A Poet Looks At Immortality: Emily Dickinson On Death And Eternity

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A POST LOOKS AT IMMORTALITY:
EMILY DICKINSON ON DEATH AND ETERNITY

by
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

THE PERSON

I am small like the wren;
and my hair is bold,
like the chestnut burr;
and my eyes, like the sherry
in the glass that the guest leaves.
(letter to T. W. Higginson, July, 1862)

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, the daughter of Edward Dickinson, a respected lawyer and Emily Norcross Dickinson, who "did not care for thought". The family included a younger sister, Lavinia, and a brother, William Austin, who later married Susan Gilbert and continued to live with theDickinsons. Miss Dickinson lived her entire life within the confines of her parents' Amherst home, dying in the house in which she was born on May 15, 1886.

Her education consisted of Amherst schools and one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley. Her childhood and adolescence were active and social, but after a pleasure trip to Philadelphia and Washington she retired into a life-long seclusion broken only by two trips to Boston for medical reasons. Her circle of friends was small, having no apparent contact with other literary figures with the exception of her literary advisor, Mr. Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

Of the 1775 poems created by Miss Dickinson, only seven were published in her lifetime and those anonymously. Since her death, her poems have been sporadically edited and published, principally by her niece, Mrs. Martha Dickinson Bianchi. In 1955, Thomas H. Johnson edited the first complete volume of her poems, published by the Harvard University Press.
The Poet lights but Lamps-
Themselves go out-
The wicks they stimulate-
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns-
Each age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference-

Emily Dickinson was just such a lamp-lighter, the "New England nun", with a vocation of igniting small vigil-lights whose vital sparks illuminated the circumference of not only the age but the entire universe.

In probing the darkness of Death and Immortality, Miss Dickinson produced a panoramic kaleidoscope of life. She gave an unprecedented meaning and vitality to man's fundamental questions of Death, Anguish, Nature, Domestication and Metaphysics. From the beginning of time, men have dramatized, sung and written of these essential aspects of life, but under the gentle scalpel of Miss Dickinson they assume a deeper, more vitalized meaning.

It was therefore not her subject matter which ranks her as a forerunner of modern poetry; her unique style is responsible for this. Conrad Aiken refers to it thus: "her disregard for the accepted forms or regularities was incorrigible. Grammar, rhyme, meter, everything went by the board if it stood in the way of thought or utterance." In other words, she attempted to make form and meaning synonymous; T. H. Johnson notes as exceptional example of this, "I like to see it lick up the miles". Various means were utilized to accomplish this synonymity——capital letters for emphasis, dashes as musical devices, and juxtaposition of words, ideas

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1 Dr. Ward, Lecture, March, 1963.
and phrases for heightened implications. Paradox abounds in her poems, giving it an element of perpetual surprise and causing her towering figures of speech to almost burst their miniature lines.

In such miniature lines one of the most outstanding characteristics of her poetry lies—conciseness, so much so that it borders on the cryptic. Here Miss Dickinson's true genius becomes apparent; in tiny, grasping lines, overpowering images leap out to clutch the meaning of the cosmos. This was not a mere New England trait, to her it was a method of achieving a single moment of intensity.  

Because of this dedicated brevity, words become an addiction with Miss Dickinson. She expresses her love and value for them when she said: "A word that breathes distinctly/ Has not the power to die". During her life she cultivated an almost infinite adaptability of the English language to heighten and deepen her bold little lines. In this respect she somewhat resembles the 17th century poets, Donne, Vaughn and Blake.

For such select and sparse wording, Miss Dickinson devised a rhyme and meter again uniquely hers; these too conveyed the meaning as well as the words. The meter consists primarily of tetrameter followed by a trimeter or occasionally a trimeter and two dimeters. It seems to have been derived from the Faulter's Measure; this long, hexameter line, popular in hymns, was broken down by Miss Dickinson to conform to her particular requirements.

Miss Dickinson combined this metric pattern with an original rhyme scheme to extend English prosody to indefinite limits. She popularized not only slant rhyme, but employed identical rhyme (stone-stone), vowel rhyme (see-bay), and suspended rhyme (thing-along) to created variation and overtones.

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3 Ibid., p. VIII.
4 Ibid., p. XI.
But for a person to be a true poet, lighting lamps of eternal truths, something more than personal meter, rhyme or word choice must reside within him. In her poem, "Alone I cannot be", Miss Dickinson speaks of this something which converts the poet to a being possessed—possessed with a grace-like inspiration. The anguish and agony resulting from its internal burning breeds a sensitivity to reality from which revelations of a higher reality flower.

**THE PURPOSE**

The blunder is to estimate—
Eternity is THEN,
We say, as 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.

In attempting any type of dissertation on Miss Dickinson the problem arising most frequently is that of lack of information. Of her hermit-life only enigmatic snatches are known; of her personality, feelings, and beliefs even less is available as such. But the problem is only apparent. Her poems themselves present a veritable encyclopedia of her.

Her values of Love, Home, Eternity; the influence of Nature, the all-pervading one of Death; her soulful questioning of God and meaning; above all her overflowing love of life leap from the pages of her poetry to embrace the entire universe.

