-made clocks could never measure. The result of living through this unique time sequence is the strange present tense of

the final line, where the "Then" stands in conjunction with the "I am". The effect for the reader is one of being wrenched out of time with the uttering of this line.

The central question to be considered in a final examination of the poem is that of the "Everlasting Race". One might note, incidentally, the links which the phrase "ready to go" has with the idea not only of beginning a journey, but, in particular, of starting a Race. In order to "ride to the Judgment", the "I" has had to strip itself of the former life, and metaphorically "die". But this "death" is no petrifying of the once vital; it is the breathless and always continuing Race towards the fulfilment and realization of a self which could never exist in "... the World I used to know". The poet cannot point to the conclusion of this journey; judgment is as near as the line

And it's partly, down Hill -

suggests, and so distant that the voyage is "Everlasting". Emily Dickinson herself supplied the surest interpretation of this lyric when, in a prose fragment written many years later, she stated: "Paradise is no Journey because it (he) is within - but for that very cause though - it is the most arduous of Journeys - ..." <sup>1</sup>

Here, death is a journey from the known to the unknown and the longed for.

Whicher, who, it must be remembered, did not have access to the complete poems, distinguishes a tripartite development in Emily Dickinson's attitude towards death, namely: the early poems in which death is viewed as a phenomenon of the consciousness, becoming in the second phase an "abstract conception", and finally,

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<sup>1</sup> Prose Fragment no. 99, Vol. III, p. 926.

an illusion which must be subjected to strict examination.<sup>1</sup> This progression is however too neatly graded from step to step. Such phases are present in the poems, but not in the form of successive stages. Many of the poems written during, and prior to, 1862 and 1863 would fall into Whicher's third category, such as "Suspense - is Hostiler than Death -",<sup>2</sup> which it is worth quoting in full:

Suspense - is Hostiler than Death -  
 Death - thosoever Broad,  
 Is just Death, and cannot increase -  
 Suspense - does not conclude -

But perishes - to live anew -  
 But just anew to die -  
 Annihilation - plated fresh  
 With Immortality - <sup>2</sup>

If death is not directly considered an illusion, it is minimized until it is stripped of any suspense it might possess, and "Suspense" is viewed as a force in its own right.

In many of Emily Dickinson's poems death becomes a way of defying time, a theme which is emphasized in those lyrics which give voice to the belief in regeneration. In two such poems the name of Nicodemus is a means of alluding to Christ's words to him on regeneration (John 3:1-13). An early lyric, "An altered look about the hills",<sup>3</sup> uses the traditional approach in relating regeneration and the return of spring, with its promises of abundance in nature. The activity of spring is viewed as a regularly returning answer to the doubts that Nicodemus expressed:

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<sup>1</sup> George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 705, Vol. II, p. 542.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 140, Vol. I, p. 99.

All this and more I cannot tell -  
 A furtive look you know as well -  
 And Nicodemus' Mystery  
 Receives it's annual reply!

In a poem written fourteen years later, "The Bone that has no Marrow",<sup>1</sup> the same question is considered, but in this lyric there is no thankfulness for those natural manifestations which can allay the qualms. The problem is seen as the phantom of the Biblical character who posed it, something which comes again and again to worry one, then disappears only to return:

Old Nicodemus' Phantom  
 Confronting us again!

There is a manner slightly reminiscent of certain Metaphysical poems in the conducting of the argument in this lyric. Stanza one proves the fact that a bone without marrow is useless:

It is not fit for Table  
 For Beggar or for Cat.

In this verse the poet keeps the implications within the confines of the bone which is associated with food and eating. The second stanza invests the bone with symbolic possibilities:

A Bone has obligations -  
 A Being has the same - .

The obligations of a bone are that it be filled with marrow so as to make it fit either for eating or for constituting part of a living body. Without the marrow there is but a skeleton:

A Marrowless Assembly .

The third stanza poses a question without attempting to answer it:

But how shall finished Creatures  
 A function fresh obtain?

As Nicodemus pondered the seemingly impossible aspects of the problem when phrased literally: "How can a man be born when he is old?"

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1274, Vol. III, p. 336,

can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:4), so too does Emily Dickinson imply the impossibility of bones being refilled with marrow, so that they may again assume their "Obligations".

The poet realizes that this lyric deliberately falsifies the nature of the problem in order to present it in an arresting manner. The whole thus resolves itself, not in a surmounting of the difficulties, but in a plain statement of fact:

Old Nicodemus' Phantom  
Confronting us again!

→  
Death was an extremely important subject for Emily Dickinson. The religious atmosphere of nineteenth-century Amherst alone would justify such an interest, but she always uses the theme as a means of exploration, and it never becomes the sole and most important direction towards which the poems orientate themselves.

Finally, it could be said that in the creation of her poems Emily Dickinson achieved her most memorable escape out of time, an escape superior even to that of death.

(v) The ideas implied by the word "circumference" are related to this time discussion. Here again one should be particularly careful not to construct convenient logical explanations for a word which Emily Dickinson employed in many, and often contradictory, ways. The poet's use of the word serves as an apt example of the manner in which she manoeuvred the weight of implications which have accrued around a word after repeated usage.

The reader will already possess a certain number of implied associations on encountering the word, only to discover that in this case it is being made to bear a different connotative and

denotative freight. The matter is not so clear-cut that one can surmount the problem by an explanation along the lines that Emily Dickinson forces one to examine anew every word that one encounters in her poetry. In the question of circumference this is partly correct, but there is another equally important aspect. This is that the implications are not wholly discarded each time the word is met with, but that certain elements remain, forming a rich background for the new interpretation. Thus there is both an accumulating and a clearing away at work. These processes are frequently operating in words such as "white", "snow", "noon", "sea" and others which occur repeatedly in the poems.

To return to the discussion of circumference, one finds that in the main it seems to be intended to convey the two following contradictories: on the one hand, the endless <sup>potential</sup> ~~possibility~~ of the human spirit and the furthest boundary of human experience, and, on the other hand, the limitations of imaginative voyaging. It is thus concerned with escape from the limits of the self and an ascertainment of the quality of the "I". Circumference can sometimes be closely equated with that meaning of noon which conveys those moments when time transcends itself, and in this sense it is another term for ecstasy.

Circumference as the source of possibilities is clearly indicated in the following short poem:

The Poets light ~~by~~ Lamps -  
 Themselves - go out -  
 The Wicks they stimulate -  
 If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns -  
 Each Age a Lens  
 Disseminating their  
 Circumference - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 883, Vol. II, p. 654.

Here the boundaries of artistic endeavour are seen as constantly being enlarged through the refracting power of future ages.

Circumference as the escape out of time is celebrated in one of the 1862 poems:

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 - <sup>1</sup>

The actions mentioned in this poem are scarcely imaginable upheavals, but, from this incredible reversal, the "I" emerges into a sphere beyond the reach of time, as is stated in the final line.

A single quatrain poem of 1862 is important in that it adds a further facet to the concept of circumference which this section is attempting to consolidate:

When Bells stop ringing - Church - begins -  
The Positive - of Bells -  
When Gogs - stop - that's Circumference -  
The Ultimate - of Wheels. <sup>2</sup>

This is an interesting poem, especially with regard to the syllabics, and the pattern of pauses and syllable-groupings could be indicated as follows:

5 - 1 - 2 -

4 - 2 -

2 - 1 - 5 -

4 - 2.

As can be seen, the second and fourth lines are identical, with the exception of the latter having a full stop in place of a final pause -

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 378, Vol. I, p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 633, Vol. II, p. 486.

mark. The first and third lines, as far as the position~~s~~ of the syllabic groups is concerned, are exact reversals of each other. What is achieved by this attention to the syllables is the effect of a firmly patterned movement, although the entire poem consists of less than twenty words. On the other hand, the interplay of groupings lifts into prominence various words, such as "begins" and "stops" in the first and third lines respectively, both of which words are placed between pause-marks.

A relationship is also formed between the "stop" of the first line and that of the third by virtue of the repetition, for, within an area as small as this, the effects of repetition are quickly established, and, if not carefully controlled, can ring more crudely than when occurring within the more spacious area of a longer poem.

In a similar manner "Positive" and "Ultimate" are distinguished in their separate lines by being the only words of more than monosyllabic length. Their positioning encourages the reader to relate them, so that the two words act in a manner comparable to two mirrors. They reflect each other, and also what is situated between them, which is, in this case, their connotative values and also what is being said in the poem.

"Bells" and "Wheels" are associated through the half rhyme which they create, while "Church" and "Circumference" seem also to stand in closeness to each other. This is brought about by their eminence in the lines in which they appear and is also due to their both being posited as the resultant affirmation of some action. The previous paragraphs might tend to over-emphasize the linking and relating of words, but the reverse is equally true, namely, that while acquiring further dimension from its association

with other words, each word is nevertheless allowed its own due aura of reverberation.

The thought running through the poem is that bells signal the approach of the church service, but, whereas at a certain moment the bells will stop ringing and the service will begin, circumference can be thought of only when the wheel - here a synecdoche for all motion carried to the uttermost degree - no longer turns. Thus "Church" becomes a solid, regular, weekly occurring event when compared with "Circumference." It is a further example of the practice of setting up an idea and knocking it down by comparison with one even greater, which is also employed in the case of "Positive" and "Ultimate".

The following poem expresses the idea of circumference not as that place which wheels can never reach, but as the dimensions of the human brain:

Pain - expands the Time -  
Ages coil within  
The minute Circumference  
Of a single Brain -

Pain contracts - the Time -  
Occupied with Shot  
Gammuts of Eternities  
Are as they were not - 1

The central idea of the poem is the elasticity of time when pain is the filter through which it is experienced. The lyric presents two diametrically opposed views with no attempt to align them. The reconciliation of the opposites is implied in the fact that the human brain dictates the duration of time to the "I", and its power supersedes that of "Gammuts of Eternity". By means of a similar method of contrast Emily Dickinson stresses the magnitude of circumference and its implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 967, Vol. II, p. 699.

The physical extent of the brain is stated in the adjectives "minute" and "single", and yet this must be seen as the container within which "Ages coil". The use of "Circumference" to describe something both minute and mighty makes one aware that, in the world of Emily Dickinson's poetry, it is a word to be treated with discrimination. The word has the ability to bestow greater significance on what it is describing, however important that may be, without the noteworthiness of circumference being appended.

For the notion of circumference to be meaningful there must be a central point. This is the "I", surrounded by possibility of movement. Emily Dickinson touched cryptically upon this matter when she wrote in a letter that "The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference".<sup>1</sup> The circumference to this centre will be supplied by the reader in his interpretations of the Scriptures, and, as the insight and capacities of the reader enlarge, so will the circumference of his understanding.

Emily Dickinson's attitude to her own poems was in some ways similar. A poem conceived, worked upon, and, if necessary, altered, eventually achieved its own identity. It was, in other words, centred within itself, making a unique statement and confirming an individual position within the body of poems. But it also had a circumference, in the sphere created around it by its explorations and implications, and, as thoughts and themes expressed in other poems are touched upon - touched upon in a way which causes mutual illumination - so the process becomes a continuous opening of new doors. Not only are unsuspected relationships perceived, but contrasts are also affirmed, and, to express the result in a simile

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 950, Vol. III, p. 849.

which might not be wholly displeasing to Emily Dickinson herself, the oeuvre is charged with an electric current.<sup>1</sup>

In summarizing these discussions of Emily Dickinson's attitudes towards the problem of time, one can see that the questions of eternity, immortality and infinity find something of a resolution in the present moment. For by virtue of the awareness of timelessness (infinity) and of the continuum of time stretching both forward and backward, Emily Dickinson discovers in the present moment a "Forever"-ness and a "Now". The present, for Emily Dickinson, lives with such intensity precisely because she devoted so much thought to problems of time in general.

In the lyrics one experiences the results of her extreme consciousness of time in the simultaneous<sup>ness</sup> and timelessness of the present. This present has the quality of the "Now" which is emphasized by the universal present tense which she so often uses. It exhibits a timelessness in the awareness of eternity and infinity which the "I" brings to its experience of this moment.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that Shelley also employed the image of circumference and centre in his poem "Peter Bell the Third". His usage inclines more to the idea of Circumference as a boundary, as can be seen in the lines below:

"He had a mind which was somehow  
At once circumference and centre  
Of all he might or feel or know;  
Nothing went ever out, although  
Something did ever enter."

The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 353, lines 293-297.

Sir Thomas Browne, one of the writers mentioned by Emily Dickinson when listing her preferred authors in a letter to Higginson (see p.18) also uses the image of circumference and centre when he quotes Hermes: "Sphaera cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nullibi" in Religio Medici.

Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici, Pt. I, Section x, ed. by John Addington Symonds (London: Walter Scott, 1886), p. 21.

Personal time and the time of clocks come into conflict repeatedly, but subjective time (i.e. personal time) and the continuum can find resolution in a lyric such as the one already quoted:

Forever - is composed of Nows -  
 'Tis not a different time -  
 Except for Infiniteness -  
 And Latitude of Home -

From this - experienced Here -  
 Remove the Dates - to These -  
 Let Months dissolve in further Months -  
 And Years - exhale in Years -

Without Debate - or Pause -  
 Or Celebrated Days -  
 No different Our Years would be  
 From Anno Domini<sup>1</sup> - 1

Time for Emily Dickinson always remained an opportunity for exploration, a possibility for learning, an adventure in which she participated with an emotional intensity and an intellectual awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 624, Vol. II, p. 430.

CHAPTER IV

IMAGERY ESTABLISHING AN EQUIVOCAL LOCUS

The second element which helps create Emily Dickinson's unique viewpoint was posited, in the preceding chapter, as her tendency, noted by David Porter, to establish an equivocal locus of meaning through imagery that has more than one possible symbolic extension. Much has been previously written in this study on the mobility of Emily Dickinson's poems, and this section will, it is hoped, further strengthen the argument, for this fact is closely related to what Porter says. In her work, Poetic Discourse, Isabel Hungerland makes a point which will serve as a useful opening for this discussion:

In a poem, associations are not "free" (controlled only by a reader's unconscious problems, mood, background, and so on), because a poem is not a word list - it is a structure of phrase, clause, sentence. It is part of the poet's craft to control the direction of suggestion and evocation in the composition of the various linguistic units employed.<sup>1</sup>

This is something in which Emily Dickinson is extremely adept, for she realized that "A good poet is as much concerned with blocking some lines of suggestion in his work as with releasing others. Mere weight of suggestion is not a literary merit."<sup>2</sup>

This practice of creating an "equivocal locus of meaning" is obviously related to another aspect of Emily Dickinson's work which has been previously commented upon, namely, her juxtaposing and deliberate confusing of objects of a concrete and abstract nature. When Max Black speaks of metaphor in his work Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy, he illuminates such a manner of juxtaposing, so that one sees in Emily Dickinson's practice a strong metaphorical habit of mind.

<sup>1</sup> Isabel C. Hungerland, Poetic Discourse (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

Black writes as follows:

To speak of the "interaction" of two thoughts "active together" (or, again, of their "inter-illumination" or "co-operation") is to use a metaphor emphasizing the dynamic aspects of a good reader's response to a non trivial metaphor. <sup>1</sup>

To achieve any degree of certainty in the present discussion, however, it would be best to turn to an actual poem, and ascertain the problems at first hand. An appropriate example is the following lyric:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed  
That 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 -

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,

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 - <sup>2</sup>

The equivocality of this poem has, in fact, been the cause of several directly opposed interpretations. The difficulties can be seen as arising from the opening verse, for various commentators have seen in this stanza the germ of what they develop into their interpretation. The poem has been regarded as, inter alia, an imaginative

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<sup>1</sup> Max Black, Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University press, 1962), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 280, Vol. I, p. 199.

formulation of the poet's own funeral, a poem recording moments of encroaching insanity or despair and a denunciation of the Puritan funeral service.

Charles R. Anderson, for example, says: "... the metaphor of 'Funeral' comes near to stealing the show. The powerfully dramatized ceremony, with all its ghastly detail, tends to draw the reader's attention away from the spiritual death it was intended to illuminate."<sup>1</sup> One notices, on the contrary, how in every stanza the funeral imagery is never allowed to become over-dominant or exclusive. Thus the position of "in my Brain" - gaining in import by virtue of the surrounding commas - removes the action from its setting in a church, and emphasizes the incredibly inward processes which the poem describes. The second and third lines, especially through the specific mention of "Mourners", keep one in touch with the funeral theme. Nevertheless, the repetition of the participle, the repetitive action implied in the verb "kept", and the emphasis of the two dashes suggest the activities of a brain frustrated by its limitations, while the word "seemed" brings with it a widening out from the apparently strictly descriptive trend.

In the final line of each of the first three verses there appears a noun, the connotations of which forbid any limited interpretation of the poem:

That Sense was breaking through - ,

My Mind was going numb -

and

Then Space - began to toll, . (Italics mine.)

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 209.

Although much of the language of the poem is concerned with the funereal, it never becomes over-specialized. Thus the poet can successfully give expression to far-reaching ideas while employing language which still remains part of an everyday vocabulary. This fact can be demonstrated in the third stanza in lines such as the following:

... creak across my Soul

and

Then Space began to toll, .

At this stage one has passed from the breaking through of the senses to a more passive numbing process, and attained an even further distance from the physical life. But the matter cannot be glibly summarized as simply a gradual diminishing of the consciousness, for there still remains, paradoxically, the soul's extreme awareness of its being creaked across. This third stanza, so filled with the deliberate juxtaposition of the tiny sounds (the lifting of the box and the noise of the "Boots of Lead,") and the mighty tolling of "Space," leads to a lovely culmination in the following verse in the words "Ear" and "Silence".

The fourth stanza gathers in the progress from "Sense," "Mind," "Soul" and "Being," linking it finally to the auditory image:

And Being, but an Ear, .

In this penultimate stanza Emily Dickinson succeeds in creating an atmosphere of acutely tuned response existing between the listening "Ear" and the heavens' bell. This is a state very similar to that which Simone Weil, in her collection of letters and essays entitled Waiting on God, defines as "attention". The following extract appears in the essay, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies":

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object, it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.<sup>1</sup>

This is a state of waiting for the revelation contained in the final stanza. With no worldly comforts or companions, the "I" is wrecked and "solitary", and, although the "I" and "Silence" are together, the solitude is intensified by the very nature of this union.

One must also consider the word "here", which seems to denote a particularity of nowhere. It can, perhaps, be taken to indicate a certain level of consciousness, for its position as the final word in the stanza gives it a paradoxically explicit force, as if the poet, with extreme deliberation, is pointing out a definite place. But this interpretation is then robbed of its supports by the fact that a dash follows the word, a dash which has the power of modifying the meaning of "here" as a specifically indicated place, and imbuing it with a vastness and a sense of its being quite impossible to fix or locate.

This stanza is a particularly good example of Emily Dickinson's ability to create for a poem its own rationale, and by so doing to impart something of what lies beyond the limits of strict reasoning without allowing the poem to deteriorate into meaninglessness.

What follows in the fifth stanza is that the "I", the being who is simultaneously the senses, mind and soul, plunges downward

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, Waiting on God, trans. by Emma Cranford (London and Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1965), p. 72. (This translation first published 1951).

in an experience, so much only partially describable that "a World" becomes but one of its stages - with the inherent implication that there was many a world crashed past. All knowledge and "knowing" is superseded or "Finished", and something attained, the immensity of which the poet cannot attempt to describe. This very absence of specific description, the sudden disappearance of the tumultuous activity and noise: "broke", "dropped down, and down", "hit a World, at every plunge"<sup>1</sup>, and the two dashes which isolate the final word, create an incredible suspension of time and locality.

In this concluding verse the attentiveness of the preceding stanza is rewarded by the attainment of that point when "knowing", of the ordinary kind, can be of no further use. The poem ends with the feeling of awaiting the onset of, or the immersion into, infinity. The mention of "Silence" in the penultimate stanza prepares the way for the great silence of the concluding line of the poem:

And Finished knowing - then .

It has certainly not been the aim of this examination to graft a mystical interpretation on to this poem, but, as it is concerned with themes traditionally encountered in mysticism, there is a natural tendency towards an elucidation which has a certain mystical colouring. What, it is hoped, has been practically demonstrated is Emily Dickinson's use of "imagery that has more than one possible symbolic extension", which is in this instance the funeral. This particular use of imagery has been sustained throughout the poem to yield its ultimate and ironic truth, that the

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson originally wrote this line as:

"And hit a World, at every Crash - "

the effect of which would have been even more cacophonous.

poem tells of a funeral which is but the birth of something infinitely greater than the final rites accorded to a corpse.

But the funeral image also possesses an undertow of possible meanings which are allowed a partial release in the poem. This point quite naturally returns one to the question of the degree of control which the poet exercises over the reader's responses. The fact that there are so many interpretations of this poem arises not from any loss of control on the part of the poet, but rather from the way in which the imagery is being used. This in turn raises the point that a reading of Emily Dickinson demands a particular discipline and attention, for otherwise there is a likelihood of confusion, especially in the too glib interpretation of what might appear to be "symbols".

Only one poem has been studied with any degree of detail, although this manner of employing imagery is present in the greater number of Emily Dickinson's lyrics. It invests their flowers, insects, bonnets, shawls and bees with an enduring significance.

The intention of this chapter and the preceding one was to clarify the means by which Emily Dickinson achieves her unique sighting of objects, experiences or emotions. Two main procedures were put forward, the viewing of these things from a standpoint "outside of time", and their expression in the poems by her particular use of imagery. The latter method should not be seen as an attempt to make ambiguous the imagery which she uses, but rather as a releasing of the various degrees of possibility within these images. Thus, both the time-escape and the imagery function as filters, and not as means of achieving a dubious ambiguity. These two factors account to a considerable extent for Emily Dickinson's stance as a poet, that she could achieve, simultaneously,

empathy and objectivity, and could see the subject of her poem in more dimensions than one.

For the responsive reader the effect is frequently similar to what Emily Dickinson herself says of an unidentified post in a prose fragment to an unknown recipient:

Did you ever read one of her Poems backwards, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have - A something overtakes the Mind - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prose Fragment no. 30, Vol. III, p. 916. (Italics mine) x

## CHAPTER V

### STYLISTIC FEATURES WHICH CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS THE CREATION OF UNIQUENESS OF TONE

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"I ... never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person",<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson once wrote, and although she was referring to the subject matter of her poems, the same quotation may be applied to her stylistics. This chapter aims at discovering just what it is that enables a reader to sense the uniqueness of a poem written by this author.

(i) The first question to be investigated will be that of Emily Dickinson's use of the hymn form. Of the varied metres employed by the hymnists, the one which most frequently occurs in her poetry is that of Common Metre, which W.P. Ker terms "the simplest and least pretentious kind of verse."<sup>2</sup>

One should also note that this is one of the traditional metres of the ballad. Certain of Emily Dickinson's lyrics do have something of a ballad quality, the finest example being perhaps "Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord,".<sup>3</sup> The present writer has found no references to Emily Dickinson's reading of traditional ballads other than in the following lines:

↑   ↑   ↑   ↑  
 But the Man within  
 Never knew Satiety -  
 Better entertain  
 Than could Border Ballad -  
 Or Biscayan Hymn - .<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 271, Vol. II, p. 415.

<sup>2</sup> W.P. Ker, Form & Style in Poetry (London: Macmillan & Co.Ltd., Reissued 1966), p. 99. (First published 1928).

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 279, Vol. I, p. 199. (See pp.100<sup>ff.</sup> for a fuller discussion of this poem).

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 746, Vol. II, p. 569.

It is none the less tempting to speculate on possible contact with traditional ballads read or sung.

Some of the poems evince a balladic thread running through the stanzas, but this is subordinate to the lyric characteristics which invariably emerge as dominant. One example of such a poem is "Glee - The great storm is over -",<sup>1</sup> and it is in the first, second and third verses that the ballad element can be most clearly recognized:

Glee - The great storm is over -  
Four - have recovered the Land -  
Forty - gone down together -  
Into the boiling Sand -

Ring - for the Scant Salvation -  
Toll - for the bonnie Souls -  
Neighbour - and friend - and Bridegroom -  
Spinning upon the Shoals -

How they will tell the Story -  
When Winter shake the Door -  
Till the Children urge -  
But the Forty -  
Did they - come back no more?

Another lyric, "When I was small, a Woman died -,"<sup>2</sup> also demonstrates how the poem's balladic propensities are fused with the lyric elements until the poem becomes a statement on fame with only the slightest of narrative undertones remaining. This process can be demonstrated by quoting the poem in full:

When I was small, a Woman died -  
Today - her Only Boy  
Went up from the Potomac -  
His face all Victory

To look at her - How slowly  
The Seasons must have turned  
Till Bullets clipt an Angle  
And He passed quickly round -

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 619, Vol. II, p. 476.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 596, Vol. II, p. 457.

If pride shall be in Paradise -  
 Ourselves cannot decide -  
 Of their imperial Conduct -  
 No person testified -

But, proud in Apparition -  
 That Woman and her Boy  
 Pass back and forth, before my Brain  
 As even in the sky -

I'm confident that Bravoes -  
 Perpetual break abroad  
 For Braveries, remote as this  
 In Yonder Maryland -

One observes that already in the second stanza the direction of the poem is changed. The relating of the boy's death gives way, in the third verse, to the theme of fame, which is then brought to a fuller development in the concluding stanza.

In order of usage, the next most frequent metre after Common Metre is Common Particular (8-8-6-8-8-6), followed by Sevens and Sixes (7-6-7-6). There is also a fair number of poems in which Emily Dickinson uses Short Metre (6-6-8-6). When writing trochaics, her chief metres were Eights and Sevens and Eights and Fives,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these metres:

Common Metre; Poem no. 1626, Vol. III, p. 1115:

"No life can pompless pass away -  
 The lowliest career  
 To the same Pageant wends its way  
 As that exalted here -" .

Common Particular; Poem no. 881, Vol. II, p. 653:

"I've none to tell me to but Thee  
 So when Thou failest, nobody.  
 It was a little tie -  
 It just held Two, nor those it held  
 Since Somewhere thy sweet Face has spilled  
 Beyond my Boundary -" .

Sevens and Sixes; Poem no. 974, Vol. II, p. 704:

"The Soul's distinct connection  
 With immortality  
 Is best disclosed by Danger  
 Or quick Calamity -" .

the latter being a comparatively new metre in hymnody which was introduced toward the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Common Metre is the metre of many of the hymns written by Isaac Watts, a copy of whose Church Psalmody was in the library of Edward Dickinson, Emily Dickinson's father. Long Metre (8-8-8-8) Emily Dickinson uses with greater reserve than did Watts and other hymnists. Whicher puts forward the suggestion that this might have been the result of her reading, in the preface to Church Psalmody, that:

A hymn in long metre generally possesses less vivacity... than one in short metre, principally because the stanza in short metre expresses as much of thought and feeling in twenty-six syllables, as the stanza in long metre does in thirty-two. In many instances in this book, hymns in long metre have been changed into common or short metre, by merely disencumbering the lines of their lifeless members.<sup>2</sup>

Whicher's suggestion is plausible, but actually less applicable than might at first be thought. Emily Dickinson's usage of Common

Short Metre; Poem no. 928, Vol. II, p. 677:

"The Heart has narrow Banks  
It measures like the Sea  
In mighty - unremitting Bass  
And Blue Monotony" .

Eights and Sevens; Poem no. 760, Vol. II, p. 578:

"Most she touched me by her muteness -  
Most she <sup>won</sup> me by the way  
She presented her small figure -  
Plea itself - for Charity -" .

Eights and Fives; Poem no. 925, Vol. II, p. 675:

"Struck, was I, nor yet by Lightning -  
Lightning - lets away  
Power to perceive His Process  
With Vitality."

