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The Metaphysical Trope In The Communication Of Myth

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THE METAPHYSICAL TROPE
IN THE
COMMUNICATION OF MYTH

by
Antoinette M. Jankowski

A Thesis
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The Department of English
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Academic Honors
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE POET</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. RELIGIOUS POETRY</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SOUL-SEARCHING POETRY</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. DEATH POETRY</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. NATURE POETRY</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIBLIOGRAPHY 34
Deeply rooted within the very nature of man are certain needs, drives, and desires. These cravings have surfaced and expressed themselves in every age and generation since the beginning of time. They have been manifested in various ways—depending upon the location and generation of the people expressing them—but these outcroppings of basic human needs have always contained elements of similarity which revert to the original themes implanted in human nature at its creation.

These needs, drives, and desires which have accompanied man throughout his entire history have been articulated in narrative modes called myths and are most frequently given expression in the literature of a race or people.

The medium of expression found in more recent history to be most suitable to the articulation of myth is the metaphysical image.

Since the poet, Emily Dickinson, has been found to be surprisingly adept at the handling of metaphysical forms, this paper proposes to examine her technique in the use of the metaphysical image in its embodying of the myth.

This paper will not deal with all the myths of man, but with four of the basic ones which correspond to the four main categories of Emily Dickinson's writing.
Thus, this paper will include the myths of man's relation to God, man's relation to himself, man's relation to eternity, and man's relation to nature. These myths will correspond respectively to the poet's religious poetry, soul-searching poetry, death poetry, and nature poetry.

Although Miss Dickinson also wrote poetry which contained the theme of the dutiful neighbor and the theme of love, this poetry is not integrally related to that of her four main divisions, and so will not be treated in this work.
CHAPTER I
Introduction

It has been said that the three people most responsible for the cultural progress and integrity of the world during any age are the philosopher, the poet, and the saint. No doubt many persons have disagreed with this statement, though many others have acknowledged it. However, if those in disagreement with this idea would scrutinize it more closely, they might discover that its theory is not so incongruous with reality, after all.

Few people would deny that the outward condition of the world during any generation is largely an external manifestation of its inward state. Neither would many individuals deny that for a world to possess inward integrity, it must be guided by men who nurture within themselves a clear concept of spiritual wholeness.

In other words, a wholesome world must allow itself to be formed by teachers of inward truth.

What three vocations are more capable of molding the world to truth than that of the philosopher, the poet, and the saint—for the philosopher discovers and apprehends truth, the poet articulates truth, and the saint lives truth.

Since the lives and contributions of the philosopher, the poet, and the saint, overlap and intermingle, let us examine the role of the second—the poet.

The spirit of any generation can usually be traced in the
poetry of that period, for the poet speaks of his generation and to
his generation. He speaks to his people in such a way that his
teaching is acceptable to them. He may attempt to warn them, or
to prophesy, or to find an answer to their problems, but he will
always communicate in a manner which spurs men toward truth.

A poet who lives in a world which is losing its grasp upon
truth, seeks to retain truth by expressing it in the form of a
myth. "A poet may then use the mythology of his age to present,
in concrete symbols embodying a metaphysic, the most complete
expression of his time." 1

A myth is a projected dream which expresses the needs, fears,
wishes, and aspirations of a people. When it is most complete,
a myth defines the relationship of man to himself and to God in
such a way that there is no distinction between symbol and meaning. 2

The poet frequently strives to convey this myth through meta-
physical analogy.

The use of metaphysical ... devices has grown out of
the modern poet's search for a mythology which might
replace that of the disintegrating Christian culture,
and which might offer him some concrete body of belief
for metaphor and metaphysics. This is not to say that
every modern poet has been deliberately concerned with
the problem. Yet all have to some degree been touched
by an urgent need which is basic to the great transitional
age in which we live. 3

1 Kimon Friar and John Malcolm Brinnin (ed.); "Myth and
Metaphysics," Modern Poetry American and British (New York:

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
The term "metaphysical", as used in poetry, is related to the problem of myth. The original meaning of the word was "beyond the physical." It later came to connote subtlety, refinement, abstraction, contemplation, transcendence, the witty, the fanciful, and the imaginative.\(^1\)