The tiny acres of Amherst enveloped Emily, God and Eternity. Here in Emily's world was the cosmos, and here time was but a slice of eternity. A robin, a lost love, a death—all revealed a universe of meaning and emotion; all were an aspect, an instance of eternity.

Eternity, then, was Emily's domain and Death the key to its meaning. The Soul, Death and Immortality—these were Miss Dickinson's
prevailing themes and it is through these principally that I will attempt to arrive at a deeper, more meaningful knowledge of the person, Emily Dickinson.

To facilitate an appreciation of Miss Dickinson's extended eschatology, I have divided her works into six aspects of Immortality: the Soul, Life (in terms of Anguish), Death, Judgement, Eternity and its apex, God. Each aspect is a strand in the thread of eternity, woven into a tapestry of brightly revealing Life.
CHAPTER TWO
THE SOUL

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared to that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself—
Finite Infinity.

As immortality begins with life, so life begins with the soul.

This spiritual entity, however unknown and invisible, is the fountainhead of life's current. How often are heard expressions such as "brevity is the SOUL of time" to emphasize an essential principle. But the soul is more than a mere thing, however primary; as Reverend Francis Aveling states:

The human soul IS a real thing—a substance having subsistence OF itself, a subsistence such as is shown by an activity particular to its nature, and not shared by the body to which it happens to be joined, and thus sufficiently exhibiting it as a being both subsistent and incorporeal.5

Thus the soul is a living being, powerful in its nature and the influence exerted on its dusty casement, the body. It is true that man is composed of body and soul equally, that one cannot exist in this world without the other, but the soul alone possesses that quality which merits it unrivaled ascendancy—Immortality.

Miss Dickinson realized this as instinctively as every man, sometime in his life, feels the prick of wanderlust which willingly or unwillingly sets him on this universal migration to eternity. Reverend

Aveling sees this instinctive urge for immortality as a very personal problem, differing with each individual.

It is an intensely interesting and an exceedingly important philosophic question; but each of us will, as indeed we must, settle it for ourselves — either on the grounds of feeling or desire, or acquiescence in the opinion and teaching of someone whose judgment we trust, or of consciousness or evidence.6

The impact, the influence of this quality of immortality in the human soul has touched every man in every age to some degree. For instance, De Quatrefages, an eminent ethnologist, after reviewing the records of all ancient nations, summarized the belief in the souls’ immortality among people of antiquity: "We look in vain for any people of antiquity that did not profess some kind of belief in man’s future existence and retribution".7 Egyptians carved the mightiest of human structure — rising majestically yet — the Pyramids, to attest to his thoughts on immortality; and his literary legacy, a Book of the Dead, reveals these thoughts in simple beauty.8 So also the Persians formulated an eschatology which roughly coincides with the Christian idea of heaven, hell and purgatory; just as our Bible finds its Persian twin in the Zend-Avesta, their sacred book.9 From the Levant to the Orient his idea of impending immortality sprang; its genesis not in preachers or hearsay, but the hearts of men. However, pagan, elemental and varying in form this nation was, it is highly significant in that it pre-dates the advent of Jesus Christ by several decades and in some instances, centuries.

Proceeding through the ages, this notion was developed by the Hellenistic culture, betrayed by the Jewish rejection of its messenger, 

6Ibid. p. 15.
9Ibid., p. 339.
and synthesized into tenets of belief by Thomas. From a primitive, pagan notion of corresponding retribution for good or evil, it rose to the Grecian concept of participation in the God-head and finally to St. Thomas' proofs of desire, justice and universality. In short, it progressed proportionate to civilization from primitive awakening to established belief.

Yet in the 19th century of Miss Dickinson, this belief was not strong enough for her -- her sensitivity and vision saw immortality in every moment of life. But the life around her was much too busy with itself, with empty dreams and actions. So Miss Dickinson turned to a personal life, that real life -- the highway to eternity -- which ribbons its way through the valleys of the soul. There all life-action originates; and some enact their life-drama solely on the state there. Such was the case with Emily Dickinson.

Around 1862, Miss Dickinson noted, "the soul elects her own society. Her soul, though its expanse held the universe within its walls, elected a society of one -- itself -- for its vastness could not retain the smallness of the contemporary world. And it is only in eternity when Death the Judgement and Resurrection are enacted, only when "the mists are carved away", will the society she rejected realize the vaster company she chose:

Of all the Souls that stand create —
I have elected — One —
When Sense from Spirit — flies away —
And Subterfuge is done —
When that which is — and that which was —
Apart — intrinsic — stand —
And this brief Drama is the flesh —
Is shifted — like a sand —
When Figures show their royal Front —
And Lists — are carved away,
Behold the Atom — I preferred —
To all the lists of Clay!10

The life of Asherst proper could not induce her to venture from
this inner life. There the soul ruled supreme over its material counter-
part and there she ruled supreme over external life, transcending it to
become part of another higher being — all accomplished by the will:

No rack can torture me,
My soul's at liberty,
Behind this mortal bone
There knits a bolder one.

