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An interpretation of ecstasy as found in the poetry of Emily Dickinson

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AN INTERPRETATION OF ECSTASY AS FOUND IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

BY

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"I find ecstasy in living--
the mere sense of living is joy enough."

Emily Dickinson

PREFACE

Because so many critics have explored the dark side of Emily Dickinson's poetry, I decided that an examination of the poet's ecstatic verse would provide a better understanding of the total Dickinson canon. My research has been most rewarding.

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Lynn C. Dickerson II, and my reader, Dr. F. Elaine Penninger, for their guidance and generous assistance in this project. Their encouragement and understanding have been invaluable. I wish also to extend my appreciation to the librarians at the Boatwright Memorial Library for their aid in matters of research. Finally, I would like to thank all those faculty members who have offered suggestions and advice during the preparation of this study.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I can wade Grief--
Whole Pools of it--
I'm used to that--
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet--
And I tip--drunken--
Let no Pebble--smile--
'Twas the New Liquor--
That was all!

Power is only Pain--
Stranded, thro' Discipline,
Till Weights--will hang--
Give Balm--to Giants--
And they'll wilt, like Men--
Give Himmaleh--
They'll Carry--Him![1]

Emily Dickinson was indeed used to grief, as the record of her life clearly indicates. She was disappointed in love and disappointed in her efforts to achieve literary fame. Yet there were moments of happiness and even ecstasy in Emily Dickinson's life. The purpose of this thesis is to examine those moments of ecstatic elevation--the "Soul's Superior instants" as Emily called them--in order to

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[1] The Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1955), 252. All subsequent poems parenthetically numbered in the text refer to the Johnson edition.

achieve a better insight into the mind of the poet and the nature of her often curious verse.

An examination of ecstasy requires a study of Emily's religious background and her psychological make-up. It also behooves the student to analyze anguish, the emotion antipodal to ecstasy, which in Emily's mind was curiously related to ecstasy. As she said: "For each ecstatic instant/ We must an anguish pay." And again more cryptically: "Water, is taught by thirst."

Unfortunately recent criticism of Emily's poetry has tended to isolate anguish from ecstasy and to consider the dark emotions--pain, fear, suffering, despair--as preeminently exemplary of the Dickinson canon. Generous and often curious interpretations of the element of anguish have been delineated in such works as Heaven Beguiles The Tired by Thomas W. Ford and The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry by Clark Griffith. (For example, Griffith asserts that pain for Emily Dickinson may have been due to the recurrent cycle of the menses).

One feels a need to move from the baneful bent of Emily's genius to the "ecstatic instant" which is present in so many of the poems. What was behind the "least push of Joy" which made the poet "tip--drunken"? In order to discover the meaning of ecstasy for Emily Dickinson, it is necessary to examine first the relationship of ecstasy to anguish, that emotion so curiously akin to joy.

CHAPTER II

ANGUISH AND ECSTASY

Emily Dickinson perceived that without anguish there could be no ecstasy, and without ecstasy there could be no anguish. This was a curious fact of human nature which the poet could not avoid. She often expressed the idea that pain and suffering were necessary for personal development. As Richard Chase points out, Emily Dickinson was "the poet who found so many ways of saying that we know pleasure only through pain . . . ."[2] The following two poems are illustrative of this notion:

> Water, is taught by thirst.
> Land--by the Oceans passed.
> Transport--by throe--
> Peace--by its battles told--
> Love, by Memorial Mold--
> Birds, by the Snow. (135)
>
> * * * * * * *
>
> We see-Comparatively--
> The Thing so towering high
> We could not grasp its segment
> Unaided--Yesterday--

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[2]Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951), p. 237.

This Morning's finer Verdict--
Makes scarcely worth the toil--
A furrow--Our Cordillera--
Our Apennine--a Knoll--

Perhaps 'tis kindly--done us--
The Anguish--and the loss--
The wrenching--for His Firmament
The Thing belonged to us--

To spare these Striding Spirits
Some Morning of Chagrin--
The waking in a Gnat's--embrace--
Our Giants--further on-- (534)

The theme of the first poem is the idea that man can know a thing thoroughly only by an intimate knowledge of its opposite. Contrariety enlarges conception. Today's mountains become tomorrow's molehills is the theme of the latter poem, or as Emily casts the thought: "Our Apennine--a Knoll--." Retrospection causes one to place emotional upsets in proper balance. Self-knowledge is increased by periods of emotional strain. As the wise Benjamin Franklin remarked, "There are no Gains without Pains." Emily Dickinson realized that one might learn to live more comfortably by an examination of one's own suffering. Pain taught one a lesson.

George Whicher writes of Emily's idea of opposite emotions: "To her deeper scrutiny it appeared that opposites did not destroy each other but brought each other into being."[3] An almost Emersonian idea of polarity runs through the poems which view human reality as

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[3]George Whicher, This Was A Poet (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 304.

dialectically balanced between Angst and ecstasy. Emerson had written in his Essays:

> Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the equation of quantity and quality in the fluids of the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism, and chemical affinity.[4]

He further commented: "Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess. Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good."[5] Emily Dickinson was certainly acquainted with the Essays and the Poems of Emerson, as Jack L. Capps substantiates in Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836 - 1886.[6] Her constant concern with the intrinsically dialectical nature of experience may be directly influenced by Emerson's notion of compensation. Writing of Emily's absorption with the question of polarity, Charles R. Anderson comments: "Her effect of reality is achieved not by an accent on pleasure or pain but by her dramatic use of their interaction. As an artist she took full

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[4]Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903), p. 96.

[5]Emerson, p. 98.

[6]Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 111-18.

advantage of contrast as a mode of definition, making the pleasure-pain antithesis a running strategy in her poetry."[7]

The interaction of pleasure and pain likewise occupied the Romantic poet John Keats. In his celebrated "Ode on Melancholy," Keats depicts the curious relationship between delight and sorrow:

> Aye, in the very temple of Delight
> Veiled Melancholy has her sov'reign shrine,
> Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
> Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
> His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
> And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

For Keats, pain seemed inextricably linked with pleasure. The voluptuous image of the burst grape of Joy emphasizes the transience of delight; pleasure disappears as quickly as it comes.

Emily Dickinson was familiar with the poetry of Keats; indeed, he was singled out by the poet in a letter of 1862 to Higginson: "You inquire my Books--For Poets--I have Keats--and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose--Mr Ruskin--Sir Thomas Browne--and the Revelations."[8] The "Ode on Melancholy" may have engendered some of Emily's ideas on the tension between anguish and ecstasy; at any rate, the parallels are striking.

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[7]Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway to Surprise (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), p. 191.

[8]Letters of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1958), Letter 261. Hereafter, Letters.

The association which Emily noticed between the antipodal states of ecstasy and anguish was at times expressed with severe deliberation. The following poem is the distilled essence of what Anderson has called "the pleasure-pain antithesis" and crystallizes in a cold mathematical formula the inherent tension between pleasure and pain:

> For each ecstatic instant
> We must an anguish pay
> In keen and quivering ratio
> To the ecstasy.
>
> For each beloved hour
> Sharp pittances of years--
> Bitter contested farthings--
> And Coffers heaped with Tears! (125)

The tone is anything but gay. The cyclical nature of human joy and suffering is epitomized in these verses. Commenting on this poem, Georges Poulet remarks: "Time is a pain lived piecemeal, and the sum of the pieces equals a moment of joy."[9] At any rate, time is psychologically measured according to the joy or the sorrow registered in the here and now, and for Emily Dickinson the awareness of time is always related to pain. An "ecstatic instant" has the power to transcend temporality and carry the poet to pure rapture or "transport," a sensation powerful and transcendental. Ecstasy is transient, however, and when it goes, a feeling of anguish returns.

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[9]Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 347.

