IT CAME FROM AMHERST

the supernatural, mystical,
lesbian, and *fin de siècle* poetry
of Emily Dickinson

edited and annotated
by Mildred Faintly



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this discovery of the marvelous
and archaeology of desire
is dedicated to
Judy Grahn,
the common woman,
and what we have in common

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Introduction

Emily Dickinson was an amusing ghoul, in the august tradition of American goth girls, which begins with Poe's heroines, Ligeia, Morella, and Annabel Lee, and whose more recent iterations include Wednesday Addams and Rob Reger's cartoon character *Emily the Strange*.

This real, dark Emily Dickinson has so far eluded view—in part because the she *needed* to. She was a horror writer, a lesbian, a mystic, and a *fin-de-siècle* decadent—none of which would have been acceptable in the mid-nineteenth-century puritanic little town of Amherst, Massachusetts. For safety's sake, she wrote in code, to which this volume provides the key.

Above each poem I give the number it bears in R. W. Franklin's edition of the poems, followed by its number in Thomas Johnson's. Johnson's was the first complete scholarly edition including nearly all the poems, but Franklin's is to be preferred for its superior completeness, correctness, and chronology.

It is suggested that each poem first be read through once, to get a sense of what is there and what is obscure. Next, read the commentary, consulting the lines being explicated as needed. Finally, the poem should be read a second time, now with full understanding of its meaning.

Comedy of Horror

A careful reading of Dickinson makes it clear that she, far more than Poe, is the nineteenth-century American master of horror. Dickinson's poetic terrors are particularly significant because they suggest a power specific to her gender. Women identify the self with the body far more than men do. Poe stories raise the fear factor by recourse to elaborate claustrophobic situations. Dickinson typically achieves more with a single *very physical* detail that induces a subtle shudder—what Allen Ginsberg called a "graphic wince."

But the most characteristic feature of Dickinson's horror is its humor. Her affinity is with the Addams Family rather than the House of Usher.

40 (not in Johnson)
I haven't told my garden yet . . .

The speaker is contemplating suicide. She cannot bid final farewell to the garden she loves lest she be overcome by her emotions (*lest that should conquer me*). Likewise, she lacks the command of countenance, the bold front, *the face,* to say her final goodbye to the town, the countryside, or her family *at table*. *The Riddle* is of course existence beyond the grave.

The suicide's concern with good manners provides the tensile structure of the poem; the prim delivery is a masterpiece of deadpan humor.

40 (not in Johnson)
I haven't told my garden yet . . .

I haven't told my garden yet,
lest that should conquer me;
I haven't quite the strength now
To break it to the bee;

I will not name it in the street
for shops would stare at me,
that one so shy, so ignorant
Should have the face to die.

The hillsides must not know it,
where I have rambled so,
nor tell the loving forests
the day that I shall go,

nor lisp it at the table,
nor heedless by the way
hint that within the Riddle
one will walk today.

243 (286)
That after-horror . . .

Here the word *pier* means "one of the supports of the spans of a bridge." The image is that of a bridge that has collapsed just after the speaker crossed over it. In the light of the author's generally cavalier attitude to pronouns, *us* may be taken for "I" without further ado. *Just as the granite crumb let go* means "just as the granite crumbled" God, *our savior* insofar as he saved her, did so at the last possible moment.

Another moment and the speaker would have dropped into the waters below the bridge, waters so deep as to make even the recovery of her body impossible. To bring to mind even the hint or outline, the *profile* of that thought, makes her numb with dread.

She ponders the possibility that she might have passed into death without even the shortest pause a clock could measure, *a moment's bell*. Death is here *conjecture*, because our state there is unknowable to us. The thought of such sudden personal annihilation is like a steel death's head.

The use of the word *drills* makes the metaphor excruciatingly vivid.

243 (286)
That after-horror . . .

That after-horror, that 'twas us
that passed the mouldering pier
just as the granite crumb let go—
—our savior, by a hair—

a second more, had dropped too deep
for fisherman to plumb;
the very profile of the thought
puts recollection numb.

The possibility to pass
without a moment's bell
into conjecture's presence
is like a face of steel

that suddenly looks into ours
with a metallic grin:
the cordiality of Death
who drills his welcome in.

340 (280)
I felt a funeral, in my brain . . .

Poe's nightmares of premature burial end with claustrophobic physical horror. Dickinson raises the terror to metaphysical heights by describing intellectual annihilation.

This poem is narrated by a corpse, dimly aware of the motion of mourners around it. But the awareness is intellectual and not quite physical (*till it **seemed** that sense was breaking through*). The dead person's awareness, which is no longer bodily, is carefully developed in succeeding stanzas, and leads ineluctably to the final shock: the experience of extinction.