You cannot prick with saw
Nor rend with scimitar.
Two bodies therefore be,
Mind one, and the one will flee.

The eagle of his nest
No easier divest
And gain the sky,
Than mayest thou,

Except thyself may be
Thine enemy;
Captivity is consciousness
So's liberty. 11

Her exultation of the soul's supremacy reaches greater proportions
as the soul now transcends all time, space and power; and in so doing,
rivals even infinity:

The life we have is very great;
The life that we shall see
Surpasses it we know because
It is infinity.

But then all space has been beheld
And all dominion shown,
The smallest human hearts' extent
Reduces it to none. 12

Thus far, Miss Dickinson proclaims the soul in terms of vastness,
power and majesty. But as in all things relating to her, the soul possesses

11 ibid., p. 88.
12 Richard Wilbur, Emily Dickinson. (New York: Dell Publishing
a paradoxical aspect. Truly the soul generates immortality in its latent life of power and glory, but it reaps this eternal fruit much as a harvest of tears. Her life's anguish and sorrow move Miss Dickinson to somberly reflect: "Gethsemane —/ Is but a Province — in the Being's Centre."

The anonymous frustration in her life, heightened by its confinement in her soul, permeates her poems as a Calvary motif, whereby she dramatizes herself as the "Empress of Calvary".

Rejecting society, the soul becomes her vicarious residence and thoughts replace living in social terms. From this minute depot, she embarked on a journey through the breadth and depth of the universe collecting souvenirs of insight into her immortal destination:

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her — Alone —
Then friend — and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn —

Eternity's disclosure
To favorites — a few —
Of the Colossal substance
Of Immortality.**

Here, in profound sanctuary, Miss Dickinson found a residence commensurate with her furnishings. In undisturbed solitude she could catch the breathless bloom of a rose, transform it to the innocent bloom of birth or the cold bloom of death and transcend it to the unending flowering of eternity. Within invisible walls, she lived alife full of beauty, love and anguish. And her life was full.

**T. H. Johnson, op. cit., p. 57.
CHAPTER THREE
LIFE

On the bleakness of my lot
Bloom I strove to raise.
Late my acre of a rock
Yielded grape and maize.

Soil of flint if steadfast tilled
Will reward the hand;
Seed of palm by Libyan sun
Fructified in sand.

To many laymen, Miss Dickinson did not really live, she merely existed. A life of spiritual exploration into the Hades of Anguish or mystic flights through Nature's Paradise was not conventional living. But conventional or not, Miss Dickinson's little-worn path to eternity was willful. More importantly, it was strewn with the wreckage of some ill-fated aspiration or desire which, as time melted, she molded into iron moments of Anguish.

Her life was one of tragic vision, for she knew she could not pierce through to the unknowable, but she insisted on asking questions -- her agonizing sense of ironic contrasts intuitively envisioned the human predicament in which man is marked, destroyed, yet attracted to the incomprehensible repose of death; it sadly noted the limits of reason, order and justice in human as well as divine relationships -- This was the anguish of Shakespeare's Lear and Herman Melville, who also struggled with Divine fact; yet she was willing to love the God she so often wrestled with.

\[14\] ibid, p. XII.
This tragic vision scorned the bitter horizons of human achievements and framed the scenes in her anguish poetry. This was her life's vocation and so she retreated to the precious solitude of her soul to salvage what tarnished values she could from life's wreckage. In describing a typical day, Miss Dickinson reveals this solitude as the essence of her life:

I rise because the sun shines and sleep is done with me. I brush my hair and dress and wonder what I am and who made me so — and then I help wash the breakfast cups, and — anon wash them again, and then 'tis afternoon and ladies call — and evening and some members of another line come in to spend the hours and then day is done. And prithee, what is life? The supper of the heart is when the guest is gone!15

This solitude and corresponding tragic vision was not precipitated by her mysterious life — disappointment alone, although this intensified it. As the following poem evidences, it lay dormant in her childhood, pricking her youthful consciousness with forboding of her future agonized search for immortality:

A loss of something ever felt I,
The first that I could recollect
Before I was, of what I knew not,
Too young, that any should suspect.

A MOURNER LURKED AMONG THE CHILDREN,
A notwithstanding stole about
As one bemoaning a dominion,
Itself the only prince cast out.

Elder today, a session wiser—
And fainter too, as wiseness is—
I find myself still softly searching
For my delinquent palaces,

And a suspicion like a finger
Touched my forehead now and then,
That I am looking oppositely
For the site of the kingdom of heaven.16


When a naturally melancholic mind such as Miss Dickinson's confronted such a crisis as she did, it could only result in an irremediable wound. Her life, once "open to the sun" now became assimilated into that wound:

A not admitting of the wound
Until it grew so wide
That all my life entered it
And there was room beside.