The spiritual quandary which results can be devastatingly bleak. Poulet describes the situation:

> At once for the instant of ecstasy, there is substituted another instant which is that of the disappearance of ecstasy. Nothing is graver in Emily's life than the apparition, in the closest succession, of these two moments, in one of which everything is given, and in the other everything taken away. It matters little that this double experience may be repeated afterwards. What matters is that each time Emily reflects on her existence, she sees it begin with a grand victory immediately followed by a bitter defeat. All her spiritual life and all her poetry are comprehended only in the determination given them by two initial moments, one of which is contradicted by the other, a moment in which one possesses eternity and a moment when one loses it.[10]

Suffering is an inevitable part of the scheme of things, and the more sensitive the soul, the more intense the agony. Emily brooded all her life over those moments in which she glimpsed a higher order, a vision of eternity, and she wondered what relationship there could be between the visions of eternal ecstasy and the grim routines of everyday living.

A religious reading of the poem "For each ecstatic instant" is one interpretation which should be noted. Perhaps the poem is a delineation of the Puritan notion that all pleasure is contemptible and that man will ultimately be called to Judgment for his earthly delights. There is an implication in the poem that ecstasy had best

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[10]Poulet, p. 346.

be avoided in this life. If Thomas Johnson's feeling that Emily's "most powerful compulsions derived from her Puritan past"[11] is correct, then perhaps Emily's devotion to seclusion and renunciation of the world at large stems from a Puritan distrust of pleasure. No doubt the most urgent needs of her psyche led Emily to a sequestered life; however, the degree of influence her Calvinistic upbringing exerted upon her personality is a matter for the biographer and lies outside the purview of this paper.

The tension between anguish and ecstasy is a leitmotif which occurs over and over again in Emily's poetry. The "least push of Joy" might indeed cause the Amherst recluse to "tip--drunken--" but she was aware of the hangover after the binge. The consequences of ecstasy were painful: the human spirit was forced to adjust itself to the quotidian after its return from the ecstatic pinnacle. Yet the longing for the moment of ecstasy could not be stilled; the tension would always remain. And in the poems the strain is ever present.

A good example of the poet's wariness of joy is illustrated in the following poem:

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[11]Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1955), p. 4.

Go not too near a House of Rose--
The depredation of a Breeze
Or inundation of a Dew
Alarms its walls away--

Nor try to tie the Butterfly,
Nor climb the Bars of Ecstasy,
In insecurity to lie
Is Joy's insuring quality. (1434)

The tone is admonitory and severe. Joy is seen as a dangerous emotion to be shunned. Like Emerson, Emily knew that beauty and the joy it engenders is forever fleeting. The idea of the "elusiveness of natural beauty"[12] may derive from Emerson, according to Jack L. Capps, who quotes the following passage from "Nature" in justification:

> But this beauty of Nature which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part. The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom . . . if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality . . . . The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October, who ever could clutch it? Go forth to find it, and it is gone.

When Emily tends to emphasize the idea that joy should be avoided because of its "insecurity" as she does in the above poem, she achieves a great poignancy. She leaves for a while the somewhat platitudinous notion that suffering is necessary in order to realize happiness. Instead of a neat didacticism, she presents the ambiguities of joy. No longer is transport taught by throe; now transport is seen to be as ultimately painful

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[12]Capps, p. 117.

as throe. The mathematical ratio is now absurd, but empirically justifiable: ecstasy: anguish :: pain : pain. Quod erat demonstrandum.

Ecstasy and anguish of course have several properties in common. Both emotions tend to be so all-encompassing in their power that they eradicate the individual's sense of time and space. As Richard Wilbur points out: "It is in their ways of annihilating time and space that bliss and despair are comparable."[13] Even the outward manifestations of ecstasy and anguish are similar; joy and sorrow may both be so intense as to bring tears to the eyes:

> So glad we are--a Stranger'd deem
> 'Twas sorry, that we were--
> For where the Holiday should be
> There publishes a Tear--
> Nor how Ourselves be justified--
> Since Grief and Joy are done
> So similar--An Optizan
> Could not decide between-- (329)

It is indeed paradoxical that grief and joy should find such similar outlets of expression, and Emily Dickinson was always anxious to capture the paradoxes of human nature poetically. Tears of joy are nonetheless different from tears of grief. The polarity between anguish and

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[13]Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," Emily Dickinson: Three Views (Amherst: Amherst College Press, 1960), rpt. in Richard B. Sewall, ed., Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 128.

ecstasy remains constant and continues to be a cause of frustration. The poet is aware that one may "perish--of Delight--":

> It might be easier
> To fail--with Land in Sight--
> Than gain--My Blue Peninsula--
> To perish--of Delight-- (405)

The emotional intensity which the poet experienced in meeting her close friends caused as much pain as delight. Unlike Whitman, who wrote, "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand," Emily Dickinson was psychologically unable to confront people whom she loved at very close range. She was forced to conceal herself from friends. Her avoidance of the world is well documented; in a letter of 1869 she wrote to Colonel Higginson," . . . I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town." (Letters, 330) Her chief means of communication with the world in the last two decades of her life was through the medium of letters. When callers came to pay their respects, Emily was wont to converse with them from behind a screen. The confrontation face to face was too painful. She discusses this idea in a poem, written about 1871:

> Are Friends Delight or Pain?
> Could Bounty but remain
> Riches were good--
>
> But if they only stay
> Ampler to fly away
> Riches are sad. (1199)

This poem perhaps gives an answer to the flight of the poet to her upstairs room. Emily Dickinson's sensitive nature and her finely wrought capacity for feeling made it extremely difficult for her to sustain herself in the presence of her friends. Writing of Emily's susceptibility to emotional distress, John Crowe Ransom observes: "Her sensibility was so acute that it made her excessively vulnerable to personal contacts. Intense feeling would rush out as soon as sensibility apprehended the object, and flood her consciousness to the point of helplessness."[14] Emily knew that friends ultimately "fly away"; the ecstasy of a "beloved hour" would cost her "Coffers heaped with Tears." She loved her friends so dearly that she was unable to stand many actual encounters with them. "The happy encounter was as painful as the grievous one."[15] Emily Dickinson's life displayed the same kind of tension between anguish and ecstasy as did her poetry.

A poem of 1874 illustrates the frustration caused by such tension:

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

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[14]John Crowe Ransom, "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored" Perspectives USA (Spring 1956), rpt. in Richard B. Sewall, ed., Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 100.

[15]Ransom, p. 100.

Suspense--is his maturer Sister--
Whether Adult Delight is Pain
Or of itself a new misgiving--
This is the Gnat that mangles men-- (1331)

Poems such as "For each ecstatic instant" had cautioned the reader to eschew ecstasy. This poem poses a vexing and goading question: "Is Delight--Pain?" At times it must have seemed to Emily that adult delight and pain were synonymous. Like a gnat the question irritated her mind. The word "mangles" is of primary importance in understanding the significance of the above poem. To mangle is to maim, to mutilate. Hardly the work of a little gnat! The Gnat that mangles Emily is an ever-present incubus which constantly oppresses her psyche and causes the "bleak condition" which the poet relates.

If ecstasy and anguish seemed often like Scylla and Charybdis, what did Emily mean by her ingenuous remark to Colonel Higginson in 1870: "I find ecstasy in living--the mere sense of living is joy enough." (Letters, 342a) Was she firmly dedicated, as Perry Miller believes, to "a lifelong dedication to a calculated shunning of joy"? "But even that is too simple," Miller continues, "she combined this stratagem with a miser's gloating over the few delicate particles of ecstasy which she could contrive to admit through the planks of abstemiousness with which she slyly surrounded

herself."[16] What constituted those "few delicate particles of ecstasy"?