The funeral service is perceived as a meaningless, monotonous repetition of sounds that no longer convey any meaning. (*like a drum kept beating, beating, till I thought my mind was going numb*). Here again, physical experience is at one remove. Words are experienced abstractly, as mere resonances registered by the pure awareness of the deceased.

The lifting of the coffin (abstracted into *a box*) is sensed with detachment as something outside—even though the speaker is inside it. The footsteps of the pallbearers, heavier for the weight they bear (*boots of lead*), cause the church floorboards to *creak*. This sound is also experienced in an immaterial, non-bodily way (*I heard . . . creak across my soul*).

The tolling of the church bells is also experienced as a disembodied sound (*space began to toll, as all the heavens were a bell, and Being but an ear*). Physical reality is only perceived in its non-physical manifestation, as vibrations, unmoored from their causes.

There is nothing left of the speaker's being than a receptive silence (*I and Silence some strange race wrecked solitary here*).

340 (280)

I felt a funeral, in my brain . . .

I felt a funeral, in my brain,
and mourners to and fro
kept treading, treading till it seemed
that sense was breaking through—

and when they all were seated,
a service, like a drum
kept beating, beating, till I thought
my mind was going numb—

and then I heard them lift a box
and creak across my soul
with those same boots of lead again,
then space began to toll,

as all the heavens were a bell,
and Being but an ear,
and I and Silence some strange race,
wrecked solitary here—

The finale is when the speaker's being, reduced to a non-physical, purely intellectual awareness (a mere *plank in reason*), ends. This final loss of being is likened to the fall when a floor-board gives way under one. The sense of plummet is deepened from a fall through a storey of a house to a fall down a chasm, bouncing off crags as one goes. And even this is further widened by replacing the implied crags with *worlds*. The experience of personal nothingness expands into cosmic emptiness.

and then a plank in reason broke
and I dropped down, and down
and hit a world, at every plunge
and finished knowing then.

372 (341)
After great pain, a formal feeling comes . . .

After a traumatic experience, one's mental activity (*feeling . . . nerves*) becomes sluggish. Dickinson describes this stunned (*stiff*) reduction in activity as *formal* (in the sense of "solemn, dignified") and *ceremonious, like tombs.*

It seems as though the experience happened to someone else: the self (*the heart*) wonders if it all actually happened to her (*he*: Dickinson's pronouns are fluid.) The sense of time (the framework of all inner experience) is impaired (*Yesterday, or centuries before?*).

One's limbs seem to move of themselves, without sensation (*mechanically, a wooden way*). One no longer notices the outside world (*of ground or air or ought, regardless grown*).

Contentment is a sense of pleasure or satisfaction: here it is ironically equated with the insensibility of minerals and metals.

Dickinson takes the conventional equation of shock to feelings of chilled numbness, with brilliant literalness, and amplifies it into psychosis, the *letting go* of all contact with reality. When we realize this is poem about the onset of madness, the foregoing descriptions of feeling unmoored from one's body, and from all time-space relations appear in their proper clinical light, and word *contentment* shows its full resonance, as a description of the weird pleasure of escaping intolerable pain.

372 (341)

After great pain, a formal feeling comes . . .

After great pain, a formal feeling comes;
the nerves sit ceremonious, like tombs;
the stiff heart questions, "Was it *he*, that bore?"
and, "Yesterday, or centuries before?"

The feet, mechanical, go round
a wooden way,
of ground or air or ought,
regardless grown:
a quartz contentment, like a stone.

This is the Hour of Lead,
remembered, if outlived,
as freezing persons recollect the snow:
first chill, then stupor, then the letting go—

448 (449)
I died for Beauty . . .

In this vegetal vision of annihilation, Dickinson's saccharine Protestant hymn prosody is subverted with eerily cheerful results.

448 (449)
I died for Beauty . . .

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.

479 (712)
Because I could not stop for Death . . .

The speaker could not choose the moment of her demise (*because I could not stop for death*), rather the moment was chosen for her (*he kindly stopped for me*). The carriage which holds Death, the speaker, and the promise of immortality is of course a hearse.

Since the speaker is dead, action and inaction (*my labor and my leisure*) are no longer concerns, and both she is too well-bred to mention them in the presence of so courtly a companion (*put away . . . for his civility*).

The children who *strove in a ring* are playing a game in the schoolyard. In Dickinson's time, "to gaze" could mean "to stare vacantly and curiously, or to open one's eyes in astonishment," rather than "to look fixedly or intently." The *gazing grain* then is the landscape observing this little drama of mortality blankly and without reaction. The speaker's mortal moment means nothing to them.