A closing of the simple lid
That opened to the sun
Until the sovereign Carpenter
Perpetual nail it down.17

Conjectured to be a love-disappointment, this could only be healed by "the sovereign Carpenter". Death. Yet death itself would now be but a "trifle", in the sense that it would only occur for a moment; but:

...the living, this include
The dying multifold - without
The Respite to be dead.18

Did this "wound" reap anything but tears and sorrow? For all its heartbreak, it presented her with one glorious moment of life, yet she paid an entire existence for this fleeting rapture. Was it worth it:

I took one Draught of Life—
I'll tell you what I paid—
Precisely an existence—
The market price, they said.

They weighed me, Dust for Dust—
They balanced Film for Film,
They handed me my being's worth—
A single Dram of Heaven!19

A single Dram of heaven — yet the irony flooding the above lines betrays the bitterness she would nourish the rest of her life.

17ibid., op. cit., p. 106.
18ibid., op. cit., p. 232.
19ibid., p. 314.
Yet out of this abyss of heartbreak emerged a sensitivity, a perception which enabled her to partake in the communion with the universe. She could now soar in the humming-bird's "route of evanescence, a resonance of emerald" or shimmer in the brilliance of the Northern Lights "bronze and blaze", for:

The Missing All — prevented Me
From missing minor things
If nothing larger than a Worlds'
Departure from a Hinge —
Or sun's extinction be observed
'Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.20

Whether creatures of nature or courses of planets, all were but signs, intimations of immortality to Miss Dickinson. Through her telescope of insight she peered into life and discerned eternity. Slowly triumphing over the dark night of her soul, she transformed it into a fruitful superiority to fate; and this:

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

A pittance at a time,
Until, to her surprise,
The soul with strict economy
Subsists till Paradise.21

And thus the poet ekes out her life, frugal with her love. In a life-long contest with fate, she overcome and impatiently awaits eternity for her prize.

An experience in anguish not only gave Miss Dickinson wisdom and sensitivity by which she could open her mind, her heart, her eyes to the eternity present about her, it gave her an experience of actual eternity in all its profoundity and immensity:

20 Ibid. p. 228.
21 Ibid. p. 242.
My life closed twice before its close -  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me  
So huge, so hapless to conceive  
As these that twice befell.  
Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell.22

As her life was one of love - its rapture, its anguish, its fruits  
so eternity would be: The eternity of a heaven in Love's possession  
or The hell of Love's departure. A life so battered by storms of sorrow  
and frustration could hardly fear the ominous thunderings of Death.

CHAPTER FOUR
DEATH

Safe in their alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning and untouched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the resurrection,
Rafter of satin, roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze in her castle of sunshine;
Babbles the bee in stolid ear;
Pipe the sweet birds in ignorant cadence,—
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

Grand go the years in the crescent above them;
Worlds scoop their arcs, and firmaments row,
Diadems drop and Doges surrender
Soundless as dots in a disc of snow.

Technically speaking, death means the cessation of bodily life
caused by the separation of the soul from the body. This abstract
definition reveals little if anything of the true essence of this in­
evitable event, so feared and reverenced by humanity. Death is not merely
an impersonal problem; but, "a mystery which engages man's entire being,
a mystery which is not objectively thrust upon us from the outside, but
which we confront from within, which involves us, the subjects, in its
very data."23 It is more than a part of life—it is a part of the soul's
very being—here lies its tragic significance. In the soul's last earthly
moment—a moment of supreme agony—it triumphs; for here the doors of the
world to come, with all its realities of judgement, purgatory, heaven or
hell, are at last swung wide for the weary pilgrim. Perhaps the most
beautiful, expressive and consoling description of death can be found in
the Preface of the Mass for the Dead: "For to Your faithful, O Lord, life

23 P.W. Gleason, S.J., The World to Come, (New York: Sheed and
Ward), 1958, p. 45.
is changed, not taken away; and the abode of earthly sojourn being dissolved, an eternal dwelling is prepared in heaven”. Death — the crossroad of eternity—signals life’s exit and eternity’s entrance.

Death to Miss Dickinson was a reservoir of emotion: hatred, love; fear, expectation; tenderness, cruelty; majesty and scorn. Yet for all its ambivalence, it was crucial for her. Reflecting on the death of her eight-year old nephew, she concludes:

"Open the door, open the door, they are waiting for me", was Gilbert’s sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know — Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the small grave at his grandfather’s feet — All this and more, though is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me its name!"

Love and death — these were life to her, for they included all its meaning and more. They bespoke immortality to her; Death as its beginning and Love as reunion in it.

Miss Dickinson did not require an actual experience of death to grasp its oblique reality. A neighbor, the “Indolent housewife, in daisies lain”, could evince all the coldness and cruel finality of death to her:

How many times these low feet staggered,
Only the soldered mouth can tell;
Try! can you stir the awful rivet?
Try! can you lift the hasps of steel?...

It was in this — the loss of a neighbor, a friend, a loved one — that Miss Dickinson found the utter separation and total certainty of death:

Dying! to be afraid of thee
One must to thine artillery
Have left exposed a friend.
Than thine old arrow is a shot
Delivered a straighter to the heart,
The leaving love behind.