The metaphysical poet strives to articulate the needs and drives of man through the use of the metaphysical metaphor or conceit which is a sustained analogy involving both comparison and contrast, usually between two apparently dissimilar objects and often resulting in the expression of intuitive truth. The analogy is often made between something material and something spiritual; something concrete and something abstract. It is metaphysical in that its comparisons are often strange, grotesque and incongruous. It frequently contains paradox and great leaps of intellect.\(^2\)

In order that we may obtain a more penetrating insight into the role of the metaphysical in its unveiling of the myth, let us examine the metaphysical as employed by a poet who speaks out of an age of transition—Emily Dickinson—a forerunner of the modern poets.

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 440.

CHAPTER II
The Poet

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her life was spent almost entirely in the home of her parents in the small New England town. Throughout most of her life, her days consisted of apparently routine, commonplace, and uneventful activities.

But though Miss Dickinson's actual experiences were limited, her mind compensated for these limitations, as can be seen in her words,

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet I know how the heather looks;
And what a wave must be.

This poet, however, did not confine herself to the use of her imagination. As any true poet, Miss Dickinson was concerned with reality and truth. Because of the changing era in which she lived, she felt compelled to express this truth through the myths of man; yet, she must express it within the scope of her own experience.

In order to acquire the insight necessary for the articulation of truth, Miss Dickinson contemplated myth and arrived at intuitive truth which she expressed in the metaphysical.

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Miss Dickinson's poems can be roughly divided into four categories. These four divisions correspond to the four myths which she contemplated: religious poems or man's relation to God; death poems, or man's relation to eternity; soul searching poems, or man's relation to self; and nature poems--man's relation to nature.

Through the contemplation of these four basic myths of mankind, Emily Dickinson, though physically limited in experience, freed herself from intellectual limitation and intuitively encompassed realms of truth.

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CHAPTER III
Religious Poetry

Emily Dickinson's approach to man's relation to God was quite different from that of her contemporaries. Had they been aware of her ideas concerning this myth, they would have been horrified.

Miss Dickinson's associates would have been surprised to find that the little "bride of silence" was not so silent when she spoke of God and to God. They would have found instead of a meek sweetness in her religious poetry, an impertinent type of semi-playful, semi-serious irreverence.

This irreverence in Miss Dickinson's religious poetry was very likely a reaction on her part to austere Puritan theology. In her considerations of her relation to God, perhaps the poet discovered that she did not entertain within herself the precise sentiments she had been told to entertain. Upon making this discovery, she expressed it truthfully, in semi-serious irreverence, as in the following poem:

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—
'Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb—
Merry, and Nought and gay, and numb—
Than this smart Misery.¹

In the lines above, Miss Dickinson expresses a conflict between God and herself. One would expect that the poet's words would reflect cheerful acceptance of God's will rather than this open and frank disagreement with His plan. Note the strange metaphysical comparison the poet uses when she says that God paid as much heed to her as to a bird which had stamped its foot upon the air. Having stated her plea for help, and God's apparent indifference, Miss Dickinson rebels against her Creator and His act of creating her. Although the feeling expressed in this poem is a personal one, it is also a universal one in that it appears frequently in the relationship between man and God—creature and Creator.

Miss Dickinson continues to contemplate God, in His role of Creator in the following lines:

\begin{verbatim}
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--
\end{verbatim}

The metaphysical images of God's creating as the gambol of His authority, and the continuous proceeding of His perturbless plan reiterate her idea of God's carefree inattention to the world and to man.

\footnote{Tbid., p. 335.}
In the continuation of her contemplation of man and God, the poet discovers a new facet of the relationship. She expresses this discovery in a semi-serious, semi-mischievous manner:

God is indeed a jealous God—
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play.1

Remaining with this same idea of man's frequent indifference to God, Miss Dickinson draws further conclusions:

Who were "the Father and the Son"
We pondered when a child,
And what had they to do with us
And when portentous told

With inference appalling
By Childhood fortified
We thought, at least they are no worse
Than they have been described.