The sun *rather . . . passed us* because Dickinson is now no longer aware of time. For the reader, the passage of the sun defines the time as evening. *The dews drew,* means that the dews "drew on," *quivering* (shimmering) in the sunset light, when darkness approaches and the temperature drops (hence the *chill*).

Dickinson's gown is of a very light fabric, *gossamer*, and her *tippet* (shawl) is of *tulle* (light silk)—a very delicate way of saying she is wearing grave-clothes, which are not designed for warmth.

479 (712)
Because I could not stop for Death . . .

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.

The crescendo of the poem is the fifth stanza, which describes the grave mound as *a house that seemed a swelling of the ground*. The *roof* is a flat stone grave marker, in what is called "ledger" style, which covers the whole grave.

A *cornice* is a horizontal moulded projection placed on top of a building; a grave with a "ledger" stone often has an upright stone at the end, which is the *cornice* here.

The style of upright tombstone whose apex forms an obtuse angle is called "rooftop," so Dickinson's use of the term *roof* is quite correct. Her sense of the tomb as home is worthy of an ancient Egyptian.

The last stanzas contrast the timelessness of post-mortem existence, with the long and awful moment when one realizes one is dying, that one is traveling fast as a carriage *toward Eternity*.

The fun here is Dickinson's being so entirely at home in darkness. The morbid is normal, Addams Family style.

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 the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
were toward Eternity.

591 (465)
I heard a fly . . .

We have here an "eye of the storm" (*between the heaves of storm*) moment, when the emotions felt around a deathbed have temporarily exhausted themselves. The *King* is of course Death himself.

The color of the fly is significant. This is the blue-bottle fly, *calliphora vomitoria*, literally "beautiful vomit-inducer." The "beautiful" refers to its metallic blue abdomen. It prompts vomiting because it is large (twice the size of a housefly), covered with black bristly hairs, and the females deposit their eggs on rotting corpses—this oviposition is sometimes used in forensic pathology to determine time of death.

The fly who *stumbles* onto the scene, upstaging the human drama in a grotesque anticlimax, is a dazzling pass of gallows humor. The speaker has made her farewells and bequests, and in this solemn moment—a fly has the last word.

591 (465)
I heard a fly . . .

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.

614 (519)
'Twas warm, at first . . .

This little masterpiece of horror-comedy showcases two powers particular to women: their exquisite awarenesses of the physical and of the social.

The first stanza, with its simile of a window (*glass*) rendered opaque by frost, foreshadows the frozen immobility of dead eyes. Body-horror reaches its vivid pinnacle with the use of the word *congealed*.

Having administered this shudder with matchless precision, Dickinson applies her delicate social sense to the unpromising subject.

The dead body now becomes a metaphor. Rigor mortis is interpreted as the stiffness of one who draws herself up to her full height to stress her dignity and distance (*it straightened, that was all*). The cold is not only physical but social (*it crowded cold on cold*). A slight, inflicted to humble the company, is the sole message conveyed by this body-language: *it multiplied indifference—as pride were all it could*.

The final stanza, which describes the rope-lowering of the coffin into the ground, though it somewhat suggests the awful inert weight of the lifeless form, is more a last gesture of disrespect. No *signal* is given to acknowledge the others' presence but, with willful abruptness, lacking any hesitation (*demur*), the departed departs. The last word, *adamant*, doesn't just suggest the body's weight and the consequent speed of its exit: *adamant* is a mythical mineral, of fabled hardness. We make no impression whatever on this being who gives us the coldest of cold shoulders!

614 (519)
'Twas warm, at first . . .

'Twas warm at first, like us,
until there crept upon
a chill, like frost upon a glass
till all the scene be gone.

The forehead copied stone,
the fingers grew too cold
to ache and, like a skater's brook,
the busy eyes congealed.

It straightened, that was all;
it crowded cold to cold,
it multiplied indifference,—
as pride were all it could,

and even when with cords
'twas lowered like a weight,
it made no signal nor demurred,
but dropped like adamant.

1069 (892)
Who occupies this house?

This bit of ghoulish foolery has not exhausted its store of fun when one realizes that the house in question is a grave. The conception is developed far beyond a single metaphor, and becomes a genuine excursion to the world of the dead.

The *name and age* are the epitaph. The sharing of this information constitutes a social introduction, else the speaker would not presume to approach so forbidding a residence. Not even a dog who was *honest*, that is, trained in the seemly and respectable usages of society, barks in greeting.

To say this is *a territory for the ghosts* is a further bit of genteel wit. The phrase merely suggests that the region is deserted, unfrequented by any living persons, and doesn't yet give away the secret of the charade.

1069 (892)
Who occupies this house?