24 H. Johnson, op. cit., p. XII.
25 Ibid., p. 20.
Not for itself the dust is shy,
But, enemy, beloved be
Thy batteries divorce,
Fight sternly in a dying eye
Two armies, love and certainty,
And love and the reverse.26

Yet for all its cruelty, her immortal "enemy" was capable of consolation. At times it assumed an aspect of tenderness as a haven from the cruelties of life. The half-way house of death magnetized Miss Dickinson on her agonized trek to eternity:

Let down the bars, 0 Death!
The tired flock come in
Whose bleating ceases to repeat,
Whose wandering is done,

Thine is the stillest night,
Thine is the securest fold;
Too near thou art for seeking thee,
Too tender to be told.27

She does not mean in the above to say that death is the completion or termination of life. Her terms are metaphorical in that the earthly life, with all its sorrows and disappointments, will be terminated; to be replaced by spiritual living on the plains of immortality.

It would indeed be naive, as Miss Dickinson realized, to envision death as the final touch on a life's portrait, for, "human life by its very meaning is activity, becoming, development... Death could not be a cessation of life due to fulfillment of the possibilities of liberty, for death is really constitutive of being".28 Miss Dickinson conceived this vitality of death thus:

A death-blow is a life-blow to some
Who, till they did, did not alive become;
Who, had they lived, had died, but when
They died, vitality begun.29

26 Ibid., p. 207
27 Ibid., p. 233.
Death was inseparable from life in Miss Dickinson's opinion. As it ushered in the new, higher life, it simultaneously culminated the old one. Death refracted supernatural rays which rendered earthly life transparent; at the moment of death, the soul grows to a spiritual maturity which apprehends previous values in a manner not possible from a temporal view. In death, "when the human personality is reflected with the least clarity in the expression of the body, it assumes its greatest clarity as freedom, unifying the past and totalizing its experiences in a choice which expresses itself finally." Miss Dickinson regarded Truth and Beauty as the only meaningful values derived from temporal life. And it was only in death that these could be united and recognized in their total worth:

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

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

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

Not only are enduring values illuminated at Death's junction;
here too the superficialities and ostentations of worldly esteem are glaringly focused on. Their thin veneer is immortally erased and their worldly acclamation hollowly reverberates in the emptiness:

The Admirations- and Contempts- of time-
Show justest- through an Open Tomb-
The dying- as it were a height
Reorganizes Estimate

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30[Reason, op. cit., p. 69.
31T. H. Johnson, op. cit., p. 107.}
And what We saw not
We distinguish clear-
And mostly see not
What We saw before-

'Tis Compound Vision-
Light-enabling Light-
The finite-furnished
With the Infinite-
Convex- and Conclave Witness-
Back-towards time-
And forward-
Toward the God of Him.32

For all its coldness and sorrow, Death's vast import cannot be
over-emphasized. To relieve the weary traveller from life's burden, it
affords a haven of tenderness and peace. Here, the soul can synthesise
its accomplishments and reorganize its values. Thus purified, it can now
proceed to the awesome Judgement to receive its ticket to immortality.

The Judgment

As a spiritual neighbor to Jonathan Edwards, Miss Dickinson
believed that the final judgment was not a foreseeable end, but a pro-
nouncement renewed in all moments of existence.33 Like eternity itself,
the Judgment is now- a vital, pervading part of life - not a vague "THERE"
of imagined situation. In other words, while the moment of divine de-
cision is actual, it is enacted every moment in the drama of life and
climaxed in eternity.

This life— the outflowing of Love— would become fully manifest
at the Judgment where, "there will be no escaping the fact that God is
love... His love will be known in all the details of its savorific plans
for man... and the capacity of man to receive that love determines his
destiny."34 The solemn "Interview" witnesses the soul's rebirth — a
rebirth in love's reunion and consummation:

32 Ibid., p. 217.
33 Ibid., p. XLI.
34 Reason, op. cit., p. 12.
'Twas a long parting, but the time
For interview had come,
Before the judgement-seat of God,
The last and second time

These fleshless lovers met,
A heaven in a gaze,
A heaven of heavens, the privilege
Of one another's lives

No lifetime set on those,
Apparelled as the new
Unborn, except they had beheld,
Born everlasting now.35

The Judgment marked the true end to the denials of this life for the poet— Here reunion would be complete in the gaze of her love— Here life would begin again.

For this solemnest of occasions, this joyest of events, the fleecy sentries of Nature crowd the audience as the Supreme Judge lays out the life-evidence before the defendant. The soul, as always is communion with the universe, the Over-Soul is:

Departed to the judgement,
A mighty afternoon;
Great clouds like ushers leaving,
Creation looking on...36

This ceremony of beauty and simplicity — yet so potent a universe pauses for the moment — is the timeless result of time-bound events. It has its fullest meaning in love, the birth of immortality, when the eyes of the soul are opened to God's justice, its heart to God's love. Armed with this atomic weapon, the soul scans the vast expanse of eternity.

35T. H. Johnson, op. cit., p. 159.
36Albure, op. cit., p. 63.
CHAPTER FIVE

ETERNITY

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

Our pace took sudden awe—
Our feet—reluctant—led—
Before—were Cities—but Between—
The Forests of the Dead.