Who are "the Father and the Son"
Did we demand Today
"The Father and Son" himself
Would doubtless specify—

But had they the felicity
When we desired to know,
We better Friends had been, perhaps,
Than time ensue to be—

We start—to learn that we believe
But once—entirely—
Belief, it does not fit so well
When altered frequently—

We blush, that Heaven if we achieve—
Event ineffable—
We shall have shunned until ashamed
To own the Miracle—2

In the words above, the poet presents several reasons for man's indifference to God. The fifth stanza contains a

1Ibid., p. 698.
2Ibid., pp. 550-551.
metaphysical image characteristic of her form of expression. Note how opposed it is to reality and yet how aptly it expresses the idea. In stanza six, Miss Dickinson allows herself to think of man's mixed feelings when he achieves union with God. She continues this thought in the poem below:

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

How excellent the Heaven—
When Earth—cannot be had—
How hospitable—then—the face
Of our Old Neighbor—God—,

In the preceding words, Miss Dickinson considers the problem of the dual nature of man—the union of soul and body, destined for heaven, but borne down by earth.

Having contemplated man's dual nature, the poet turns to his fallen nature. Her relation with God now appears to be on a higher plane—progressing from rebellion to understanding as she says:

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

The several instances of paradox in the above poem are employed artistically by Miss Dickinson to convey the idea of conflict within man, himself. She carries this point one step farther.

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1Ibid., p. 307.

2Ibid., p. 619.
in the following poem as she points out man's role in his fallen nature:

Of God we ask one favor,  
That we may be forgiven—  
For what, he is presumed to know—  
The Crime, from us, is hidden—  
Immured the whole of Life  
Within a magic Prison  
We reprimand the Hapiness  
That too competes with Heaven.  

Miss Dickinson's consideration of the relation between man and God progresses to the consciousness of His awareness of each and every man:

Of Consciousness, her awful Mate  
The Soul cannot be rid—  
As easy the secreting her  
Behind the Eyes of God.  

The deepest hid is sighted first  
And scant to Him the Crowd—  
What triple Lenses burn upon  
The Escapade from God.  

Through the paradox and metaphysical analogy in this poem, the poet points out the futility in man's attempted escape from God. She further realizes this truth when she says:

Escaping backward to perceive  
The Sea upon our place—  
Escaping forward to confront  
His glittering Embrace—  

Retreating up! a Billow's height  
Retreating blinded down  
Our undermining feet to meet  
Instructs to the Divine.  

Man's realization of God's presence in every direction is uniquely stated by Miss Dickinson in the preceding lines. Note

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1 Ibid., p. 662.
2 Ibid., pp. 423-424.
3 Ibid., pp. 413-414.
the conflict she sets up through the paradox of the escape.

Having achieved a clearer understanding of man's relation to God, Miss Dickinson expresses man's reconciliation with God in these words:

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

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

His House was not—no sign had He—
By Chimney—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?

The Silence condescended—
Creation stopped—for Me—
But awed beyond my errand—
I worshipped—did not "pray"—

Only through metaphysical analogy can the poet express the truth of her experience in this instance. Continuing in this same experience, she says:

My Maker—let me be
Enamored most of thee—
But nearer this
I more should miss—

Having progressed to a vivid understanding of the relation of creature to Creator, the poet announces to her generation this truth:

______________________________

1Ibid., pp. 274-275.

2Ibid., p. 601.
God made no act without a cause,  
Nor heart without an aim,  
Our inference is premature,  
Our premises to blame.¹

Thus, Emily Dickinson, speaking of and to the people of her time, traces the ageless myth of the cry of creature to Creator—exposing its phases and facets which she has apprehended through contemplation. Striving to convey her discovery to men, she has employed the witty, the baroque, and the ironic, but she has succeeded in bringing to her people the realization of their myth.

¹Ibid., p. 518.
CHAPTER IV
Soul-Searching Poetry

The ageless struggle of man with himself presented to Emily Dickinson another truth for contemplation and expression. The reflective and reticent poet found in the myth of man's relation to himself, truth which was ever lucid and present to her. Striving to communicate her intuitions, she gave forth poetic expression which searched the depths of her soul.