Who occupies this house?
A stranger, I must judge.
Since no one know his circumstance
'tis well the name and age

are writ upon the door
or I should fear to pause
where not so much as honest dog
approach encourages.

It seems a curious town,
some houses very old,
some newly raised this afternoon.
Were I compelled to build

it should not be among
inhabitants so still,
but where the birds assemble
and boys were possible.

Before myself was born
'twas settled, so they say;
a territory for the ghosts
and squirrels, formerly,

until a pioneer,
as settlers often do,
liking the quiet of the place,
attracted more unto,

Eternity's acquaintances are those personally acquainted with Eternity, that is, the dead. The phrase which raises to apex the jocose notion of cemetery visit as a normal social call.

and from a settlement
a capital has grown
distinguished for the gravity
of every citizen.

The owner of this house,
a stranger he must be;
Eternity's acquaintances
are mostly so to me.

1446 (1428)
Water makes many beds . . .

For those whose misery or anxiety makes sleep impossible, there is always the recourse of suicide by drowning (*its awful chamber open stands*). The prospect is not uninviting: the currents (*curtains*) *blandly sweep,* that is, they flow, in a manner that is gentle and soothing.

But rest in a watery grave is actually *abhorrent* (the word means literally "horrifying") in rooms which have no solidity or substance (*undulating*), no walls (*whose amplitude no end invades*) and no center (*whose axis never comes*). This vision of eternal vertigo, in quaint quatrains, is vintage Dickinsonian horror comedy.

1446 (1428)

Water makes many beds . . .

Water makes many beds
for those averse to sleep,
its awful chamber open stands,
its curtains blandly sweep.

Abhorrent is the rest
in undulating rooms
whose amplitude no end invades,
whose axis never comes.

1766 (1748)

The waters chased him as he fled . . .

A colloquy between a wave and a drowning person. The wave invites him below, touting the amenities of a home (*parlor*) on the ocean floor.

The walls of *shriven glass* are stainless, perfectly transparent. (To shrive someone is to hear their confession and impose a penance for sins committed, hence, to absolve them, returning the person's soul to a state of moral purity).

The bill of fare includes fish to gratify every possible taste preference (*for every palate of the year*).

In the final lines it is revealed that the invitation is to death's *revolting bliss*—and that the swimmer has died in the course of this chilling invitation.

1766 (1748)

The waters chased him as he fled . . .

The waters chased him as he fled,
not daring look behind.
A billow whispered in his ear,
“Come home with me, my friend.
My parlor is of shriven glass,
my pantry has a fish
for every palate in the year—"
To this revolting bliss
The object floating at his side
Made no distinct reply.

Fin de Siècle

Dickinson, whose dates are 1830 to 1886, can fairly be reckoned with the *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist and Decadent poets on temporal as well as literary grounds. The fact that death is her defining theme already places her here, but we may add to this her nearly *Art Nouveau* preoccupation with flowers.

But the most appealing case is made by her taste for solitude in autumnal and sunset scenes, which are the focus of this selection. The artistically oblique, riddling style of her poems is paralleled by that of her contemporary Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), the high priest of Symbolist poetry. We will hear more of Dickinson's subtleties if we bring to her work an ear attuned to Debussy. One should note that Dickinson's unambiguously lesbian poems likewise place her alongside the Decadent poets Swinburne and Jean Lorrain, who pioneered the modern poetic expression of non-ordinary sexuality.

13 (24)

There is a morn by men ***unseen*** *. . .*

This vision of ghosts at play on the village green has the psychedelic brightness of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. It's as though Christina Rossetti had set herself to making a ghost story in verse.

Those who *walk no more the village street* are of course the souls of the dead.

A distaff is a stick on which wool to be spun is wound: *last year's distaff idle hung* means in autumn—when the stalks (*distaffs)* no longer held flowers. *Summer's brows were bound* means that summer was done putting forth her foliage, when her "hair" no longer hung loose. The *birds that sought the sun* were those that soared in the light of that vanished time.

The *ring* is a circle dance. *Chrysolite* is a yellow-green transparent gemstone. That the stars *swung their cups of chrysolite* means that they merrily sparkled with golden light.

13 (24)

There is a morn by men unseen . . .

There is a morn by men unseen,
whose maids upon remoter green
keep their seraphic May—
and all day long, with dance and game
and gambol I may never name,
employ their holiday.

Here to light measure move the feet
which walk no more the village street
nor by the wood are found,
here are the birds that sought the sun
when last year's distaff idle hung
and summer's brows were bound.

Ne'er saw I such a wondrous scene,
ne'er such a ring on such a green
nor so serene array—
as if the stars some summer night
should swing their cups of chrysolite
and revel till the day!