Although many of the poems present a cyclical relationship between ecstasy and anguish, the ecstatic experience remained for Emily Dickinson an event which surpassed every other in its power and significance. Shortly before her death, the following poem was composed. Johnson dates it around 1885. It could well serve as her epitaph:

> Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy,
> And I am richer then than all my Fellow Men--
> Ill it becometh me to dwell so wealthily
> When at my very Door are those possessing more,
> In abject poverty-- (1640)

More than twenty years before this poem was written, Emily had composed a poem familiar to most students, "The Soul selects her own Society--." In that poem the speaker regally rejects all suitors, though they be emperors, who come to her door, in favor of One. The soul selects once and for all her own society, and then closes the door. The above poem presents a similar situation. The soul possessed of Ecstasy is viewed as infinitely richer than all her fellow men who possess material wealth. Those outside the Door, beyond the private world of the speaker, may indeed be rich in possessions, but they are poor without the benefit of Ecstasy. The soul in this poem

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[16]Perry Miller, "Emily Dickinson: The Shunning of Joy," Reporter, 18 (1958), 35.

is content with Ecstasy, though deprived of everything else. Ecstasy is seen as the possession of utmost value. The anguish which Emily describes as payment for its purchase was no doubt well worth the bargain.

CHAPTER III

ANGUISH

Attempts to analyze the reasons for the anguish of which Emily Dickinson writes have been legion. Critics agree that the poet suffered great pain, but they differ in their diagnosis of the ailment. Clark Griffith puts forth a theory in The Long Shadow that the menstrual cycle may have been the cause of Emily's pain, and he notes that the poet "could well have transformed menstruation into a process so grim and terrible that it ruled her life, and, in ways partially unrecognized by her, came to color and condition the view that she took of every sort of experience."[17] In a footnote to his article on "The Soul has Bandaged moments," John Cody proposes a rather similar hypothesis: "Although there is no biographical support for such an interpretation it is possible that the inner upheaval of the preceding years [prior to 1865] induced a premature psychogenic

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[17]Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 292.

menopause."[18] Both Griffith and Cody have presented interesting analyses, notwithstanding their hypothetical nature.

Other critics believe that sexual idiosyncracy is at the heart of Emily's problem. Horace Gregory asserts that one can discover in Emily's letters to Abiah Root and Susan Gilbert "signs of incipient Lesbianism."[19] Rebecca Patterson's controversial theory of Emily's Lesbianism is the subject of her study, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson. Mrs. Patterson proposes that Emily and a young widow, Kate Scott Anthon, fell madly in love between 1859 and 1861. Such theories are engaging but are impossible to substantiate with any degree of certainty.

During the same years in which Mrs. Patterson believes that Emily was becoming infatuated with Kate Anthon, other more conventionally oriented theorists believe that the poet was falling desperately in love with a man. The identity of the man remains clouded, but the Rev. Charles Wadsworth has often been mentioned as the possible object of Emily's hopeless love. Wadsworth was married with a family, and in 1861 he received and accepted a call to

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[18]John Cody, "Mourner Among the Children," Psychiatric Quarterly, 41 (1967), rpt. in Richard H. Rupp, ed., Critics on Emily Dickinson: Readings in Literary Criticism (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 92.

[19]Horace Gregory, "The Real Emily Dickinson," Commonweal, 68 (1958), 449-50.

San Francisco. It was during this year that Emily was thrown into deep depression. In a letter of April, 1862, she cryptically commented to Higginson:

> I had a terror—since September—I could tell to none—and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground—because I am afraid— (Letters, 261)

It was around 1862 that she wrote her famous poem of unrequited love, "I cannot live with You--." The poem's last stanza depicts the finality of physical separation:

> So We must meet apart--
> You there--I--here--
> With just the Door ajar
> That Oceans are--and Prayer--
> And that White Sustenance--
> Despair-- (640)

The magnificent description of despair as a "White Sustenance" signifies the totality of spiritual depression, which leaves the speaker void of purpose, a sensation graphically represented by the total absence of color--a monochromatic whiteness. The poem epitomizes the suffering resultant from a tragically unfulfilled love.

There are many poems in the Dickinson canon which express the anguish which comes from a futile love. Speculation no doubt will continue as to the cause of the futility. The safest conclusion to draw is well expressed by Francis Manley: "Between 1860 and 1862 Emily Dickinson is commonly believed to have experienced a psychic catastrophe, which drove her into poetry instead of out of her mind."[20]

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[20]Francis Manley, "An Explication of Dickinson's 'After Great Pain,'" Modern Language Notes, 73 (1958), 260-4.

Fear of a mental breakdown plagued Emily during the years of emotional crisis, in spite of the therapeutic rapture she discovered in her poetry. A poem of around 1862 recounts the agony of psychic pain:

> The first Day's Night had come--
> And grateful that a thing
> So terrible--had been endured--
> I told my Soul to sing--
>
> She said her Strings were snapt--
> Her Bow--to Atoms blown--
> And so to mend her--gave me work
> Until another Morn--
>
> And then--a Day as huge
> As Yesterdays in pairs,
> Unrolled its horror in my face--
> Until it blocked my eyes--
>
> 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? (410)

With clinical observation, Emily presents the inception of mental illness. The detachment creates a ghastly dramatic effect which is brought to a stunning climax by the stark question with which the poem closes: "Could it be Madness--this?"

Aside from such chilling ventures into psychological torment, several of the poems deal with the anguish suffered from a sense of cosmic woe. This is anguish with a capital "A", the anguish of the spirit in a struggle

with religious doubt. The torment of religious misgivings appears frequently in the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Before making an examination of these poems, a view of Emily Dickinson's Puritan background is helpful in the understanding of the character of her mind. Emily grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts, where the religious zeal of Jonathan Edwards still manifested itself in periodic revivals of extreme fervor. Unlike sophisticated Boston, Amherst was by and large unaffected by the liberal thrusts of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism in the early nineteenth century. Indeed Amherst College had been founded in 1821 mainly through the efforts of Emily's grandfather as a bastion of orthodox Christianity. Her strict and aloof father, Edward Dickinson, "preached a stern morality based on his Puritan past and was to his daughter the living symbol of a tradition to which she was drawn, yet against which she rebelled."[21]

The rebellion of Emily Dickinson was not the superficial contumaciousness typical of so many adolescents. Rather it was a sincere yearning for proof of divine Love which always seemed to escape her grasp. As early as 1846, she recounted her spiritual struggle in a letter to her friend Abiah Root:

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[21]Thomas W. Ford, Heaven Beguiles The Tired (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966) p. 45.

> I was almost persuaded to be a christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly--and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior . . . I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ. (Letters, 10)

A year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary during the 1847-1848 session brought the religious question to its zenith. Mary Lyon, the dynamic founder of the school, was assiduously waging a campaign for lost souls through a series of talks and meetings. Much time was spent in questioning the girls of their personal experiences of conversion. Emily never did experience any kind of personal conversion, and she was unable to feign or dissemble in such a serious matter. She was relegated to a group of lost souls, and reacted against this ostracism. "When Miss Lyon asked those lost girls who at least desired to become Christians to stand up, Emily Dickinson was the only one to remain seated."[22]

Her resentment toward the organized church grew after her return to Amherst, and eventually she stopped going to church altogether. She felt the guilt of being the only member of her family never to join the church, and she justified her behavior in a poem of around 1860:

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[22]Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 32.

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

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice--
I just wear my Wings--
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton--sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman--
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last--
I'm going, all along. (324)

This lilting, rather amusing comment on her absence from church services pales beside some of her vituperative attacks on the Godhead.

A poem of about 1862 expressly accuses God of not caring for His creatures:

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. (376)

She concludes her attack with the thought that it would have been better if she had never been born.

The verbal assault on the Deity is often couched in terms of God's indifference. Not only is God unresponsive, He is also frivolous:

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-- (724)

The word "Gambol" suggests a skipping, frisking Deity, giving life and taking it away at the snap of His fingers. As Thomas W. Ford remarks: "To insert here a sun and there leave out a man is whimsy."[23]

The most dramatic representation of the sporting God occurs in the poem "I know that He exists." The first two stanzas present a God playing blind man's buff with His children. God hides from His flock only for an instant in order to heighten their bliss when He appears. But what happens to the soul who never finds the hidden God? Will God play hide and seek in eternity as well? Does the game end at the moment of death? Does God have the last laugh?