Long Metre; Poem no. 1373, Vol. III, p. 947:

"The worthlessness of Earthly things  
The Ditty is that Nature Sings -  
And then - enforces their delight  
Till Synods are inordinate -" .

<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 85 - 86.

<sup>2</sup> George Whicher, This was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), pp. 240 - 241.

Metre seems curiously instinctive, as if she recognized and knew the form best suited to her purpose, and this impression is strengthened during a reading of the collected poems, an experience which was denied Whicher. As W.P. Ker says:

Speaking generally and roughly one may say that unless the poet knows his form to begin with, he is in danger of failure; one would not give much for the prospects of an unmade poem which did not know whether to be in the stanza of The Faerie Queene or in the lighter verse of The Lay of the Last Minstrel. Here again, as generally in poetry, the form is inseparable from the poetic matter; the tune of the verse is part of the meaning of the poem; poems begin in the mind of the poet as a tune without words, and he discovers words agreeing with the pattern. The pattern is not a scheme to be filled up with a certain number of syllables, but something living in the poet's mind. <sup>1</sup>

A similar point, but one made with a different slant of emphasis, is found in Kathleen Raine's discussion of Shelley's notebooks:

We can see whole stanzas blocked out, like a musical score, with only a word or a phrase here and there, to be filled in later, as if in an instantaneous perception of the lyric form which is antecedent to the words, drawing them towards itself like particles of iron into a magnetic field. At other times no doubt words and metre came together. <sup>2</sup>

Martha Winburn England, in a chapter entitled "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts" which appears in Hymns Unbidden, mentions several illuminating facts:

She [i.e. Emily Dickinson] wrote nineteenth-century hymns. They differ from eighteenth-century hymns (especially from those by Watts) by their greater metrical freedom, freer use of enjambement, use of more images with no scriptural source. The voice is that of a lone singer rather than the voice of the congregation assembled. <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W.P. Ker, Form & Style in Poetry (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., Reissued 1966), pp. 201 - 202.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Raine, Defending Ancient Springs (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Winburn England and John Sparrow, Hymns Unbidden (New York: The New York Public Library, 1966), p. 119.

The same critic makes a further point which elucidates the difference between the "hymns" of Emily Dickinson and those of Isaac Watts:

Writing for all congregations, some with no official litany, he made the songs a litany, a careful and complete pronouncement of classic Christian doctrine in its fulness, covering all occasions. The doctrine had to be clear to the lowest mind; the poetry must give no offense to his own cultured congregation. Preserving Augustan purity of diction, he abjured Augustan ornamentation, excluding any metaphor that might mislead those unaccustomed to the oblique statements of art. Mnemonic devices, usually of an undignified nature, must be used if they could be made consonant with dignity, so that his verses would cling to the memory of the illiterate. <sup>1</sup>

Watts had thus constantly before him a more or less accurate assessment of the nature of his immediate audience. As a private poet, Emily Dickinson committed her <sup>e</sup>po<sub>^</sub>ms largely to the future.

An anecdote which exhibits the extent to which Watts succeeded in his aim was told by Emily Dickinson's brother Austin:

In 1839... came the acquisition of the first musical instrument ever owned by the parish, a double bass viol. With my first recollection Joseph Ayres managed it, and the tones he drew from its lower chords in his accompaniment to the singing of some of Watts' Favourite Hymns, haunt me even now. Some lines as

"That awful day will surely come,"

"That last great day of woe and doom,"

and

"Broad is the road that leads to death," etc.

seemed to me sufficiently depressing in plain print; sung with accompaniment they were appalling - to a boy. <sup>2</sup>

Any discussion which simply lauds the extent of Emily Dickinson's achievement to the denigration of that of Watts is of little

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 125 - 126.

<sup>2</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), pp. 35 - 36. (Copyright 1955 by Millicent Todd Bingham).

relevance. One should attempt to trace the difference <sup>between</sup> ~~of~~ their productions, and recognize that the hymn form was probably brought to her notice by the frequency with which Watts' hymns were sung in the Amherst parish.

One aspect of the hymn being what Porter terms "the controlled, formalized expression of the intense impulses of aspiration and devotion",<sup>1</sup> the poet can employ it for this purpose. The hymnal mode serves constantly to alert the reader to Emily Dickinson as a religious, or, one might more accurately say, a spiritual poet. (Louise Bogan puts forward the thesis of Emily Dickinson as "A Mystical Poet",<sup>2</sup> but without sufficient substantiation to make the proposed idea acceptable.) This form can also be made to fulfil an ironic purpose, by using it to present ideas which work contrary to the themes of aspiration and devotion. By bringing the above elements into interplay, Emily Dickinson could create that sense of perilous balance which characterizes many of the poems, and achieve an effect more haunting than that of the combination of the Watts' hymns and the "double bass viol" on the young Austin Dickinson.

To bring the whole question more sharply into focus, it might be helpful to examine a few stanzas from one of Watts' hymns, and also to mention briefly a few facts about the man.

Isaac Watts (1674 - 1748) was the son of an English Non-conformist who was twice imprisoned for his religious beliefs. He

<sup>1</sup> David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Bogan, "A Mystical Poet" in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 137 - 143.

was ordained in 1702, and, as a result of his delicate health, became a lifelong guest at the country house of Sir Thomas Abney. He received honorary degrees from the universities of Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and a monument was erected to his honour in Westminster Abbey.

In his own writing Watts owed much to the example of psalmodists who had preceded him, but to the writing of hymns he also brought a "healthy strength of thought and a habit of broad, jubilant praise." Watts also had a way of breaking into sudden beauty amid a welter of inferior lines, as in:

Run up with joy the shining way  
To meet my blessed Lord

or

Let me within Thy courts be seen,  
Like a young cedar, fresh and green.<sup>1</sup>

The following stanzas are taken from Hymn no. 745 in the Congregational Hymn Book:<sup>2</sup>

There is a house not made with hands,<sup>3</sup>  
Eternal and on high:  
And here my spirit waiting stands,  
Till God shall bid it fly.

Shortly this prison of my clay  
Must be dissolved and fall;  
Then, O my soul! with joy obey  
Thy heavenly Father's call.

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<sup>1</sup> Information about Watts taken from Concordance to Christian Science Hymnal and Hymnal Notes (Boston: Christian Science Publishing Society, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> "Prepared by the Committee appointed at the Annual Meeting of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, held in London, May 8, 1855." The edition quoted from was printed in 1877 in London, by Yates and Alexander, Printers. The hymn appears on p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> The opening line of this ~~poem~~<sup>hymn</sup> is taken from II Cor. 5:1. The phrase, "not made with hands", was a particular favourite of Emily Dickinson's, appearing in several of her letters: Letters no. 180, Vol. II, p. 320; no. 182, Vol. II, p. 323; no. 458, Vol. II, p. 552; no. 866, Vol. III, p. 797.

'Tis He by His almighty grace  
 That forms thee fit for heaven  
 And as an earnest of his place,  
 Hath his own Spirit given.

One notices the exactitude of the rhymes ("heaven"/"given" of the third stanza being the only slight exception) and the regularity of the stress-pattern. (The syntax<sup>here</sup> is marked by a pause at the conclusion of the second line in the first and second stanzas, while each verse terminates in a full stop.) The presence of the rhyming words tends slightly to lessen the effect of the enjambements; but the very solidity of form assists the writer in constructing a definite step-by-step approach to the climax of the final lines of the hymn:

We would be absent from the flesh,  
 And present, Lord, with Thee. /

Returning to Ker's statement about a poet's knowing his form, one can, with certainty, claim that Emily Dickinson "knew" hers. She practised and experimented with it until what can be described as an assimilation of the form into her poetic consciousness took place. Not only could she shape the form to meet the many demands which she placed upon it, but it became what Porter terms "her mode of perception."<sup>1</sup> This should not be interpreted as a limiting, but rather as a refining process, for the possibilities contained within her metrics (so much a part of herself as almost to seem her natural way of speaking) were continually open to allow a wide vista, yet simultaneously rigid enough to maintain a firm foundation.

Into the Common Metre quatrain Emily Dickinson wove such traditional poetic devices as assonance and alliteration, and frequently moved away from the effects of exact rhyme, using instead

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<sup>1</sup> David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 73.

suspended, identical, imperfect, vowel and eye rhymes.<sup>1</sup>

(ii) Early in the correspondence between Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Emily Dickinson the former recommended that she drop her manner of rhyming in favour of a more conventional usage of exact rhymes. In her third letter to her chosen "Preceptor", Emily Dickinson

<sup>1</sup> All italics mine.

Suspended rhyme:

Poem no. 333, Vol. I, p. 326:

"And stir all day to pretty Tunes  
The Breezes fetch along -  
And hold the Sunshine in it's lap  
And bow to everything -" .

Identical rhyme:

Poem no. 712, Vol. II, p. 546:

"We paused before a House that seemed  
A swelling of the Ground -  
The Roof was scarcely visible -  
The Cornice - in the Ground -" .

Imperfect rhyme:

Poem no. 820, Vol. II, p. 620:

"All Circumstances are the Frame  
In which His Face is set -  
All Latitudes exist for His  
Sufficient Continent -" .

Vowel rhyme:

Babette Deutsch in her Poetry Handbook writes as follows concerning this rhyme:

"Vowel rhyme, in which any vowel is allowed to agree with any other, is rare, though examples can be found, notably in the verse of Emily Dickinson. She compensated for the regularity of her metrics by her unorthodox procedures in the matter of rhyme. These are too various and idiosyncratic to discuss, but one of her quatrains may be cited to illustrate the use of vowel rhyme:

'Nature sometimes rears a sapling,  
Sometimes scalps a tree;  
Her green people recollect it  
When they do not die...' "

Babette Deutsch, Poetry Handbook (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 125.  
The correct version of this quatrain is:

gratefully but assuredly wrote:

Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, swung -  
I had not supposed it. Your first - gave no dishonour, because  
the True - are not ashamed - I thanked you for your justice -  
but could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp -  
Perhaps the Balm, seemed better, because you bled me, first.<sup>1</sup>

As an example of what Emily Dickinson meant, the following poem -  
written in Eights and Sevens - ~~serves as an apt example:~~<sup>is apt:</sup>

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!  
When they dislocate my Brain!  
Amputate my freckled Bosom!  
Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness -  
Blush, my unacknowledged clay -  
Seven years of troth have taught thee  
More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped its socket -  
Trust entrenched in narrow pain -  
Constancy thro' fire - awarded -  
Anguish - bare of anodyne!

Burden - borne so far triumphant -  
None suspect me of the crown,  
For I wear the "Thorns" till Sunset -  
Then my Diadem put on.

Big my Secret but it's bandaged -  
It will never get away  
Till the Day its Weary Keeper  
Leads it through the Grave to thee.<sup>2</sup>

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"Nature - sometimes sears a Sapling -  
Sometimes scalps a Tree -  
Her Green People recollect it  
When they do not die -" .

Poem no. 314, Vol. I, p. 237.

Eye rhyme:

Poem no. 348, Vol. I, p. 278:

"I dared not meet the Daffodils -  
For fear their Yellow Gown  
Would pierce me with a fashion  
So foreign to my own -" .

This could be regarded as an assonantal rhyme, but evidence elsewhere suggests that Emily Dickinson was acutely aware of the appearance of words on the page, e.g. see discussion of Poem no. 1763, Vol. III, p. 1182: "Fame is a bee." on p. 58.

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 265, Vol. II, p. 408.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1737, Vol. III, p. 1168.

The only stanza which has an exact rhyme is the second, where "clay" and "may" occur. The rhymes in the first, third and fourth verses are imperfect, the final consonant in each case being an "-n", against which are sounded various combinations of vowels. Thus in the opening stanza the rhyme is centred on the contrast of "-ain" ("Brain") and "-an" ("man"); in the third the rhyme is established by "ain" ("pain") and "-yne" ("anodyne") and in the fourth by "-own" ("crown") and "on." The final stanza has the apocopated rhyme "Keeper"/"thee" as the only end rhyme, and an internal rhyme in "away" of line two and "Day" of line three, as well as <sup>the</sup> assonance of these two words and "Grave".

Like Emily Dickinson's own definition of Beauty:

The Definition of Beauty is  
That Definition is none - <sup>1</sup>

the critic must in the end admit that to formulate a pattern in Emily Dickinson's rhyme techniques would be only satisfying a personal sense of ordering, for the pattern is, that pattern is none. Emily Dickinson never seemed to feel the compulsion either to rhyme or deliberately to avoid an exact rhyme. This is not to say that the poet's attitude to her rhymes was negligent or neglectful; it was simply that rhyme never became the sole sovereign of the stanza.

Lest the quotation from the letter to Higginson be misunderstood, it should be stated that, despite her feeling for the imperfect rhyme, there are a great many poems in which Emily Dickinson uses full rhymes. This very lack of patterning was one of her means of never allowing the Common Metre stanza to become a strait jacket. It was also a manner of activating the stanza to yield a

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 988, Vol. II, p. 715.

new and unexpected energy. Thus, flatly to term Emily Dickinson a poetic experimenter would be mistaken, for what she was doing was to explore the possibilities contained within a traditional form.

Many of the poems will reveal a rhyme only after several readings, or, equally, a rhyme may suddenly leap into being for the reader. A favourite technique of Emily Dickinson's was to mingle various types of rhymes within the compass of a single poem. The following lyric illustrates this point:

My Portion is Defeat - today -  
 A paler luck than Victory -  
 Less Paecans - fewer Bells -  
 The Drums dont follow Me - with tunes -  
 Defeat - a somewhat slower - means -  
 More Arduous than Balls -

Tis populous with Bone and stain -  
 And Men too straight to stoop again,  
 And Piles of solid Moan -  
 And Chips of Blank - in Boyish Eyes -  
 And scraps of Prayer -  
 And Death's surprise,  
 Stamped visible - in Stone -

There's somewhat prouder, over there -  
 The Trumpets tell it to the Air -  
 How different Victory  
 To Him who has it - and the one  
 Who to have had it, would have been  
 Contenteder - to die - <sup>1</sup>

To map out an exact and definitive rhyme/scheme for this poem could prove difficult, for there are several disputable instances, but a close approximation would run as follows, if one counted in all kinds of rhyme:

a a b c c b  
 d d e f g f e  
 g g a h h a

It could, for example, be claimed that it is academic cavilling to

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 639, Vol. II, p. 491.

designate "Victory" in line three of the third stanza as an "a" rhyme because the same word has a similar classification in the second line of the poem. More important, however, is the mixture of full and imperfect rhymes. The rhymes of the first verse are predominantly consonantal: "Bells"/"Balls" and "tunes"/"means". But there is also the approximate rhyme "today"/"Victory" which contains the hint of an eye-rhyme, albeit very slight, in the "-y" ending of both words.

The situation alters when the second stanza is reached, for here the emphasis is on the full rhyme in "stain"/"again", ~~and~~ "Moan"/"Stone", and "Eyes"/"surprise". This verse is actually a perfectly conventional Common Particular Metre stanza, for the extra line has come about by the splitting of the octosyllabic fifth line into two tetrasyllabic lines with "Prayer" sounded as a mono-syllable. What is also interesting is the manner in which the only word without a rhyming correspondent in the second stanza, "Prayer", finds a resolution in the "there"/"Air" rhyme of the first and second lines of the third stanza. After this point the verse moves away from any definable type of rhyme, but can by no means be considered as unrhymed.

There are, for example, the words "has it" and "had it" in the fourth and fifth lines which are verging on an internal identical rhyme. This illustrates remarkably well one of the main problems to be contended with in any examination of Emily Dickinson's rhyme techniques. As a poet Emily Dickinson was sufficiently strongly responsive to rhyme to defend her manner of practising it in the already quoted letter to Higginson, but in the poems themselves the reader becomes aware of words forging unexpected (and frequently

undetected) rhymes, of words straining towards the creation of a rhyme, of rhyme as a kind of protean agent within the poems, lucidly emerging, then disappearing to emerge again a few lines later. The possibility of rhyme in the poetry is a force which constantly serves to prevent any lapsing into lethargy on the part of either the poem or the reader. In this vesting of words with an ever potential rhyme-making ability Emily Dickinson was again exhibiting her awareness of the multiplicity of forces which words possessed.

Several critics have related Emily Dickinson's fondness of suspended and approximate rhymes to the frequency with which she uses the subjunctive mood. Both are seen as manifestations of the indirect expression of ideas, as grammatical reinforcements of the imperative she issues in the following poem:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -  
 Success in Circuit lies  
 Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth's superb surprise<sup>1</sup>

Another idea which has been suggested by the poet's employment of the subjunctive mood and half rhymes is that they help give utterance to her doubts, to her knowledge that the world is an unknowable place; whereas, when her vision crystallizes into certainty, she tends more often to use full rhymes and a present or past tense. This argument is perhaps applicable to a few poems, but begins to pale when one considers that this so-called subjunctive may very likely be not so much a subjunctive as a type of universal present tense, which includes in its compass both past and present.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1129, Vol. II, p. 792.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 148 ff.

One should also attempt to see her rhymes not as distinctly apart from these philosophically orientated questions, but at least as operative within the poems and as being used by a poet who, however far she might have "pushed ... into language" and reached "the embrace of thought,"<sup>1</sup> remained primarily a lyricist and not a thinker. Emily Dickinson rhymed in this manner because as a poet she quite literally had to write in this style. The whole question of sincerity of purpose on the part of the creative artist has become a field so fraught with hazards for the inexpert that this proposition may sound naively unconsidered. But a great deal of the excitement experienced in the reading of Emily Dickinson's poems comes about because of the reader's realization that the words are "lived" words, and those words which she had not "lived" Emily Dickinson did not use.<sup>2</sup> The rhymes can also come alive of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 46, from Henry James, Essays in London (1893), p. 155, but in a different context.

<sup>2</sup> This principle can also be applied to poetic forms. It is interesting to note that, of the 1,775 poems, only very few are written in vers libre. One example is the following:

"Victory comes late -  
 And is held low to freezing lips -  
 Too rapt with frost -  
 To take it -  
 How sweet it would have tasted -  
 Just a Drop -  
 Was God so economical?  
 His Table's spread too high for Us -  
 Unless We dine on tiptoe -  
 Crumbs - fit such little mouths -  
 Cherries - suit Robins -  
 The Eagle's Golden Breakfast - strangles - Them -  
 God keeps His Oath to Sparrows -  
 Who of little Love - know how to starve -"

Poem no. 690, Vol. II, p. 533.

Emily Dickinson must have felt that this form was alien to her, and so seldom used it again. What is typical is that the poem first appeared in a letter written to Samuel Bowles in 1861 or 1862, and the copy quoted above was written in 1863. Emily Dickinson

their own accord. Sometimes it is by contrast with the exactitude of the full rhyme, as in "My Portion is Defeat - today -", but more often it is the simultaneous similarity-dissimilarity of sound created by the words constituting the rhyme which generates the excitement. Such is the case with the "Bells"/"Balls" and "Tunes"/"means" rhymes in the first stanza of "My Portion is Defeat-today". In this sense the rhyme is an element of delight and surprise, which can electrify the stanzas into coruscations of sound.

(iii) The next element of Emily Dickinson's stylistics to be examined is her use of the pause-mark or dash. This little sign provides any editor of the poems with difficulties, and in several less scrupulous editions it is often totally omitted. In some instances it is even claimed that the poems are "Reprinted by permission of the publishers from Thomas H. Johnson", but the poems are nonetheless presented in this debased form.<sup>1</sup> Such a practice robs readers of an extremely significant aspect of the poems.

What frequently occasions difficulty is the fact that in the manuscripts the pause-marks vary considerably. Some are

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returned to the poem later, altering certain words, substituting pause-marks for exclamation marks in seven cases, and increasing the length of the eighth line by two syllables. It is thus certain that the poem was not abandoned without effort and consideration being expended upon it.

Another of her vers libre lyrics, Poem no. 691, Vol. II, p.534:

"Would you like Summer? Taste of ours."

was also included in a letter to Samuel Bowles (Letter no. 229, Vol. II, p. 371) from which the poem was reproduced in the Johnson edition, as no autograph is known to exist.

<sup>1</sup> Laurel Poetry Series Emily Dickinson (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1960).

others descending,  
 ascending, while some are noticeably longer than others. Anderson and several other critics are of the opinion that they are intended to act as a guide to the rise and fall of the voice:

Her special use of punctuation marks in the manuscripts, it has been pointed out, was probably an attempt to indicate the proper inflection. Certainly one must make every effort to read her poems with the right tune.<sup>1</sup>

On the same question Johnson writes as follows:

Her use of the dash as ~~an~~ end-stop punctuation often replaces conventional commas and periods. Within lines it frequently is without grammatical function, but is rather a visual representation of a musical beat. The emotion is thus conveyed in the poem beginning:

Sweet - safe - Houses -  
 Glad - gay - Houses -

Such dashes become an integral part of the structure of her poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Since no editions which show the ascending or descending pause-mark have been printed, this function cannot really be said to exist for the general reader who has no access to the holographs of the poems.<sup>3</sup>

But the dash performs several very important functions within the poems. It can, visually, isolate a word or phrase from the remainder of the line, and so lift it to prominence. An example of this type of usage is the phrase "the Immortality" of the following poem:

<sup>1</sup> Charles Anderson Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), pp. 39 - 40.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> See holographs of poems nos. 49, 80, 324, 216, 449, 668, 907, 988, 1067, 1114, 1156, 1209, 1302, 1353, 1416, 1459, 1522, 1567 and 1606, Vol. I, between pp. xviii and xix.

Take all away -  
 The only thing worth larceny  
 Is left - the Immortality - <sup>1</sup>

The mid-line dash can often strengthen the effects of an enjambement, as, for instance, in this poem:

The first Day that I was a Life  
 I recollect it - How still -  
 The last Day that I was a Life  
 I recollect it - as well -

'Twas stiller - though the first  
 Was still -  
 'Twas empty - but the first  
 Was full -

This - was my finallest Occasion -  
 But then  
 My tenderer Experiment  
 Toward Men -

"Which choose I"?  
 That - I cannot say -  
 "Which choose They"?  
 Question Memory! <sup>2</sup>

In the first and second stanzas of this poem the pause-mark assists in the creation of a quiet, secondary voice. It is this voice which comes into play against that making the more overt statements. In each case the comments of this secondary voice, "How still", "as well", "'Twas stiller" and "'Twas empty", are separated by a dash from the remainder of the line. The pauses after "stiller" and "empty" in the first and third lines of the second verse are those which are earlier referred to as increasing the effect of the enjambement:

'Twas stiller - though the first  
 Was still -  
 'Twas empty - but the first  
 Was full - •

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1365, Vol. III, p. 943.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 902, Vol. II, p. 663.

The dash may sometimes have no strictly "grammatical function", as Johnson suggests, but it is, nevertheless, often a vital factor in the creation of tone, as in this fine illustration:

It's coming - the postponeless Creature -  
 It gains the Block - and now - it gains the Door -  
 Chooses it's latch, from all the other fastenings -  
 Enters - with a "You know Me - Sir?"

Simple Salute - and Certain Recognition -  
 Bold - were it Enemy - Brief - were it friend -  
 Dresses each House in Grape and Icicle -  
 And Carries one - out of it - to God - <sup>1</sup>

In the first verse the dash serves as a means of attaining a considerable height of suspense within the space of a few words. Thus the setting apart of "the postponeless Creature" and of "and now" enables a visual progression of items to be enacted. There is a corresponding increase in tension as the danger moves closer, ~~from~~<sup>to</sup> block, to door, to latch, to threshold. In the second stanza the pause-marks operate in a different manner. They add a levelling out or flattening quality to the words, so that, instead of the suspense being immediately experienced, it is concealed beneath a smooth exterior. If anything, the suspense becomes more awesome, especially in the absolute certainty of the "Creature"'s gaining its objective:

Simple Salute - and Certain Recognition - .

In the concluding line of the poem the irrevocable finality is emphasized in the slowing, dirge-like tempo which the pause-marks impose upon the reading voice:

And Carries one - out of it - to God - .

It is here that the real value of the dash emerges, namely, the effect which it has on the reading voice. It can force the reader

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 390, Vol. I, p. 307.

to become conscious of a word which might otherwise be neglected. The pause-mark also makes for the sense of considered intensity which is so much a part of Emily Dickinson's tone, and it frequently brings a calm into lyrics which express a superabundance of emotion.

In Emily Dickinson's poems the pause-mark is most often met with at the end of a line, a fact which the following poem demonstrates:

How many Flowers fall in Wood -  
Or perish from the Hill -  
Without the privilege to know  
That they are Beautiful -

How many cast a nameless Pod  
Upon the nearest Breeze -  
Unconscious of the Scarlet Freight -  
It bear to Other Eyes - <sup>1</sup>

In such a case the pause-mark has a force something between that of a full stop and a comma, yet not equivalent to a colon or semi-colon. It individualizes each line of the poem so that the line can sing in a sphere of its own. Simultaneously, these line-ending pause-marks give to the poem as a whole a feeling of fluidity, a sense of the poem's having nowhere the finality of a full stop. This fluidity of the poem is one of the reasons why Emily Dickinson's lyrics seem so unbound by time, for this final concluding dash enables them to be absorbed at any stage into the continuum of time. They exist in potential, merely awaiting the reader to respond to their qualities; then, this done, they incorporate him into their timelessness and he incorporates them into the passage of time in which he lives. Of course, it is not solely the effect of the dash

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 404, Vol. I, p. 315.

upon the words, for the words must, in certain cases, dictate the usage of the dash, but, none[the]less, this substituting of silence for sound which enables the words to emerge more clearly is one of the most strikingly unique aspects of Emily Dickinson's stylistics.

(iv) Earlier in this chapter a reference was made to the frequency with which Emily Dickinson uses a verbal mood often termed the subjunctive.<sup>1</sup> An example of this debatable subjunctive can be found in the following poem:

Give little Anguish -  
Lives will fret -  
Give Avalanches -  
And they'll slant -  
Straighten - look cautious for their Breath -  
But make no syllable - like Death -  
Who only shows his Marble Disc -  
Sublimar sort - than Speech.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the "Give" of line one and line three, could be understood as "should one give". In the form in which the verb appears in the poem it evokes an idea of the eternal possibility of this giving. If, as some critics maintain, the subjunctive conveys Emily Dickinson's uncertainties, then the tone of the above poem would appear to be working contrary to such an interpretation. In this lyric, for example, there is a series of definite statements as to how the human being will react to different intensities of trouble ("slant", "Straighten", "look cautious", "make no") followed by a further statement-making image in the last two lines on the approach of death.

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 310, Vol. I, p. 230.

Perhaps the most balanced answer to this question of the tense of these deliberately created verbal moods is that they are able to incorporate something of the subjunctive, while at the same time creating a continuous universal present tense. It is typical of Emily Dickinson to refine her verbs until they attain this particular tense which enables the events it records to exist in and for all time.

One of Emily Dickinson's verbal habits which has been neglected by commentators is her employment of the imperative mood, noticeably, her predilection for striking a firm opening note by beginning a poem with an imperative. The following <sup>eleven</sup>~~twelve~~ openings were discovered in a cursory reading of the Index of First Lines:

- Dont put up my Thread & Needle <sup>1</sup>  
 Take your heaven further on - <sup>2</sup>  
 Touch lightly Nature's sweet Guitar <sup>3</sup>  
 Praise it - 'tis dead - <sup>4</sup>  
 Put up my lute! <sup>5</sup>  
 Go not too near a House of Rose <sup>6</sup>  
 Go slow, my soul, to feed thyself <sup>7</sup>  
 Knock with tremor - <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 617, Vol. II, p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 388, Vol. I, p. 306.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1389, Vol. III, p. 957.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1384, Vol. III, p. 953.

<sup>5</sup> Poem no. 261, Vol. I, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Poem no. 1434, Vol. III, p. 994.