Like thee to dance, like thee to sing,
people upon the mystic green,
I ask, each new May morn;
I wait thy far, fantastic bells
announcing me in other dells –
unto the different dawn!

122 (130)
These are the days . . .

The *sophistries of June* refers to "indian summer," the *blue and gold* of whose skies may deceptively persuade us of the *mistake* that autumn is not yet fully here.

The refined, melancholy nature mysticism, formulated in the language of Catholic sacraments, is utterly Mallarmean.

122 (130)
These are the days . . .

These are the days when birds come back—
a very few, a bird or two
to take a backward look.

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

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the bee,
almost thy plausibility
induces my belief

till ranks of seeds their witness bear,
and softly thro' the altered air
hurries a timid leaf.

Oh, sacrament of summer days,
oh, last communion in the haze,
permit a child to join,

thy sacred emblems to partake,
thy consecrated bread to take
and thine immortal wine!

1072 (959)
A loss of something ever felt I.

The sense of spiritual alienation is a standard theme of Romantic poets, more artfully cultivated by those latest of late Romantics, the Decadents and Symbolists. It is often an ultra of refined self-pity, a feeling especially dear to melancholy adolescents, and those perpetual melancholy adolescents, the drug addicts.

Poe's "*From childhood's hour I have not been, as others were . . .*" is a homegrown and precise parallel. If we call to mind the poet as "disinherited child" from Baudelaire's *Bénédiction* or the "prince of the shattered castle" from de Nerval's *El Desdichado* this poem finds its place in a well-established *fin-de-siècle* context.

In the third stanza, *session* is used to mean an age or period; *fainter* means living less vividly (than in childhood). The *palaces* are *delinquent* (failing in duty) by no longer being accessible. *Looking oppositely* is seeking in all the wrong places.

1072 (959)

A loss of something ever felt I.

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

a mourner walked among the children,
I, notwithstanding, went about
as one bemoaning a dominion,
itself the only prince cast out . . .

Elder today, a session wiser,
and fainter too (as wiseness is),
I find myself still softly searching
for my delinquent palaces,

and a suspicion, like a finger,
touches my forehead now and then,
that I am looking oppositely
for the site of the Kingdom of Heaven.

593 (629)
I watched the moon . . .

This poem challenges comparison with Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* both for lunar coloring, and the theme of decapitation.

The speaker notes the moon's passage *around the* (outside of the) *house*, by noting the shifting pools of moonlight on the floor—until the moon fills the window. She then looks boldly at this visitor, just as a respected and elegant female resident of a town might feel entitled to peer through her lorgnette (*lift her glass)* at a stranger.

The moon has of course no limbs, and no verbal greeting (*nor formula had she*). She is *like a head a guillotine slid carelessly* away. "Slid" is here used as if it were a transitive verb, meaning "caused to slide." *Carelessly* here means "easily."

(Recall Wilde's "*Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things."*)

The moon appears to levitate, *independent* of any visible support, like an insect suspended in *amber*.

Then the moon is likened to *a stemless flower*, which is echoed by Wilde's "*How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, you would think she was a little silver flower."*

The moon is *upheld by finer gravitations than bind philosopher*, that is, by more esoteric laws of gravity than those known to science. In Dickinson's time "philosopher" could still apply to anyone learned in physical science.

593 (629)
I watched the moon . . .

I watched the moon around the house
until upon a pane
she stopped—a traveler's privilege—
for rest, and thereupon

I gazed, as at a stranger
the lady in the town
doth think no incivility
to lift her glass upon.

But never stranger justified
the curiosity
like mine, for not a foot nor hand
nor formula had she,

but, like a head a guillotine
slid carelessly away,
did independent amber
sustain her in the sky—

or like a stemless flower—
upheld in rolling air
by finer gravitations—
than bind philosopher.

The moon has no need to retire to an *inn* to tend to her hair and makeup (*her toilette to suffice*); she has no secondary tasks (*avocation*), and none of our mortal concerns (*little mysteries*) such as whether or not there is an afterlife (*Afterlife of Nay*). She is entirely (*to absolute*) taken up with celestial affairs.

The moon withdraws from the window with a *silver practice* (here "practice" means "way of acting") and the speaker's gaze next encounters her on a cloud, outdistancing observation. *Advantage blue* means "of superior position in the blue sky."

No hunger had she, nor an inn
her toilette to suffice,
nor avocation, nor concern
for little mysteries

as harass us—like Life and Death
and Afterwards or Nay,
but seemed engrossed to absolute
with shining and the sky.

The privilege to scrutinize
was scarce upon my eyes
when, with a silver practice
she vaulted out of gaze,

and next I met her on a cloud,
myself too far below
to follow her superior road
or its advantage blue.