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

Thomas Carlyle once observed: "Brethren, this planet, I find,
is but an inconsiderable sandgrain in the continents of Being; this
Planet's poor interests, Thy interests and my interests there, when I
look fixedly into that eternal Light—sea and Flame—sea with His
eternal interests, dwindle literally into nothing". 37 Thus Mr. Carlyle
very beautifully foreshadowed Miss Dickinson's concept of the relation of
life and its contents to eternity: a life whose meager interests are but
sterile flecks of sand, vainly fringing the Flame—sea of eternity,
to eventually be consumed by it.

Yet Miss Dickinson's domestic mysticism also perceived an es-
sential relationship between these two, between this tiny acorn of life
which would eventually germinate oaken immortality. She saw life molding,
lengthening, adorning the soul for its eternal ultimate; and at the same
instant its eager flight. Life, for all its beauties and values, could

37 Rt. Rev. Msgr. John S. Vaughn, Life After Death, (New York:
Benziger Brothers), 1908, p. 1
only be at best, urgent minutes before the timeless for her.

As she absorbed eternity, as eternity absorbed her. From an oblong gem of sunlight glazing fragile petals, from the redden-steel clasps of a departed neighbor's mouth, from the scarred sanctum of her soul, Miss Dickerson read the "bulletsins from immortality".

Eternity was intricately bound up with life to her. There was no "hereafter", no "after-life": Eternity is NOW, every day. In fact, it is a vital part of life, for "Those not live yet/who naught to live again." 33 This eternal overtone to life enhances it, makes it more meaningful and vital unto itself. The limitations and confines of this earth are swept away, as life’s dimensions are cast in eternal measurements. For:

Two lengths has every day,
Its absolute extent—
And area superior
By hope or heaven lent.

To dies not to go—
On Doom’s consummate chart
No territory new is staked,
Remain thou as thou art.

She thus exhorts the reader to cast aside fears of death and its ensuing darkness; the territory is the same as it is now, visible in the world about us. The unknown — eternity will be far from that; it will be unknown to the degree the self is unknown to the person:

Eternity will be
Velocity or pause
Precisely as the candidate
Preliminary was. 34

Yet eternity, the peak at life’s Everest, does more than just exist in life. In a timelessness unconceivable to the human mind, it

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34 H. L. Johnson, op. cit., p. 272.
40 H. D. Bianchi and A. L. Hampson, Poems by Emily Dickinson, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 1957, p. XI.
perfection the being of this life: "it is the perfect still-point of
perfect being. Neither development nor decline... realization of full
potentialities in the simple act of being... appearance and capacity
would be equally and fully valid... existence would be justified by its
worth". Miss Dickinson, in her immense range of mortal consciousness
and beatific vision, captures this marriage of life and eternity with
all its majestic and perfecting power:

Behind me — dips Eternity-
Before me - Immortality-
Myself - the term between-
Death but a Drift of Eastern Grey,
Dissolving into Dawn away;
Before the West begin-

'Tis kingdoms-afterward-they say-
In perfect-pauseless Monarchy-

'Tis Miracle before me-then-
'Tis Miracle behind-between-
A Cresant in the sea-

As Miss Dickinson obliquely implies above, this "miracle" of
eternity has its nucleus in the personal soul. Thus the cycle is complete:
soul — life — death — eternity — soul. In each phase the soul
dominate, victorious over this earthly life, because:

(it has) immortal place,
Though pyramids decay,
And Kingdoms like the orchard,
Rut russetly away.

Though the poet can invision the ultimate withering of kingdoms
and man's vain achievements, for the majority only eternity can unmask the
frailty of their fleeting goals. As eternity realizes full perfection,
it exposes all false perfections to their shameful reality. The illusions

\[\text{Notes:}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{ Romano Giordini, The Last Things, (New York: American Book -}
\text{Stratford Press Inc.), 1954, p. 105.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\text{T. H. Johnson, op. cit., p. XIV.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\text{Ibid., p. 161.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\text{Ibid., p. 223.}\]
of this life dwindle into their true nothingness in the timeless reality of eternity:

How much the present moment means
To those who've nothing more -
The dog, the tramp, the atheist
I take an entire store

Upon a moments' shallow rim,
While their commuted feet
The torrents of eternity
Do all but inundate.\(^{45}\)

In terms of value, as stated before, Miss Dickinson regarded love as the highest. It was love that built a barrier between the secular world and her cloistered home; it was love that smote her sensibilities and rendered them a tender, cutting sensitivity; it was love that produced her marriage to Nature and the Universe. Inevitably this same love would be a cornerstone in eternity. She based all on love so eternity would be built of reunion in love:

A Wife - at Daybreak I shall be -
Sunrise - Hast thou a Flag for Me?
At Midnight I am but a Maid,
How short it takes to make a Bride -
Then - Midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East, and Victory -

Midnight - Good Night! I hear them call,
The Angels bustle in the hall -
Softly my future climbs the Stair,
I fumble, at my childhood's prayer
So soon to be a Child no more -
Eternity, I'm coming - Sir,
Savior - I've seen the face - before! \(^{46}\)

Marriage -- from a Child to a Bride -- then is the true maturation, the fulfillment, the perfection. Only in eternity can this be accomplished for the poet -- the eternity where her lover can be her personal savior.