Miss Dickinson understood that inner spiritual conflict was not reserved to herself, alone, but to the whole of mankind. In her attempt to express this truth, she began to speak of the first subtle stirrings of unnamed spiritual conflict within man in the following words:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons--
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes--

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us--
We can find no scar;
But internal difference,
Where the meanings, are--

None may teach it--Any--
'Tis the Seal Despair--
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air--

When it comes the Landscape listens--
Shadows--Hold their breath--
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death--

\[1\text{Tbid.}, \text{pp. 118-119.}\]
Note the metaphysical images of silence. The poet, however, succeeds in portraying an atmosphere of conflict within this silence.

Miss Dickinson then turns to the next conflict within man—a conflict which might well follow the one just mentioned. In the poem below, Miss Dickinson speaks of man's wonder, as he searches his soul for answers—the questions, themselves, perhaps not quite clear.

Wonder—is not precisely Knowing
And not precisely Knowing not—
A beautiful but bleak condition
He has not lived who has not felt--

Suspense—is his maturer Sister--
Whether Adult Delight is Pain
Or of itself a new misgiving--
This is the Gnat that mangles men--1

Through paradox and metaphysical comparison, Emily Dickinson sets up a parallel to this particular experience of man. Her images parallel the ideas expressed in that her comparisons present agreement, and her paradoxes present disagreement.

From the problem of wonder, the poet progresses to the problem of doubt within the soul of man:

The Heart has narrow Banks
It measures like the Sea
In mighty—unremitting Bass
And Blue Monotony

Till Hurricane bisect
And as itself discerns
Its insufficient Area
The Heart convulsive learns

That Calm is but a Wall
Of unattempted Cause
An instant's Push demolishes
A Questioning--dissolves.2

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1Ibid., p. 577.
2Ibid., p. 436.
As the poet progresses, we can see that her intuitive grasp of man's inner conflict with himself achieves greater depth. From the realization of slight stirrings of unrest, she leaps to the comprehension of man's inner longing and sorrow. Through the use of grotesque images, she articulates the intensity of this experience:

The Missing All—prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World's
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.¹

Reflecting on the words she has just spoken, Miss Dickinson considers their meaning, and offers an answer to the problem in the lines below:

Until the Desert knows
That Water grows
His Sands suffice
But let him once suspect
That Caspian Fact
Sahara dies

Utmost is relative—
Have not or Have
Adjacent sums
Enough—the first abode
On the familiar Road,
Galloped in Dreams—²

Through the strange analogy of man as a desert, Miss Dickinson heightens one's understanding of the intensity of man's desire by comparing it to a desert's thirst. She then proceeds, in the

¹Ibid., p. 459.
²Ibid., p. 565.
following poem, to consider man's state when this desire remains unfulfilled:

To fight aloud, is very brave—
But gallanter, [italics hers] I know
Who charge within the bosom
The Cavalry of Woe—

Who win, and nations do not see—
Who fall—and none observe—
Whose dying eyes, no Country
Regards with patriot love—

We trust, in plumbed procession
For such, the Angels go—
Rank after Rank, with even feet—
And Uniforms of Snow.¹

As Miss Dickinson continues to contemplate the myth of man's relation to himself, she sees him striving to succeed in the midst of almost insurmountable inner conflict, as she says,

From Blank to Blank—
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet—
To stop—or perish—or advance—
Alike indifferent—

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed—
I shut my eyes—and groped as well
'Twas lighter—to be Blind.²

Pursuing this inner woe one step farther, the poet apprehends the soul in a psychotic state of terror bordering on despair. The weird, metaphysical comparisons in the following lines aptly express her intuition.