But--should the play
Prove piercing earnest--
Should the glee--glaze--
In Death's--stiff--stare--

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest--
Have crawled too far! (338)

These two concluding stanzas clearly express the anguish of the poet's tormented soul.

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[23]Ford, p. 105.

The above-mentioned poems have shown Emily Dickinson's tortured spirit in view of her religious scepticism. Yet one must not conclude from these verses that Emily Dickinson was an atheist. God was very real to her, even though He chose to remain in silence. She was obsessed with God, as she was obsessed with eschatology, and she could not abandon her pursuit of Truth. She could never be comfortable, however, in orthodox religion, for as one critic has observed, "not even the seclusion of an orthodox convent would have satisfied her."[24] In her own isolated room, she pursued the Ultimate as relentlessly as Ahab pursued the white whale. Never at ease in Zion, she followed her elusive God outside the confines of New England doctrine. The search was anguished and difficult, but compulsive and necessary for her yearning heart.

Belief in the divinity of Christ was a commitment she could not make. "Her vision of Christ was almost entirely limited to his fellowship and humanity."[25] She could empathize with the humanity of Christ, the Man of Sorrows. "When Jesus tells us about his Father," she wrote, "we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is

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[24]Rollo Walter Brown, "A Sublimated Puritan," The Saturday Review of Literature, 5 (1928), 187.

[25]Johnson, p. 245.

'acquainted with Grief,' we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own." (Letters, 932) When she prayed to Jesus, however, He remained as aloof as God the Father:

> At least--to pray--is left--is left--
> Oh Jesus--in the Air--
> I know not which thy chamber is--
> I'm knocking--everywhere
>
> Thou settest Earthquake in the South--
> And Maelstrom, in the Sea--
> Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth--
> Hast thou no Arm for me? (502)

Christ, like His Father, was playing hide and seek. The frequent dashes visually indicate the halting breath with which the prayer is spoken, and heighten the emotional intensity of the piece.

Other metaphysical problems which plagued Emily were the questions of death and immortality. If God were indifferent to His creatures on earth, would He not likewise be indifferent in eternity? What happens after death--eternal life or eternal nothingness? How hard it is to believe in immortality:

> To die--without the Dying
> And live--without the Life
> This is the hardest Miracle
> Propounded to Belief. (1017)

So obsessed was Emily with this eschatological dilemma that she haunted the sick chambers and death-beds of her friends and acquaintances in the vain hope of discerning some clues to "the hardest Miracle."

Many of her poems deal with the physical observation of the dying:

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

It is interesting to note that Emily Dickinson was often perturbed with the dying for failure to disclose what it was "'twere blessed to have seen." She was struck by the impersonality of the dead, and their stubborn incommunicability. Time and again she uses the neuter pronoun "it" to refer to the dead:

> There's something quieter than sleep
> Within this inner room!
> It wears a sprig upon it's (sic) breast--
> And will not tell it's name.
>
> Some touch it, and some kiss it--
> Some chafe it's idle hand--
> It has a simple gravity
> I do not understand! (45)

The flippant treatment of the dead in this poem illustrates the poet's exasperation with the deceased, a perverse corpse that "will not tell it's name." It is significant to note that Emily uses "will" instead of "can", the implication being that the cadaver refuses to speak out of obstinance. The dead always reminded the poet of her own limitations; sometimes in despair Emily thought of this life as a kind of death.

A poem helpful in the understanding of Emily Dickinson's obsession with both death and immortality is her famous description of her own death:

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-- (465)

The fly may represent the daily annoyances of life, which continue to pursue human beings until the moment of death. The King may refer to Christ, come to receive His own into heaven, or to Death, the end of life for the unbeliever. Although the thought may be morbid and ghoulish, there is an association between flies and carrion which cannot be overlooked. Suppose the fly is indeed the conqueror of all. The very ambiguity of the images suggests the turmoils of uncertainty in the poet's mind. There should be no ambiguity about immortality for the orthodox Christian.

It is apparent from the above poems that a specifically religious anguish marks a great deal of Emily Dickinson's

writing. The ever pressing questions of death and immortality would never leave her wounded spirit, for her temperament was basically religious, in spite of her distrust of doctrine. The Puritan past was to haunt her as it haunted Hawthorne; both writers displayed the agony of the religious soul in an age of growing materialism. Emily summed up in a moving way the spiritual Sturm und Drang of her day:

> 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-- (1551)

Such spiritual tumult led some of Emily's contemporaries to pantheism or Transcendentalism. Whitman had written: "If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." Emily Dickinson took no ecstasy from the thought of being mulch for daisies. Speaking of the same thought which Whitman made transcendental, Emily could voice only apprehensiveness: "That Bareheaded life--under the grass--worries one like a Wasp." (Letters, 220) The smart caused by the wasp-like sting on her soul at times engulfed her spirit and left her a victim of total despair. The greatest suffering was wrought by her religious uncertainties.

Knowledge of the Eternal seemed hopeless in a world of flux. Consciousness of the constant passage of time weighed heavily on Emily's psyche. How could God ever be present to a finite creature like herself? How could man bridge time and glimpse the Infinite? Instead of revealing the Godhead, the world often seemed to be an agent in the Deity's disappearing acts, the "expensive" fun of a frivolous God. Heaven was concealed by a veil no mortal could penetrate; the Eternal was screened by fleeting time. Emily's obsession with temporality, according to Anderson, was " . . . a concept central to her thinking: that the essence of the human condition, limiting man's ability to understand ultimate truths, is the imprisonment of his mind in time rather than the imprisonment of his spirit in a body."[26] Writing of Emily's fear of flux and finitude, Griffith remarks in a similar vein:

> In her universe, either time and change seem to be absolute masters, who delight in baffling, whose aim it is to blot out the basis for ultimate understanding. Or, still more dreadfully, they seem the instruments of a malign God--a Deity who cloaks Himself with the time process, which He uses to withhold answers from his creatures. Cast in either role, time prevents knowledge of the Timeless. The terror of the situation is that, whichever role time plays, the preventions seem conscious and willful and maliciously contrived.[27]

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[26]Charles R. Anderson, "The Trap of Time in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," ELH, 26 (1959), 402-424.

[27]Griffith, p. 83.

The nature of the universe appeared at times to be deliberately designed by God for the purpose of the total bewilderment of mankind.

As a finite, limited human being, Emily sensed the chasm between man and God. Heaven, the abode of God's saints, seemed a never-never land at best only dimly imagined by dwellers in the world of time and space:

> Their Height in Heaven comforts not--
> Their Glory--nought to me--
> 'Twas best imperfect--as it was--
> I'm finite--I can't see--
>
> The House of Supposition--
> The Glimmering Frontier that
> Skirts the Acres of Perhaps--
> To Me--shows insecure--
>
> The Wealth I had--contented me--
> If 'twas a meaner size--
> Then I had counted it until
> It pleased my narrow Eyes--
>
> Better than larger values--
> That show however true--
> This timid life of Evidence
> Keeps pleading--"I don't know." (696)

The poet's despair causes her to term Paradise a "House of Supposition." "In my Father's house are many mansions," Christ had told His followers. Emily felt she could not trust Christ, and her own "timid life of Evidence" could find no answer to the mystery of the universe. The finite could not apprehend the Infinite.

Vision of the celestial city was inexorably eclipsed by a portcullis fashioned by the Omnipotent. And that portcullis for Emily Dickinson was the relentless foe--time.

Consciousness of temporality invariably brought a sense of pain and frustration. Time was the eternal escort of every human being to Charon's boat.