<sup>7</sup> Poem no. 1297, Vol. III, p. 900.

<sup>8</sup> Poem no. 1325, Vol. III, p. 916.

Lay this laurel on the One <sup>1</sup>

Read - Sweet - how others - strove - <sup>2</sup>

Step lightly on this narrow spot - <sup>3</sup>

There are even cases when it is extremely difficult to decide whether the verb is an imperative or an example of the previously discussed universal present tense, as in the poem:

Take all away -  
The only thing worth larceny  
Is left - the Immortality - <sup>4</sup>

Naturally, to draw conclusions from the above occurrences would be to present an argument without real substantiation, and the list is intended merely to call attention to this overlooked feature of many of the poems. It is this imperative mood which often brings a sense of spontaneity to the lyrics, the sense of a voice issuing commands, sometimes urgently, sometimes with considered quietness, so that one can feel hints of the pressures which compelled these poems to be written.

A particularly interesting poem in connection with Emily Dickinson's original verbal techniques is this short lyric:

Me - come! My dazzled face  
In such a shining place!  
Me - hear! My foreign Ear  
The sounds of welcome - there!

The Saints forget  
Our bashful feet -

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1393, Vol. III, p. 960.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 260, Vol. I, p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1183, Vol. III, p. 826.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1365, Vol. III, p. 943.

My Holiday, shall be  
 That They - remember me -  
 My Paradise - the fame  
 That They - pronounce my name - <sup>1</sup>

The main reason for quoting this poem is to examine two lines in the first stanza, namely:

Me - come! My dazzled face

and

Me - hear! My foreign Ear .

In the two phrases "Me - come!" and "Me - hear!" it is as if Emily Dickinson has suddenly, joyously, perceived the relationship between the self and the verb. The wholly ungrammatical means of expression emphasizes the intensity of this recognition and by sheer force of unexpectedness jolts the reader into participating in the experience. The very way in which the words are committed to paper conveys something of this excitement: "Me", dash, "come", exclamation mark. The dash represents a pause of unbelieving incredulity followed by the marvellous rush of truth that "Me" and "come" are indeed related to each other, hence the exclamation mark. The immensity of what is conveyed by "come" and "hear" has created a personal response of such intensity that it demands this spontaneity of expression.<sup>2</sup>

(v) Other of Emily Dickinson's ways of stressing certain words were the related ones of underlining, italicization and capitalization.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 431, Vol. I, p. 334.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson uses a similar construction in Poem no. 268, Vol. I, p. 191:

"Me, change! Me, alter" .

These devices have been criticized on the grounds that the emphasis which she wished to achieve should have emerged solely from the way the words functioned within the poem.

A particularly perceptive critic, David Porter, comments as follows on her capitalization:

... this habit of capitalization ... indicates that they [i.e. the capitalized words] are charged with a meaning and sentiment which, by activating the reader's own remembrance of perceptual and emotional experiences, engage him thoroughly ...

and

... her use of capitalization serves on occasion as a visual distinguishing mark, ... The function ... is indicative.<sup>1</sup>

It would be extremely difficult to formulate a theory to explain Emily Dickinson's use of capital letters. In certain poems they seem to be operating according to a discernible pattern, but in many other instances the usage appears arbitrary. The answer lies in the fact that words capitalized or underlined are pointing to the great connotative wealth which lies behind them, part of which they are thus introducing into the poem.

Sometimes, however, it seems that a word is emphasized simply because of its importance in being that particular word, an idea which coincides with Emily Dickinson's reverence for the word and its multiple powers.

In order to prevent this chapter from becoming too unwieldy, such questions as assonance (apart from rhyme and rhyme associations), unusual noun-adjective combinations and the coining of words are handled in the separate appreciations of poems, where they can be examined in greater detail.

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<sup>1</sup> David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 142 - 143.

(and a framework for the preceding numbered sections of the chapter)

The next topic for discussion<sup>1</sup> is Emily Dickinson's use of words in her poems, a subject so vast that only a few selected aspects will be analysed. In Chapter III<sup>1</sup> several poems were examined, all relating to the power which Emily Dickinson felt to be present in words, and the results of that discussion will be confirmed in the present argument.

Before one can approach the subject of the poet's concern with the word, one must realize that, for Emily Dickinson, etymology was a matter of vital importance and, as Anderson says, played no mean rôle in the aesthetic experience.<sup>2</sup>

In one of her letters to Higginson, Emily Dickinson wrote: "... for several years, my Lexicon - was my only companion -",<sup>3</sup> and this was due to the fact that she was not only constantly enlarging her vocabulary, but also delving into the derivations of words. The results can be seen in such techniques as the frequent and deliberate juxtaposition<sup>ing</sup> of words of Latin and Saxon origin as in these lines:

Spurn the temerity - /  
           ↑      ↑      ↑  
 Rashness of Calvary - . 4

It is true that it would be difficult to write in the English language without using words of Latinate origin; for instance, a ~~deliberate~~ juxtapositioning of this kind can be found in religious writing, especially in the Collects in the Book of Common Prayer.

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 54 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 32 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 261, Vol. II, p. 404.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1432, Vol. III, p. 992.

One does, however, notice a marked predilection on Emily Dickinson's part for concluding poems with words derived from Latin; for example:

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet  
 Feels shorter than the Day  
 I first surmised the Horses Heads  
 Were toward Eternity - <sup>1</sup>

and

'Twas the Winged Beggar -  
 Afterward I learned  
 To her Benefactor  
 Making Gratitude .<sup>2</sup>

This characteristic is doubtless partly due to her interest in abstractions, the words for which are frequently of Latinate origin, ~~and~~ whose use creates thematic resonances in the oeuvre.

Another characteristic of Emily Dickinson's poetry is the occurrence of specialized words or terms, the best known example being her employment of a legal vocabulary (which is known to contain many words of Latin origin).<sup>3</sup> The use of such specialized words expresses a desire for precision and exactitude, although the words themselves appear in the poems in a manner which allows their connotative power to be fully realized.

In an examination of Emily Dickinson's poetry there is a constantly recurring difficulty with which the student has to contend, namely, that as soon as one point has been established, the exact opposite is seen to be equally applicable. But these opposites illuminate each other, instruct the critic, and frequently end as being different views of the same matter, and not antitheses. In

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 712, Vol. II, p. 546.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 760, Vol. II, p. 579.

<sup>3</sup> See Genevieve Taggard, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1967), pp. 278 - 281 for a list of legal terms used by Emily Dickinson.

this instance (of the poet's use of specialized terms) one has to remember the fact that Emily Dickinson more than once stated her conviction of the pretentiousness of using unnecessarily learned words. A clear example is presented by this stanza, written in 1859:

I slew a worm the other day -  
 A "Saven" passing by  
 Murmured "Resurgam" - "Centipede":  
 "Oh Lord - how frail are we"! <sup>1</sup>

Here this aversion to ostentatious language is, in fact, an affirmation of the desire for precision and accuracy.

The other side of Emily Dickinson's conviction that words are the possessors of immense power is her feeling of frustration at the inadequacy of words, as when she wrote in a letter: "The old words are numb - and there a'nt any new ones -" <sup>2</sup> A poem praising the virtues of silence, in contrast to what can be achieved through speech, expresses the idea that certain emotions defy translation into words:

Speech is one symptom of Affection  
 And Silence one -  
 The perfectest communication  
 Is heard of none

Exists and it's indorsement  
 Is had within -  
 Behold said the Apostle  
 Yet had not seen! <sup>3</sup>

A poem such as the one above could be written precisely because Emily Dickinson had devoted so much time to living and working with words and to manipulating them so that they would impart her

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 70, Vol. I, pp. 55 - 56.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 252, Vol. II, p. 395.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1681, Vol. III, p. 1143.

particular ideas. The poet coins words. She is constantly pre-occupied in seeing just what can be achieved when words are used to perform functions grammatically not their own. Thus, nouns are made to fill the rôle of adjectives, adjectives become, for the purpose of the poem, adverbs;<sup>1</sup> and pronouns are, from a purist's viewpoint, used incorrectly, if the idea should demand such

<sup>1</sup> All italics mine.

Coinages:

Poem no. 1417, Vol. III, p. 983:

"Of subjects that resist  
Redoubtablest is this  
Where go we -" .

Poem no. 283, Vol. I, p. 283:

"And yet a Wren's Peruke  
Were not so shy  
Of Goer by -" .

Poem no. 364, Vol. I, p. 289:

"They'd modify the Glee  
To fit some Crucifixal Clef -" .

Emily Dickinson's coinages are frequently unusual grammatical forms which the uninitiated reader might well mistake for errors. She is particularly fond of original superlatives.

Nouns used as adjectives:

Poem no. 1315, Vol. III, p. 910:

"Transport's decomposition follows -  
He is Prism born."

Poem no. 86, Vol. I, p. 70:

"Butterflies pause  
On their passage Cashmere -" .

Poem no. 851, Vol. II, p. 640:

"When to his Covenant Needle  
The Sailor doubting turns -" .

Adjectives used adverbially:

Poem no. 953, Vol. II, p. 691:

"The Door as instant shut - And I -  
I - lost - was passing by -" .

Poem no. 821, Vol. II, p. 621:

"The Habit of a Foreign Sky  
We - difficult - acquire" .

Poem no. 1285, Vol. III, p. 893:

"I know Suspense - it steps so terse  
And turns so weak away -" .

expression, as in the line:

"That Mushroom - it is Him!"<sup>1</sup>

The result is that the diction of the poems is constantly straining in all directions, so that the neat Common *Mètre* stanzas become the containers of a language which is muscular, active and plastic.

Emerson in his essay entitled "The Poet" says: "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty".<sup>2</sup> It is not with the aptness of his definition as a whole that this section is concerned, but with one portion of it, the poet as "the namer". In many of her poems Emily Dickinson is using words in an almost primitive manner akin to that of bestowing names by describing functions.

Sometimes, to make the effect more riveting, she will omit the article, or refer to something as "it" for several lines before finally naming the object. Such is the procedure in the following poem:

We shun it ere it comes,  
 Afraid of Joy,  
 Then sue it to delay  
 And lest it fly,  
 Beguile it more and more -  
 May not this be  
 Old Suitor Heaven,  
 Like our dismay at thee?<sup>3</sup>

What is shunned, sued and beguiled is only revealed by a comparison with Heaven in the final two lines, so that throughout the lyric there is a growing sense of mystery before a resolution is presented.

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1298, Vol. III, p. 901.

<sup>2</sup> Reginald L. Cook, ed., Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1580, Vol. III, p. 1088.

The poet concludes with a question mark, which simultaneously opens out the whole poem and also swings it back to the opening line again.

To round off this discussion of Emily Dickinson's "primitivism", mention should be made of the instances when she seems suddenly to view things with the eyes of a child, as when, for example, she states the almost simplistic truth contained in the first and second lines of the lyric quoted below:

A power of Butterfly must be -  
The Aptitude to fly  
Meadows of Majesty concedes  
And easy sweeps of Sky - .<sup>1</sup>

For a butterfly to be a butterfly it must possess "The Aptitude to fly", and must be able to flit nonchalantly over great meadows and breadths of sky. But this idea changes in the next stanza, to be replaced by the human being's struggles preceding the discovery of enchantment:

So I must baffle at the Hint  
And cipher at the Sign  
And make much blunder, if at last  
I take the clue divine - .

Another fine poem which follows a similar course of development opens as follows:

What mystery pervades a well!  
The water lives so far -  
A neighbour from another world  
Residing in a jar

Whose limit none have ever seen,  
But just his lid of glass -  
Like looking every time you please  
In an abyss's face! <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1099, Vol. II, pp. 772 - 773.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1400, Vol. III, pp. 970 - 971.

The idea of the strangeness and foreignness of water is presented in a lucidly child-like manner - by terming the well "a jar" wherein the water "lives", and also by the use of a phrase such as "every time you please". But these verses never degenerate into the childish, for the idea of the strangeness of an everyday substance such as water pervades the lines, changing the familiar well into an inscrutable abyss. The next two stanzas describe the courage of the grass and the sedge, before the poem concludes:

But nature is a stranger yet  
 The ones that cite her most  
 Have never passed her haunted house,  
 Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not  
 Is helped by the regret  
 That those who know her, know her less  
 The nearer her they get.

This is not a poem of alienation from nature, but rather one of praise that nature will never yield up all her secrets even to those who love her most, that greater knowledge simply means greater awareness of further unfathomable mysteries.

However, it must not be thought that all or most of the elements discussed in this chapter are necessarily present in a typical Emily Dickinson poem. The following two lyrics, which show only some of the traits singled out, could be cited as examples of the uniqueness of tone of which she is capable:

On the Bleakness of my Lot  
 Bloom I strove to raise -  
 Late - My Garden of a Rock -  
 Yielded Grape - and Maisie -

Soil of Flint, if steady tilled  
 Will refund the Hand  
 Seed of Palm, by Lybian Sun  
 Fructified in Sand - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 681, Vol. II, p. 528.

and

Ample make this Bed -  
 Make this Bed with Awe -  
 In it wait till Judgement break  
 Excellent and Fair.

Be it's Mattress straight -  
 Be it's Pillow round -  
 Let no Sunrise' / yellow noise -  
 Interrupt this Ground - <sup>1</sup>

The first poem is actually not the version accepted by Johnson, for he prints only the second stanza. The two stanza version quoted here is a semi-final draft in one of the packets, but it has a completeness which allows one to consider it as a unified poem.

What is found in both these lyrics is a beautifully resolved quietness and firmness of tone. The voice speaks of homely things - a patch of garden and a bed - with an unwavering fortitude, so that they live in the fullness both of being garden and bed, and also of being representative of struggle rewarded and the necessity of living a life of austere honesty if the grave is eventually to be a place both "Ample" and of "Awe". These objects do not have the air of being deliberately forced to carry a symbolic weight, for the abstract and concrete implications have evolved quite naturally and simultaneously. The reader is not jolted from one sphere to the other, for both spheres are fully incorporated in the poems. It is in lyrics such as these that Emily Dickinson's "doubleness of vision" comes to fruition, in her ability to sight objects in both their temporal and eternal aspects.

The rich sparseness of these poems comes from the struggle which lies behind their achievement. For these words have been won

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 829, Vol. II, p. 628.

not only by constant companionship with the lexicon, but also by arduous experience in the writing of poetry. The strength of the spirit of Puritanism and New England-ism which Emily Dickinson recognized within herself is also present in these lyrics.

It is this sense of the union of struggle and ease which can stamp a poem as being uniquely a product of Emily Dickinson's. Fluency and control operate together to create lyrics whose tone has the seriousness and import of the finest products of the hymnists and the strength and delicacy of something toughly yet exquisitely tempered.

CHAPTER VI

FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE IN THE POETRY  
OF EMILY DICKINSON

"Love is Immortality"

One of the most important problems related to the work of the private poet is the danger of the self becoming the only reality. As Archibald MacLeish says in his essay on Emily Dickinson in Poetry and Experience:

The poet of the private world is not observer only but actor in the scene that he observes. And the voice that speaks in his poems is the voice of himself as actor-<sup>[1]</sup> as sufferer of those sufferings, delighter in those delights - as well as his voice as poet. If the tone is false, if the voice is self-conscious, the poem becomes unbearable as well as bad for the actor is then false, self-conscious. If the voice is dead, the poem is dead.<sup>2</sup>

Emily Dickinson was acutely aware of these difficulties. One means of seeking out a balance was her craving for correspondence with the minds of others, a fact which is especially noticeable in her attitude towards letters and friendship. In this attitude one can find a convenient starting point for an examination of the subject of love.

The forming and maintaining of a relationship with another human being became for Emily Dickinson a process of supreme importance. One can observe a treatment similar to that applied to the difficulties of time in her handling of the theme of friendship. In the former case she could achieve a transcendence of time precisely by intense concentration on the present moment. Thus, by underscoring the seemingly ephemeral and most humanly vulnerable

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<sup>1</sup> Compare this to Emily Dickinson's famous statement:

"When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person."

Letter no. 268, Vol. II, p. 411.

<sup>2</sup> Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1965), p. 95. (First published by Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

aspect of friendship, she could imbue it with awe - inspiring importance. This was achieved by concentrating on the many perils which constantly threaten the survival of a friendship. If these could be withstood, a relationship could be formed which would be strong and filled with the possibilities of further development.

The following poem, written about 1882, stresses the element of chance in the forming of a friendship:

Meeting by Accident,  
 We hovered by design -  
 As often as a Century  
 An error so divine  
 Is ratified by Destiny,  
 But Destiny is old  
 And economical of Bliss  
 As Midas is of Gold - <sup>1</sup>

The character of this meeting, suggestive of that of two insects hovering around a warm source of light amidst a huge and hostile universe, is placed beside the overwhelming odds against its occurring in the words: "Accident", "often as a Century", "An error" and "Destiny is old/And economical of Bliss". Countering such opposition is the determination of those concerned, expressed in the phrase "by design", which denotes the human will holding out against the conspiring forces of destiny.

A poem written twenty-three years earlier takes as subject the zeal to keep firm the links of friendship:

By a flower - By a letter -  
 By a nimble love -  
 If I weld the Rivet faster -  
 Final fast - above -

Never mind my breathless Anvil!  
 Never mind Repose!  
 Never mind the sooty faces  
 Tugging at the Forge! <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1548, Vol. III, p. 1068.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 109, Vol. I, p. 81.

By dropping a syllable from the second and fourth lines of each stanza, Emily Dickinson converts the 8-6-8-6 syllabic count of Common Metre to an 8-5-8-5 metre. The result is that, while the firmness and resolution of the Common Metre can still be experienced, the abbreviated lines add to the movement of the poem ~~in~~ a sense of breathless urgency. This is intensified in the first verse by the listing of the various means by which her aim will be achieved, and, in the second, by the combination of the repetition of the words "Never mind" and the series of exclamation marks. The maintaining of a friendship is thus shown as something of extreme relevance, but more important is the strengthening of that invisible extension of the relationship, the dimension of friendship which will be rendered:

Final|fast - above - .

In this matter of friendship the known areas of Emily Dickinson's biography serve as scrupulous witnesses to her concern about the part it played in her life. The early letters ~~of~~<sup>to</sup> Abiah Root, a girlhood friend, frequently contain passages which express the regard in which the idea of friendship was held by the poet when still very young. The following extract is taken from a letter written in September 1845, when Emily Dickinson was fourteen:

I long to see you, dear Abiah, and speak with you face to face; but so long as a bodily interview is denied us, we must make letters answer, though it is hard for friends to be separated. I really believe you would have been frightened to have heard me scold when Sabra informed me that you had decided not to visit Amherst this fall. <sup>1</sup>

Emily Dickinson's feeling for her own family was no less ardent. The letters to her brother Austin during the years that he

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 8, Vol. I, p. 19.

was away from the family home are filled with assurances of how deeply felt is his absence. The following three quotations are typical:

You speak of not coming home, and I cant help writing one word, tho' I have but a moment of time.

I am so surprised and astonished, at the bare supposition that you are not coming, that I hardly know what to say. I am sure you are not in earnest, you cannot mean what you say. If I supposed you did, I should rather speak, than write, and rather cry, than either. We have tho't of nothing and talked of nothing else, all winter and spring, and now the time is so near, I dont believe you will disappoint us. <sup>1</sup>

Dont feel lonely, for we think of you all the time, and shall love you and recollect you all the while you are gone. Your letter made us all feel sadly, and we had a sober evening thinking of you at Cambridge, while we were all at home. <sup>2</sup>

How much I miss you, how lonely it is this morning - how I wish you were here, and how very much I thank you for sending me that long letter, which I got Monday evening, and have read a great many times, and presume I shall again, unless I soon have another. <sup>3</sup>

But the laws of friendship, as Emily Dickinson understood them, also demanded that relationships be terminated when there no longer existed a reciprocal flow of warmth and interest between the

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 84, Vol. I, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 104, Vol. I, p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 109, Vol. I, p. 232.

No excuse is made for the length or number of these quotations, for an appreciation of Emily Dickinson's poetry is nurtured and increased by a reading of her prose. Extracts from the correspondence with Austin contained in Chapter III have shown that there is nothing maudlin about the tone of heartfelt longing for her brother's return. There is a great deal of humorous description, a quizzical viewing of people and situations and a current of seriousness which give <sup>to</sup> these letters a spontaneity, appeal, and literary merit which would seem to demand more critical attention than they have as yet received.

two people. The extract below is from a letter written about 1854 to Susan Gilbert, who was later to marry Austin Dickinson. A disagreement on spiritual matters had obviously arisen between the young women, and Emily Dickinson states her position with uncompromising frankness:

Sue - you can go or stay - There is but one alternative -  
We differ often lately, and this must be the last.

You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved, - sometimes to the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion rather bitterer than death - thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage, and I only add an agony to several previous ones, and at the end of day remark - a bubble burst!

Such incidents would grieve me when I was but a child, and perhaps I could have wept when little feet hard by mine, stood still in the coffin, but eyes grow dry sometimes, and hearts get crisp and cinder, and had as lief burn.

Sue - I have lived by this. It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven I once dreamed, and though if this be taken, I shall remain alone, and though in the last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me - there is a darker spirit will not disown it's child.

Few have been given me, and if I love them so, that for idolatry, they are removed from me - I simply murmur gone, and the billow dies away into the boundless blue, and no one knows but me, that one went down today. We have walked very pleasantly - Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge - then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on.

I have a Bird in spring  
Which for myself doth sing -  
The spring decoys.  
And as the summer nears -  
And as the Rose appears,  
Robin is gone.

Yet do I not repine  
Knowing that Bird of mine  
Though flown -  
Learneth beyond the sea  
Melody new for me  
And will return.

Fast in a safer hand  
Held in a truer Land  
Are mine -  
And though they now depart,  
Tell I my doubting heart  
They're thine.

In a serener Bright,  
 In a more golden light  
 I see  
 Each little doubt and fear,  
 Each little discord here  
 Removed.

Then will I not repine  
 Knowing that Bird of mine  
 Though flown  
 Shall in a distant tree  
 Bright melody for me  
 Return.

E. - <sup>1</sup>

The poem has been included in its entirety because it should be seen as an integral part of the letter, and not as an additional delight which has been appended. It is also interesting to note that Emily Dickinson's letters were to show increasingly a tendency to commingle prose and verse, especially in the rhythms of certain of the prose paragraphs. The poem has also been quoted from a point of general interest, in that it has certain phrasings in which one hears an echo of some of Blake's lyrics. The effect is particularly noticeable in its opening and closing lines.

The letter is suffused with ~~such~~ strong and striking imagery, the haemorrhaging heart, the heart grown "crisp and cinder", the "darker spirit" which will protect what Jesus spurns, as well as drownings, leavetakings and journeys. Another interesting fact is the variety of rhythms which appears in this passage of prose. The first paragraph has a staccato effect especially when compared with the sentence beginning "It is the lingering emblem ...", which, although broken into units by the use of commas, still has the feeling of the long flowing line. Interesting also is the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 173, Vol. I, p. 305.

The poem also appears as Poem no. 5, Vol. I, p. 7.

juxtapositioning which enables a phrase such as "We have walked very pleasantly" to radiate its full measure of emotional implications. One also notices that in the final sentences of this letter the general feeling becomes quieter, but is no less precise, a further example of the fact that Emily Dickinson's mastery of tone as a prose writer was no less great, although less frequently practised, than that which she exhibited as a poet.

The danger inherent in writing a chapter with this emphasis is the already mentioned temptation either to indulge in biographical speculation, or almost unwittingly to side with those critics who feel that what is known of Emily Dickinson's life should be interpreted or amplified by means of the poems and letters.

Emily Dickinson's own statements on friendship are all indicative of the esteem with which she regarded it. The most famous is "My friends are my 'estate'",<sup>1</sup> and the quality of the letters and of the poems on friendship shows the devotion which she tendered her friends. A quatrain with which a letter to Mrs. J.G. Holland is concluded reinforces the argument presented above:

Nature assigns the Sun -  
That is Astronomy -  
Nature cannot enact a friend -  
That - is Astrology.<sup>2</sup>

The many anecdotes concerning the poet's refusal actually to meet her friends in person are sometimes regarded as being the result of Emily Dickinson's yearning to create a dramatic aura about her life. The fact that the personal encounter might prove to involve an emotional intensity which her health could not sustain

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 193, Vol. II, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1336, Vol. III, p. 923.

is another and more probable explanation.<sup>1</sup> The situation is actually less paradoxical than it is often made out to be, for a letter became to Emily Dickinson not a substitute for seeing the person, but "like immortality - because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend"<sup>2</sup> and "a joy of Earth - It is denied the Gods."<sup>3</sup>

There are also several poems which refer to the theme of letters. One such is the following which tells of the re-reading of letters stored away for many years:

In Ebon Box, when years have flown  
To reverently peer,

.....

To con the faded syllables  
That quickened us like Wine! <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Higginson's letter to his wife after he had paid a visit to the poet:

"I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her."

Letter no. 342b, Vol. II, p. 474.

See also his recollections of the meeting, published twenty years later in the Atlantic Monthly LXVIII (October 1891):

"The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life. Perhaps in time I could have got beyond that somewhat overstrained relation which not my will, but her needs, had forced upon us. Certainly I should have been most glad to bring it down to the level of simple truth and everyday comradeship; but it was not altogether easy.

She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make <sup>her</sup> withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods; I must name my bird without a gun, as recommended by Emerson."

(Notes to Letter no. 342b)

Despite having recognized the "enigmatical" quality in Emily Dickinson, and having already for several years been the recipient of her unusual letters, Higginson seemed wholly to lack the ability to perceive that "everyday comradeship" was an impossibility. One must be grateful that he trusted his instincts so far as to avoid an inquisitorial approach.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 330, Vol. II, p. 460.

<sup>3</sup> Letters no. 960, Vol. III, p. 854; no. 963, Vol. III, p. 857.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 169, Vol. I, p. 124.

The ritual surrounding the reading of a letter is the subject matter of a poem written in 1862, the first stanza of which is quoted below:

The Way I read a Letter's - this -  
 'Tis first - I lock the Door -  
 And push it with my fingers - next -  
 For transport to be sure - .<sup>1</sup>

There also exist two versions of an extremely interesting poem, the first beginning:

Going to Him! Happy Letter!

and the second:

Going - to - Her!  
 Happy - Letter!...~~Tell Her~~ .<sup>2</sup>

What makes these poems so fascinating is the mention of the difficulties of committing words to paper, whether it be in poem or in letter:

Tell Her - the page I never wrote!  
 Tell Her , I only said - the Syntax -  
 And left the Verb and the Pronoun - out!  
 Tell Her just how the fingers - hurried -  
 Then - how they - stammered - slow - slow -  
 And then - you wished you had eyes - in your pages -  
 So you could see - what moved - them so - .

The second stanza further emphasizes the idea of the struggle reflected in the words and sentences:

Tell Her - it was'nt a practised writer -  
 You guessed -  
 From the way the sentence - toiled -  
 You could hear the Boddice - tug - behind you -  
 As if it held but the might of a child!  
 You almost pitied - it - you - it worked so - .

All this effort underlay the finished product, for to Emily Dickinson the correspondence of minds was a process which should

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 636, Vol. II, p. 489.