35 (1540)
As imperceptibly as grief

The end of summer comes so gradually that we are for some time not even aware that it is gone. The change would have to have been more sudden to seem like a breach of faith or the betrayal of a promise (*perfidy*). A *quietness* was infused, imparted in small quantities (*distilled*), into the atmosphere.

The days grow shorter (*dusk drew earlier on*) and the mornings have the different, chillier brightness of autumn (*the morning foreign shone*). The beauty (*grace*) of this season is distressing and disturbing (*harrowing*) because it reminds us of death and partings (*as guest that would be gone*).

The *beautiful* of the last line has a transcendent value, like Mallarmé's *azure*—a perception which, with autumn theme, makes this poem consummately *fin de siècle*.

935 (1540)
As imperceptibly as grief

As imperceptibly as grief
the summer lapsed away,
too imperceptible, at last,
to seem like perfidy.
A quietness distilled,
as twilight long begun,
or Nature, spending with herself
sequestered afternoon.
The dusk drew earlier in,
the morning foreign shone,
a courteous, yet harrowing grace,
as guest who would be gone.
And thus, without a wing,
or service of a keel,
our summer made her light escape
into the beautiful.

1090 (813)
This quiet dust . . .

In this little masterpiece of autumnal nostalgia, *this passive place* is a grave. One meaning of passive, "inert, quiescent, inactive," is somewhat stretched to mean "quiet" or "restful."

An oriental circuit means "one circular journey of the sun beginning in the east," that is to say, "for a period brief as a day."

The mood, like the meter, calls to mind Dowson's, "*They are not long, the days of wine and roses . . .*"

1090 (813)
This quiet dust . . .

This quiet dust was gentlemen and ladies
and lads and girls,
was laughter and ability and sighing
and frocks and curls.

This passive place, a summer's nimble mansion,
where bloom and bees
fulfilled their oriental circuit,
then ceased like these.

Mystical Flights

I
Heresy in a Hebrew Key

Dickinson wrote mystical poems to rank with the most sublime effusions of Hafez or Kabir. Her spirituality matured *despite* growing up in a fundamentalist environment so strict as to make the hills of northwest Massachusetts a kind of American Afghanistan.

Eight major religious revivals swept through Amherst between 1840 and 1862, when Dickinson was between the ages of ten and thirty-two. Our best record of Dickinson in this context comes from her time at Mt. Holyoke.

Though we now rightly regard Mt. Holyoke as a very outstanding school, and its founder, Mary Lyon, as a brave pioneer of education for women, it was still Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary during Dickinson's two semesters there. Lyon was a fanatic of a kind both common and respected in that time and place. She required her students to go for hour-long hikes every day after breakfast, even in winter, and made them spend an hour each day in prayer and meditation. There was tremendous pressure on the students to "find God." Dickinson was among the ten percent of ostracized "no hopers" who declined to accept Christ as their personal savior.

Dickinson's renunciation of the really great educational opportunities there, which included upper level courses in Mathematics and Latin, is testimony to her principled resistance to the totalitarian environment.

Consequently, Dickinson developed a profound distaste for normative Christianity. Though her poetry is peppered with refences to Christ, angels, and heaven, these are no more evidence of conventional piety than other poets' references to Greek deities attest neopaganism.

Although Dickinson had profound religious experiences, of which the following poems are indisputable evidence, hers

was a Biblical religiosity that took its cues from the Old Testament and eschewed the New. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her skeptical coyness regarding the afterlife. Reward or punishment after death are essential to Christianity, and to Islam, but are conspicuously absent from Jewish thought.

Judaism sees the face of God in the human reality of lived life. An afterlife has never intrigued the Jews, because it detracts and distracts from their primary focus: decent dealings with people in the here and now. The Jewish preoccupation with finding God *in this world* is typically vilified in Christian polemic as "Jewish materialism."

And it is precisely this Old Testament, Jewish focus on God's *immanence*, this determination to make sacred the world we actually inhabit, that makes Dickinson so extremely congenial to modern minds.

Another and even more remarkably Hebraic feature of Dickinson's writing is her sense of *time* as holy. While other ancient peoples experienced time as a sacred cycle, the Jews were the first to see holiness in time's *progression*, in history's irrepeatable events—which is why all the Jewish holidays are *historical*.

While other peoples have built monuments and shrines to their faith, the Jews have erected their cathedrals in the calendar itself. To be sure, some of this can be explained by the lack of a land on which to rear religious structures, but more was due to the most ancient Jewish conception of sacred time. By the Biblical account, the day is the structural unit of creation, from Genesis, where the cosmos is formed in a series of days, to its eventual perfection on a Day of Judgement. A glance over Dickinson's poetic work will suffice to confirm that she is preoccupied with seasonal changes, sunrises and sunsets, and clock-measured minutes to a degree unexampled among the poets. Just as Dickinson found God in her garden rather

than in the mists of metaphysics, she was far more truly attuned to *time* than to eternity.