> Immersion in time is, for Emily Dickinson, not simply a matter of contemplating diurnal changes or the rotating seasons. The true consequence of the immersion--a consequence consistently expressed through the symbols of the poetry--is to be reminded of blemishes on the moral landscape. It is to have brought home to one the facts of death, madness, and incoherence, the realizations of human finitude and the oppressive silence of God.[28]

Inextricably linked were the sensations of passing time and spiritual anguish.

Her keen awareness of time and her own finite condition links Emily Dickinson with her Puritan forebears. The Puritan viewed man's limitations as a consequence of Original Sin, that sin of Adam and Eve which resulted in man's banishment from Paradise. Emily of course ridiculed the concept of sin as "a distinguished Precipice/Others must resist--" (1545), but she nonetheless shared the Puritan idea of human imperfection and finitude, the idea of human limitations as insurmountable stumbling blocks between man and his God. Emily could never share the transcendentalist optimism of Emerson who boasted: "The highest revelation is that God is in every man." She was too immersed in the dilemma of human finitude.

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[28]Griffith, pp. 105-106.

Anguish at its most extreme resulted from the metaphysical problems with which the poet was forced to grapple. An extremely religious sensitivity was confronted with an ever-questioning intellect and an apparently reticent God. If God were reticent, His world seemed a cosmic plaything subject to the twin evils of constant change and constant death. Rumination on such thoughts brought bleak despair. Life often seemed more horrible than death as a result of the poet's brooding spirit:

> We hated Death and hated Life
> And nowhere was to go--
> Than Sea and continent there is
> A larger--it is Woe-- (1136)

Such cosmic woe surpasses in expression even the grim fatalism delineated in some of Hardy's writings.

Where then could relief be found in this world? How could one transcend the temporal tedium--break out of the world of time, pain, and madness? Was life no more than a whimsy, a game invented by a divine Power? These questions kept returning to Emily Dickinson's consciousness. The anguish of the spirit demanded something more: an ecstatic instant, a moment of elevation, a superior moment. The "dark night of the soul," no matter how dismal, always had to come to an end. Such was the cyclical character of human life.

CHAPTER IV

ECSTASY

Ecstasy for Emily Dickinson connoted the ultimately joyful experiences in which an individual was temporarily transported to Elysium. The problems of the world, human pain and suffering, were for a brief period of time forgotten. The ecstatic experience was above all an experience of transcendence. From a religious point of view, ecstasy involved the closest kind of communion with the Godhead which Emily could achieve. Ecstasy at its most intense pitch had specifically religious significance for the poet: it involved a transcendence of time and space and a vision of immortal life.

Anguish had accompanied Emily's sense of religious doubt and frustration, but the contrapuntal emotion, ecstasy, always accompanied her sense of religious affirmation. At times the God to Whom the poet cried so desperately sent her a gratuitous joy. This joy would completely possess the poet's spirit. Emily felt that she was near to her God at such a time. Richard Wilbur describes vividly the kind of gratuitous happiness which periodically possessed the recluse:

> One psychic experience which she interpreted as beatitude was 'glee,' or as some would call it, euphoria. Now a notable thing about glee or euphoria is its gratuitousness. It seems to come from nowhere, and it was this apparent sourcelessness of the emotion from which Emily Dickinson made her inference. "The 'happiness' without a cause," she said, "is the best happiness, for glee intuitive and lasting is the gift of God." Having foregone all earthly causes of happiness, she could only explain her glee, when it came, as a divine gift--a compensation in joy for what she had renounced in satisfaction, and a foretaste of the mood of Heaven. The experience of glee, as she records it, is boundless: all distances collapse, and the soul expands to the very circumference of things.[29]

It is significant to note Wilbur's comment that "all distances collapse" in the gleeful experience. In other words, the sense of time, which weighed so painfully on the poet's psyche, was transcended in the experience of divine, gratuitous glee. The soul became expansive and euphoric. God seemed within reach at last.

A jaunty, lilting piece of around 1862 graphically describes the feeling evoked by glee:

> I cannot dance upon my Toes--
> No Man instructed me--
> But oftentimes, among my mind,
> A Glee possesseth me,
>
> That had I Ballet Knowledge--
> Would put itself abroad
> In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe--
> Or lay a Prima, mad,
>
> And though I had no Gown of Gauze--
> No Ringlet, to my Hair,
> Nor hopped to Audiences--like Birds,
> One Claw upon the Air,

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[29]Wilbur, p. 55.

Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls,
Nor rolled on wheels of snow
Till I was out of sight, in sound,
The House encore me so--

Nor any know I know the Art
I mention--easy--Here--
Nor any Placard boast me--
It's full as Opera-- (326)

When glee seizes the poet totally, she feels as if she could perform any feat. The image of Emily guised as a ballet dancer, madly whirling and pirouetting, is a far cry from the conventional picture of the neurotic recluse, flitting from room to room, hiding in darkened alcoves, sequestering herself behind screens lest she be seen. The above poem is an ebullient, ecstatic piece which depicts Emily's joie de vivre, her "ecstasy in living."

How important it is to understand that Emily Dickinson was subject to such joyful experiences. The arrival of the glee broke the gloom time and again, and the poet rhapsodically records the momentous event. Such periods of happiness were very real and very meaningful, and their transcription in verse invariably contains the imagery of two distinct sources. Ecstasy in the Dickinson canon is delineated in terms peculiarly religious: the terminology of Puritan theology and the terminology of traditional Catholic mysticism.

The Puritan theology with which Emily was familiar stressed that man was unable in his mortal condition to

save himself. Faith in God and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures were by themselves insufficient to redeem fallen man. Man was conceived in sin; as a descendent of Adam he inherited the stain of Original Sin. Man needed to be born again, to be regenerated spiritually in order to receive salvation. God chose those whom He wished to be saved, and bequeathed grace to the elect of His children. Grace was God's special gift; it was freely given to the chosen.

The receipt of divine grace then was regarded as an indication of God's special favor. Upon receipt of God's grace, the individual experienced a preternatural illumination. Jonathan Edwards described the illumination in his treatise, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," an essay devoted to the concept of heavenly grace. Edwards describes the "spiritual and divine light" as "a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them thence arising." A new attitude characterizes the gracious person; a rebirth, a spiritual regeneration has occurred within the soul. The recipient of God's grace can now be totally committed to God; in Edwards' words, he "has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart."

The spiritual enlightenment which accompanies grace is by its very nature mystical and euphoric. Perry Miller

expatiates upon the characteristics of grace for the Puritan and for Everyman:

> The moment of regeneration, in which God, out of His compassion, bestows grace upon man and in which man is enabled to reply with belief, was the single goal of the Augustinian piety. Without it individual life was a burden, with it living became richness and joy. Other people have found other names for the experience: to lovers it is love, to mystics it is ecstasy, to poets inspiration.[30]

Certainly the Damascus road experience of St. Paul was ecstatic in nature: "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9. 3-4) Saul was regenerated by this "light from heaven"; he became Paul, totally committed to Christ and His church. It is significant that both the Damascus road conversion and the description of grace recorded by Edwards are explained in terms of divine light.

At Mount Holyoke under the tutelage of Mary Lyon and other zealots, Emily Dickinson was exposed to individuals who experienced spiritual illumination. She yearned for such enlightenment but never felt she could yield herself totally to Christ. When Emily experienced one of her ecstatic instants, she employed nonetheless the imagery of regeneration in the Puritan sense.

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[30]Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 25.

Traditional religious terminology portrayed the kind of ecstasy she achieved.