<sup>2</sup> Both poems classified as Poem no. 494, Vol. I, p. 376.

not be desecrated by anything shoddy. That Emily Dickinson herself practised a scrupulousness in her letter-writing can be seen in the many rough drafts, fragments, and incomplete fair copies of letters which are extant. This quality is evident in her correspondence with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, where the poet seemed ~~very~~ deeply concerned that the letters convey her ideas with the most acute precision.<sup>1</sup>

Another poem uses the letter as a symbol of the artist's attempts at communication <sup>with</sup> ~~to~~ a world of readers as yet uncomprehending:

This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me -  
The simple News that Nature told -  
With tender Majesty -

Her Message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see -  
For love of Her - Sweet - countrymen -  
Judge tenderly - of Me <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of the fifteen remaining "letters" to Judge Lord found after Emily Dickinson's death, eight are rough drafts:

Letter no. 563, Vol. II, p. 618.  
Letter no. 600, Vol. II, p. 638.  
Letter no. 645, Vol. III, pp. 663 - 664. (Fragments)  
Letter no. 695, Vol. III, p. 695. (Fragments)  
Letter no. 780, Vol. III, p. 747.  
Letter no. 790, Vol. III, p. 753. (Incomplete fair copy)  
Letter no. 791, Vol. III, p. 754. (Written on three scraps of paper)

Six are fair copies:

Letter no. 559, Vol. II, p. 614.  
Letter no. 560, Vol. II, p. 616.  
Letter no. 561, Vol. II, p. 616.  
Letter no. 750, Vol. III, p. 727.  
Letter no. 752, Vol. III, p. 730.  
Letter no. 842, Vol. III, p. 786. (Fragments of a fair copy)

One letter, no. 562, Vol. II, p. 617, is presumably a rough draft, as it is written on sheets of paper several of which have been cut off.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 441, Vol. I, p. 340.

That Emily Dickinson could view her oeuvre as a letter which entailed toilings, stammerings and omissions, makes understandable the concluding line in the sense of her work's being committed to a body of unknown future readers.

The writing and receiving of letters became an exploration, a thrilling meeting of minds "each ... like a distinct Bird -",<sup>1</sup> a venturing into an unfamiliar continent, a voyaging towards a new circumference. There was a morality to be observed, however, and one of the accepted rules is found jotted on an envelope addressed by Emily Dickinson to Judge Lord: "As there are Apartments in our own Minds that - (which) we never enter without Apology - we should respect the seals of others."<sup>2</sup>

It is this ever-present sense of respect for other human beings which helps make her letters such fine pieces of writing.

The passage from the discussion of friendship to that of love cannot be seen as a bridge between two wholly disparate subjects. In the poetry of Emily Dickinson it is frequently difficult, and often unnecessary, to create distinctions between the two. Neither can love be viewed as a theme unrelated to the other themes which recur in her poetry, for in this sphere, too, one of the poet's greatest wishes is for comprehension; not the comprehension which demands a logical understanding of matters, but the acquiring of more knowledge of the self and of the loved object.

There is, too, the fact that ecstasy and suffering are frequently interdependent; more often than not, one being unable to operate without the other. Related to this last point is the idea

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 457, Vol. II, p. 551.

<sup>2</sup> Prose Fragment no. 21, Vol. III, p. 914.

that love is seldom a gift suddenly and gratuitously granted; it is a state of mind to be struggled for, which may demand the most harrowing suffering before yielding up its reward.

Neither is it a matter of ecstasy only, for, as Charles Anderson says: "More than most of her contemporaries she ... was aware how small a part ecstasy makes in the sum total that comprises life."<sup>1</sup> Equally heartfelt are the states of happiness, joy, glee and bliss which are celebrated in many different poems. Similarly, the despair, while intense, does not become maudlin. In the finest poems in this group, the poetic and emotional quality is most intense precisely when the emotion is most under control, that is, when she can, with ability accrued from long experience, wrest from her metres the exact expression she wishes.

Thus far the word "love" has been used to mean that which is loved; to gain a clearer view of the matter, one must realize that the current of love flowed outwards from the "I" towards many things. Flowers, animals, insects, various manifestations of nature, family and friends are but a few of the subjects which awake love within the poet. Even in the early poems the lyric note is one of praise and delight at the awareness of so many marvels in the world.

With regard to this idea of love flowing outwards to embrace many things, Emily Dickinson may be compared to the seventeenth century English writer, Thomas Traherne. The comparison may not be a far-reaching one, but in a reading of Traherne's Centuries one is struck again and again by a similarity of outlook between these two writers. Thus Traherne writes in the eighteenth meditation of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 191.

the First Century:

The WORLD is not this little cottage of Heaven and Earth. Tho this be fair, it is too small a Gift. When God made the WORLD, He made the Heavens and the Heavens of Heavens, and the Angels and the Celestial Powers. These also are parts of the World: So are all those infinit and Eternal Treasures that are to abide for ever, after the Day of Judgment. Neither are these, some here, and some there, but all evry where, and at once to be Enjoyed. The WORLD is unknown, till the Value and Glory of it is seen: till the Beauty and Serviceableness of its parts is considered. When you enter into it, it is an illimited **feild** of Varietie and Beauty: where you may lose your self in the Multitude of Wonders and Delights. <sup>1</sup>

One feels here very strongly the spirit of certain of Emily Dickinson's lyrics.

The world in which Traherne lived was filled with wonderment, "Value and Glory", "Beauty and Serviceableness". Like the English mystic, Emily Dickinson too saw the world as marvellous in itself and containing within itself heavenly extensions, for, as Traherne says of the "Heavens and the Heavens of Heavens": "These also are parts of the World: ...". Or, as he writes in another of the meditations:

The Brightness and Magnificence of this World, which by reason of its Height and Greatness is hidden from Men, is Divine and Wonderfull. It Addeth much to the Glory of that Temple in which we live. Yet it is the Caus why men understand it not. They think it too Great and Wide to be Enjoyed. <sup>2</sup>

Emily Dickinson could enjoy the greatness of the world and also its minutiae, and these are celebrated in poems the subject matter of which ranges from the magnificence of the skies to the detailed observation of spiders, snakes and caterpillars.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Traherne, Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

Traherne, in the second meditation of the Third Century, expresses another view which is also very similar to Emily Dickinson's manner of thinking, namely, "All Time was Eternity ..." <sup>1</sup> Both writers loved the world for itself as well as for the eternal dimensions which they perceived to be vivifying all things. Emily Dickinson's nature poems, especially the lyrics about flowers, are written in a spirit of love flowing outwards to created things. She would defend usually disregarded plants and discover a beauty in them, as in the poem "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants -". <sup>2</sup>

Less mystical than Traherne, and definitely more concerned with a minute analysis of the self as it stood in relation to the universe, Emily Dickinson saw the world as both paradise and prison, <sup>3</sup> but what must never be forgotten is that the prison was a magical one:

Immured the whole of Life  
Within a magic Prison  
We reprimand the Happiness  
That too competes with Heaven. <sup>4</sup>

Whicher, one of the most reliable of Emily Dickinson's critics, claims that the distorted legends of her lovers:

... impose a cheap and commonplace interpretation on what was in reality a subtle and highly individual relationship. They reduce the pioneering of a soul to the stale formulas of Hollywood romance and Greenwich Village psychology. <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1298, Vol. III, p. 901.

<sup>3</sup> See Meditation 36 of the First Century: "for the World is both a Paradise and a Prison to different Persons."  
Thomas Traherne, Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1601, Vol. III, p. 1102.

<sup>5</sup> G.F. Whicher, This Was a Poet (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 83.

Nevertheless, he still feels that any serious student of the poems will have a "legitimate curiosity" about the romance of Emily Dickinson as it has bearing on the poems, and vice versa. He concludes his argument by comparing the case to that of the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets, and asks:

Would anyone who discovered a clue to the identity of the Dark Lady consider the heart of that mystery too sacred to be plucked out? <sup>1</sup>

To this end he sorts the poems at his disposal into "clusters" dealing with various aspects of this "love affair", such as departure, constancy, union in the immortal life and waiting for happiness. Whicher displays a sensitivity in his handling of this admittedly precarious subject, but still appears to feel that a substantial degree of compartmentalization is required to illuminate the biography. It is indeed desirable to distinguish various themes at work in different poems, but one must then reject the compulsion to treat these as fragments of a jigsaw puzzle, which when complete forms a map of Emily Dickinson's romance. <sup>2</sup>

In other words, the poems are not to be taken as autobiographical in a crude sense, for the "I" and the "he" are largely dramatic.

What Emily Dickinson is celebrating in many of her finest love poems is the idea of <sup>that</sup> eternity <sup>which is present</sup> ~~as living~~ in the spirit of love. Love is also the yearning for communication, the opportunity to

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> The researches into Emily Dickinson's life by Doug Ruddock, a character in Pamela Hansford Johnson's satiric novel Night and Silence Who is here? (1963), shows this practice carried to absurd lengths. Obsessed with the idea that Emily Dickinson's "secret" is her ~~alcoholic~~ addiction to rum, he tracks down any image which, feasibly or otherwise, may be manipulated to strengthen his thesis. He finally "proves" that the poet did indeed spend the major part of her adult life in a state of inebriation, constantly racked by violent cravings for liquor.

make new discoveries, to be endowed with a new type of vision, enabling her to see in the beloved, and in all things around her, a dimension of which she was previously unaware. The power of love is one which continues its workings and processes even when the "Fuel" is absent, for, as Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter to Judge Lord:

The withdrawal of the Fuel of Rapture does not withdraw the Rapture itself.  
Like Powder in a Drawer, we pass it with a Prayer, it's Thunders only dormant. <sup>1</sup>

An 1862 lyric, "Love - thou art high -", illuminates several important points and advances the discussion considerably:

Love - thou art high -  
I cannot climb thee -  
But, were it Two -  
Who knows but we -  
Taking turns - at the Chimborazo -  
Ducal - at last - stand up by thee -

Love - thou art deep -  
But were there Two -  
Instead of One -  
Rower, and yacht - some sov'reign Summer -  
Who knows - but we'd reach the Sun?

Love - thou art Vailed -  
A few - behold thee -  
Smile - and alter - and prattle - and die -  
Bliss - were an Oddity - without thee -  
Nicknamed by God -  
Eternity - <sup>2</sup>

Each stanza begins with the poet's applying a different adjective to love, and in combination these are sombre, indicative of something set far off, stately and of high seriousness:

Love - thou art high -  
Love - thou art deep -

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 842, Vol. III, p. 786.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 453, Vol. I, p. 350.

and

Love - thou art Vailed - .

But, "were there Two", the difficulties might be overcome, the highest mountains scaled,<sup>1</sup> the deepest seas sailed and glory attained:

Who knows - but we'd reach the Sun?

Love, as can be seen, confers a majesty upon those who are prepared to undergo the struggle involved, making them in the final estimate of things "Ducal", for this takes place "some sovereign Summer -". The opening image of the third stanza links love with the idea of the concealed deity which, once seen, must thenceforth alter the life of the beholder. The experience is of a nature that cannot be described, and any attempts sound like "prattle" in comparison with the magnificence of the face of love revealed.

The final three lines express the synonymy of love and eternity. The human being does not always perceive the fact that the two words are both names for the same thing, and it is God who must, with seeming benignity, bestow the appellation as a nickname. What the reader must realize, of course, is that the "I" of this poem has, by implication, seen love unveiled. It is the perception of this fact which enables one to understand, at least in part, the tone of calm recognition of the nature of love.

A poem written in 1864, the first stanza of which was sent to Sue probably in March, 1865<sup>2</sup> when her sister Harriet Cutler died, explores a similar idea:

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<sup>1</sup> "Chimborazo, in Ecuador, is one of the highest peaks in the Andes." (Johnson's note to the poem.)

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 305, Vol. II, p. 441.

Unable are the Loved to die  
 For Love is Immortality,  
 Nay, it is Deity -

Unable they that love - to die  
 For Love reforms Vitality  
 Into Divinity. <sup>1</sup>

The idea that love is "Immortality" or deity stands as the glowing centre of Emily Dickinson's love ethic, and is reaffirmed in many poems. This short poem is not circular in movement as it may at first seem to be; rather it expresses the certainty of love's being deity by the poet's building up each of the stanzas so that at their conclusions they illustrate the same idea. Each verse examines one half of the equation; the first, those that love, and the second, those that are loved. The final result, that the loved "are Deity" and that "they that love" exude divinity, is a re-emphasizing of the fact that love and immortality are inseparable. Love is a transmogrifying power, for those whom it touches, whether loved or lovers, are changed utterly, placed beyond time by this magic<sup>d</sup> current, becoming participators in something beyond themselves.

Frequently the love poems express the attempts of the "I" to create a correspondence between itself and God; for example:

You constituted Time -  
 I deemed Eternity  
 A Revelation of Yourself -  
 'Twas therefore Deity

The Absolute - removed  
 The Relative away -  
 That I unto Himself adjust  
 My slow idolatry - <sup>2</sup>

This lyric signifies precisely what lies behind those poems which

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 809, Vol. II, p. 611.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 765, Vol. II, p. 581.

are all too often interpreted as documents of despair. It is the lack of the dimension of eternity in love, or the mistaken assumption that eternity is present, granting an illusion of magnitude to the experience, when, in fact, it is not the thing itself but a precursory sign of eternity.

In this poem the flaw in understanding is lucidly indicated:

I deemed Eternity  
A Revelation of Yourself - .

Then, in the second stanza, the situation is adjusted, true eternity (the absolute) does away with the relative, and another relationship begins slowly to formulate itself - that between the "I" and God. The poem does not deal merely with the realigning of the profane into a channel of divine love. Particularly in the rhythm of the final lines,

That I unto Himself adjust  
My slow idolatry - ,

it seems to be hinting at the setting up of new time cycles, vast and slow-moving in comparison with what was occurring in the opening line:

You constituted Time - .

The effect is in part achieved by the alliteration operating within the two lines. That of line one is almost piquant, notably the three "t"'s in "constituted", followed by yet another in "Time", while in the eighth line a languor is created by the "l"'s of "slow" and "idolatry", by the fact that the "t" in "idolatry" is softened by the "-ry" which follows it, and by the assonantal effects of the accented vowels of "slow" and "idolatry". The love was not idolatrous because it was earthly, but because it saw all time as vested, not in the operative spirit of love, but in the figure of the beloved.

Earlier in this chapter Emily Dickinson was compared to Traherne, a mystic, and a brief relating of her love poetry to that of a non-mystical religious poet such as George Herbert can also prove illuminating.<sup>1</sup>

Herbert in his poem "Love" (III) presents a personified love who is a welcoming and forgiving figure:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
 If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:  
 Love said, You shall be he.  
 I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
 I cannot look on thee.  
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
 Go where it doth deserve.

(no stanza break)

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<sup>1</sup> A positive proof that Emily Dickinson had read at least one of Herbert's poems is to be found in this incident related by Capps:

"... from among Herbert's poems she transcribed the second two stanzas of his 'Matin Hymn' to keep among her own papers. The poem was published in The Springfield Republican for October 28, 1876 with the title 'Mattens', and is included in the Chambers anthology. [Cyclopaedia of English Literature, ed. by Robert Chambers, copies of which were owned by Edward Dickinson and Susan Dickinson.] She chose to copy the following lines:

My God, what is a heart,  
 Silver, or gold, or precious stone,  
 Or star, or rainbow, or a part  
 Of all these things - or all of them in one?

My God, what is a heart,  
 That thou shouldst it so eye and woo,  
 Pouring upon it all thy art  
 As if that thou hadst nothing else to do?

These stanzas bore enough resemblance to Dickinson poems for Millicent Todd Bingham to publish them as Emily's own in the first edition of Bolts of Melody.<sup>11</sup>

Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading : 1836 - 1886 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 69.

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
 My deare, then I will serve.  
 You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
 So I did sit and eat. <sup>1</sup>

The marvellous sense of problems overcome and of resolution with which the poem ~~concludes~~ <sup>ends</sup> reminds one of the calm firmness with which Emily Dickinson concludes one of her love lyrics already quoted:

For Love reforms Vitality  
 Into Divinity.

Herbert's figure of love has the quiet authority of some eternal personage who knows all answers to the fumbling human questions, who has an amplitude which can constantly forgive and grant further bounties.

One of the closest bonds between the finest of Emily Dickinson's love lyrics and this Herbert poem is the fact that they both exude a spirituality without being narrowly religious. There is a constant awareness of the high holiness or divinity of love. In another of his poems, "The World", Herbert speaks of the "stately house" built by love, which, after it has been razed by sin and death, is rebuilt:

But Love and Grace took Glorie by the hand,  
 And built a braver Palace then before. <sup>2</sup>

Love is thus for Herbert that central spirit of life which can never be destroyed. In this belief he is very close to Emily Dickinson who too saw love as the core and raison d'être of existence.

Frequently the myth which has been constructed around Emily Dickinson stands as an obstacle between the poems and a true

<sup>1</sup> The Works of George Herbert, ed. by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 188 - 189.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

appreciation of them. This myth has been built up by any number of critics, and constant addition has served to grant further substance to the legend. Conrad Aiken, in an essay on Emily Dickinson, says, for example:

... it is permissible to suggest that her extreme self-seclusion and secrecy was both a protest and a display - a kind of vanity masquerading as modesty. She became increasingly precious, of her person as of her thought. Vanity is in her letters - at the last an unhealthy vanity. She believes that everything she says, however brief, will be of importance; however cryptic, will be deciphered. She enjoys being something of a mystery, and she sometimes deliberately and awkwardly exaggerates it. Even in notes of condolence - for which she had a morbid passion - she is vain enough to indulge in sententiousness: ...<sup>1</sup>

Aiken is making the same mistake as many other critics who exercise a perceptive sensitivity when dealing with the poems, but combine/ with it the yearning to construct a poet who will measure up to the demands of the legend.

Again, Henry W. Wells, in attempting to substantiate his theory of Emily Dickinson's "Romantic Sensibility", tends to come down heavily on certain of the poems:

Although some of her most moving love poems are majestically impersonal, or, in other words, come nearer to Sappho or Dante than to Browning or Tennyson, a number by no means of her least impressive pieces are stamped with marks of peculiarly romantic sensibility. One of her best known lyrics, "Although I put away his life," is very much in Mrs. Browning's equally sentimental and realistic manner ... She might have been the faithful and devoted servant of a husband, sowing the flowers he preferred, soothing his pains, pushing pebbles from his path, playing his favorite tunes, or fetching him his slippers. The more fanciful of her love hyperboles also tend to follow current patterns. One of her longest lyrics, "I cannot live with you," proves a more concise version of the romantic theme of love and immortality as handled in Rossetti's Blessed Damosel ... Without losing high merit, Emily's verse occasionally steps down from a high and impersonal dignity to assume the

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Aiken, "Emily Dickinson", in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 12.

consciously feminine manner especially admired in the mid-nineteenth century. Though the poetry is more than commonplace it is less than universal. The feminine note grows unmistakable.<sup>1</sup>

Criticism such as the above, while not employing biographical information, none the less assists in strengthening the misleading legend. Present in the above paragraphs seems to be a gently insidious note of resentment at the poet's being a woman. This is a fact which compels many critics to apologies for, or amazement at, the idea that a woman could write poetry of such calibre. If the expression of love in the poems is sometimes hyperbolic, it is because of the intensity of the emotion; it is certainly not the gushings of a sentimentally romantic lady poet. The love which is manifested in Emily Dickinson's lyrics is not a wishy-washy thing to be bandied about, but a powerful force going outwards to the world around her, never narcissistically turned inwards upon itself.

The very poem which Wells criticizes for belonging to the presumably deplorable school of Rossetti-ism - "I cannot live with You" - actually stresses the same point as "You constituted Time". The sixth, seventh, ninth and ultimately the twelfth<sup>5</sup> stanzas of the poem follow below:

Nor could I rise - with You -  
Because Your Face  
Would put out Jesus' -  
That New Grace

Glow plain - and foreign  
On my homesick Eye -  
Except that You than He  
Shone closer by -

. . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Henry W. Wells, "Romantic Sensibility", in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 47 - 48.

Because You saturated Sight -  
 And I had no more Eyes  
 For sordid excellence  
 As Paradise .

This love is not only all-absorbing; it has become so exclusive that it has divorced itself utterly from the sphere of heavenly love, and so, instead of the energy of love flowing out in all directions, it has become ~~instead~~ a self-enclosed thing, <sup>not</sup> open to ~~neither~~ life, death or redemption, forbidding the lovers to be with each other, and surviving mistletoe-like on "that White Sustenance - / Despair -":

So We must meet apart -  
 You - there - I - here -  
 With just the Door ajar  
 That Oceans are - and Prayer -  
 And that White Sustenance -  
 Despair - . 1

There is also a number of poems celebrating the marriage ritual sometimes combined with the theme of wifhood, as for instance:

I'm "wife" - I've finished that -  
 That other state -  
 I'm Czar - I'm "Woman" now -  
 It's safer so -

How odd the Girl's life looks  
 Behind this soft Eclipse -  
 I think that Earth feels so  
 To folks in Heaven - now -

This being comfort - then  
 That other kind - was pain -  
 But why compare?  
 I'm "Wife"! Stop there! 2

The centre of the poem lies in the comparison of states; ~~of~~ the compound state of being wife, woman and Czar ~~which~~ has eclipsed

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 640, Vol. II, p. 492.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 199, Vol. I, p. 142.

(in the sense of "outshone" and with the implications of the natural phenomenon) "that other state", "the Girl's Life". But in the final stanza the heaven-earth, comfort-pain contrasts are abandoned in the decision that the very word "Wife" is so powerful and awe-inspiring as quite naturally to convey the immensity of the change, there being no need for further elaboration. One also notices that when the word appears in the concluding line it is capitalized and followed by an exclamation mark, not solely ~~because~~ <sup>for</sup> of emphasis, but also as if the stature of the word, and what it conveys, demands such recognition.

More important, however, are those poems in which marriage, love, death and the attainment of an ideal after long striving are fused. These poems celebrate that time when, as Emily Dickinson expressed it in the poem "Exhilaration - is within -",

The Soul achieves - Herself - .<sup>1</sup>

One such lyric is:

I live with Him - I see His face -  
I go no more away  
For Visiter - or Sundown -  
Death's single privacy

The Only One - forestalling Mine -  
And that - by Right that He  
Presents a Claim invisible -  
No Wedlock - granted Me -

I live with Him - I hear his Voice -  
I stand alive - Today -  
To witness to the Certainty  
Of Immortality -

Taught Me - by Time - the lower Way -  
Conviction - every day -  
That Life like This - is stopless -  
Be Judgment - what it may - <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 383, Vol. I, p. 303.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 463, Vol. I, p. 357.

The poem is a testimony that immortality can be achieved, or, as Emily Dickinson said in another poem also written in 1863, her poetically most prolific year:

Forever - is composed of News -  
'Tis not a different time - .<sup>1</sup>

The poem under discussion deals with a sphere of certainties which are yet invisible and without proof. The "I" is completely alone, and yet linked to the "Him" by a bond far exceeding that of wedlock. What is designated by this pronoun "Him" may at first sight appear puzzling, especially in the light of the sixth and seventh lines:

And that - by Right that He  
Presents a Claim invisible -

where it seems to refer back to the "Death" of the fourth line. The answer is that the "He" is no masculine character able to be defined with any measure of assurance, but a compound idea made up of various elements. There is the deliberate partial confusion with death, because death is present in the final whole, for the poem seems to say that the "I" has, in a sense, already died, and is speaking with a knowledge for which "the lower way" was preparation.

The present tense of "Presents" in the seventh line also stands as witness to the constant attendance of death, whose <sup>t</sup>petition is the only one worthy to survive the honing away of everything superfluous. It is because of this acknowledgement of death that the poet can affirm the vital aliveness of the "I" in such lines as:

I live with Him - I see His face -

and

I live with Him - I hear his Voice -

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 624, Vol. II, p. 480.

and, above all, in the second line of the third stanza:

I stand alive - Today - .

This line illuminates with piercing immediacy the sense of the speaker's being alive at the moment the poem was committed to paper; but "Today" is also part of eternity, and can be seen as another manner of expressing the "Nows" in the line quoted earlier in this discussion.

Also embodied in this "Him" is the fulfilment of the spiritual quest, the sense of suffering rewarded and the attaining of the goal after many explorations. It is not true, as is often claimed, that Emily Dickinson can dispense with the lover-figure, or abstract him out of existence, for this "figure" seems both very real - an effect started up by the mention of his face and voice, to then filter through the poem - and also, for the reader, elusively abstract. He stands thus for both the physical and the spiritual, being able to evoke responses in both spheres.

Another important fact is that only through a maturity of emotion and intellect can such a state be reached, and that the consummation is in the certainty which lies behind the statement of the final lines:

Conviction - Every day -  
That Life like This - is stopless -  
Be Judgment - what it may - .

This is not a denigration of "Judgment," but the simple assertion that the self has realized itself, the soul "achieve[d]" herself, and nothing, however powerful or apocalyptic, can destroy this conviction.

There is in this lyric a maturity which is not always present in many of the more obviously erotic poems, examples of which are:

Did the Harebell loose her girdle  
To the lover Bee <sup>1</sup>

or the more famous:

Wild Nights - Wild Nights!  
Were I with thee  
Wild Nights should be  
Our luxury!

Futile - the Winds -  
To a Heart in port -  
Done with the Compass -  
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -  
Ah, the Sea!  
Might I but moor - Tonight -  
In Thee! <sup>2</sup>

-I see His face-

"I live with Him" <sup>3</sup> is the finer poem because the final concatenation of events is one of considerably higher import than is that in "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!". The "Heart in port" and the mooring for "Tonight" lack the wider application with which the personal experience has been endowed in the former poems.

Emily Dickinson once wrote in a letter to Dr. and Mrs. Holland:

"Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love ... 'My business is to sing' - ".<sup>3</sup> This is precisely what she did, and the intense response to life as evidenced in the poems is witness to the dedication with which they were written. Thus, the undated quatrain with which this chapter is concluded sounds the spirit of love which permeated so much of her work:

That Love is all there is,  
Is all we know of Love;  
It is enough, the freight should be  
Proportioned to the groove. <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 213, Vol. I, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 249, Vol. I, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 269, Vol. II, p. 413.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 1765, Vol. III, p. 1183.

## CHAPTER VII

### A DISCUSSION OF SOME PENINSULA POEMS

(i)	Bring me the sunset in a cup,	194
(ii)	That after Horror - that 'twas <u>us</u> -	206
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(ix)	How brittle are the Piers	260
(x)	Above Oblivion's Tide there is a Pier	267
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The proposed aim of this final section is to examine in detail a number of Emily Dickinson's poems. That most of these poems contain images related to the pier or peninsula must be regarded as constituting the most open of conditions for the formulation of the group. It is hoped that through the study of these poems much of the material contained in the preceding chapters will be exemplified.

At this point it might be useful to attempt to assess the possible difficulties of the course to be undertaken. One of the most obvious is expressed by P.N. Furbank, who warns against "... the belief that you can isolate the 'images' in a work of literature, that you can collect and categorize them and trace patterns in them, so forming a work-within-the-work."<sup>1</sup> Isabel Hungerland expresses a similar view in her Poetic Discourse:

One cannot do justice to ... poems by merely "tracing the images," that is, by tracing the interrelations of the suggestive work of certain nouns and adjectives. [2].. The merits of poetry ... depend on many factors in interrelation. Hence, it is illegitimate to take one device for achieving a certain kind of effect, namely, the use of imagery to suggest appraisals and generalizations which are not explicitly stated, as the criterion of excellence in poetry. <sup>3</sup>

The statements cited above dissuade one from the practice of "tracing the images", and lead one to enlarge somewhat the area of examination as it was originally proposed. In the poems selected, the study of the entire poem, and of its relationships to others outside the group, will be regarded as the task to be undertaken.

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<sup>1</sup> P.N. Furbank, "Do we need the terms 'Image' and 'Imagery'?" The Critical Quarterly (Winter, 1967), pp. 341 - 342.