¹Ibid., p. 59.
²Ibid., p. 373.
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.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos—crawl—
Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool—

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine—

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some—

When everything that ticked—has stopped—
And Space stares all around—
Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground—

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
Without a Chance, or Spar—
Or even a Report of Land—
To justify—Despair, 1

Striving to convey the totality of her experience to men,

Emily Dickinson echoes the words she spoke in the preceding poem
with the following grotesque images:

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,

1Ibid., p. 249.
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—

After an articulation of the depths of misery which man is capable of reaching within himself, the poet makes one last comment concerning this particular conflict:

Its Hour with itself
The Spirit never shows.
What terror would enthrall the Street
Could countenance disclose

The Subterranean Freight
The cellars of the Soul—
Thank God the loudest place he made
Is licensed to be still.

Having successfully followed man through the deepest of conflicts in her contemplation of inner unrest, Emily Dickinson discovers the soul to be refreshed after its purging. With this new discovery in mind, she cries:

No Rack can torture me—
My Soul—at Liberty—
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One—

You cannot prick with saw—
Nor pierce with Scimitar—
Two Bodies—therefore be—
Bind One—The Other fly—

The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest—
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou—

1Ibid., pp. 128-129.
2Ibid., p. 539.
Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy—
Captivity is Consciousness
So's Liberty.¹

In the lines above, Miss Dickinson confides to all men their own independence and freedom. Having followed man through a period of agonizing purgation, she achieves a profound comprehension of his soul.

Thus, beginning with the first signs of inner upheaval within the human being, Emily Dickinson embarks upon an intuitive discovery of truth as evidenced in the myth of man's relation to himself.

¹Ibid., p. 163.
CHAPTER V
Death Poetry

Perhaps the myth most deliberately avoided by man and yet most evident to him is that of his relation to eternity. Man possesses within himself a basic drive to live; yet, he is confronted with the reality of death. When the need to die and the will to live meet, a conflict results.

The poet, Emily Dickinson, frequently saw the reality of death within the circle of her own acquaintances. Desiring to understand more about this reality and its relation to eternity, Miss Dickinson pondered death in its various forms.

In her attempt to express man's relation to eternity, she reflected upon the death of persons unknown to her. The following lines illustrate this reflection:

After a hundred years
Nobody knows the Place
Agony that enacted there
Motionless as Peace

Weeds triumphant ranged
Strangers strolled and spelled
At the lone Orthography
Of the Elder Dead

Winds of Summer Fields
Rcollect the way—
Instinct picking up the Key
Dropped by memory—

Through the personification of instinct and memory, Miss Dickinson succeeds in showing man one facet of his relationship

1Tbid., p. 513.
to eternity. The poet then takes a closer look at the death of others and discovers that man, having died, is apparently unaware of anything:

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

Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds sweep their Arches—
And Firmaments—row—
Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow—

From a reflection upon the death of unknown persons, Miss Dickinson proceeds to consider man's relation to eternity at the time of a departing loved one:

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying—this to Us
Made Nature different

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

As We went out and in
Between Her final Room
And Rooms where Those to be alive
Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist
While She must finish quite
A jealousy for Her arose
So nearly infinite—

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

\(^1\text{Ibid., p. 100.}\)
She mentioned, and forgot—
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce—
Consented, and was dead—

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

Having uttered man's feelings at the death of a close friend,
the poet goes on to express the wishes that crowd upon man's
mind after he realizes the finality of death:

We Cover Thee—Sweet Face—
Not that We tire of Thee—
But that Thyself fatigue of Us—
Remember—as Thou go—
We follow Thee until
Thou notice Us—no more—
And then—reluctant—turn away
To Con Thee o'er and o'er—

And blame the scanty love
We were Content to show—
Augmented—Sweet—a Hundred fold—
If Thou would'st take it—now—

Progressing to an even deeper concept of death, the poet,
in metaphysical terms speaks in an apostrophe to 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 straighter to the Heart
The leaving Love behind.

Nor 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.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Ibid., pp. 496-497.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 232.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 403.
Having expressed in strange, metaphysical analogy the conflict within death as seen in the loss of a loved one, the poet seeks to discover the reaction of man in the inevitable reality of his own death. Intuitively experiencing death, Miss Dickinson speaks these words:

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

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

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

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

We paused before a House that seemed
A swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than a Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

Note how the first two stanzas present an ironic description of death as a rather commonplace occurrence. Through references in the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas to everyday sights and situations, the poet tells of the proximity of death. Stanza six

\[1\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 350.\]
offers a reflection on her own death by the poet.