According to Richard Chase, Emily's poem, "The farthest Thunder that I heard" is the "most complete statement she made about the immediate bequest of grace."[31] Note how much of the imagery corresponds to the notion of grace as a "spiritual and divine light":

> The farthest Thunder that I heard
> Was nearer than the Sky
> And rumbles still, though torrid Noons
> Have lain their missiles by--
> The Lightning that preceded it
> Struck no one but myself--
> But I would not exchange the Bolt
> For all the rest of Life--
> Indebtedness to Oxygen
> The Happy may repay,
> But not the obligation
> To Electricity--
> It founds the Homes and decks the Days
> And every clamor bright
> Is but the gleam concomitant
> Of that waylaying Light--
> The Thought is quiet as a Flake--
> A Crash without a Sound,
> How Life's reverberation
> Its Explanation found-- (1581)

Emily's use of a bolt of lightning recalls Paul's "light from heaven." The importance of the ecstatic experience to the poet is indicated by her statement that she "would not exchange the Bolt/For all the rest of Life--." The experience has the intensity of an electric charge; it shocks the recipient into true awareness. The tingling sensation originally felt recurs periodically; it "rumbles

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[31] Chase, p. 149.

still" within the soul of the poet. As Miller noted, the illumination has brought "richness and joy." As the regenerative grace of God gave the Puritan a changed attitude toward existence, so Emily's "Lightning" has given her the "Explanation" of life. Latitudinarian that she was, Emily was receptive to religious rapture: "In her moments of what she called 'rapt attention' Emily Dickinson, though late upon the Puritan scene, was capable of the ecstatic experience of grace."[32] Chase believes that the line, "It founds the Homes and decks the Days" implies that "redemption by the immediate reception of the divine regenerative experience gives a status to domestic life."[33] Chase's idea is a bit strained, but nonetheless relevant when one recalls Emily's absorption in her own private plight to justify her existence to herself and her friends. Whatever the interpretation of the poem, one feels secure in stating that Emily drew heavily from Puritan dogma in her portrayal of the ecstatic instant.

Another poem which equates light with God's grace is the following exclamatory piece:

> Always Mine!
> No more Vacation!
> Term of Light this Day begun!
> Failless as the fair rotation
> Of the Seasons and the Sun.

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[32] Chase, p. 148.

[33] Chase, p. 149.

> Old the Grace, but new the Subjects--
> Old, indeed, the East,
> Yet upon His Purple Programme
> Every Dawn, is first. (839)

Once grace has been experienced, the individual is sobered by the presence of God. Vacations are over for the committed believer; God's work is now the mission of the recipient of His grace. From now on life is a reflection of the newly bestowed grace: a "Term of Light" has begun.

The second stanza acknowledges the unique quality of the regenerative process within each individual. God's grace is "old", yet each time a "Subject" receives it, it is received with innocent rapture, as each new dawn is viewed with renewed awe. The "Subject" thus transformed is reborn into a new relationship with the Almighty.

Emily Dickinson's ecstatic experiences find fitting expression in the Puritan imagery with which she was familiar. So accustomed to seek the grace of God, she found a felicity in depicting her moments of religious rapture in terms of her childhood faith. She felt the presence of God at such intense instants, although she could not share the orthodox belief in the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of Original Sin. Nonetheless she was wont to limn her bliss with the light imagery of the Puritan fathers.

Traditional Catholic terminology also found poetic expression in her evocations of ecstasy. Emily was fond

of describing herself at times as a nun, and her seclusion and white habiliment intensify the image. In one poem she calls herself "Empress of Calvary" (1072) which suggests the nun's position as the bride of Christ. In her role as a nun, she beseeches the Virgin for her healing grace in the following piece:

> Only a Shrine, but Mine--
> I made the Taper shine--
> Madonna dim, to whom all Feet may come,
> Regard a Nun--
>
> Thou knowest every Woe--
> Needless to tell thee--so--
> But can'st thou do
> The Grace next to it--heal?
> That looks a harder skill to us--
> Still--just as easy, if it be thy Will
> To thee--Grant me--
> Thou knowest, though, so Why tell thee? (918)

This cri de coeur to the Mother of God is a prayer which indeed could have been composed by a devout Roman Catholic. One cannot assume, however, from this poem that Emily entertained a flirtation with Roman dogma. Had she been reared a Catholic in a less turbulent day, she might well have sought the seclusion of the cloister. The drama of the Roman Church does lend itself to poetry, however, so any argument for Emily's Catholicism is vitiated by the poet's keen sense of the power of symbols, whether secular or ecclesiastical.

A kinship to mysticism cannot be denied, as several critics have noted. Inge defines mysticism as "the attempt

to realise the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature, or, more generally, as the attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal."[34] The true mystic follows certain prescribed steps in his spiritual journey, usually termed purgation, illumination, and union. Religious ecstasy occurs at the unitive stage, when the soul attains a vision of God's glory. In mystical parlance, the spirit of man realizes or unites with the spirit of God, and the result is rapture. Writing of Emily's ecstatic moments, Higgins asserts: "Her experience of 'the soul's superior instants' is not unique, of course. It is recorded again and again throughout the history of all the arts. Calling it mysticism, William James devoted a chapter to it in The Varieties of Religious Experience. Malcolm Cowley has detected it as a factor in the poetry of Whitman."[35] There are indeed several similarities between Emily Dickinson's portrayal of ecstasy and James' analysis of the nature of the mystical experience.

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[34]William R. Inge, Christian Mysticism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), p. 5

[35]David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson: The Poet And Her Prose (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1967), pp. 87-88.

According to James, a mystical experience is usually marked by four major characteristics: ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity. The experience is ineffable because it cannot be verbally expressed with any kind of felicity; it is noetic in that it brings a special knowledge or illumination, which is regarded as authoritative; it is transient because it is of brief duration, usually lasting no longer than an hour or two; it is passively received by the human spirit which is rendered in thrall by the power of the experience. James felt that ineffability and the noetic quality "will entitle any state to be called mystical," while he believes that transiency and passivity "are less sharply marked, but are usually found."[36]

The poem heretofore examined vis-a-vis Puritan imagery, "The farthest Thunder that I heard," certainly depicts an ineffable experience with noetic value. "Always Mine!" is yet another example of a poem which contains the primary features of James' characterization of mysticism.

Transiency is the cardinal motif of this poem on Emily's "Best Moment":

> Did Our Best Moment last--
> 'Twould supersede the Heaven--
> A few--and they by Risk--procure--
> So this Sort--are not given--

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[36]William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), pp. 371-372.

Except as stimulants--in
Cases of Despair--
Or Stupor--The Reserve--
These Heavenly Moments are--

A Grant of the Divine--
That Certain as it Comes--
Withdraws--and leaves the dazzled Soul
In her unfurnished Rooms (393)

Emily was keenly aware that her ecstatic moments were evanescent. "For dazzling moments she and the world were transfigured into divinity, but the difficulty lay in holding the transfiguration in a sustaining vision."[37] Yet even though happiness gave way to despair, the moments of ecstasy served as needed "stimulants" to combat the periods of anguish. Ecstasy was God-given, "A Grant of the Divine--."

Actually one may discover all four of James' features of mysticism in the above poem. The experience is described as a "stimulant," a "Heavenly Moment," "A Grant of the Divine"; no careful delineation of the moment of elevation is portrayed; the experience remains basically ineffable. To be sure the noetic quality of the episode is powerful: it is granted by God for "Cases of Despair." The individual is illuminated by the special gift from heaven. The transient nature of the occurrence has been observed. Finally, one may infer the passive nature of the soul by the "dazzled" state in which it is left; the soul has in

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[37]Gelpi, p. 90.

effect surrendered to a supreme Power and been transformed by capitulation. The inevitable departure of the ecstasy leaves a spiritual void which colors the individual's universe: even the rooms of one's house seem now "unfurnished." One recalls that haunting stanza so vital to the dialectical tension between agony and ecstasy:

> For each ecstatic instant
> We must an anguish pay
> In keen and quivering ratio
> To the ecstasy. (125)

Emily is aware that if life were all ecstasy heaven would be superseded; one must be content with brief "Heavenly Moments" on this plane. Although the poet stoically accepts the reality of human finitude, her essentially religious temperament always demands reassurance of a God Who distributes "stimulants" only in "Cases of Despair." Would that God were less parsimonious!