<sup>2</sup> Isabel Hungerland, Poetic Discourse (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

The reasons for the selection of an archipelago of poems from the large body of Emily Dickinson's work can be prefaced by a description of how others have approached a similar problem. The creation of hard and fast boundaries or strict delimitation<sup>s</sup>, which is perhaps feasible in the work of only a very few poets, proves in the case of Emily Dickinson a peculiarly difficult task. There are two chief reasons for this. The first is contained in the well known criticism of her work, that she simply wrote the same poem over and over again. Those critics who have tended to apply this judgment in a pejorative sense have frequently been able to reach this decision only through skilful manoeuvring, and, in several cases, through paucity of evidence. David Porter singles out this particular point for comment: "... to suggest that a single idea controls her work is to impose a single reading on poems which are in fact abstract, equivocal in their symbolic meanings, and capable of more than one reading." <sup>1</sup>

The second reason is best illuminated by a quotation from Northrop Frye, who declares that: "... she seems, after her early valentines [1850 - 1852], to have reached her mature style almost in a single bound." <sup>2</sup>

To adopt the method of concentrating almost exclusively on the images in the poems is essentially a short-sighted view, limiting the poetry in the same way that division and categorization on the basis of subject matter do. (It is interesting to note that Mrs. Todd and Colonel Higginson followed a flexible and wide embracing

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<sup>1</sup> David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

system of this nature when editing the first volume of Emily Dickinson's poems. They grouped the poems under four headings, viz. Life, Love, Time and Eternity.)<sup>1</sup> In addition to the approaches already mentioned - the single idea or theme delimitation, categorization based on subject matter and the grouping of image clusters - there is another which actually evades the problem without really attempting a solution. This is the view, applied frequently without any derogatory intention, that the poems as a whole are without direction, isolated impulses, a series of "Bulletins ... / From Immortality."<sup>2</sup>

To reconcile these diverging judgments is not the purpose of this discussion, but to mention them is necessary for an understanding of the type of selection undertaken. Following what Frye has said, one could, quite literally, select at random poems from the oeuvre, and, by studying them attentively and perceiving their relationships to other poems, learn much which is meaningful about the poetic craft of Emily Dickinson. It will be possible to test Frye's viewpoint thoroughly, for the poems to be examined are not concentrated in one particular phase of Emily Dickinson's creative career.

"That after Horror - that 'twas us -" can be dated at about 1861, while "Above Oblivion's Tide there is a Pier" has been placed among those poems written in 1881.

The dating of most of Emily Dickinson's poems has been based on an analysis of the changes which her script underwent.<sup>3</sup> In those

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<sup>1</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), pp. 34, 35, & 56.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 827, Vol. II, p. 626.

<sup>3</sup> See Johnson's summary of his findings entitled "Characteristics of the Handwriting," Vol. I, pp. xlix - lix.

cases where no autograph copy of a particular poem is known to exist, such as "The Earth has many Keys", Johnson has reproduced the poem from Bolts of Melody<sup>1</sup> which derives from a transcript made by Mrs. Todd. Other transcripts derive from Susan Dickinson and published sources.<sup>2</sup> The poems considered here have been placed in a chronological order corresponding to Johnson's dating in The Poems of Emily Dickinson.

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<sup>1</sup> Nabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, eds., Bolts of Melody (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

<sup>2</sup> The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Vol. III, p. 1188.

(i)

Bring me the sunset in a cup,  
 Reckon the morning's flagon's up  
 And say how many Dew,  
 Tell me how far the morning leaps -  
 Tell me what time the weaver sleeps  
 Who spun the breadths of blue!

Write me how many notes there be  
 In the new Robin's extasy  
 Among astonished boughs -  
 How many trips the Tortoise makes -  
 How many cups the Bee partakes,  
 The Debauchee of Dews!

Also, who laid the Rainbow's piers,  
 Also, who leads the docile spheres  
 By withes of supple blue?  
 Whose fingers string the stalactite -  
 Who counts the wampum of the night  
 To see that none is due?

Who built this little Alban House  
 And shut the windows down so close  
 My spirit cannot see?  
 Who'll let me out some gala day  
 With implements to fly away,  
 Passing Pomposity? <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 128, Vol. I, p. 91.

The twentieth century appreciation of John Donne and other Metaphysical poets has sometimes encouraged critics to speak of the metaphysical quality of Emily Dickinson's poems. This term has been applied to certain of her images, and especially to the force and brilliance of her opening and concluding lines. The adjective is not wholly applicable, however, although the reasons which prompted its being used are clear.

That Emily Dickinson on at least one occasion did, knowingly or unknowingly, write a poem using certain external features of the metaphysical type of poem can be verified by examination of the lyric "Bring me the sunset in a cup,". Even a cursory reading will indicate the similarity between the first stanza of this poem and that of Donne's "Song", which is quoted below:

Goe, and catche a falling starre,  
 Get with child a mandrake roote,  
 Tell me, where all past yeares are,  
 Or who cleft the Diuels foot,  
 Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,  
 Or to keep off envies stinging,  
     And finde  
     What winde  
 Serves to advance an honest minde.

If thou beest borne to strange sights,  
 Things invisible to see,  
 Ride ten thousand daies and nights,  
 Till age snow white haires on thee,  
 Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell mee  
 All strange wonders that befell thee,  
     And sweare  
     No where  
 Lives a woman true, and faire.

If thou findest one, let mee know,  
 Such a Pilgrimage were sweet;  
 Yet doe not, I would not goe,  
 Though at next doore wee might meet,  
 Though shee were true, when you met her,  
 And last, till you write your letter,  
     Yet shee  
     Will bee  
 False, ere I come, to two, or three. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne : Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. by John Hayward (London: The Noonessuch Press, 1962), p. 4.

But a critical appreciation of any depth will show that the similarities lie mostly in the first stanza and more particularly in the phrasing of the rhetorical imperatives, and that basically the poems stand far apart.

Donne's poem has been chosen not because it is an example of his most highly metaphysical arguments, but because of its markedly lyric note. This, and its relative simplicity, make it suitable material for a comparison and contrast with the Emily Dickinson lyric.

"Bring me the sunset in a cup," consists of four stanzas written in the Common Particular Metre of 8-8-6-8-8-6. This creates the effect of a forward movement with a backward recoil. Another element which demands scrutiny is that of the rhyme. The rhyme scheme is as follows: aabccb - ddbeeb - ffbggg - hhdiid. The number of rhyming couplets and the frequency of exact rhymes distinguish this poem as something of an exception in Emily Dickinson's works.

Less unusual, however, is the reappearance of the "b" rhyme (as a half rhyme) in the second and third stanzas, in the final lines of which it creates a type of refrain. Another fact which emphasizes the refrain quality of the concluding lines is the alliteration:

Who spun the breadths of blue!

The Debauchee of Dews!

and

Passing Pomposity?

The first stanza consists of a series of rhetorical imperatives relating to natural occurrences, the sunset, the dew, dawn and the sky. It is this verse which is most reminiscent of the Donne poem, particularly in the imperative openings:

Bring me the sunset in a cup,

and

Goe, and catch a falling starre, .

Another echo which vibrates between the two stanzas is the phrase "Tell me", but where Donne changes it to "Teach me", Emily Dickinson prefers a repetition:

Tell me, where all ~~the~~ past yeeres are,  
Or who cleft the Divils foot,  
Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,  
Or to keep off envies stinging,

as contrasted with:

Tell me how far the morning leaps -  
Tell me what time the weaver sleeps  
Who spun the breadths of blue!

Already one can sense the diverging directions of these poems. Donne employs images from the sphere of the supernatural - the mandrake, "the Divils foot" and mermaids, while Emily Dickinson continues developing the theme of the amazing manifestations of nature, in this and the two following verses.

In fact, a closer examination of the things mentioned will reveal that they are precisely the subjects to which many of her nature poems are devoted, the tortoise constituting an exception. A stanza by stanza analysis of the poem will best enable one finally to perceive its movement and direction.

The first line, with its implications of the impossible task of forcing into a tiny container the vastness of the sunset, exhibits a typical Dickinsonian technique. She frequently uses this suggestion-by-negation method to aggrandize the object or event which cannot be brought within the bounds of human compartmentalization. One of the best known suggestion-by-negation poems is:

It was not Death, for I stood up,  
 And all the Dead, lie down -  
 It was not Night, for all the Bells  
 Put out their Tongues, for Noon. <sup>1</sup>

A lyric which is concerned with artistic creation employs a similar approach:

The One who could repeat the Summer day -  
 Were greater than itself - though He  
 Minutest of Mankind should be - .<sup>2</sup>

Sunrise and sunset were times of day which held for Emily Dickinson an excitement which finds expression in several poems. Besides being the defining limits of the day, they have in themselves a power which has attracted the artist for centuries. Dew as the token of what the night has left behind is also the subject on which several lyrics are centred. In this poem it is mentioned in the final line of the second stanza:

The Debauchee of Dews!

and in the corresponding line of the third stanza it is recalled in the form of a pun:

Who counts the wampum of the night  
 To see that none is due?

The dew is also remembered in the conclusion of the first stanza by virtue of its constituting the rhyming partner of the word "blue".

This opening stanza is lucidly straightforward, the reader has no struggle with adjectives, images or verbal tenses. Personification is used in a direct manner with only the simplest of elaborations in the figure of the "weaver". In this sphere of freshness which so enchants the beholder there is also a rich array of

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 510, Vol. II, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 307, Vol. I, p. 228.

colours. These begin with the association of "cup" and "sunset" - and in the burnished, glowing tones of the descending sun which, by implication, colour this line. Then a silver freshness<sup>related</sup> to the flagons of dew is followed by the great universal leap of the morning against "the breadths of blue!" The verb "leaps" brings to mind another poem about the sunset, written two years later:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple  
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky  
Then at the feet of the old Horizon  
Laying her spotted face to die .<sup>1</sup>

The poems which Emily Dickinson wrote about landscapes are often rich in colours, filled with a gorgeousness not of pageantry but of wonderment, entr<sup>h</sup>alling the onlooker as the tones press upon the eye.

This feeling of wonderment, of the responsive child amidst nature's glories, is particularly noticeable in the first three stanzas of "Bring me the sunset<sup>in a cup,</sup>" .

The second verse consists of a brief selection from the realm of animals - a bird, a reptile and an insect - which seems to typify the Emily Dickinson bestiary. Poems about birds, especially the robin, are numerous. Reptiles and amphibians in the form of snakes and frogs frequently appear, while bees, spiders and flies are without doubt Emily Dickinson's favourite insects.

Each of the animals in this stanza is involved in a symbolic activity. The young robin greets the spring,<sup>2</sup> the tortoise pursues his countless slow journeys and the bee fulfils his part in

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 228, Vol. I, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> For accuracy's sake it is worth noting that Emily Dickinson's robin is not the bird traditionally associated with the winter in Britain, but the American bird (actually a species of thrush) which she regards as a herald of the spring. See also Poem no. 348, Vol. I, p. 278: "I dreaded that first Robin so -".

the cycle of pollination. This stanza shows a gradual increase in complexity, notably in the use of adjectives. The first to so strike the reader is "new" in the second line, but this is a comparatively straightforward word with which to contend. A more interesting case is that of "astonished boughs". A hint of personification in the adjective suggests the amazement not only of the branches as they become conscious of their verdure, but <sup>also,</sup> even more, of the human spectator. One frequently notices in the spring poems an equal emphasis on the cyclical return of the season and on the beholder's astonishment at the very coming about of this miracle, which has occurred despite the rigours of winter. One of the finest expressions of this sensation is to be found in the following poem:

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! <sup>1</sup>

The adjective "astonished" conveys another version of the emotion recorded above.

In addition to the refrain-like effect of the concluding lines of the verses, Emily Dickinson is also concerned with creating repetitive effects within the body of the verses. In this stanza this device appears in the following form:

How many trips the Tortoise makes -  
How many cups the Bee partakes, .

When anaphora is met with in other stanzas as well, one realizes that Emily Dickinson is intent on producing an incantatory quality in these lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1333, Vol. III, p. 921.

In the poem quoted above, there is a reference to the "little Madness" of the king who is the representative of the esteemed, civilized being, in contrast to the clown, the figure of uneducated, undeveloped simplicity for whom the spring is filled with marvels. In the poem being discussed, the bee is termed:

The Debauchee of Dews!

The intoxication of the insect, like that of the clown, stems from a complete immersion and involvement in the Spring.

In the third stanza, the "I" who poses the questions is present only by implication, and the personification of God as begun in the first stanza is picked up again at this point. He is here occupied in such traditional rôles as the creator of the rainbow and the controller of the heavenly spheres. The visual effect of the opening line is striking in a way similar to that of the line in the first verse:

Tell me how far the morning leaps - .

The idea of an arch extending across the vast expanse of sky becomes, in the image in the third stanza, the penetration of the coloured shafts into the surrounding blueness, in the same manner as the pier extends into the sea.

In the third line of this verse there is the use of an adjective in a manner particularly favoured by Emily Dickinson. The line is:

By withes of supple blue?

and the adjective "supple", although qualifying "blue", is nevertheless working in another direction as well, namely, in its relationship to "withes" to which it is applicable by the very nature of a withe. The word is thus mobile and capable of movement between the two nouns. An even clearer example of this practice is found

in the poem "A Bird came down the Walk":

He glanced with rapid eyes  
That hurried all around -  
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought -  
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb  
And he unrolled his feathers  
And rowed him softer home -

Than Cars divide the Ocean, <sup>1</sup>

Here it is the word "Cautious" which is performing a double function, relating to the attitudes of the bird and of the person offering the crumb. These usages have been examined because, to be responsive to the movement of the poem as a whole, one must also be alert to these ~~smaller~~ <sup>minor</sup> activities.

The anaphora which has been noticed in the preceding stanzas is also present here, notably in the first and second lines:

Also, who laid the Rainbow's piers,  
Also, who leads the docile spheres

and to a lesser extent in the "Whose" and "Who" which open the fourth and fifth lines respectively. This verse is concerned with activities of the hands: the phrases "who laid", "who leads", "Whose fingers string" and, to a lesser degree, "Who counts", recall the weaver of the first stanza. The fourth and fifth lines show a movement from the subterranean sphere of the stalactite to the super-terrestrial one of the stars in the night sky.

The poet is perpetuating what Isabel Hungerland terms a "violation of some rule of usage"<sup>2</sup> when the verb "strings" is used

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 328, Vol. I, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> Isabel Hungerland, Poetic Discourse (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 108.

with reference to "stalactite" rather than to "wampum" to which it would seem to belong by dictionary definition. Nevertheless, the metaphor has a nicety of construction seen in the fact that the function of wampum was to serve as money, and the "due" can thus be taken as indicative of what is owing or still payable.

The rhetorical effect which has been built up in the first three stanzas is used, in the fourth, to give prominence to two further questions. These are:

Who built this little Alban House

and

Who'll let me out some gala day - .

The first of these questions obviously refers to the grave, for Emily Dickinson was frequently to describe the grave in terms of a house. One of the most famous examples is to be found in the poem "Because I could not stop for Death":

We paused before a house that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground -  
The Roof was scarcely visible -  
The Cornice - in the Ground - .<sup>1</sup>

In both images the closeness to the ground is emphasized, while behind that <sup>in</sup> "Bring me the sunset" <sup>in a cup,</sup> stands one of Emily Dickinson's favourite Biblical texts: "~~an~~ house not ~~built~~ <sup>made</sup> with hands." <sup>x</sup><sup>2</sup>

As is so often the case, death is seen as a period of learning, an acquiring of the "implements" necessary for greater discoveries. The new knowledge will be superior to that which swells with pride the human brain during the earthly life, as the concluding lines explicitly indicate.

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 712, Vol. II, p. 546.

<sup>2</sup> II Cor. 5:1.  
See also p. 134.

This final verse, while employing the same approach as the earlier stanzas, namely the rhetorical use of questions, takes a new direction in that it turns from problems of the world of nature to the human dilemma.

What relates these lines to the earlier stanzas is the sense of the impossible which is present in both. Just as one cannot contain the sunset within a cup, so the spirit can never be limited to the "little Alban House". Although no answer as such is attempted, and God is not referred to by name, the tone of serene confidence indicates that the problems need not cause distress, for the coming about of the "gala day" is never in doubt and has the same inexplicable certainty as the passage of the sun and the existence of the stars.

One can now see clearly the difference between the Donne and the Dickinson poems. In the former the resolution is achieved by the aligning of what was apparently disparate to form a conclusive statement, especially noticeable in the final verse. Emily Dickinson achieves her resolution in an almost opposite way, by increasing the number of questions whose very inexplicability eventually leads to the already known answer.

This detailed examination of an early poem is a helpful introduction to problems which will be encountered in later lyrics. The attitude of mind reflected in the movement of "Bring me the sunset in a cup," is not one which changed considerably over the years. The questions posed in these stanzas (about time, wonderment at the natural world, human inadequacy of expression in the face of nature) were to recur repeatedly.

Especially interesting is the manner in which the questions relating to death are brought forward in the final verse, to create the impression that the poem concludes at a point which is also a moment of opening out.

A sense of struggle is exemplified in the manner in which the poet seems to make her words strain to realize their potential. This fact is one of the reasons why Emily Dickinson's lyrics cannot be regarded as the narrow productions of a poet whose seclusion prevented her involvement in matters which have always intrigued the questioning mind.

(ii)

That after Horror - that 'twas us -  
 That passed the mouldering Pier -  
 Just as the Granite Crumb let go -  
 Our Savior, by a Hair -

A second more, had dropped too deep  
 For Fisherman to plumb -  
 The very profile of the Thought  
 Puts Recollection numb -

The possibility - to pass  
 Without a Moment's Bell -  
 Into Conjecture's presence -  
 Is like a Face of Steel -  
 That suddenly looks into our's  
 With a metallic grin -  
 The Cordiality of Death -  
 Who drills his Welcome in - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 286, Vol. I, p. 204.

The poem "That after Horror - that 'twas us -" was probably written in 1861, and some time during 1863 the final eight lines were incorporated into a letter to Thomas Higginson.<sup>1</sup>

The stanzaic form of the poem is two quatrains and an eight line verse in which the quatrain structure is continued in the a-b-c-b rhyme scheme. The use of Common Metre in this poem is directly evident. This metre is retained throughout the lyric, the third line of the third stanza being the single exception. Instead of the customary eight syllables, the line contains only seven. (The second line of the first stanza has been taken as a hexasyllabic line, with "mouldering" treated as a disyllabic, and not a trisyllabic, word.)

What is experienced in this poem, particularly in the opening portion, is what Jay Leyda has termed the "omitted center". He writes: "... the deliberate skirting of the obvious - ... was the means she used to increase the privacy of her communication: it has also increased our problems in piercing that privacy."<sup>2</sup> The difficulties can be seen as beginning with the very first word, the "That", which is more delusive than its indicative function might suggest. The type of certainty which eventually emerges as the poem progresses is a certainty of the emotions involved, the circumstances yet remaining not fully distinct. It is this fact which creates the danger of constructing situations which the reader considers complementary to the emotions.

The first stanza expresses two themes which frequently appear in Emily Dickinson's poetry, the first being that which happens

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 282, Vol. II, p. 425.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), Vol. I, p. xxi.

after an event. There are several poems which begin in a similar manner:

After a hundred years <sup>1</sup>

┌───────────┐  
After all the Birds have been investigated and laid aside - <sup>2</sup>

After the Sun comes out <sup>3</sup>

and

After great pain, a formal feeling comes - .<sup>4</sup>

The poems which employ this approach create a bilocated viewpoint. One experiences both the surrounding events which create a fullness of context for the central idea, and also the after effects.

This theme of the "after" is related to Emily Dickinson's predilection for what is in the process of going out of sight, or is beyond the mental or visual range. In a letter to Louise and Fanny Norcross Emily Dickinson wrote:

You remember my ideal cat has always a huge rat in its mouth, just going out of sight - though going out of sight in itself has a peculiar charm. It is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God ... <sup>5</sup>

In this letter one notes her light touch in moving from the pictorial detail of the cat, to a fading away from the visual until the point of the unseen and the unknown is reached.

The second major theme of the opening stanza is that of the hairbreadth escape, and is found in the third and fourth lines:

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1147, Vol. II, p. 803.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1395, Vol. III, p. 963.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1148, Vol. II, p. 804.

<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 341, Vol. I, p. 272.

<sup>5</sup> Letter no. 471, Vol. II, p. 559.

Just as the Granite Crumb let go -  
Our Savior, by a Hair - .

This theme appears too regularly for all the examples to be  
enumerated, but a few quotations will suffice:

Just lost, when I was saved!  
Just felt the world go by!  
Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,  
When breath blew back,  
And on the other side  
I heard recede the disappointed tide! <sup>1</sup>

and

We like a Hairbreadth 'scape  
It tingles in the Mind . <sup>2</sup>

Many of these escape poems are centred on rescue from threatening  
waters. An early poem, written about 1858, deals with a boat lost  
in the ocean,<sup>3</sup> while a later lyric contains the following lines:

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,  
That nearer, every Day,  
Kept narrowing it's boiling Wheel . <sup>4</sup>

The very word "escape" exerted sufficient fascination to  
constitute the subject matter of at least two poems:

I never hear the word 'escape'  
Without a quicker blood,  
A sudden expectation,  
A flying attitude! <sup>5</sup>

and

Escape is such a thankful Word  
I often in the Night  
Consider it unto myself  
No spectacle in sight . <sup>6</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Poem no. 160, Vol. I, p. 116.  
<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1175, Vol. II, p. 820.  
<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 30, Vol. I, p. 28.  
<sup>4</sup> Poem no. 414, Vol. I, p. 322.  
<sup>5</sup> Poem no. 77, Vol. I, p. 62.  
<sup>6</sup> Poem no. 1347, Vol. III, p. 931.

To return, however, to the poem selected for specific attention, one notices that stanzas one and two are written predominantly in the past tense, but in the final lines of the second verse a change occurs:

The very profile of the Thought  
Puts Recollection numb - .

Despite the numbing which can threaten any act of recollection, these lines show that memory is now awake - an image taken from a later poem, incidentally -<sup>1</sup> and in the final stanza only the present tense occurs.

What the first verse establishes is that the cessation of the horror does not of necessity entail the coming about of relief or ease. In the final stanza of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes -" one notes a similar concatenation of the activity of memory and a numbing process:

This is the Hour of Lead -  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -  
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go - .<sup>2</sup>

Another aspect of such experiences is the notion of a past experience whose influence and effect is still at work and caught up in the present, a notion which can be seen in the concluding lines of "Because I could not stop for Death":

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses Heads  
Were toward Eternity - .<sup>3</sup>

Change and alteration live with one, and are not merely experiences

<sup>1</sup> The opening line of Poem no. 744, Vol. II, p. 567:  
"Remorse - is Memory - awake -".

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 341, Vol. I, p. 272.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 712, Vol. II, p. 546.

which, having been endured, become part of our past. This point Emily Dickinson elucidates in the poem "The first Day's Night has come -":

And tho' 'tis Years ago - that Day -  
My Brain keeps giggling - still. <sup>1</sup>

In the opening verse of "That after Horror - that 'twas us -" one is given more than adequate opportunity to grapple with several of the difficulties which a study of Emily Dickinson's poetry invariably involves. The first line, as has already been noted, teases one into the position of having something pointed out to one but of being unable to realize what is being indicated. The first "That" is a substitution for some phrase such as "That which came", while the second is a demonstrative pronoun. The meaning of "us" is cryptic, but indicates perhaps all those fellow experiencers of this horror. In the remaining three lines of this verse one senses that tension between the concrete and the abstract which is present in much of Emily Dickinson's imagery. Those readers who are determined to make such images yield a "picture" may attain a certain limited success, as also the symbol-hunter who, in Isabel Hungerland's words, "scrutinizes literature for the mention of concrete objects".<sup>2</sup> This is not an easy task in Emily Dickinson's poetry, for she can move between the concrete and the abstract with a rare fluency and naturalness. The poem "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -"<sup>3</sup> is a very good example, for the insect heightens the realization of death by its very presence at this critical moment.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 410, Vol. I, p. 319.

<sup>2</sup> Isabel Hungerland, Poetic Discourse (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 465, Vol. I, p. 358.

Emily Dickinson is able to bring abstractions to the point where they seem at any moment to be about to assume concrete form, or dematerialize the concrete until it verges on dissolution into the non-visual. As Archibald MacLeish says:

... images are in constant play ... coupling back and forth, not only between incongruities, but between worlds - the visible and the invisible. <sup>1</sup>

At the risk of erecting a barrage of quotations from critical works, there follows an excerpt from Winifred Nowotny, who speaks of:

... the point where we realize that the inner circle of vivid meanings has to be related to the outer circle of vast significance. If poetic language can indeed close its own circuit so as to individualize the meanings of individual phrases, and yet at the same time so successfully expand the significance of what is said that the stars in outer space seem to return an echo to its beam, it would appear that there cannot be anything more important for us to do than to find out how this can be. <sup>2</sup>

What P.N. Furbank says concerning the metaphor is worth repeating at this point:

What differentiates one metaphor from another is the kind of effort - the length and complexity and particular character of the effort - that trying to "realise" it demands of the reader. A metaphor is an invitation to an activity, ending in an impossibility. (For you cannot actually think of something in terms of something else: any metaphor must break down somewhere.) It is the activity which matters, an activity which may often be a question, not of forming mental images, but of trying and failing to. <sup>3</sup>

The reader has here to attempt to hold together the passage of persons along an old and decaying pier, at just that moment when

<sup>1</sup> Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1965), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1962), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> P.N. Furbank, "Do we need the terms 'Image' and 'Imagery'?", The Critical Quarterly (Winter, 1967), p. 341.

the infinitesimal portion of what is solid and trustworthy gives way. (Comparing the size of that which is solid - a "Crumb" - <sup>to</sup> that which is about to fall - a "Pier" - emphasizes the peril.)

The point when the ostensibly sturdy finally gives way has an obvious place of importance in Emily Dickinson's poetry. One finds it in the concluding verse of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,"<sup>1</sup>:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down -  
And hit a World, at every plunge  
And Finished knowing - then - .<sup>1</sup>

In "That after Horror - that 'twas us -" one notices a similar course of events, except that instead of the plank breaking, the "I" is saved "by a Hair~~l~~". The second verse expands what might have occurred:

A second more, had dropped too deep  
For Fisherman to plumb - .

Here there is a need to sort out the various possibilities which emerge from the lines. There exists the idea of a depth deeper than that able to be reached by the usual means. The co-existing possibility is that of a status indescribable as that in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," to describe which the mind cannot find adequate words. But because this uttermost state is not plumbed, a description can be attempted, and this is encountered in the final stanza.

In line three of the second verse one again meets a confronting of the concrete and the abstract. To grant only a partial personification to "Thought", the poet employs a noun - "profile" - denoting a representation which by its nature is limited, being

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 280, Vol. I, p. 199.

a side view or silhouette. By using this noun Emily Dickinson gives to the abstraction "Thought" a type of semi-presence, a not fully materialized, haunting quality. In fact, this line and that succeeding it:

Puts Recollection numb -

are performing a synecdochal function, for, if the effects of the mere profile are so profound, then those of a full-face confrontation must, by implication, belong to a region any description of which would be impossible.

The notion of the influence of certain events as being one of numbing or freezing frequently appears in Emily Dickinson's poetry. An instance from "After great pain, a formal feeling comes -" has been quoted earlier in this discussion, but the whole poem is filled with descriptions of this phenomenon:

The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -  
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,  
  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

and

This is the Hour of Lead -  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow - .

Flowers visited by frost undergo a change which is in some ways similar:

A Visitor in Marl -  
Who influences Flowers -  
Till they are orderly as Busts -  
And Elegant - as Glass - .<sup>1</sup>

It would actually be more precise to term this<sup>phenomenon</sup> not a "benumbing" but rather the faint possibility of action entrapped within

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 391, Vol. I, p. 308.

immobilization, as witnesses the previously quoted line:

Remembered, if outlived, .