Dickinson, a mystic on the Hebraic model, has nothing essential in common with Hildegard of Bingen or Juana Inés de la Cruz. Unless we grasp how utterly different her spirituality was than that of Christians in general and Protestant New England in particular, we will not understand why she wrote her mystical poems in code, and how that coding shows exactly what ideas she most needed to conceal.

An instructive parallel is to be found in Dickinson's contemporary, George Eliot, whom Dickinson so admired she hung a portrait of Eliot in her room. Eliot had been a devout evangelical Christian in her youth, and never ceased to hear the Bible's moral call. She was, however, convinced by historical criticism to reject all the miraculous aspects of Christianity. But Christianity without miracles is Judaism. Thus Eliot's last book, *Daniel Deronda* (1876) was the first Zionist novel.

II
Sociable Nature and Little Infinities

Description of landscape is a particular strength of poetry by women. Feeling themselves more *physically* present than men (who tend to save their passion for abstractions), women are able to charge a vista with emotional power. In the folk poetry composed by women, such as we find in *The Song of Solomon* or in the Chinese *Classic of Poetry*, so much feeling and personal history is concentrated in visual details that it seems as though time has been transformed into space!

Landscape that is at once an inner world and an outer one, a vision brought to perfection in the poetry of Akhmatova, appears in particularly pellucid guise in Dickinson.

We look in vain for anything comparable in landscape poetry by men. In English, the best contenders are Pope's *Windsor Forest* and Milton's *L'Allegro*, but these poems, though their merits are great, are, *as landscape*, just neoclassical pastiche. Nor did Imagist poets, like Pound and Williams, understand the true implications of the Asian landscape poetry they admired .

In Dickinson, whose poems are all miniatures, the feminine sense of landscape is expressed in *microcosm*. While men's poetry soars far, often beyond the range of possible experience, women's poetry tends to find emblems for its insights in the present and the concrete. Milton and Dante rove from Hell to Heaven for illuminations such as Dickinson discovered in her backyard or on the main street of little Amherst.

The term microcosm originally referred to the notion that there was a structural similarity between the human being and the universe. The human was (inwardly) as infinite and worthy of awe as the whole cosmos, and, as a corollary, the cosmos was a living and sensitive being.

This archetypal understanding, which we in the West trace back to Plato's *Timaeus*, underlies our delight in snow globes, doll houses, and terrariums. In Dickinson, this frequently plays out in little landscapes, petite vistas of winsome and sociable nature, similar in mood to those one finds in children's books.

It is significant that the closest parallels to Dickinson's vistas of sociable nature are to be found in the modern Hebrew poet Rachel Blaustein, as in these lines from her poem *The Sea of Galilee,*

Look down now, to the Sea of Galilee,
see that palm tree with its unkempt crown of fronds,
disheveled like the hair of an unruly boy—
see where it grows—

it looks like it slid down the slope
to the very edge of the water
as if it meant to raise root and go wading!

In her wee genre paintings, Dickinson manifests the world-building power of an epic poet. Her little worlds, expressed in so few words, are monumental works, no less than the prophetic books of William Blake—the programmatic opening lines of whose *Auguries of Innocence* are the most apt introduction to Dickinson's small worlds,

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

If a further credential and precedent is wanted, we can look to is Goethe's *Entoptic Colors*, which I might freely translate as,

Leave the Macrocosm be,
the "big picture" that doesn't fit in any frame,
and no one really sees. Real it may be,
but for us it will always be an abstraction,
the ghost of the reality that's really ours.

It's the dear little worlds of the dollhouse,
of the landscape in a bell jar, that show us
reality at its beautiful truest,
poignant and joyful as toys.

143 (76)
Exultation is the going . . .

"Exultation," which now has the sense of "joy" or "rapture," originally meant "leaping over" (ultimately derived from the Latin ex, "out of," and *salire*, "to leap,") and Dickinson plays upon this root meaning. She declares that in her *exultation* she has overleaped the limits of ordinary experience (*past the houses, past the headlands*), and known a mystic's ecstasy (the *exultation* of *deep Eternity*)

In second stanza a worldly person responds, "*Bred as we* were *among the mountains*, (where the sea is never so much as glimpsed in the distance), *how* could **we** *understand* the *divine intoxication* a mystical voyager (a *sailor*) feels as soon as he's so much as a league away from the land?"