\(^{45}\) Wilbur, op. cit., p. 129.

\(^{46}\) T. H. Johnson, op. cit., p. 110.
Miss Dickinson, in this equation, is not being heretical, but merely expressing the divinity, beauty and power of love, for in all occasions, she looked on God as the fountain-head and summation of love. Love is the key to life, eternity, divinity. "Unable are the loved to die/ For love is Immortality -/ Nay, it is Deity." 7

For Miss Dickinson, eternity was not a timeless abstraction, it was a living measurement of life. It encompassed her world, pervaded her thoughts, directed her energies. As "two lengths has every day," so she lived every day:

The Only New I know
Is Bulletins all Day
At Immortality.

The Only Shows I see -
Tomorrow and Today -
Perchance Eternity -

The Only One I meet
Is God - The Only Street -
Existence - This traversed

If other News there be -
Or, Admirable Show -
I'll tell it you -

The eternity after death will not confound this visionary who has lived her life in it. Yet while it existed with her, she tugged at Life's leash to imbibe in its full realization. The harsh medicine of life would be replaced by the intoxication of immortality. Here ideals which merely existed on earth, would be actualized. Here too, perfection would be the still-point — and for Miss Dickinson Love in the God-head would be the still-point.

7 Bianchi, op. cit., p. 263.

CHAPTER SIX
THE GOD-HEAD

"...The Brain is just the weight of God —
For — Left them — Pound for Pound —
And they will differ — if they do —
As Syllable from Sound."

In her religious beliefs as with all else, Miss Dickinson was unorthodox. She could accept neither the narrow pessimism of her Puritan ancestry nor the limitless optimism of contemporary Transcendentalism. A prophet, a forerunner, she more than once implies modern Existential ideas. In rejecting orthodox faith, Miss Dickinson did not relinquish belief; she merely sought a religious freedom and dimension commensurate with the scope of her overpowering zeal, love, and curiosity:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —
I keep it, staying at Home —
With a Bobolink for a Chorister —
And an Orchard, for a Dose —

This was no Pantheism or Fatism in Nature she found a solitude no chapel could afford, a communion no minister could offer. In a larger sense, this Nature encompassed the human, the divine, the Universe. Miss Dickinson meditated on the leafy clues from Nature in the cathedral of her mind and synthesized a creed of reverence, rebellion and frivolity. In spite of its sometimes mischievousness, its sometimes bitterness, it was an abiding creed of depth — in love, adoration and hope. As inevitable

[^67: Ibid., p. 66.]
as eternity, hers was a God very personal and very near:

Lonely, indeed! they didn't look,
and couldn't have seen if they had,
who should bear me company... God
is sitting right here - looking right
into my very soul.50

A love for the divine as deep as Miss Dickinson’s could only
be derived from a long, painful search among the illusions of life.
Yet she salvaged living monuments of Beauty, Love and Justice; only to
find the Architect had failed in their use. She therefore sought this
Builder not to command, but to question; she argued, reproved, accused
Creation.51 She rebelled with the explosives of her poetry:

Of course - I prayed -
And did God care?
He cared as much as on the air
A bird - had stamped her foot -
And cried "Give me" -
My Reason - Life -
I had not had - but for Yourself -
"More better Charity
To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb -
Merry and Mauled, and gay, and numb-
Than this smart misery.52

God’s seeming disregard for His creation is acidly apparent in the
preceding lines, where she futilely begs His help in this “misery”
of life, to come only to the nothingness of air in her impertinence.
In this instance of pessimism, the poet prefers the numbness of the
tomb to the "smart" numbness of this life.

This life, despite its frustrations and sorrows reaches its
peak in the Creator-creature relationship. Again the poet decries
God’s apparent disregard for His creatures in weighty understatement:

50 Bianchi, op. cit., p. 65.
It's easy to invent a Life -
God does it - every Day -
Creation - but the Gambol
Of His Authority -

It's easy to efface it -
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity -

The Perished Patterns murmur -
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed - inserting Here - a Sun -
There - leaving out a man. 53

Creation in its entirety seems but a divine frolic, where the God-head flits from random creation to deaf erasures.

Yet Creation has another aspect for the poet - it is a blessed gift from a generous father to his weak and sinful children. Despite the fallen nature of man, amidst the dust a likeness to the divine exists. Apologizing, yet thankful, Miss Dickinson reflects on the dual nature of the human being:

"Heavenly Father" - take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy Candid Hand
In a moment contraband -
Thou to trust us - seem to us
More respectful - "We are Dust" -
We apologise to thee
For thine own Duplicity - 54

While the divine yet co-exists in human nature, it is not enough. To truly achieve a relationship of depth with the Creator, another quality is vital — Faith. Directing her steel-tipped lines to the faithless world around her, Miss Dickinson notes:

53 Ibid. p. 182.
54 Ibid. p. 288.
Those - dying then,
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small -
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all -55

Reminiscing on previous ages of faith, the poet sees the modern world
slashing the bridge between creature and Creator. She asserts a
belief based on fear of hell is better than no belief at all. All too
clearly the poet traces the path of a world low with barrenness back
to the thorns of unbelief.