In "I've dropped my Brain - My Soul is numb -"<sup>1</sup> this idea is obviously to the fore. Quoted below are the first, second and fourth stanzas of this lyric:

I've dropped my Brain - My Soul is numb -  
The Veins that used to run  
Stop palsied - 'tis Paralysis  
Done perfecter on stone.

Vitality is carved and cool.  
My nerve in Marble lies -  
A Breathing Woman  
Yesterday - Endowed with Paradise.

. . . . .

Who wrought Carrara in me  
And chiselled all my tune  
Were it <sup>a</sup>Witchcraft - were it Death -  
I've still a chance to strain .

(The final line is underlined for the purposes of this discussion.)

What the concluding line emphasizes is that the germ of action is present within this state of ossification.

As so often in Emily Dickinson's poems, there is in "That after Horror - that 'twas us -" an unmentioned activity which takes place, in this particular lyric, between stanzas two and three. One senses a change in direction, but how this has been achieved is not ~~always~~ immediately apparent. The third verse here serves as a comment on what has preceded it, as well as constituting an opening out of the poem. Possibility, as has been previously stated, is an important theme in Emily Dickinson's work, and it appears here as an ever-present avenue open to the mental traveller. In the sphere of possibility there is the freedom achieved by the absence

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1046, Vol. II, p. 739.

of temporal limitations, for one may enter it:

Without a Moment's Bell - .

Conjecture is a region always accessible to the human mind, and this thought helps one to understand the preceding stanzas. In this final verse the poet is giving the reader the setting of the poem, and this landscape is a mental one. The imaginative projection operating here is similar to that which enabled Emily Dickinson to write a poem such as "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -".<sup>1</sup> But possibility, with its freedom, also entails hardships and dangers. It can suddenly transform itself into the adamantine "Face of Steel". The previous freedom is changed into a forced acceptance of the existence of death. This is the face-to-face confrontation, and not the "profile of the Thought".

The obdurate, unyielding nature of this experience is emphasized by the mention of "Steel" and "metallic". The hardness suggested by these words should be contrasted with the "Granite" of line three. In the earlier instance, the hardness conveyed that which could be depended upon; in the later, the inescapable perception which is forced upon one.

The movement of the poem is circular. It begins with a description of "That after Horror -", and stanzas one and two employ past tense verbs. Stanza three, using the present tense, describes a type of horror which can torment the human mind. This present tense prevents the specific placing of the experience in any temporal context. It remains a constant possibility, which can at any moment "suddenly" confront one. In effect, the final stanza not only concludes the poem, but is able to precede the opening

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 465, Vol. I, p. 358.

lines - hence the previously mentioned circularity <sup>of</sup> ~~in~~ movement.

The concluding lines:

The Cordiality of Death -  
Who drills his Welcome in -

describe a situation similar to that encountered in the final lines of "The event was directly behind Him", where a superior force is ready to change utterly the nature of a human being by a penetrating and shattering action:

Motioned itself to drill  
Loaded and Levelled  
And let His Flesh  
Centuries from His soul .<sup>1</sup>

The development of "That after Horror - that 'twas us -" might at first seem to be an unrelenting progress through a series of distressing states of mind to final catastrophe. But the climax of the concluding lines is not the only manner of coming to a <sup>realization</sup> ~~perception~~ of the existence of death. Many other poems show that recognition comes in different forms, and that, if this be one, it must be faced with the equanimity which is reflected in the presentation of the poem, the formal structuring of which enables at least a partial <sup>portrayal</sup> ~~presentation~~ of the terror to be given without the slightest suggestion of sensationalism.

A brief assessment of the notable features of this lyric must include the fact that it demonstrates the tight thematic interrelationship of Emily Dickinson's poems, practical proof that they are not isolated impulses.<sup>2</sup>

A second point which emerges from this examination is an

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1686, Vol. III, p. 1145.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 192.

awareness of the existence of possibility which can make all mental and physical experience significant. The implication which can be drawn from the statement above is that the world in which Emily Dickinson lived contained a meaningfulness for her in its every part. This, in turn, is concretely confirmed in the poems which centre on such humble topics as adjusting a shawl<sup>1</sup> or making a bed.<sup>2</sup>

That the particular course of mental progress which Emily Dickinson chose as her own was fraught with dangers is the third point which should be noted in connection with this lyric. The statement of this fact in the lyric itself:

A second more, had dropped too deep

and

The possibility to pass

. . . . .

Into Conjecture's presence -  
Is like a Face of Steel -

has a plainness of presentation which in its own way proves that these dangers were accepted along with the excitement of discovery.

The ~~perils~~<sup>of perils</sup> mentioned in this and many other poems ~~are~~<sup>is</sup> in no way an attempt to present the poet's chosen path in a praiseworthy light, but simply <sup>an endeavour</sup> to illustrate the nature of this life.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 443, Vol. I, p. 341:  
"I tie my Hat - I crease my Shawl -"

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 829, Vol. II, p. 628:  
"Ample make this Bed -".

See p. 160 for <sup>a</sup> fuller discussion of this poem.

## (iii)

It might be lonelier  
 Without the loneliness -  
 I'm so accustomed to my Fate -  
 Perhaps the Other - Peace -  
  
 Would interrupt the Dark -  
 And crowd the little Room -  
 Too scant - by Cubits - to contain  
 The Sacrament - of Him -  
  
 I am not used to Hope -  
 It might intrude upon -  
 It's sweet parade - blaspheme the place -  
 Ordained to Suffering -  
  
 It might be easier  
 To Fail - with Land in Sight -  
 Than gain - My Blue Peninsula -  
 To perish - of Delight - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 405, Vol. I, p. 316.

In this poem the peninsula image, whose protean manifestations are present in most of the poems in this section, appears only in the concluding stanza. The poem is part of that large group which is centred on the theme of aspiration, and, more especially, attitudes towards aspiration. The lyric thus contributes to the concept which Thomas Johnson terms "the pursuit of liberty, gained only by agony and travail, ..." <sup>1</sup> In an article entitled "Sumptuous Destitution", Richard Wilbur speaks of this poet's "repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty; ... that 'The Banquet of abstemiousness/Defaces that of wine.'" <sup>2</sup> In the same article Wilbur states that:

The creature of appetite ... cannot imagine the vaster economy of desire, in which the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object is spiritually possessed, not merely for itself, but more truly as an index of the All. <sup>3</sup>

The same theory about privation is expressed by David Porter as:

... the idea that the worth of an experience is ultimately best measured by those who are denied gratification in it. The central paradox is that in equal ratio to the suffering caused by denial one receives an increased comprehension. <sup>4</sup>

These factors mentioned above enable one to view many of the poems, often interpreted as denoting despair, as actually being indicators of a quite different, and much wider, subject. The despair is a surface stratum invariably underlaid by the anticipation of a greater joy. If this emotion of despair is to be

<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution" in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 169 - 170.

granted a positive status, then it is that of not being able to utilize the distance between the emotion of yearning and the object of the yearning,<sup>a</sup> despair at not being able to operate in a larger sphere than that of frustration. That several such lyrics are poems of encouragement and self-discipline can be more clearly seen from a closer examination of this one, "It might be lonelier".

One of the first opinions to be examined is that the final stanza has no organic function in the poem. That this verse was once considered as a separate poem is shown in the details of publication, which Johnson adds to each poem in his definitive edition.<sup>1</sup> The link between this stanza and the rest of the poem is to be found in the similarity of the opening lines of the first and final stanzas. "It might be lonelier", line one, is the starting point for the discussion carried on in the first three verses, while the thirteenth line, "It might be easier", generates a further argument, which both extends the dimensions of the theme of the poem and acts as a summation of what has been presented in the preceding verses. A fact which might seem to argue the case for the separateness of this stanza is that the peninsula image jars with that of the "little Room", but, when seen in the perspective

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<sup>1</sup> Vol. I, p. 316. "Publication: The final stanza was published as a separate poem in Poems (1896), 64, titled 'Philosophy'. It has been thus separately included in all later collections. All four stanzas were published in Unpublished Poems (1935), 102, with line 1 rendered: 'It might have been lonelier.' "

Millicent Todd Bingham in her work detailing the history of the editing and publication of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters, Ancestors' Brocades (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), gives little helpful information as to why her mother, Mabel Loomis Todd, followed this course. Instead she attempts to show that Martha Dickinson Bianchi's printing of the entire poem in Unpublished Poems is not absolutely correct, as the final verse had already appeared in Mrs. Todd's Third Series of the Poems. Ancestors' Brocades, pp. 394 - 395.

of what the poem as a whole is attempting to convey, this difficulty vanishes.

Between the "lonelier" and the "easier" of lines one and thirteen respectively, there is what, at a cursory reading, might appear to be the rejection of hope, so that "It's sweet parade -" might not disturb the "Room", which is the human mind, "Ordained to Suffering -". But before this apparent rejection of hope can be looked at, the confusing juxtaposition of "lonelier" and "Loneliness" must be resolved:

It might be lonelier  
Without the Loneliness - .

These two opening lines affirm the fact that, as yet, the worst depth has not been plumbed, for "Loneliness" is still with the "I" as a type of companion figure. When this companion deserts her, then the "lonelier" state will commence.

The first three stanzas are filled with words connoting a restricted place, deprivation and a constantly performed ritual of religious significance: "interrupt the Dark", "crowd the little Room", "Too scant - by Cubits -", "The Sacrament", "I am not used to Hope -", "intrude upon -", "blaspheme the place -" and "Ordained to Suffering -". The fourth verse brings with it an opening out into a sphere of ocean, land and sky. The first two lines of this verse are reminiscent of the many poems which contain images of shipwreck, drowning swimmers, and failure when the longed for goal is sighted and almost within reach.<sup>1</sup> Here, too, the gaining of the shore is more difficult than the attaining of the loneliness of the first three stanzas.

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<sup>1</sup> Poems no. 619, Vol. II, p. 476; no. 739, Vol. II, p. 563; no. 1749, Vol. III, p. 1175.

One should also examine the two adjectives which qualify the word "Peninsula". The possessive adjective "My" denotes a place related to the "I" amidst this impersonality of the ocean, the claiming of what is peculiarly individual, as against the generality of "Land in Sight -". The adjective "Blue" functions in this instance descriptively rather than symbolically. The peninsula, situated between the blues of the sea and the sky, is "Blue" by virtue of its distance from the gazing eye.

Charles Anderson limits the possibilities of this image when he remarks that "the unknown peninsula" is Emily Dickinson's "recurrent image for the incomprehensible."<sup>1</sup> To equate this peninsula with the incomprehensible might appear to be granting it a vast sphere of operation, but it is actually truncating much of the power of the image, which should not be viewed only in the isolation of its connotative function within this poem; one should also attempt to see it alongside images which appear in such a lyric as:

"Heaven" - is what I cannot reach!  
 The Apple on the Tree -  
 Provided it do hopeless - hang -  
 That - "Heaven" is - to Me!

The Colour, on the Cruising Cloud -  
 The interdicted Land -  
 Behind the Hill - the House behind -  
 There - Paradise - is found!

Her teasing Purples - Afternoons-  
 The credulous - decoy -  
 Enamored - of the Conjuror -  
 That spurned us - Yesterday! <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Frome and London: William Heinemann, 1963), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 239, Vol. I, p. 172.

One is not really justified in forming the perhaps tempting bridge between the "interdicted Land" and its equation with heaven in the verses quoted above, and the peninsula whereon one would "perish - of Delight -" in "It might be lonelier", but there is obviously a relationship.

In "It might be lonelier", the tension of the final stanza is created by the co-presence of the reader's sense of resolution and irresolution. The former is firstly experienced in the fact that this verse contains the only exact rhyme ("Sight"/"Delight") in the entire poem, previous stanzas having employed imperfect rhymes such as "Loneliness"/"Peace" and "Room"/"Him". This exact rhyming underlines this verse as <sup>being</sup> the concatenating point of the poem. Against this is working the spirit of conjecture as seen in the partly anaphoraic line, "It might be easier". Another fact is that one cannot position the peninsula definitively within the poetic geography of this seascape. It leads out into an ocean, usually seen as a symbol of flux, but at the same time the "I" is depicted as struggling in this ocean, striving to gain the peninsula. What Emily Dickinson is doing here is keeping the possible interpretations hovering, like a juggler's balls which appear to be somehow suspended in their passage through the air.

The lyric is not a morbid denial of the more positive aspects of redemption, for calling a poem morbid (in the sense of being unwholesomely sentimental) entails the judgment of its being an incomplete and flawed work. What is being discussed in this lyric is the unreadiness, as yet, of the "I" for a greater revelation. But the aspiration is still present, for the difficulties of this experience are merely a preparation for that time when "the Other - Peace" and "Hope" will succeed loneliness as companions of the soul.

It is the word "easier" which provides the final clue, however, for these hardships are not endured simply to make the course of progress less difficult. They are undergone precisely because the road is an arduous one, and an opting for the less painful choice would be a denial of all that has gone before.

The greater part of this discussion has been focussed upon the concluding stanza, for this is the section which concatenates what has been stated in the preceding verses. In the first three stanzas there are combinations of a verb and an abstract noun wherein the verb seems to express precisely the opposite of the noun. Examples are the peace which interrupts and crowds, and the hope which intrudes and whose presence blasphemes. These pairings attain their highest point in the final line of the poem:

To perish - of Delight -

where the contrast between the verb and the noun is so marked that the whole structure is overturned and the reader is made to realize that peace can never interrupt, hope never blaspheme and that the delight, when experienced, will most definitely be a source of strength.

Another point which should be emphasized is the typical Dickinsonian ambiguity of the image of "the little Room". It was earlier taken as the human mind, but it could also be interpreted as the grave, for Emily Dickinson frequently described the grave in terms of a building. It actually makes little difference whether it be the grave or the mind, or even both, for the point being stressed is that of restriction giving way to a wholly new experience to which the presumed knowledge of one's fate cannot accustom one, to a passing from the limitations of suffering to the

freedom of delight.

The most important specific contribution which this poem makes towards a wider appreciation of Emily Dickinson's achievement lies in its expression of the idea of privation. This privation is in no way a martyring of the self or a denial of the wonders of the material world, but rather a chiselling away of inessentials until the starkness of "the little Room -" is attained.

The poem is primarily concerned with the efforts of the "I" to pursue a way of life unsustained, if necessary, by the strength supplied by hope and allied concepts. But privation, to repeat Porter's words, works for the gaining of "increased comprehension", a fact which is undeniably demonstrated by the only full rhyme in the poem - "Sight"/"Delight" - which appears in the concluding lines. The sense of reward which is affirmed by this rhyme, being placed as it is after a succession of imperfect rhymes ("Loneliness"/"Peace", "Room"/"Him", for example) is in complete harmony with Emily Dickinson's idea of widened understanding being the goal of privation and mental struggle.

(iv)

They put Us far apart -  
 As separate as Sea  
 And Her unsown Peninsula --  
 We signified "These see" -  
  
 They took away our Eyes -  
 They thwarted Us with Guns -  
 "I see Thee" each responded straight  
 Through Telegraphic Signs -  
  
 With Dungeons - They devised -  
 But through their thickest skill -  
 And their opaquest Adamant -  
 Our Souls saw - just as well -  
  
 They summoned Us to die -  
 With sweet alacrity  
 We stood upon our stapled feet -  
 Condemned - but just - to see -  
  
 Permission to recant -  
 Permission to forget -  
 We turned our backs upon the Sun  
 For perjury of that -  
  
 Not Either - noticed Death -  
 Of Paradise - aware -  
 Each other's Face - was all the Disc  
 Each other's setting - saw - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 474, Vol. I, p. 364.

It might appear that a considerable amount of attention is being devoted to poems not usually mentioned in critical examinations of Emily Dickinson's work. No excuses are offered for this practice, and it can only be hoped that some small success will be attained in bringing to light the fact that, besides those poems usually anthologized, there is a vast body of Emily Dickinson's work which many readers may not have discovered.

The following poem "They put Us far apart -" was written in 1862, the year during which a flood of activity saw three hundred and sixty-six poems being added to the packets in which Emily Dickinson had begun assembling her work, some time during 1858. From Johnson's approximate estimates one realizes that the productivity of 1862 was indeed phenomenal. 1858 yielded fifty-two poems, 1859 ninety-six, and the following two years sixty-four and eighty-six poems respectively. At this point, 1862 is reached, and a sudden increase which extended at a decreasing rate into 1863 and 1864 is noticeable. Never again was Emily Dickinson to experience such poetic fecundity, and from 1866 until her death she did not exceed fifty poems a year. Towards the end of her life the quantity diminished even further, so that 1885 saw ten poems being written, and 1886 two.

During these final years Emily Dickinson was enduring much physical suffering from the effects of nephritis and Bright's disease, and there were long periods when she was so weak that she could not even hold a pencil. This is doubtless one of the reasons why so few poems were committed to paper during these last years.

The theme of this poem is the power of love to overcome all obstacles. One encounters a similar tone in one of Emily Dickinson's

letters (previously quoted) to Dr. and Mrs. Holland, probably written during the summer of 1862: "Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love ..." <sup>1</sup>

The implications of this excerpt are obvious; the person who is wholly committed to loving, or, for that matter, to poetry, can appear ridiculous in the eyes of others and will inevitably occupy a minority position. But such factors are of little importance, for such a one is committed to love or to poetry by a relentlessness which eventually triumphs over such hindrances.

In the first stanza of the poem the obstacle presented to the lovers is that of separation. But physical distance in the poems of Emily Dickinson is frequently seen as a spur to the mind to overcome this hindrance. The reverse is also sometimes shown to be the case, namely, that closeness need not imply any narrowing of the abyss. This idea is expressed in the concluding verse of one of the longest poems, "I cannot live with You -" :

So We must meet apart -  
 You there - I - here -  
 With just the Door ajar  
 That Oceans are - and Prayer -  
 And that White Sustenance -  
 Despair - . 2

In the poem under examination, the lovers are meeting apart, which idea brings with it the paradox that, if the apartness is so intense, an actual confrontation would be unbearable. But, on the other hand, a physical meeting might be clumsy in comparison with the majesty which this distance possesses. Thus the poet hints at

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<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 269, Vol. II, p. 413.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 640, Vol. II, p. 492.

the fact that silence can be a medium of communication, a theme which was to assume a gradually increasing significance in her work.

To return to the opening stanza, there is no indication as to who is intended by the "They". This pronoun is employed only in verses one to four, and is not mentioned in the two closing stanzas. "They" seems to indicate all those forces which conspire against the achieving of a particular relationship. But the tone of the poem is not one of resentment; rather it is one of gratitude. Thankfulness towards obstructing elements, which create opportunities for the growth of the individual through effort and struggle, is a note which Emily Dickinson frequently sounds in her poetry. It is a particularly striking feature of "The first Day's Night had come -".<sup>1</sup> In the final stanza of this lyric the emerging sense of the gratefulness of the "I", both for the experience itself and for having survived it, dominates the haunting and horrific after effects:

My Brain - begun to laugh -  
 I mumbled - like a fool -  
 And tho' 'tis Years ago - that Day -  
 My Brain keeps giggling - still.

And Something's odd - within -  
 That person that I was -  
 And this One - do not feel the same -  
 Could it be Madness - this?

There is also the fact that Emily Dickinson could scarcely be unaware that, without the something "odd", she might lack the courage for experiences such as these, and so for writing some of her greatest poems.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 410, Vol. I, p. 319.

To emphasize the separation in the poem under discussion, Emily Dickinson uses the idea of opposites. There is the contrast between the sea and land, and the adjective "unsown" brings a further contrast into operation. For this peninsula does not as yet exist, whereas the sea does, and is a necessary element for the existence of the peninsula.

But despite this vast separation, a link remains, for

We signified "These see" - .

"These" has a certain ambiguity, for it could refer to the people involved in this experience, or to the "Eyes" in the first line of the second verse. The idea of sight constitutes a type of refrain throughout the poem, but a refrain on which changes are constantly being played. The concluding lines of every stanza except the fifth contain a reference to this sense:

"I see Thee" each responded straight  
Through Telegraphic Signs -     /

Our Souls saw - just as well -     /

Condemned - but just - to see -

and

Each other's setting - saw - .

Emily Dickinson's frequent use of a form of refrain is one of the links which exists between her work and certain characteristics of ballads and early lyrics. Her kind of refrain tends often to be present in a slightly disguised form, as in this poem. Here it serves not only to keep the theme in mind, but to rotate it by implying further possible interpretations. She seldom uses the repeated phrasing of a traditional refrain, and one seems rather to sense the presence of a refrain than actually to encounter

it. Such is the case in the poem "Poor little Heart!"<sup>1</sup> The closing lines of the first three stanzas are as follows:

Then dinna care! Then dinna care! ✕

Be debonnaire! Be debonnaire! ✕

and

Could'st credit me? Could'st credit me?

The final verse abandons the repetitive effect, but it is interesting to note that, when Mrs. Todd edited Poems (1896), she attempted to extend the pattern into the fourth stanza by altering the final line of the poem to read:

Thou'll wilted be; thou'll wilted be!

Another aspect which strengthens the sense of a refrain in this poem is the opening line of each verse, which reads:

Poor little Heart!

Proud little Heart!

Frail little Heart!

and

Gay little Heart - .<sup>2</sup>

The second stanza of "They put Us far apart -" continues the theme of oppression in the first two lines and the surmounting of these fresh difficulties in lines three and four:

They took away our Eyes -  
They thwarted Us with Guns -  
"I see Thee" each responded straight  
Through Telegraphic Signs - .

Emily Dickinson constantly stresses the need for darkness and

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 192, Vol. I, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Other balladic features are more fully discussed with reference to the poem "Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord". (See pp. 100 §§. and pp. 127 ff.)

non-seeing in any love relationship. Faith and memory can grant acuter vision than the eyes, as is shown in these lines:

What I see not, I better see -  
Through Faith - my Hazel Eye  
Has periods of shutting -  
But, No lid has Memory - .<sup>1</sup>

Another lyric, "I see thee better - in the Dark -",<sup>2</sup> is actually a closer parallel to the poem being studied. Here Emily Dickinson expresses the need for a temporal distance between herself and her beloved:

I see thee better for the Years  
That hunch themselves between -  
The Miner's Lamp - sufficient be -  
To nullify the Mine - .

Each of the three stanzas quoted above brings to mind Emily Dickinson's firm belief in the superiority of yearning from afar as opposed to the gratification of the appetite.<sup>3</sup>

With the modus operandi of taking various poems as a main base from which to make forays into the larger body of work and then return to the starting point with added insight, one now comes back to the point of the last departure, namely, the second verse of "They put Us far apart -". After the torture of deprivation of natural faculties, there follows the torment induced by man-made instruments:

They thwarted Us with Guns - .

Instead of the flash of the missile comes ~~instead~~ the bullet-like response:

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 939, Vol. II, p. 683.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 611, Vol. II, p. 470.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of "It might be lonelier", p. 220.

"I see Thee" each responded straight .

But this sight is not visual, it is transmitted

Through Telegraphic Signs - .

The frequency of legal terminology in Emily Dickinson's poems has often been remarked upon, and ascribed to the fact that both her father and brother were lawyers, but a terminology not so often noticed is that descriptive of man-made contrivances. There is the deservedly famous poem about the locomotive, "I like to see it lap the Miles -".<sup>1</sup> There are also other signs of the poet's awareness of utilizing mechanical terms for her poetic purposes. In this poem, the phrase "Telegraphic Signs" has been observed, and other poems contain references to clocks, springs, revolvers and telescopes. A fact such as this proves that Emily Dickinson was constantly aware of the vast variety of subjects which could be incorporated into her lyric utterances. That she was conscious of this activity, and that it was not a matter of fortuity, is shown in the following poem:

This was a Poet - It is that  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meanings -  
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species  
That perished by the Door -  
We wonder it was not Ourselves  
Arrested it - before - .<sup>2</sup>

In the same manner that all previous hindrances proved inadequate, to separate the speakers, so too the "Dungeons" of stanza three fail in their purpose. What is particularly interesting in this stanza are the two adjective-noun combinations: "thickest

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 585, Vol. II, p. 447.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 448, Vol. I, p. 346.

skill" and "opaquest Adamant", both of which are preceded by the possessive adjective "their". This possessive adjective enables the phrases to perform a double function, for they refer to both "Dungeons" and "They".

The first of these phrases appears to veer slightly closer to the "They" by virtue of the noun "skill". Yet "thickest" implies the quality of the dungeon/walls as well as the cruelly obdurate nature of this "skill". Nor can one deny that "skill" performs a typically Dickinsonian function, for in the association of "Dungeon<sup>s</sup>" and "skill" there is a suggestion of the vivification of the inanimate, an effect which Emily Dickinson often created.

The second of the adjective-noun combinations illuminates another facet of Emily Dickinson's use of language, namely, her fondness for creating unusual forms of the superlative, in this instance, "opaquest". In one of her finest poems about insects, "Further in Summer than the Birds", Emily Dickinson examines the song of the cricket and again feels the need for an adjectival form uncommon to English:

*Antiquest* felt at Noon  
When August burning low  
Arise this spectral canticle  
Repose to typify .<sup>1</sup>

The theme of "They put Us far apart -" is suited to superlatives, which, by increasing the greatness of the hindrances, consequently heighten the nature of the victory. If the first of the two phrases being discussed moves in applicability towards "They", the second directs itself more nearly towards "Dungeons". But, just as "skill" has a twofold meaning, so "Adamant" signifies

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1068, Vol. II, p. 752. (Italics mine.)

both the impenetrability of the walls and also the obdurate and unyielding nature of those who create the difficulties.

<sup>Like</sup>  
~~As~~ in the concluding lines of the preceding stanzas, the third verse also ends with a triumphant declaration of vision:

Our Souls saw - just as well - .

This is the most acute kind of seeing yet achieved, superior to both "Eyes" and "Telegraphic Signs".

The fourth stanza marks the emergence of a new movement in the poem which is to become more dominant in the final two verses. What the "They" propose as the greatest of hardships, to die, is received

With sweet alacrity/ .

The idea of hindrance is none the less still present in the participle "stapled", conveying the inability to move from a certain ordained place. It also expresses ideas of acute physical suffering. The presence of this participle has the effect of a knot in a plank of wood; it constitutes an integral part of the stanza, yet it is uncompromisingly difficult to resolve. This is no rare occurrence in Emily Dickinson's poetry, for there are many occasions when the reader must wage the adjectival battle.

Emily Dickinson's concern with such poetic techniques as alliteration is frequently neglected as less rewarding a study than her imagery or vocabulary. This stanza has a preponderance of "s" and "st" sounds:

They summoned Us to die -  
With gweet alacrity  
We stood upon our stapled feet -  
Condenned - but just - to see - .

The effect is partially ironic, in that the words which first rivet the reader's attention to this alliteration are "summoned" and

"sweet", which expresses contrasting ideas in the stanza. The alliteration again includes both parts of the contrast when one encounters "stapled" and "see".

The alliteration does not make a sudden appearance only in this particular stanza. In the second verse one can observe the interplay of the two sounds "th" and "t":

They took away our Eyes -  
They thwarted Us with Guns -  
 "I see Thee" each responded straight  
Through Telegraphic Signs - .

The third stanza exhibits a complex mingling of alliterative patterns.

The "th/t/st" strand is continued from the preceding verse:

With Dungeons - They devised -  
But through their thickest skill -  
And their opaquest Adamant -  
 Our Souls saw - just as well - .

The "s/st" alliteration which plays an important rôle in the following stanza is also woven in at this stage:

With Dungeons - They devised -  
But through their thickest skill -  
And their opaquest Adamant -  
 Our Souls saw - just as well - .