In contemplating death still farther, Emily Dickinson utters her discoveries in a more sober tone:

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

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

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

From a contemplation of death, itself, the poet turns to a consideration of her own role in the act of death. Note how detailed is her account of the experience as she says:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

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

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

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

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1Ibid., p. 203.

2Ibid., pp. 223—224.
Having experienced her own death, Miss Dickinson reflects upon her burial. It is with fanciful, yet grotesque, images that she describes this intuition:

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--Themself 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--

Note how the images in the last stanza in the poem above convey the idea of time stretching forth into eternity.

Having intuitively progressed through the various phases of death--death of an unknown person, death of a loved one, and one's own death--Miss Dickinson contemplates death, itself, saying to it:

Let down the Bars, Oh Death-- The tired Flocks come in Whose bleating ceases to repeat Whose wandering is done--

Thine is the stillest night Thine the securest Fold Too near Thou art for seeking Thee Too tender, to be told.

Through the above metaphysical analogy of death as the shepherd and men as the sheep, Emily Dickinson conveys her exact comprehension of the nature and meaning of death.

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1Ibid., p. 216.
2Ibid., p. 486.
Apprehending the final facet of myth of man and eternity, the poet speaks of the Last Judgment, metaphysically comparing it to a wedding nuptial:

'Twas a long parting— but the time
For interview— had come—
Before the Judgment 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 eyes—

No lifetime— on them—
Apparelled as the new
Unborn— except they had beheld—
Born infinite— now—

Was bridal— e'er like this?
A Paradise— the host—
And Cherubim— and Seraphim—
The unobtrusive Guest—

Through the foregoing stages, Miss Dickinson passed from a contemplation of death as a distant thing to death as a proximate— even personal— reality. From this point, she continued her reflection until she discovered the Last Judgment and eternity.

Having intuitively experienced the various facets of man's relation to eternity, the poet, through metaphysical expression, helped the people of her time to better understand this myth.

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 308.\]
CHAPTER VI  
Nature Poetry

From the earliest times man has contemplated nature. He has wondered about nature and been awed by its various manifestations. Observing the world around him, man throughout the ages has attempted to explain his relation to nature.

Emily Dickinson, the poet, felt this basic need for nature in man, and reflecting upon this myth, she set forth to articulate this basic truth in its various forms.

Perceiving nature first in its most elemental form, Miss Dickinson speaks of being in its inanimate form. One might think that there is no relation between man and inanimate creation, but the poet shows this idea to be false. The following lines paint inanimate creation as almost an object of envy to man:

How happy is the little Stone
That rambles in the Road alone,
And doesn't care about Careers
And Exigencies never fears--
Whose coat of elemental Brown
A passing Universe put on
And independent as the Sun
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute Degree
In casual simplicity--

From a consideration of inanimate being, Miss Dickinson turns to nature in the seasons. Experiencing the ecstasy of Indian summer, she metaphysically compares it to sacramental union:

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

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 634.}\]
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!

Besides enabling man to experience deep inner joy, the seasons
produce another effect upon men:

September's Baccalaureate
A combination is
Of Crickets—Crows—and Retrospects
And a dissembling Breeze.

That hints without assuming—
An Innuendo sear
That makes the Heart put up its Fun
And turn Philosopher.\(^1\)

Thus, we learn through the words of the poet, that nature
at times has a sobering as well as a joyful effect upon man.