In light of the similarity between Emily's religious rapture and the criteria for such rapture set forth by William James, may one feel safe in calling Emily Dickinson a mystic? Sister Mary Humiliata sees a mystical bent in the poet, but feels one should not regard Emily as a true mystic:

> So far as one can penetrate the poetic mind and achievement of Emily Dickinson, one finds that her work on themes which might be designated as mystical in nature, her poetry concerned with the Creator, the Redeemer, with death and immortality, are the fruit of a peculiarly deep insight and an intensely emotional nature, but they are not of the

> body of that literature which is based on the search of the mystic for God and for union with Him. There is faith, certainly, and religious conviction; but nowhere is there that complete dedication to the search for perfection which motivates the mystic.[38]

Critics are still debating the matter, and arguments for and against Emily's mysticism no doubt will continue. She was certainly not a mystic in the tradition of St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa. She was not a believer in the divinity of Christ. Many of her religious ideas were heterodox. Yet her poetic descriptions of her ecstatic moments indeed employ the marks by which William James defined mysticism. Emily Dickinson's esoteric illuminations are as "mystical" in their own way as the enlightenments attained by Tennyson, John Addington Symonds, and Walt Whitman, all of whom James includes as recipients of mystical insight. A sane conclusion concerning Emily Dickinson's mysticism perhaps is the recognition that her heterodox ideas make it difficult for the critic to label her specifically a mystic; one is indeed loath, however, to call her ecstatic raptures anything but mystical.

Part of the mystical quest is a transcendence of time and space. The following poem will serve as an example of the poet's need to overcome the limits of

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[38]Sister Mary Humiliata, "Emily Dickinson Mystic Poet?" College English, 12 (1950), rpt. in Richard H. Rupp, ed., Critics on Emily Dickinson: Readings in Literary Criticism (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 61.

temporality and spatiality and achieve a vision of the Supernal. Ecstasy for the poet always involved a loss of the sense of measured time, as was noted earlier in the phrase "dazzled Soul" in which the human spirit seemed ravished by the Eternal. In this poem, time and space are likewise momentarily transcended:

> At Half past Three, a single Bird
> Unto a silent Sky
> Propounded but a single term
> Of cautious melody.
>
> At Half past Four, Experiment
> Had subjugated test
> And lo, Her silver Principle
> Supplanted all the rest.
>
> At Half past Seven, Element
> Nor Implement, be seen--
> And Place was where the Presence was
> Circumference between. (1084)

According to Robert W. Russell: "The first six lines are an imaginative description of what Emily Dickinson thinks the bird is trying to do, while the last six describe the effect upon her of what the bird has achieved. In the first part she is projecting herself into the bird, while in the second she achieves that complete identification at which she aimed."[39] The bird is similar to the poet in its attempt to solve the riddle of the universe. The three hours between stanzas two and three illustrate the growth of "mystic vision" in Russell's analysis. Russell concludes that the poet loses the "sense of the

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[39]Robert W. Russell, "Dickinson's 'At Half Past Three, A Single Bird'," Explicator, 16, No. 1 (1957), Item 3.

passing of time." Time and space are transcended. "There is no longer, as there was at the beginning, the bird, the sky, and the listening poet. The song has made them one."[40] "Element" and "Implement" no longer exist; "Place" has become "Presence"; "Presence" has become "Place." The poet has achieved a union with the universe.

Russell's interpretation of this ecstatic poem is interesting from what has been already observed about Emily's dread of temporality. The correctness of Russell's reading is, however, questionable. The difficulty in this poem lies in the poet's catalogue of abstractions: "Experiment," "test," "Principle," "Element," "Implement," "Place," "Presence," "Circumference." Russell defines "Circumference" as "the perimeter of consciousness." Johnson defines the word as "a projection of her imagination into all relationships of man, nature, and spirit."[41] Gelpi states that "Circumference" was Emily's "most frequent metaphor for ecstasy."[42] The poem is too riddled with abstract concepts to render an easy explication; once again one finds how precisely "ineffable" the ecstatic experience is. Communication is difficult; as

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[40]Russell article.

[41]Johnson, p. 140.

[42]Gelpi, p. 120.

James remarks: "No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists."[43]

A less abstruse poem in which the poet loses her fear of finitude in the experience of "Circumference" or ecstasy is the following:

> I saw no Way--The Heavens were stitched--
> I felt the Columns close--
> The Earth reversed her Hemispheres--
> I touched the Universe--
>
> And back it slid--and I alone--
> A Speck upon a Ball--
> Went out upon Circumference--
> Beyond the Dip of Bell-- (378)

Gelpi asserts that this poem is concerned with "the airy dilation of the expansive consciousness."[44] In the first two lines, the poet seems lost in a labyrinth; she cannot find her way to the Heavens. Then, inexplicably, "The Earth reversed her Hemispheres," and the poet "touched the Universe." The initial inability to arrive at "Circumference" recalls the "dark night of the soul" to which so many mystics refer in their spiritual journey to the Godhead. The concluding stanza finds the poet reduced to a "Speck" as she glimpses the "Universe." She senses her smallness "Beyond the Dip of Bell." As Gelpi notes: "She was never to lose completely the sense of her insignificance. . . ."[45]

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[43] James, p. 371.

[44] Gelpi, P. 121.

[45] Gelpi, p. 121.

Even though the poet feels diminutive in the face of the universe, she nonetheless is upon "Circumference" or ecstasy; she is beyond the world ruled by clocks and bells; she is free from time and change. And freedom from time and change is both ecstasy and the state of God and His saints: immortality.

The highest revelation, the vision of mystical rapture, the summum bonum for Emily Dickinson was a feeling of immortality. It was the most important thing in her life. Writing of immortality in a letter to Higginson, she remarked: "That is the Flood subject." (Letters, 319) Emily elaborates this idea in the following poem:

> We thirst at first--'tis Nature's Act--
> And later--when we die--
> A little Water supplicate--
> Of fingers going by--
>
> It intimates the finer want--
> Whose adequate supply
> Is that Great Water in the West--
> Termed Immortality-- (726)

Water is the sustainer of all life, and because of its life-giving power, it has been from ancient times a symbol of life. No doubt Emily recalled the story of Christ and the woman of Samaria: "Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again; But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

(John 4. 13-14) As man thirsts for water, so does he also thirst for a "finer want", or in the words of Christ, "everlasting life." This thirst is as natural as the will to live.

Neither philosophy nor sagacity can plumb the riddle of immortality. There are other ways of understanding immortality, the poet suggests, through faith:

> This World is not Conclusion.
> A Species stands beyond--
> Invisible, as Music--
> But positive, as Sound--
> It beckons, and it baffles--
> Philosophy--don't know--
> And through a Riddle, at the last--
> Sagacity, must go--
> To guess it, puzzles scholars--
> To gain it, Men have borne
> Contempt of Generations
> And Crucifixion, shown--
> Faith slips--and laughs, and rallies--
> Blushes, if any see--
> Plucks at a twig of Evidence--
> And asks a Vane, the way--
> Much Gesture, from the Pulpit--
> Strong Hallelujahs roll--
> Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
> That nibbles at the soul-- (501)

The deep hunger for belief is evident in this affirmation of faith in existence beyond this mortal life. Ratiocination is useless in matters of spiritual commitment; the spirit within man seeks the Spirit which is God. The poet's faith stems from the ache in her spirit and the yearning for belief, not from the "Hallelujahs" of the pulpit. Surely this world is not conclusion, for the persistent nibbling at the soul implies a world beyond our own.