In addition to its function as an alliterative arrival and departure point for the "th/t" and "s/st" patterns respectively, this stanza has yet another alliterative design present within its texture, notably the "d" of "Dungeons", "devised" and "Adamant". The function which these words perform in the stanza is sufficiently prominent for the "d" alliteration to be noticeable, although it appears in only three words.

The phrase "Condemned - but just" in the final line of this verse is most clearly understood when taken as referring to the narrow margin between condemnation and reprieve. It has, too, the quality of a pun, for it could also be interpreted as meaning that

the lovers are condemned despite their being honest or just.

In the fifth stanza, those who constitute the "They" are no longer mentioned, and the focus is on the sufferers and what awaits them. Although there is no alteration in the syllabic structure of the lines, this verse has a different visual appearance (at least, in print) which is created by the apparent brevity of the first, second and fourth lines.

The stanza tells of that moment when those undergoing hardship must resist the agonies lest they perjure themselves by recanting the tenets of their belief. There is a turning away from the bright life-engendering sun towards the darkness of the night. The repetitive nature of lines one and two creates the rhythm of those thoughts which hammer through the brain under stress.

But everything is changed in the concluding stanza which celebrates the highest point in the poem, the insignificance of death:

Not Either - noticed Death - .

The verb "noticed" diminishes the stature of death to that of some minor irritation.

In this verse the sun images are used to convey ascendancy and triumph over suffering, and the setting sun is the herald of the greatness which awaits those who remain true to the spirit of love. In this moment of extinction there is a realization and perception of the boundlessness of possibility. Like some gigantic cosmic phenomenon, the face of each completely fills the other's visual and emotional range before vanishing beyond the horizon. "Disc" is not merely a metaphor for the face of the beloved, but a synonym for circumference and further exploration now that certain barriers have been crossed. The poem is, in fact, a double image of

living and writing, and of the courage demanded by both these activities.

The lyric begins and concludes with a sense of distance between the lover and the beloved, but all the suffering is more than justified by the triumphant statement contained in the final stanza:

Of Paradise - aware - ,

for the gap has been bridged despite the intervening distance. This awareness is present throughout the poem and thus marks it for inclusion among those many lyrics which are too often misinterpreted as being poems of despair.

(v)

Soto! Explore thyself!  
Therein thyself shalt find  
The "Undiscovered Continent" -  
No Settler had the Mind. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 832, Vol. II, p. 631.

In this poem Emily Dickinson uses the name of Hernando de Soto, a Spanish navigator who explored North America in the sixteenth century, to contrast the ideas of exploring new continents, and exploring the self. In fact, the quatrain in its present form is actually addressed to Soto, for the poet abandoned an earlier version wherein the Spaniard's name was placed between inverted commas.

The poem uses words frequently associated with discovery, such as "Explore", "Undiscovered Continent" and "Settler", all of which point to the fact that these new lands must be discovered and populated, while one's own mind always remains a place unknown.

It is interesting to note that Thoreau in a poem in the concluding chapter of Walden uses imagery of a very similar kind to express the same theme:

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find  
A thousand regions in your mind  
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be  
Expert in home - cosmography. <sup>1</sup>

Emily Dickinson's quatrain is a more finished piece of work, and the "home - cosmography" of <sup>Thoreau's</sup> ~~Melton's~~ concluding line creates an unfortunate coyness.

In another poem written approximately eleven years after "Soto! Explore thyself!" Emily Dickinson speaks of the heart as "the Capital of the Mind -", <sup>2</sup> thereby implying a populated continent, but concludes with the same advice as in the earlier poem:

This ecstatic Nation  
Seek - it is Yourself.

In poems such as these Emily Dickinson is simply presenting

<sup>1</sup> H.D. Thoreau, Walden (London: Walter Scott, 1886), p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1354, Vol. III, p. 935.

the credentials of the type of exploration which she herself undertook, showing that the mental traveller faces hazards as arduous as those of the discoverers of geographical New Worlds.

(vi)

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

I knew not but the next  
Would be my final inch -  
This gave me that Precarious Gait  
Some call Experience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 875, Vol. II, p. 650.

Perhaps the soundest manner to set about mastering the many implications of this poem will be to establish a preliminary idea of what it seems to be saying. This first sketch can then be filled out as further understanding is achieved. The approach will thus strive to be a cautious putting forward of a proposition, essentially plastic in conception, and not a setting up of one interpretation to be knocked down dramatically by another, and so seemingly granting a greater importance to the poem.

With this in mind, one can say that the poem appears to recount a past experience, offered as a type of explanation of a present state. It is constructed predominantly of monosyllabic words; in fact, there are only five words of more than monosyllabic length - "cautious", "about" (which appears twice), "final", "Precarious" and "Experience." The poet is alert to these words, and to establishing relationships between them. This one can experience in lines three and four:

The Stars about my Head I felt  
About my Feet the Sea. ,

where the repetition gives to the vagueness of a word such as "about" a certain definiteness of ubiquity, stressing the poet's human aloneness in being surrounded by the sea and stars. In the two concluding lines the connotations of the words "Precarious" and "Experience" are, to some extent, mingled with, and conferred upon, each other by virtue of their proximity. The tongue and ear, having grown into the feeling of the monosyllabic word, interspersed with an occasional word of disyllabic length, encounter these two words each containing four syllables, which fact is one of the reasons for their being linked:

This gave me that Precarious Gait  
Some call Experience.

There is also a certain assonantal relationship of words in the rhyme position, namely "Plank" and "way" (lines one and two) and "felt" and "Sea" (lines three and four) while "way" and "Sea" are felt as imperfect rhymes; but the closest auditory relationship in this respect operates between two words which possess a particular importance for the poem, "inch" and "Experience" of lines six and eight. The syllabic structure of stanzas one and two runs as follows: 6-6-8-6 and 6-6-9-6 respectively, and this Short Metre is peculiarly well suited to the opening image of the poem. The pier which reaches into the surrounding sea is reflected in the manner the third line of each verse stretches beyond the surrounding shorter lines, a fact which becomes visually apparent in the second stanza. Here, the extra syllable is, in fact, an instancing of the "Gait".

The first verse intimates the presence of a pier by mention of its most typical component, the plank. In this case one is shown ~~a~~ venturing into an unknown sphere, not as an abandoned flinging of oneself into the chasm, but as:

A slow and cautious way .

The opening of the poem stresses that the progress is gradual:

"... from Plank to Plank"

which notion is further emphasized in the second line ~~with~~<sup>by</sup> the appearance of the word "cautious", with its implications of prudence and alertness to security. The idea of a "Plank" is one which frequently appears in Emily Dickinson's poetry. It is either mentioned or implicit in the many poems which make reference to the coffin, ~~such~~<sup>in</sup> as <sub>^</sub> the stanza that follows:

A closing of the simple lid  
 That opened to the sun  
 Until the tender Carpenter  
 Perpetual nail it down - .<sup>1</sup>

It also forms the component part of a very different image in the poem "I felt a Funeral, in my brain," :

And then a Plank in Reason, broke, .<sup>2</sup>

It is the feeling of this last mentioned image which is perhaps most like that in the poem under discussion, the link lying in the idea of planks being strong and sturdy, but this to a certain degree only, for the possibility of breaking is ever present. The "cautious" reflects this possibility, as much as it does the fact that the pier might end suddenly. "Way" may well be intended to operate on at least two ascertainable levels of meaning, indicating both a route and a state. (The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1933 edition, gives as one definition: "A path or course of life".) In this sense "way" constitutes another of Emily Dickinson's many puns, and even repeated readings of the poem cannot really force either of the meanings to emerge as definitively dominant.

Lines three and four set up an incantatory effect by means of several devices. There is the repetition of "about", the chiasmic type of construction of:

... Stars ... my Head ...  
 ... my Feet ... Sea

and the neat similarity of the equation:

my Head - the Stars  
 my Feet - the Sea.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1123, Vol. III, p. 789.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 280, Vol. I, p. 199.

But the question which must be confronted at this point is: in what way does the speaker "feel" the stars and sea? Is the involvement in this "slow and cautious way" so deep that there is but a subconscious awareness of these things? They are experienced with that ever-abiding consciousness which makes the poet include the fly buzzing above the death-bed and write the opening lines of poem 894:

Of Consciousness, her awful Mate  
The Soul cannot be rid - .<sup>1</sup>

The presence of these two elements stresses the tininess of the human figure in this scene. The pier is puny in comparison with the all-surrounding sea, the human figure minute beneath the vastness of the night sky. The pier is a fragile construction stretching but a very short way into the hugeness of the ocean.

The second stanza repeats in the opening words the grammatical structure employed in the corresponding line of the first verse, namely, the personal pronoun "I" followed by a verb in the past tense. This fifth line contains a cluster of monosyllables which creates an interplay of vowels the effect of which is heightened by the "t" alliteration in "not", "but" and "next". The sixth line stresses the irony of the situation, the "final inch" as opposed to the boundless miles of the sea. There comes to one's mind the caution and courage with which certain tiny insects crawl along leaves, on every side of them oceans of air, which is both a hazardous adventure and a mere following out of their instinctive processes of life. Line six concludes with a dash, which pause enables the change in tense and tone to be wrought

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 894, Vol. II, p. 659.

with more telling effect. For, in the final two lines, the poet is no longer describing the actual experience, but has returned to the time which precedes the first line, a mood of recollection. Lines seven and eight could be taken as her reflections on how this incident has affected her life henceforth. The lyric thus constitutes a member of that group of poems in which the narrator returns from an experience made significant by a sign, or from having gained knowledge not granted to the less privileged. This can be illustrated by quoting the second stanza of "Just lost, when I was saved!" :

Therefore, as One returned, I feel,  
 Odd secrets of the line to tell!  
 Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores -  
 Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors  
 Before the Seal! <sup>1</sup>

Another interpretation containing equally great implications is also possible. If one is to explore this possibility, one must attempt to view the poem as one of the many which contain imaginative projections of the self into a state achieved after death - an exercise undertaken rather, it seems, in order to gain a further perspective on life than for a morbid investigation of death and the after-life. In this sense the walk along the pier becomes the journey of the soul, the progress of a pilgrim along a flat wooden construction containing all the vicissitudes encountered by Christian in the Slough of Despond and Hill Difficulty. Thus, "Precarious" of line seven conveys the meanings of "unsafe" and "dangerous", but also retains something of its pristine force, namely, "held by the favour and at the pleasure of another". (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.) The extent and quality of

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 160, Vol. I, p. 116.

one's life are thus subject to a greater power whose decision it will be as to when the "final inch" must be achieved. If one extends this last interpretation, one finds that "Gait" is much more than the particular manner of moving; it is to be seen as the mode of living which reflects the difficulties and victories encountered in the progress.

The concluding line of the poem implies that, while some call this "Precarious Gait" "Experience", others define it in different terms. The trend of the poem as a whole at this point seems to be that, while the term "Experience" may well be partly correct, it is altogether too narrow for this purpose, and since it is, in our usage, a word with the widest connotations and application, and yet remains insufficient, the poet declines to propose an alternative.

An examination of the pier image in this poem does not justify the attempt of the critic to create a neatly interlocking and "rounded-off" image by speculations as to what might occur when the limit of the pier is reached. Addenda such as this too often work in opposition to the very suggestiveness of the image, limiting and falsifying its area of movement. What one can determine, however, is that the journey is, like that of the insect on the leaf, simultaneously dangerous and completely natural. Forethought and rational processes can be employed, but still one will remain unknowing as to what the final inch will hold. In this sense, the poem can also be read as a statement of the type of difficulties and joys encountered by a poet.

(vii)

Faith - is the Pierless Bridge  
Supporting what We see  
Unto the Scene that We do not -  
Too slender for the eye

It bears the Soul as bold  
As it were rocked in Steel  
With Arms of Steel at either side -  
It joins - behind the Vail

To what, could We presume  
The Bridge would cease to be  
To Our far, vascillating Feet  
A first Necessity. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 915, Vol. II, p. 670.

"How brittle are the Piers"<sup>1</sup> and "Faith - is the Pierless Bridge" naturally form a pair of poems, each exploring the concept of faith, and employing the bridge metaphor. But whereas in the former the idea of the bridge leading from one point to another is noticeably absent, in the latter this idea carries the main burden of image and theme.

The poem is developed through a series of paradoxes. Faith is the bridge without supports, yet it carries the soul "With Arms of Steel at either side -", it is "Too slender for the eye -" and yet "It bears the Soul", and, finally, if humankind <sup>were</sup> ~~had~~ to discover just where the bridge led, it would no longer be of prime importance for the faltering footsteps on the road of spiritual progress.

The bridge leads from "what ~~We~~ see/Unto the Scene that We do not -", from the visible to the invisible, from this world to another. Emily Dickinson employs a pun to emphasize the unusual nature of the bridge, "Pierless" (peerless), and another construction very similar to a pun, made up of the "see" of the second line and "Scene" of the third, so that the final destination is a scene the human eye cannot see.

The second stanza concentrates on affirming the strength of the bridge. The repetition of the word "Steel" in the second and third lines of this verse stresses the absolute infallibility of faith. The soul is rocked in a cradle of steel, guided and protected by "Arms of Steel" while awaiting a birth into a new life. The phrase "Arms of Steel" has the effect of endowing abstractions such as "the Everlasting Arms" and faith with a tough and tangible

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<sup>1</sup> See pp.261 ff.

concreteness. The final line of this stanza and the first line of the following verse are run-on, and thus one moves from the confirmation of the bridge's durability to its absolute necessity for the human mind.

This concluding stanza presents the most important paradox of the poem, that, could we view the final destination of the bridge, there would be no reason for it to exist. This destination is hidden "behind the Vail", and thus all human presumption is of no help, and man must place his trust in the bridge of faith.

"Faith-is the Pierless Bridge" points out the indispensability of the abstract, and the equation finds its resolution in the fact that awareness and appreciation of both the concrete and the abstract are necessary, not only if we are to participate in this earthly life and prepare for what lies beyond it, but also if we are to see the constant correlation between them, the "condition for converting becoming into being, potentiality into actuality, imperfection into perfection."<sup>1</sup>

If one is not to denigrate the intellectual quality of Emily Dickinson's work, one should, perhaps, point out that very little poetry is original in the sense of presenting new ideas. The lyric, especially, can often be termed the poetry of the already known - a statement intended in a purely descriptive sense.

In "Faith - is the Pierless Bridge", for example, the poet states that faith is always the "first Necessity" for any progress. The manner in which the lyric affirms this well-known thought, and moreover the very fact that the poem is a re-stating of what could

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Meyerhoff, Time in Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 68.

be termed a truism, are in accordance with what E.M.W. Tillyard says in Poetry Direct and Oblique:

In the world's history a great commonplace is every now and then brought forth, and poetry may be concerned in its birth; but those that already exist must be kept alive. They are in perpetual danger of perishing. They have to be refelt continually and reformulated by human experience. They cease to be <sup>true</sup> unless continually ratified by fresh expression. It is one of the functions of poetry, the most intense form of speech, to keep these commonplaces alive, in contemporary idiom through the ages. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard, Poetry Direct and Oblique (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), p. 43.

(viii)

The inundation of the Spring  
Enlarges every Soul -  
It sweeps the tenement away  
But leaves the Water whole -

In which the soul at first estranged -  
Seeks faintly for it's shore  
But acclimated - pines no more  
For that Peninsula - <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1425, Vol. III, p. 988.

For Emily Dickinson, involved as she was with the question of time, the seasonal cycle was a matter of deep interest. Her lyrics concerned with spring, or its approach, invariably give the sense of the "Tremendousness"<sup>1</sup> of this occurrence, which assumes the form of a confrontation between the self and a natural phenomenon, of vast proportions. A typical example of the emotions which spring awakes is to be found in the poem:

I cannot meet the Spring unmoved -  
I feel the old desire - .2

Another of the spring lyrics has as foundation a series of instructions to the soul as to its greeting of the new season:

Go slow, my soul, to feed thyself  
Upon his rare approach - .3

In the poem being examined, however, it is the revitalizing and enlarging force of spring which is being celebrated. A first reading might lead one to think that the complexity contained within, and interest generated by, the flood image distract one from the idea of the actual coming of the spring. ↑

But this is not the case, for the reader is made to realize keenly the theme of the arrival of spring by his participation in the image of the flood.

In the first stanza, the torrents of spring create an expansion of the soul by removing what is superfluous, here represented by "the tenement". "Tenement" can be explained when one examines the meaning given by The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary which

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 963, Vol. II, p. 697: { "A nearness to Tremendousness -  
An Agony procures -" .

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1051, Vol. II, p. 741.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1297, Vol. III, p. 900.

is: "land or real property which is held of another by any tenure", in which case the word may well refer to "that Peninsula" of the eighth line.

To this peninsula accrue connotations of an enclave of safety for the human soul in the midst of its many perils. The soul is thus "estranged" when the peninsula is removed, and seems to be dazed into weakness - "Seeks faintly" - while it attempts to regain "it's shore". This genitive carries with it ideas of the peninsula's being the natural residence of the soul, a sphere wherein it can operate with complete assuredness.

But one must also examine the other strand of argument which is actually the dominant one. This is the abandoning of a position which is secure and comparatively comprehensible, for here it is the known rather than the "unknown peninsula" of the poem "The earth has many keys -".<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson is, in fact, turning the image around, and making it yield a meaning directly contrary to that which it expressed in the last mentioned lyric. This moving from the known to the unknown is, throughout the poem, shown as being beneficial, a fact which is seen especially in the second line, for it:

Enlarges every soul - .

The exact rhyme which is encountered in this first stanza ("soul"/"whole") elevates both words, and encourages the reader to examine other possible meanings for "whole". The word is allowed the freedom of revolving to show its several meanings, such as "In sound condition ... intact", "undiminished" and "a thing complete

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<sup>1</sup> See pp.274 ff.

in itself".<sup>1</sup>

The unit of thought in this poem is the couplet, a fact seen more clearly in the first than in the second verse. At a first glance the rhyme scheme of the poem appears to be: a-b-c-b d-e-e-f. There is, however, a distinct half rhyme in the second stanza: "shore"/"Peninsula", so that the rhyme scheme is actually: a-b-c-b d-e-e-e. While the rhyme in the second verse performs a kind of enjambement function by lessening the regularity of the couplet thought unit through the forging of a link between the second and third lines, the power of the syntax is such that the "shore"/"Peninsula" rhyme dominates, and the "shore"/"more" rhyme is swept away. This prosodic uncertainty obliquely counterparts the thematic movement, in both the second verse and the poem as a whole, from "inundation" to acclimatization.

In the second stanza the soul is immersed within the flux of the ocean. This is an image which constantly appears in Emily Dickinson's writing and a fuller consideration of it at this point will prove to be no digression. The following extract is taken from a letter which Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend Abiah Root in December 1850:

The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea -  
I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters,  
and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! You  
are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love  
you more. I'm afraid he don't love me any! ...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "In good condition; sound, unbroken, intact, ... a complete and individual thing." The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 edition.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 39, Vol. I, p. 102.

A similar idea finds expression in the poem "Wild Nights! Wild Nights!"<sup>1</sup> which arouses many critics' interest on account of the sexual implications of the imagery. But the second and third stanzas show how the theme of the soul battling against the sea is as important as the more famed erotic connotations:

Futile - the Winds -  
To a Heart in port -  
Done with the Compass -  
Done with the Chart !

Rowing in Eden -  
Ah, the Sea !  
Might I but moor - Tonight -  
In thee !<sup>1</sup>

David T. Porter makes a pertinent comment on this very question:

This conjectured calm is specious, however, for while it may promise both the security and repose of immortality, it involves also the futility of a state where the most profound experiences are impossible. In resolution, she opts for the dangerous course:

Ah, the Sea!  
Might I but moor - Tonight -  
In Thee!

The sea is one of Emily Dickinson's diffuse symbols. In "Wild Nights! Wild Nights!" it may represent both lover and immortality. It is perhaps best interpreted as a fusion of the two in which there is an undefined convergence of earthly and divine love.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for the two quotations above are found in a third excerpt. The prose and poetry passages both indicate the importance which Emily Dickinson attached to a participation in the dangers of the unknown. This facing of what she knew to be unsafe was in no way a craving for sensationalism, but rather a necessary element in her search for understanding. It is David T. Porter who terms aspiration "her controlling thematic concern, the matrix from which

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 249, Vol. I, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> David T. Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 71 - 72.

the poems spring."<sup>1</sup> A further quotation from his book might serve better to substantiate his claim:

The aspiring attitude appears with varying intensity, and coincident with that attitude is a sustaining tone (evident when the speaker identifies herself with the pilot figure in "On this wondrous sea" [Poem no. 4] ), or a lighter and detached tone which relieves potentially grave situations of any profound emotional involvement ... In general, then, the disposition of Emily Dickinson's mind is between the poles of the now and the hoped for, between actuality and ideality. The act of the speaker's mind in her poetry is one of aspiration, of attempting to effect a bridge between the two poles.<sup>2</sup>

The constructing of such a bridge is a slow and arduous labour, and achieved only through the slow stages of the development of the self. Part of this process is realizing that the overwhelming effects which nature has upon the self are ultimately beneficial, though at first they ~~might~~<sup>may</sup> appear destructive. In this respect one can observe the use of the verb "sweeps", denoting a cleaning away and getting rid of the unnecessary while leaving the essential. Thus, the soul is "at first estranged -" when it is, as far as the image holds, quite literally, at sea, without any of its usual strongholds: "the tenement", "the shore", and "that Peninsula -". Eventually, however, the acclimatization takes place, which means that another step forward has been achieved.

The enlarging of the soul which is referred to in the second line of the poem is a process which is in constant evolution. Regarding the whole matter in a larger perspective, one could claim that the poems Emily Dickinson wrote not only record this evolving, but also contribute towards and are an extremely important part of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 23 - 24.

(ix)

How brittle are the Piers  
On which our Faith doth tread -  
No Bridge below doth tetter so -  
Yet none hath such a Crowd.

It is as old as God -  
Indeed - 'twas built by him -  
He sent his Son to test the Plank,  
And he pronounced it firm.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1433, Vol. III, p. 993.

Emily Dickinson included this poem in a letter written to Colonel Higginson in June 1878, and it is prefaced by the comment: "That those have immortality with whom we talked about it, makes it no more mighty - but perhaps more sudden -" <sup>1</sup> The idea of the contrasting forces of strength and <sup>of</sup> the liability of this strength to give way is an important feature of this poem. <sup>2</sup> In the first stanza appear such words as "brittle" and "totter", while in the second verse are the phrases "old as God -" and "he pronounced it firm." Both aspects of the question are thus presented, but the emphasis is on the durability, rather than the frailty, for it is on a note of unwavering conviction that the poem concludes.

The two opening lines of the poem proclaim the terrifying fact that the basis of faith can, at any moment, collapse. The third line of this verse

No Bridge below doth totter so -

indicates that, of every bridge on earth, taking "below" in the sense of "beneath the heavens", none is in as perilous a condition as is the bridge of faith. One must, however, be wary of forcing an actuality onto this image, as difficulties of an almost ludicrous nature can result when one reaches the following lines in the second stanza:

He sent his Son to test the Plank,  
And he pronounced it firm.

(To prevent any possible misinterpretation, it should be established at this point that "Piers" here refers to the columns or pillars which support the spans of a bridge.) Yet the muscularity of

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 533, Vol. II, p. 610.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. p. 213 and p. 246.

this poem lies chiefly in the poet's handling of the imagery, and, without a response to the imagery, the poem presents an elusive smoothness, a blandness, an interlocking nicety which might appear to offer the reader no grasping point.

A helpful fact to keep in mind when approaching this poem is a comment made by Archibald MacLeish, who points out Emily Dickinson's fondness of "speaking of two things which, like parentheses, can include between them what neither of them says."<sup>1</sup> This technique is operating in a slightly different manner in "How brittle are the Piers". In the first line the piers are termed "brittle", while in the final line the Son of God pronounces the bridge to be "firm." Between these two points the poem has found expression for its chosen theme and, in so doing, a complete circular movement has taken place, so that the eighth line brings one back again to the first.

There is always a movement taking place in an Emily Dickinson poem, though it is sometimes difficult to detect, but, when it is once perceived, the poem orientates itself into meaningfulness.

The first stanza is predominantly concerned with the human concept of the structure of faith, and finds it to be brittle, tottering and overcrowded. The second verse presents the heavenly credentials of the bridge, which are indeed remarkable: created by God, timeless - the presumable interpretation of the phrase "as old as God" - and declared steadfast by one no less than Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1965), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> The word "Plank" is a typical Emily Dickinson pun, for it refers not only to the bridge of this poem, but also to the wooden Cross upon which Christ was crucified.

The difference between the personae of these two verses is stressed by the emphasis laid on the presence of human beings in the first stanza:

Yet none hath such a Crowd.

This fact is also seen in the verbs which are used, for "tread" has connotations of martyrs tramping along the path to salvation, while "totter" demonstrates the typical Puritan dogma of mankind's essential weakness and depravity as compared with the Eternal Being. The second verse shows a pruning away of all this crowd, leaving only God, the bridge and Christ.

There is thus a disparity between the human and heavenly opinions of this bridge. This difference is emphasized by the fact that the words "Crowd" and "God" are, to some extent, parallel by virtue of their positions in their separate lines. The linking of these two words is further stressed by their tendency to establish a rhyming relationship with each other, seen in the /**CV**/ and /**D**/ sounds and also in the "-d" ending of both words.

One is now better prepared to tackle the wider implications of this poem. One of the difficulties is that the bridge acquires an almost concrete existence, and this despite the earlier mention of the fact <sup>that</sup> the reader should beware of making the bridge into a concrete structure. It is not that concrete details such as "Piers" and "Plank" obfuscate what they are intended to illuminate, but that the reader must wrestle to attain that point where these two seemingly disparate elements of the concrete and the abstract come together, and from there work both outwards and inwards to achieve the most comprehensive interpretation.

This is not made any easier by the fact that the bridge image is not used in the conventional way, as a span leading from one

point over some obstacle to another point. One must therefore be wary of introducing speculations which find neat points of departure and arrival for the bridge, as, for example, its leading from uncertainty over the abyss of despair to salvation.

Another of the difficulties involved in a study of this poem is that the imagery vividly defines the main theme of the lyric, but that at the conclusion the reader must still "baffle at the Hint/And cipher at the Sign"<sup>1</sup> in an attempt to discover what has been so seemingly precisely explicated.

A further understanding can be gained if one sees the poem as an expression not only <sup>of</sup> the earthly and heavenly attitudes earlier mentioned, but also of viewpoints which owe their existence to the presence of the unexpressed Dickinsonian "I" who speaks the lyric, and whose being is implied in a phrase such as "our Faith" and indeed in the whole tone of the poem. It is, in fact, this realization which constitutes the previously referred to "swinging into meaningfulness", for, with the perception that this lyric is both a statement on the nature of faith and a struggle to convince the self of this already possessed knowledge, the reader has a grasping-point on the poem.

This leads to the fact that the main themes of much of Emily Dickinson's poetry are expressions of her deep spiritual pre-occupation. The conviction of the existence of God or of a greater power was always with her. The many poems in which she might seem to rail against God, or adopt deliberately provocative attitudes were but part of her rejection of those dogmas of Puritanism which she found untenable, especially that which "made man insignificant

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1099, Vol. II, p. 772. Lines 9 - 10.

and helpless before the crushing force of God."<sup>1</sup> Also present in the poems, not in opposition to, but in conjunction with, her belief, was the doubting, the questioning, the firm resolve to face as many facets of the problem as were within her imaginative scope.