From nature as a sobering element, Miss Dickinson apprehends
the relation between man and nature as one of fear:

The Lightening playeth—all the while—
But when He singeth—then—
Ourselves are conscious He exist—
And we approach Him—stern—\(^2\)

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 61.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 556.
With Insulators—and a Glove—
Whose short—sepulchral Bass
Alarms us—the' His Yellow Feet
May pass—and counterpass—

Upon the Ropes—above our Head—
Continual—with the News—
Nor We so much as check our speech—
Nor stop to cross Ourselves—

Having seen one facet of man's relation to nature as a
relation of fear, the poet progresses to the level of seeing
the relation as one of positive interaction. She expresses this
idea metaphysically in the lines below:

To my quick ear the Leaves—conferred—
The Bushes—they were Bells—
I could not find Privacy
From Nature's sentinels—

In Cave if I presumed to hide
The Walls—began to tell—
Creation seemed a mighty Crack
To make me visible—

Discovering interaction between nature and man to be a basic
truth, Emily Dickinson next sees the relation as one of friend­
liness and communion. Notice the fanciful manner in which she
expresses this idea in the following words:

The Mountains stood in Haze—
The Valleys stopped below
And went or waited as they liked
The River and the Sky.

At leisure was the Sun—
His interests of Fire
A little from remark withdrawn
The Twilight spoke the Spire,

1 Ibid., pp. 311-312.
2 Ibid., p. 422.
So soft upon the Scene
The Act of evening fell
We felt how neighborly a Thing
Was the Invisible. 1

Realizing the immensity, yet delicacy and pure ecstasy of
nature, Emily Dickinson warns her listeners:

Partake as doth the Bee,
Abstemiously.
The Rose in an Estate—
In Sicily. 2

Miss Dickinson finally apprehends nature as a transcendent
beauty, joy, and being, which pre-exists and outlives man as
she says,

Of Bronze—and Blaze
The North—Tonight—
So adequate—it forms—
So preconcerted with itself—
So distant—to alarms—
An Unconcern so sovereign
To Universe, or me—
Infects my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty—
Till I take vaster attitudes—
And strut upon my stem—
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
For Arrogance of them—

My Splendors, are Menagerie—
But their Completeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I, am long ago,
An Island in dishonored Grass—
Whom none but Beetles—know. 3

In the preceding manner, Miss Dickinson's reflection upon
nature begins with individual inanimate objects, progresses to
the seasons, proceeds to the mysterious and unknown, and then

1 Ibid., p. 558.
2 Ibid., p. 462.
3 Ibid., pp. 134-135.
embraces the whole of nature in its proximity and distance, its simplicity and majesty and its timelessness to man.

As a final utterance in her articulation of the myth of man's relation to nature, Emily Dickinson speaks to her people the following words:

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.
CHAPTER VII
Conclusion

The preceding chapters have presented an explanation of
myth and the metaphysical as manifested in the poetry of Emily
Dickinson.

Because of her great leap of intellect, it is obvious that
her expression of intuition must be metaphysical. No ordinary
form of expression could possibly convey the ideas of harmonious
yet discordant elements which she apprehended in her search for
truth.

Emily Dickinson, as any other great metaphysical poet
has sensibility amalgamating disparate experience. The
poet who has this power can make use of any kind of
experience; in any one kind of experience he will show
himself aware of its opposite: thus his sentiment is
always aware of the possibility of satire; his lyrical
enthusiasm, of reason; his seriousness, of mockery;
his admiration of disgust.

Such a poet... must therefore use all his intellectual
as well as his intuitive resources to bring congruity to
discordant ideas and images; he must correlate whatever his
subconscious offers him, but with superconscious awareness;
his habitual mask is that of irony since he is always
aware of contrary claims and possibilities; he is witty
and fantastical, but with serious almost tragic purpose.

All of these elements can be found in the poetry of Emily
Dickinson, for her piercing and sensitive mind organized data

1Ruth Bailey, A Dialogue on Modern Poetry in "Myth and
Metaphysics" Modern Poetry American and British, edited by
Kimon Friar and John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Appleton-
Century-Crofts, Inc.) pp. 442-443.

supplied by a most delicately sensitive and powerful intuition.

This was a person whose mind asked many questions above and beyond her immediate physical surroundings. This was a poet whose spirit transcended limitation, and whose desire attached itself to the loftiest heights. This was a teacher whose inward integrity flowed forth into the expression of truth.

Emily Dickinson, an obscure poet in a changing era, communicates to us the basic myths of our nature through her intuition and intellectual groping for truth.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