From this faith, this belligerance, this wrestling with the
divine came a reconciliation. The poet concedes the match to her con-
descending Creator and attempts orthodox worship:

My period had come for Prayer -
No other Art would do -
My tactics missed a rudiment -
Creator - Was it you?

Bad grows above - so those who pray
Horizons - must ascend -
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend -

His house was not - no sign had He -
By chimney - nor by Door -
Could I infer his Residence -
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler -
Were all that I could see -
Infinitude - Had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?

55Tbid., p. 298.
The Silence condescended -
Creation stopped - for Me -
But awed beyond my errand -
I worshipped - did not "pray" - 56

Her prayer is not one of thanksgiving or beseeching; it is an assertion of beautiful simplicity, exalting the majesty, the unreachable-ness of the God-head. It is the prayer of one overwhelmed by the awesome expanse of eternity. As a contemporary Church could not contain her faith, so familiar prayers could not express it. Her prayer differed only as she did - in sensitivity, depth and vision.

In this majestic duty, Miss Dickinson found the consummation in love she had been denied on earth. A love as immense, as potent as hers could only be expressed in a divine wedlock. With it, she gained her final triumph over mortality and received the dowry of love's spiritual realization:

Given in Marriage unto Thee
Oh thou Celestial Host -
Bride of the Father and the Son
Bride of the Holy Ghost.

Other Betrothal shall dissolve
Wedlock of All, decay -
Only the Keeper of this Ring
Conquer Mortality. 57

Since the "brain is just the weight of God", it could only be in a true marriage of minds that Miss Dickinson found her reconciliation with the God she often questioned. Her beatific vision, while deploiring its defects, irresistibly praised His Creation. Only a faith as wide and soulful as hers could emerge from a path of doubt, deprivation and frustration to boldly assert the tender, awesome majesty of the Creator, while the world around her naively crowned the creature.

56Mid., p. 141.
57Mid., p. 203.
CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

"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!

This was Miss Emily Dickinson — not the "new England man",
not a broken-hearted recluse — this was a vital lover; a lover
of nature, life, eternity, all reflections of her imperfect God.
Within her society of one, the invisible germ of immortality ex­
panded the soul into a playground for the universe. In the vast
solitude there, the poet imbided in the life-energy of eternity;
she endured the dark night of the soul to see Life's dawning in
eternity's light. Her love, radiating in an awareness of eternity's
presence could rise above the cold cruelty of Death's separation
and elevate itself to eternity's reunion. The gentle hand of im­
mortality led her through a life of sensitivity which touched all
she contacted with love and rendered them a beautiful poem of faith,
hope and love.

It is here in the very lines of her poetry that Miss Dickinson's
vital, full personality bursts through. As she loved life, she
loved words; and transported them into glistening moments of life.
In her instinctive element of paradox, she united the disparages of life — hatred, desire, fear, hope — and revealed the common glow of love shining within each. As a realist working with ideals, she wrenched her beautiful thoughts from the bitter, cryptic often cruel language of life. Miss Dickinson knew life well and only a genius such as hers could transform it into the immortal poetry we know today.

Miss Dickinson's style, despite her seclusion, is tinged with similarities to both preceding and forthcoming American writers. Whether there was any true influence by either party can only be left to conjecture. It is known that she read neither Thoreau nor Emerson, despite the fact that they were contemporaries. Yet she resembles Thoreau in that she read not the times but the eternities and abounded in paradox. Her resemblances to Emerson are many: in false rhymes and certain metaphors and propensity towards axioms; in her exultation in apotheosn, in her virtuous soul in states of excitement. Miss Dickinson truly deepened the American poetry resources of Emerson's metaphysics all the way from Herbert and Donne to Poe's enrichment. She becomes a spiritual ally of Theodore Parker in her seeming defiance of orthodoxy in the very excess of piety. W. D. Howells once read her poetry aloud at a dinner with Stephen Crane and Hamlin Garland, thus substantiating the opinion that her irregularity inspired his. Even the modern great, Carl Sandburg, absorbed

59 Ibid., p. 735.
61 A. H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 735.
62 Ibid., p. 735.
Miss Dickinson's sensitivity to human values and her immediate response to color and form rather than metaphysical ambiguity.

In a brilliant synthesis of style and insight, Miss Dickinson bequeathed a legacy of inspired artistry for future artists to imitate and future readers to absorb.

Miss Dickinson's work has much the same quality as that which she so often wrote about — timelessness. Today, perhaps more than in the day they were written, the reader can re-discover the tender beauty of nature in a world blind with asphalt and skyscrapers. The anguish and suffering in her poems can re-open the flow of warmth and sympathy so often closed in a world cold with impersonalness. For a moment, the reader can discern the divine fact around us, and see the eternity she heralded wind its inevitable path through our lives.

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