In this connection the question of *immortality*, which for Emily Dickinson constituted "the Flood subject"<sup>2</sup> of all thought, should be mentioned. The remarks which introduce this poem in the letter to Higginson might seem to run contrary to the notion of the mightiness of immortality which is expressed in several poems. But Emily Dickinson's attitude towards immortality was essentially a plastic one, as if its very magnitude continually presented new aspects and possibilities which she had to examine and accommodate.

The prose sentence assures Higginson that his deceased wife has attained the state of immortality, and the stanzas which follow exhibit the comforting quality which was so much a part of Emily Dickinson's occasional poems.

These verses are more fully appreciated if read in conjunction with a portion of a letter which Emily Dickinson wrote to Judge Otis Lord: "On subjects of which we know nothing ... we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble."<sup>3</sup> The poem thus presents to the reader the firmness of the faith which is given by God, as well as the liability of this faith

<sup>1</sup> John B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1967), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 319, Vol. II, p. 453:  
 "You mention Immortality.  
 That is the Flood subject. I was told that the Bank was  
 the safest place for a Pinless Mind."

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 750, Vol. III, p. 728.

to yield. This wavering is, however, only the human propensity to "believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour", and <sup>that</sup> in moments of spiritual discouragement when the vaster and invisible supports are lost sight of.

In the discussion of "Faith - is the Pierless Bridge"<sup>1</sup> it was suggested that that lyric and "How brittle are the Piers" form a pair of poems each examining the concept of faith and each employing the metaphor of a bridge to do so. The remark made concerning the latter, namely, that "the idea of the bridge leading from one point to another is noticeably absent", can now be restated with more emphasis.

The sense of the always enduring strength of this bridge is expressed in the final line of the poem:

And he pronounced it firm.

This line is purposely constructed to convey this sense of firmness. The conclusiveness of the "And", the strength of judgment implied in the verb "pronounced" and the adjective "firm" followed by a full stop, suggest that this is a final decision which excludes any possibility of further doubt.

This lyric is, in fact, an excellent example of how a poem by Emily Dickinson which can initially appear elusive, or seem to have a precision surrounded, for the reader, by tantalizing imprecisions, is able to consolidate its position and its statements with amazing concreteness once the movement in the poem has been recognized.

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 250 ff.

(x)

Above Oblivion's Tide there is a Pier  
And an effaceless "Few" are lifted there -  
Nay - lift themselves - Fame has no Arms -  
And but one smile - that meagres Balms -

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are scattered there.

Scattered - I say - To place them side by side  
Enough will not be found when all have died. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1531, Vol. III, p. 1056.

The theme of the existence of a place different from the world in which we live is one which frequently appears in the work of Emily Dickinson. It is present in two of her very earliest poems, namely:

There is another sky,  
Ever serene and fair,  
And there is another sunshine,  
Though it be darkness there;<sup>1</sup>

where it forms the conclusion of a letter written to her brother Austin in 1851,<sup>1</sup> and is encountered again in another poem written seven years later:

There is a morn by men unseen - † .<sup>2</sup>

The poem to be discussed is one of Emily Dickinson's later lyrics (1881) and in its present form one cannot ascertain whether it was intended to be a poem of two stanzas, or two versions of the same quatrain.

The opening line sets down the poet's conviction that the tide of oblivion will leave unharmed that pier which is the enduring stronghold of those to whom fame belongs. In this poem the visual elements of the pier's construction are being utilized, as is indicated by the very first word, "Above", for the pier stands higher than the continuous forward and backward roll of the seas which lap at its foundations. The pier is thus a subtler image than the "serene and fair" sky and the "unseen" morn of the earlier poems. Emily Dickinson is using the pier as a means of presenting a subject which was of particular importance to her, namely, the manner in which fame

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 2, Vol. I, p. 2.  
Letter no. 56, Vol. I, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 24, Vol. I, p. 24.

comes to a person.

In a much quoted extract from a letter written to Higginson in 1862, the poet states: "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase - and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me - then - My Barefoot - Rank is better -".<sup>1</sup> In this extract Emily Dickinson hints at the inevitable acquiring of fame by those to whom it rightfully belongs. In many of the poems, fame, or the striving after it, are depicted as essentially unadmirable. Examples of this are to be found in poems such as the following:

Fame is a fickle food  
Upon a shifting plate<sup>2</sup>

and

Fame is a bee.  
It has a song -  
It has a sting -  
Ah, too, it has a wing.<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore obvious that there are for this writer at least two different kinds of fame, or rather, two different attitudes towards the gaining of fame. There is the striving after it which is accompanied by the hopes for acclamation which the poems condemn, and there is that fame referred to in the letter to Higginson and in the lyric being examined. The latter type of fame is actually situated outside of the time sphere as understood

<sup>1</sup> Letter no. 265, Vol. II, p. 408.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1659, Vol. III, p. 1132.

<sup>3</sup> Poem no. 1763, Vol. III, p. 1182.

in relation to the human life span.<sup>1</sup>

This superior fame is not achieved without effort and exertion, for the metrics of the poem indicate a turning about after the words "are lifted there -", making a correction lest any misunderstanding exist/, so that the third line reads:

Nay - lift themselves - Fame has no Arms - .

The final line of this stanza evinces an unusual type of tension, created partly by the use of the adjective "meagre" in a verbal capacity. The caesura is exactly at the syllabic mid-point of the line, and the first half of the line might lead one to expect the kind of smile encountered in the poem "That after Horror - that 'twas us -", namely:

... a Face of Steel -  
That suddenly looks into our's  
With a metallic grin -  
The Cordiality of Death -  
Who drills his Welcome in .<sup>2</sup>

But the second half of the line: "that meagre Balms -" conveys the supremely comforting power of true fame. The line is thus constructed so that the anticipation of grim horror is eclipsed by the smile of fame. The difficulties involved in attaining fame are rewarded in a manner which makes poor the palliatives of balms. Much of the power of the phrase "that meagre Balms -" is due to the fact that it is in many ways a stripping away of the associations which surround the words "Balms". This word is normally used by Emily

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Poem no. 406, Vol. I, p. 316:

"Some - Work for Immortality -  
The Chief part, for Time -  
He - Compensates - immediately -  
The former - Checks - on Fame -".

See pp. 58 ff. for a fuller discussion of fame.

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 286, Vol. I, p. 204.

Dickinson in a manner which allows its more conventional connotations of healing, soothing and consolation to emerge, as in the final stanza of the poem "The World - Feels Dusty" :

Mine be the Ministry  
 When thy Thirst comes -  
 Dews of Thessaly, to fetch -  
 And Hybla Balms - .<sup>1</sup>

By diminishing the power of the balms, Emily Dickinson has strengthened<sup>9</sup> the theme of the durability of this fame, a fact which has already emerged both through its standing "Above" the obliterating forces of oblivion, and also through the detail that those who attain it are termed "effaceless".

The unfinished fragment has a rhyme scheme similar to that of the completed quatrain. The "there" of the second line prompts one to consider the possibility of the opening line and a half being anaphoric, so that both the first and second stanzas would have the "pier"/"there" rhyme repeated in the first two lines and conclude with the "Arms"/"Balms" and "side"/"died" rhymes respectively. The fragment stresses how few are accorded the honour of fame and the quotation marks which enclose "'Few'" are perhaps intended to function in an ironical fashion, relating the line to the idea of "the Chosen Few".

This poem ~~demonstrates~~<sup>illustrates</sup> remarkably well Emily Dickinson's manner of firmly stating beliefs which, after long consideration and examination, have been formulated into truths. This fact is demonstrated in lines such as:

May - lift themselves - Fame has no Arms -  
 and  
 Scattered - I say - To place them side by side  
 Enough will not be found when all have died.

<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 715, Vol. II, p. 548.

The assuming of a kind of prophetic rôle by the poet can often prove to be one of the most striking characteristics of Emily Dickinson's poetry. These are the moments when all doubt and equivocality disappear and the voice in the poems makes pronouncements which rivet the reader by their sense of rich experience gained through struggle and dedication.

This lyric is one example of how Emily Dickinson, within the space of a quatrain, can allow several themes related to the main theme to emerge without in any way encumbering her lines.

(xi)

The earth has many keys.  
Where melody is not  
Is the unknown peninsula.  
Beauty is nature's fact.

But witness for her land,  
And witness for her sea,  
The cricket is her utmost  
Of elegy to me. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1775, Vol. III, p. 1186.

No autograph copy of this poem is known to exist, and the text as printed in Johnson's The Poems of Emily Dickinson is taken from Bolts of Melody which is in turn derived from a transcript made by Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd.

The poem is written in Short Metre (6-6-8-6) although the penultimate line has only seven syllables instead of the customary eight. Of the different iambic metres which Emily Dickinson used, Short Metre is the third in frequency of occurrence.<sup>1</sup> What is particularly noticeable about this lyric is the phrasing of the first stanza, which is unlike Emily Dickinson's usual handling of her lines.

The opening verse is composed of three statements, the first being contained in the opening line, the second corresponding to the run-on second and third lines, and the third being the concluding line of the stanza. There is thus a brief beginning of the argument, a slightly longer expansion, followed by <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ concise summation.

The second stanza is constructed on different lines. Lines one and two lay down the all-embracing premises in anaphoraic lines each concluding with a comma. These are followed by the final two lines which are run-on, and in which the argument of the whole poem is resolved.

The belief that:

The earth has many keys.

is expressed again and again in Emily Dickinson's poetry. She found music in the song of frogs as well as that of the birds, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 85.

wind and in the thunder of the approaching storm, in the buzzing of bees and flies and in the eruption of volcanoes.<sup>1</sup> As the second and third lines explain, the place that is without "melody" is unknown to her, and, by implication, cannot be of this earth.

The final line of the first verse has a straightforwardness which emphasizes the simplicity of the point it is advancing, namely, that Nature's realization of itself cannot be other than in the form of beauty, and that the "many keys" are but one aspect of this beauty.

The second stanza claims that, of all the manifestations of Nature's beauty, it is the song of the cricket which is the "utmost/Of elegy". Emily Dickinson devoted two other poems to the cricket, both of which are better known than "The earth has many keys." These are "Further in Summer than the Birds -"<sup>2</sup> where the insect's song is termed an "unobtrusive Mass"; and "'Twas later

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed illustration of this theme of universal music is Poem no. 276, Vol. I, p. 197:

"Many a phrase has the English language -  
 I have heard but one -  
 Low as the laughter of the Cricket,  
 Loud, as the Thunder's Tongue -  
 Murmuring, like old Caspian Choirs,  
 When the Tide's a'lull -  
 Saying itself in new inflection -  
 Like a Whippowil -  
 Breaking in bright Orthography  
 On my simple sleep -  
 Thundering it's Prospective -  
 Till I stir, and weep -  
 Not for the Sorrow, done me -  
 But the push of Joy -  
 Say it again, Saxon!  
 Hush - Only to me! "

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 1068, Vol. II, p. 752.

when the summer went"<sup>1</sup> where Emily Dickinson uses the cricket as a gauge <sup>of</sup> ~~for~~ the seasonal cycle.

The cricket's chirping is an audible manifestation of Nature; it is, in other words, a "fact" of Nature, and thus it is beautiful, for:

Beauty is nature's fact.

To underline the greatness of the little insect, Emily Dickinson <sup>in these poems</sup> uses words from the spheres of religion and poetry, "Mass" and "elegy", to describe his song, and <sup>here</sup> constructs an argument involving earth, nature, land and sea to lend support to her claim. (Both "elegy" and "Mass", but more especially the former, create an allusion to the death of the year as manifested in the cricket's chirping.)

The main idea to emerge from this poem is one which is constant in Emily Dickinson's work. This is that the poet cannot neglect the most ordinary manifestations of everyday life, as these minutiae are vitally important. It is through a realization of their significance that the knowledge which lies beyond this world, "the unknown peninsula" of this poem, may eventually become known.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 1276, Vol. III, p. 887.

SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE  
PENINSULA POEMS DISCUSSED

As the foregoing section of this chapter attempts to suggest, the peninsula is an apt illustration of several of the themes in Emily Dickinson's poetry and of her own outlook as it emerges through the lyrics. The concluding section which follows aims at concatenating and expanding the most important points raised in the individual discussions of the poems.

One learns from the lyric "Bring me the sunset in a cup," that in this instance, at least, the poet's approach differed from that of a writer such as Donne; a fact which is especially significant in the light of critical judgments which compare Emily Dickinson's work with that of the Metaphysical school.

The sense of wonder at the marvels of the natural world, which is so notably present in the Emily Dickinson poem and absent in "Goe and catch a falling starre", was not an early characteristic which she later abandoned. The wonderment is expressed in this poem in the many questions of which the following are but a few:

Tell me how far the morning Leaps -  
Tell me what time the weaver sleeps  
Who spun the breadths of blue!

Write me how many notes there be  
In the new Robin's extasy  
Among astonished boughs - .

This wonderment can be traced throughout the body of the work. Frequently it took the form of lyrics praising such creatures as the spider<sup>1</sup> and the frog,<sup>2</sup> for example. To enumerate the poems which Emily Dickinson wrote about flowers and plants would be no small task, for the flower seems often to exemplify the greatness

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<sup>1</sup> Poems no. 605, Vol. II, p.464; no. 1138, Vol. II, p.800; no. 1275, Vol. III, p.886; no. 1423, Vol. III, p.987.

<sup>2</sup> Poems no. 1359, Vol. III, p.940; no. 1379, Vol. III, p.950.

of nature in a manner similar to that in which the most everyday of tasks or objects could remind the poet of infinity or immortality.

The basic tenet of Emily Dickinson's nature poetry is stated quite unequivocally in the poem "The earth has many keys.", and is that:

Beauty is nature's fact.

However ambiguous and unknowable the world might appear to be, there always remained the undeniable, granite-like truth of that line. It was because of Emily Dickinson's awareness of, and reliance on, the element of beauty that she could undertake her arduous mental explorations; explorations which are filled with hazards such as the possibility of the objective being lost sight of and of the self plunging into an experience of profound mental suffering:

That after Horror - that 'twas us -  
That passed the mouldering Pier -  
Just as the Granite Crumb let go -  
Our Savior, by a Hair -

A second more, had dropped too deep  
For Fisherman to plumb -  
The very profile of the Thought  
Puts Recollection numb - .

A fact which is seemingly too often overlooked is that, when Emily Dickinson's poetry is considered as an entire body of work, it has no imbalance towards the horrific or the macabre, ~~the~~ a charge which has~~s~~ been levelled against her lyrics. The more awesome elements of experience were celebrated in poems such as the above because the poet realized that progress in any sphere is accompanied by hardship. Closely related to this fact are the ideas expressed in the single quatrain "Soto! Explore thyself!" which confirms Emily Dickinson's belief that the human mind can be a region of tremendous loneliness:

No Settler ha[s] the Mind.

It is in this way that the peninsula is representative of the furthest delvings into the self and the surrounding world before the vast unknown of the ocean is encountered.

The many poems which are directly centred on the theme of this self-exploration find a kind of summation in these lines from "I stepped from Plank to Plank":

I knew not but the next  
Would be my final inch -  
This gave me that Precarious Gait  
Some call Experience.

Experience is a hard-won victory, and one which is always indecisive. The journey towards this state of mind, the conquest, and, above all, the maintaining of the balance, find expression in the poems in the sense of immediacy with which these lyrics are so often charged. Because Emily Dickinson saw the eventual goal of her poetry in the perspective of a lifetime and because the longed for aim, namely, widened comprehension, remained constant, she could rework a poem over a period of years with no danger of losing the pulsing spontaneity which is one of the most marked characteristics of her work.

The overcoming of all manner of obstacles and hindrances - another extremely important theme - is expressed in the two lyrics "It might be lonelier" and "They put Us far apart -". The solutions attained in each case differ greatly, but both are indicative of attitudes frequently encountered in Emily Dickinson's oeuvre. In "It might be lonelier", the main idea to emerge is that the fearless plumbing of the difficulties themselves will eventually bring about its own reward; while, in "They put Us far apart -", victory lies in the repeated assertion of the endurance of sight despite

every horror and deprivation which is inflicted upon the personae of the poem.

The question of sight always remained one of extreme relevance for Emily Dickinson. Her acute perception of the world around her and of her own position in that world seemed to result in the involvement of her whole existence in seeing. Memory was one of the most acute forms of sight, for:

... my Hazel Eye  
Has periods of shutting -  
But, No lid has Memory - .<sup>1</sup>

The experience of emotions and examination of this experience in the poems is another way of seeing more clearly the problems to be contended with.

Two other poems in this peninsula group which were earlier indicated as forming a pair are "Faith - is the Pierless Bridge" and "How brittle are the Piers". In the former, the theme of sight is again present:

Faith-is the Pierless Bridge  
Supporting what We see  
Unto the Scene that We do not - .

"How brittle are the Piers" presents a mingling of visual and abstract elements in a typically Dickinsonian fashion:

How brittle are the Piers  
On which our Faith doth tread -  
No Bridge below doth totter so -  
Yet none hath such a Crowd. /

The poem is, in fact, an ideal means of studying the manner in which Emily Dickinson achieves a balance between the visual and the non-visual. In order to respond to the movement between these poles, the reader must be prepared actively to involve himself in

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<sup>1</sup> Poem no. 959, Vol. II, p. 683.

the intricacies of the poem - a difficult task, for many of Emily Dickinson's lyrics at first seem elusive. This quality of the poem's slipping away from the reader is frequently related to the unusual commingling which Emily Dickinson establishes of things visible and invisible. When this fact is realized, one enters a world where nearly everything seems to exist in both the temporal and <sup>the</sup> eternal spheres.

In "The inundation of the Spring", the theme encountered is the soul's learning to acclimatize itself to new experiences. This is related to the idea of widened comprehension <sup>'s</sup> being the eventual aim of living a life of discipline, for the effect of the coming of spring is that it

Enlarges every soul - .

The image of the flood which sweeps away what is unnecessary and leaves the essential also appears in the lyric "Above Oblivion's Tide there is a Pier", where it illustrates the poet's belief that ~~true~~ fame will endure despite the forces of oblivion. An integral characteristic of this kind of fame was the idea of dedication, and this is one of the most impressive lessons which Emily Dickinson, as an artist, learns. The term "dedication" is not one which Emily Dickinson uses, to the present writer's knowledge, nor does she <sup>often</sup> employ the image of the poet dedicated to his art, but the theme is implicit in almost everything she writes. Her life and her work together create something which one could not truthfully describe as having, among other attributes, that of dedication, for this unity of life and poetry is dedication.

In itself this quality is obviously insufficient, for devotion to inferior art would be no reason for holding the finished product

in high esteem. But Emily Dickinson's dedication to her poetry was the determination to improve upon a unique talent. Hers was a life lived with so much seeming compromise, and yet one whose most striking feature was the almost total lack of compromise.

This combination of dedication and refusal to comply with what she felt to be foreign to her art is perhaps most clearly illustrated in her declining any opportunity to publish her poems, as she realized that the lyrics would, in all likelihood, be altered to bring them in line with the literary taste of the day. This attitude does not imply an arrogance in estimating the worth of her poetry, but an awareness that her work might be recognized for its unique merit only in years to come.

The growing critical interest in Emily Dickinson's poetry, an interest which is not confined to writing in the English language,<sup>1</sup> shows that the twentieth century has accepted her work as being worthy of the attention of some fine critical minds, or - to use her expression - her "letter to the World"<sup>2</sup> is being read with interest and devotion.

As one of the major aims of this thesis has been to investigate the originality of Emily Dickinson's poetry, at this point a consolidation of the findings is necessary for any final estimation.

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<sup>1</sup> A glance through the listings in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature indicates that in recent years much French, German and Italian criticism has appeared on this writer's work. Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, a publication of the Modern Humanities Research Association in association with the University of Colorado Press. (Cambridge at the University Press).

<sup>2</sup> Poem no. 441, Vol. I, p. 340:  
 "This is my letter to the World  
 That never wrote to Me -"

The opening chapter suggested the importance of friendships and correspondence with others, an idea which was later developed in the section concerned with Emily Dickinson's love lyrics. It was her committal to the idea of love flowing outwards in all directions; of love being one of the most important means of achieving comprehension; and especially of the presence of immortality in love, which helps destroy the notion that Emily Dickinson's poems must, on account of the poet's seclusion, be products narrow and limited as regards their literary merit. Such a committal to love demanded an awareness of events and emotions, however insignificant their appearance. This awareness, and consequent involvement in many different spheres of interest, is always present in Emily Dickinson's most typical work. The reader is made to feel that the devotion with which she explored and expressed the possibility inherent in all things was rewarded by the crystallization of her thought into lines whose weathered strength is seldom without a delicate lyricism.

The lyric voice which is heard in Emily Dickinson's work is, in fact, one of her major achievements as a poet. This voice utters statements which imply a process of long and careful consideration, yet the poems simultaneously convey a spontaneous play of mind, so that one seems to feel the words being put down in rhythms matching the utterances of a voice which has only just spoken the line, and whose just-departed echo is sounding through the stanzas. The voice has a gleefulness and a lightness, a capacity to illuminate by means of the humorous, even in those poems which are expressing the most heartfelt emotions. This voice sings with a rich simplicity, rich in that the musicality of this poet's work is more complex than is often suspected, simple in the bare, honed quality which is

always present.

Emily Dickinson's uniqueness is also to be experienced in her unusual poetic viewpoint, achieved through a concern with the problem of time and the "equivocal locus" of much of her imagery. The combined effect of these characteristics is encountered in poems which seem constantly to be striving to escape from the bondage of the time of clocks, and to be handling their themes so that the reader is made aware of the temporality and eternality of all things. The stylistics, the poetic forms and the themes the poet pursued are all working towards the creation of that moment when one feels oneself most <sup>firmly</sup> anchored in this world, yet simultaneously released from its limitations and able to view it in a wholly new perspective.

Emily Dickinson's lyrics are frequently meeting points of opposites, two examples of which have already been given, namely richness and simplicity, spontaneity and consideration. Another pair not yet instanced is the energy and the calm which emanate from the poems. It is this sense of activity, felt in the strenuous demands which much of the imagery makes upon the reader, felt in the turns of argument and exemplified in the poet's handling of her rhymes, coinages and creation of unusual verbal tenses and moods, which eliminates any sense of lethargy or meaningless repetition.

The mood of calm arises partly from the firmness of purpose with which even the most harrowing utterances are made, so that the reader is always aware of the intellectual ordering which is at work. Another source of pervading calm is the presence of thematic echoes which resound throughout the oeuvre. There is a great satisfaction to be derived from this feeling of a poet's

stating her chosen themes, then proceeding, in a lifetime devoted to the task, to examine and re-examine them, constantly discovering further aspects, and repeatedly affirming what has already been discovered.

Emily Dickinson's striving for a widened mental circumference, her explorations of the themes of immortality, eternity, infinity, fame and death are undertaken in nearly every case in Common Metre stanzas - a fact which shows to just what extent she realized the possibilities of this form. The mastery of form which she attained is one of her greatest achievements. Her knowledge of the Common Metre measure enabled her to enunciate her vision of the world in a lyric voice which strikes the reader by virtue of its clarity, its enduring tones and its unflinching trueness to its subject.

The influence of Emily Dickinson on the poetry of the twentieth century is a matter which cannot be easily estimated. The American critic Henry Wells writes of Wallace Stevens:

His independence as man and poet renders him in fact a legitimate successor to earlier New England individualists who chose their own way of life by pond or hill. The author of the succinct "Emperor of Ice Cream" owes many a debt to Emily Dickinson.<sup>1</sup>

But this brief comment cannot really be considered a definite evaluation of the influence of one poet on the other. Emily Dickinson's poems have, however, inspired artists in different fields to interpretations of her work. Martha Graham, herself a New Englander, has interpreted in dance such poems as "This is my Letter to the World,"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964), p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Clarke, Presenting People who Dance (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1961), p. 29.

The American poets Adrienne Rich and Hart Crane have dedicated poems to Emily Dickinson, and so too have the South African poets Elizabeth Eybers and Margaret Gough.<sup>1</sup> But inspiration and influence are not necessarily synonymous, and it can be stated with reasonable certainty that the work of no major English-speaking poet is markedly influenced by Emily Dickinson.

The title of America's "chief lyric poet"<sup>2</sup> is now generally accepted as belonging to Emily Dickinson, and with Walt Whitman she stands as one of the most important figures in nineteenth century American poetry. A comparative study of Whitman and Emily Dickinson could well reveal unsuspected affinities between these two poets (especially in the area of their experiments and concern with vocabulary and with their very different types of line), for Whitman's expansiveness and Emily Dickinson's austerity have for too long been regarded as opposite poles in American poetry.

Another related matter which should be discussed is that of Emily Dickinson's position in American poetry. As was earlier pointed out, she cannot be counted among the nineteenth century Transcendentalist writers, nor regarded as part of the traditional concept of Puritan literature. But, if Emily Dickinson is not to be included in the above movements, she still falls within the New

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<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, "E", Emily Dickinson by Albert J. Gelpi (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. xiii.

Hart Crane, "To Emily Dickinson", Vol. II of Chief Modern Poets of England and America, ed. by G.D. Saunders, J.H. Nelson, and M.L. Rosenthal (4th ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 388.

Elizabeth Eybers, "Emily Dickinson", Die Ander Dors (Cape Town: Constantia, 1946), p. 18.

Margaret Gough, "Emily Dickinson", New Coin (Vol. 3, No. 1, 1967), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964), p. 233.

England literary tradition, despite the many characteristics which might seem to require her exclusion. Her candid avowal of the fact that she saw "New Englandly" is perhaps the strongest proof of her Amherst affinities. Awareness of the typical New England religious pressures active at the time was strong in Emily Dickinson, and, although she cannot accurately be termed a specifically religious poet, there is a concern with spiritual questions throughout her work.

A further point of which mention must be made is the unusual absence of an early or late style in Emily Dickinson's work. This is unusual when one considers the fact that even such a uniform style as that of Pope displays a discernible development.

One of the reasons for this lack of change in her style is the fact that Emily Dickinson pursued the same themes throughout her poetic career. For approximately twenty-five years she wrote poems about eternity, infinity, immortality, life and death, and remained constant in her manner of treating these themes primarily as a lyricist and not as a thinker.<sup>1</sup> The Common Metre quatrain, and the many experiments which she attempted within its lines, so completely met her requirements that she found little need to use other verse forms.

Proof of this constancy of mode and matter can be found in the various anthologies of her poems. In each case there are a few poems which recur; otherwise the choice of lyrics varies widely and yet the final selection remains thoroughly representative of

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<sup>1</sup> The thesis put forward by William R. Sherwood in Circumference and Circumstance, namely, that the poems show a logical development of thought is not, in the opinion of the present writer, sufficiently substantiated to be convincing.

William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

her work.<sup>1</sup> Such an absence does not imply a static quality in Emily Dickinson's poetry, for the searching for and exploring of her chosen themes, which takes place within the Common metre quatrains, precludes any such limitation.

As the themes of discovery and exploration have so frequently been alluded to in the course of this study, it is perhaps fitting that they should be remembered in the concluding comments, for what was said of Gertrude Bell, a woman whose explorations involved the physical travelling which Emily Dickinson's did not, can aptly be applied to Emily Dickinson, namely, that the frailty of her body was eventually "broken by the energy of her soul."<sup>2</sup> It is this energy of soul, perpetuated in Emily Dickinson's lyrics, which will ensure their lasting position in English poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> See the following:

A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).

Laurel Poetry Series : Emily Dickinson, ed. by John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1960).

Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by James Reeves (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1963).

Selected Poems & Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Robert M. Linscott (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959).

A Letter to the World, ed. by Rumer Godden (London: Bodley Head, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Selected Letters of Gertrude Bell. Selected by Lady Richmond from Lady Bell's Standard Edition (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1953), p. 378.

The quotation is taken from a speech delivered at the funeral of Gertrude Bell by H. Dobbs, the then High Commissioner of Iraq.

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