A poem of 1862 discloses the ecstatic vision of immortality which is the ultima Thule for the poet:

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her--alone--
When friend--and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn--

Or She--Herself--ascended
To too remote a Height
For lower Recognition
Than Her Omnipotent--

This Mortal Abolition
Is seldom--but as fair
As Apparition--subject
To Autocratic Air--

Eternity's disclosure
To favorites--a few--
Of the Colossal substance
Of Immortality (306)

The importance of the soul sequestered from society, removed from friends and "Earth's occasion," is stressed in this poem. The ecstatic experience is intensely personal: a private encounter between the soul and "Her Omnipotent," the Godhead.

The poet speaks of the ecstatic moment as a "Mortal Abolition"; the separation from mortality and its concomitant woe, temporality, is effected by the elevation of the soul to the empyrean. Purged of the earth, the spirit is united with the Divine. Eternity is disclosed to the "favorite" of God, for only "a few" are granted the divine gift of rapture. The "Colossal substance/Of Immortality" is the celestial vision attained during the rapture: the glimpse of immortality is the acme of the "Superior instants."

When Emily Dickinson writes of "Superior instants", she is referring to the special knowledge granted to her during her mystical states: the knowledge of eternal life. Richard

Chase finds a Gnostic bent in the poet's esoteric enlightenment:

> . . .the most strikingly Gnostic strain is to be seen in her constant insistence that immortality is a form of knowledge. It is the fullest illumination--'the illumination that comes but once'--and the knowledge of truth which one receives through revelatory experiences during mortal life is merely a dim, preliminary shadowing forth of the truth immortality vouchsafes to us.[46]

The Gnostic element is indeed present in the poet's ecstatic vision; the knowledge gained by her spiritual odyssey is reserved for "favorites--a few--." Initiation into the bliss of the Infinite has been extended only to the chosen.

A month after the Rev. Charles Wadsworth's death in April, 1882, Emily wrote the distinguished clergyman, Washington Gladden, to ask: "Is immortality true?" (Letters, 752a) Her question is typical of her ever-questioning spirit, which needed constantly "stimulants--in/Cases of Despair--," her ecstatic moments notwithstanding. Gladden answered that he could not give her an absolute answer, but affirmed that "a thousand lines of evidence converge toward it; and I believe it. It is all I can say."[47] In the same year, she wrote affirmatively: "I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker—that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence. . . ." (Letters, 785)

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[46]Chase, pp. 183-184.

[47]Johnson, p. 237.

The following year, 1883, brought the death of her beloved nephew, Gilbert, the dear child who lived next door to Emily and whose charm had won the spinster's heart. Emily's letter to Gilbert's mother, Sue Dickinson, records a vision as powerful as her poetic rapture on "The Soul's Superior instants." Higgins calls it "perhaps the finest letter she ever wrote."[48]

> The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled--
> How simply at the last the Fathom comes! The Passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us--
> Gilbert rejoiced in Secrets--
> His Life was panting with them--With what menace of Light he cried "Dont tell, Aunt Emily"! Now my ascended Playmate must instruct me. Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee!
> He knew no niggard moment--His Life was full of Boon--The Playthings of the Dervish were not so wild as his--
> No crescent was this Creature--He traveled from the Full--
> Such soar, but never set--
> I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies--His Life was like a Bugle, which winds itself away,his Elegy an echo--his Requiem ecstasy--
> Dawn and Meridian in one.
> Wherefore would he wait, wronged only of Night, which he left for us--
> Without a speculation, our little Ajax spans the whole--
> Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light,
> Pangless except for us--
> Who slowly ford the Mystery
> Which thou hast leaped across! (Letters, 868)

It is significant that the poet again uses the image of "Light" to describe celestial bliss. The sheer energy of this

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[48]Higgins, p. 225.

vision of transcendence renders the prose captivating. The felicity of the language alone elevates this requiem into a majestic elegy.

If ecstasy brought a vision of immortality, then death itself could be viewed as an ecstatic moment:

> A throe upon the features--
> A hurry in the breath--
> An ecstasy of parting
> Denominated "Death"--
>
> An anguish at the mention
> Which when to patience grown,
> I've known permission given
> To rejoin its own. (71)

This poem brings the reader full circle. It recalls the "keen and quivering ratio" with which the poet viewed anguish and ecstasy. Death perfectly combines the two antipodal emotions. Yet he who has grown patient in his suffering may die with the ecstasy which faith and spiritual insight freely impart. Transport has been learned by throe; transport has been learned in spite of throe. The ecstasy of parting may be "denominated" Death, but it is more than that: death is but the beginning of immortality.

A poem of 1860 also equates ecstasy with death. The didactic quality of the verse is paramount, and the relationship of joy and pain once again is stressed:

> A Wounded Deer--leaps highest--
> I've heard the Hunter tell--
> 'Tis but the Ecstasy of death--
> And then the Brake is still!

The Smitten Rock that gushes!
The Trampled Steel that springs!
A Cheek is always redder
Just where the Hectic stings!

Mirth is the Mail of Anguish--
In which it Cautious Arm,
Lest anybody spy the blood
And "you're hurt" exclaim! (165)

Emerson's ideas of compensation may be found in this study of contrapuntal emotions. The plasticity of the human nervous system accounts for the necessary adjustment which men make in the face of suffering and pain: individuals wear a coat of mail called Mirth which is a needed shield against Anguish. This defense mechanism is as much a part of the scheme of things as the cyclical nature of weal and woe. Like the Deer, the Rock, and the Steel, human beings are also wounded, smitten, and trampled by circumstances beyond control. Yet psychological acclimations are made, and ecstasy overcomes death; the "Smitten Rock . . . gushes"; the "trampled Steel . . . springs!" Anguish had taught the poet the true meaning of ecstasy. "Out of loss had come an enrichment of her nature, a proved vitality of consciousness, a power to savor and discriminate, a multiplied intensity of inward life."[49]

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[49]Whicher, p. 287.

CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

The purpose of this paper has been the exploration of Emily Dickinson's ecstasy, its relationship to anguish and its kinship with mystical states of consciousness. The deepest anguish which the poet experienced was her sense of flux, finitude, and death, and this dread has been contrasted with her rapture with eternity, the Infinite, and immortality. The intent of this study has been a better perspective of the reclusive poet, who oftentimes emerges from the biographies and anthologies as a high priestess of pain. Not only is this viewpoint distorted; it is also damaging, for it turns away many readers who wrongly infer that the poet has nothing to offer but morbid musings on mortality.

The ecstatic content of her verse brings a new dimension to the interpretation of Emily's life and art. Behind her closed door, she lived as "deliberately" as Thoreau at Walden, or Hawthorne at Salem, who made "a captive" of himself for twelve years. At Amherst, alone in her room, she probed realms of consciousness with the precision of the

psychologist, the perspicacity of the philosopher, and most importantly of all, with the power and pathos of the poet. Her poetry covers the gamut of emotions, from bleak despair to sheer transport. By isolating herself from the world, the poet discovered that she, like Thoreau, could "front only the essential facts of life." She found ecstasy in the private world which she consciously chose for herself when as George Whicher states, "her heart overleaped boundaries of time and space and stormed eternity."[50]

So much has been said of Emily Dickinson's tragic vision. Her ecstatic vision has to be viewed as an integral part of her life and art if a comprehensive portrait of the poet is to evolve. Life, for Emily Dickinson, was defined by ecstasy because the ecstatic instants which she experienced gave purpose and direction to the anguish which followed so inevitably. One learned to endure suffering, because one knew what ecstasy was. Life was also delimited by ecstasy, i.e., the most intensely alive moments for the poet were those "Superior instants" which brought transcendence and a vision of future bliss. Death was also ecstatic, for it opened the door to immortality, the zenith of the mystical vision. So ecstasy gave a definition to life, a demarcation to life, a purpose for the present and a faith for the future. Little wonder the poet guilelessly observed to Higginson: "I find ecstasy in living--the mere sense of living is joy enough."

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[50]Whicher, p. 286.

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