The earnestness of this Blake-like claim to mystical attainment is confirmed by the Blake-like cypher. Dickinson knew her New Testament well enough to appreciate just how well prophets may expect to be accepted in their hometowns.

143 (76)
Exultation is the going . . .

Exultation is the going
of an inland soul to sea,
past the houses,
past the headlands,
into deep Eternity.

"Bred, as we, among the mountains,
can the sailor understand?
The divine intoxication
of the first league out from land?"

285 (673)
The love a life can show below . . .

The love a life can show below is but a ***filament***, literally, "a tenuous, thread-like fiber," that is, a minute hint *of that diviner thing* which is the mystical experience of God's love.

A mystic's love for God is always ambivalent. Though the direct experience of the divine allows one to experience life as meaningful, it also entails going beyond the mortal condition, which is a kind of dying, from which one never entirely returns. Thus the mystic can't bear the full blaze of illumination (*faints upon the face of noon*), yet solicits its ignition (*smites the tinder in the sun*), but then again demurs (*hinders Gabriel's wing*)—Gabriel, be it remembered, is the angel of the annunciation, and so the proper emblem of divine communications. Gabriel's status as revealer is general rather than specifically Christian, as his prominent role as God's messenger in the Koran attests.

It is a foretaste or analogy of the mystic's experience, *'tis this*, that we feel in music when it *hints and sways*, that is, provokes in us subtle yearning which can fill whole days with vague bittersweet longing (*far abroad on summer days distils uncertain pain*). It will be easier to understand this response to music if we think of a sentimental popular love song one can't get out of one's head.

With a similar intimation of the mystical, dawn enthralls us (*enamors in the East*), and sunsets are woundingly beautiful (*harrowing*), like with their violet (*iodine*) tinted sense of things ending.

Dickinson is not simply using extravagant metaphors to talk about love, music, and sunsets—she is describing a world transfigured by the divine, and identifying the places where God gives psychedelic tints to even ordinary experiences.

285

The love a life can show below . . .

The love a life can show below
is but a filament, I know,
of that diviner thing
that faints upon the face of noon—
and smites the tinder in the sun—
and hinders Gabriel's wing.

'Tis this, in music, hints and sways,
and far abroad on summer days
distils uncertain pain;
'tis this enamors in the East,
and tints the transit in the West
with harrowing iodine.

Bearing in mind the above-noted ambivalence of mystical experience, we can appreciate the precision, the purpose, and most importantly the subtle dread expressed (*appals*) in the final stanza.

'Tis this invites, appals, endows,
flits, glimmers, proves, dissolves,
returns, suggests, convicts, enchants
then flings in paradise.

320
There's a certain slant of light . . .

Dickinson's work is rich in expressions of existential angst, which is one of the reasons it finds such a ready resonance in the modern reader. But this is also an authenticating credential of her mystical experience. None can know real faith who have not experienced real doubt.

This poem declares that the melancholy muted light of a Winter afternoon has a particular *heft*—"weight, heaviness, ponderousness." Existence in ordinary secular time (*afternoons*) is then experienced as oppressive.

This sense of existence as profane rather than sacred has a kind of anti-holiness (*heavenly hurt*) which weighs us down rather than lifting us up (*oppresses like the heft of cathedral tunes*). It's an inner sense that our personal events aren't properly aligning, that something essential is missing: an *internal difference where the meanings are*.

This mood can't be fully conveyed to anyone who hasn't experienced it (*none may teach it any*). It's a consecration (*seal*) of despair, a negative royal anointing (*imperial affliction*). And it comes to us, seemingly, out of nowhere (*sent us of the air*).

The experience is that of a great abeyance, like a sudden silence (*the landscape listens, shadows hold their breath*). This is real existential alienation. We feel a space between our true selves and ordinary, unreflecting, haphazard life. The estrangement is unbridgeable as that between the living and the dead—*like the distance on the look of Death*—far away as the gaze of a corpse when the soul has left.

320 (258)

There's a certain slant of light . . .

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.

326 (262)
The lonesome for they know not what . . .

This poem describes spiritual vagrants, persons who have sought, and had some genuine mystical experience, with not entirely positive results.

The period leading up to the Civil War was one of radical social and religious experimentation. Even Dickinson's Amherst was not as homogenously orthodox as might appear. Mormons, Shakers, Spiritists, Clairvoyants, Phrenologists, and proponents of Animal Magnetism were features of Dickinson's New England landscape, so a poem about a lost spiritual seeker is no anomaly here.

Such persons, whose spiritual longings never took definite shape and direction (*lonesome for they know not what*) are pilgrims seeking to regain an illuminated state of wholeness, represented by the Western imagination as the mystical (and sometimes literal) *East*.

The vagrant seekers of Dickinson's poem did at one time attain an intoxicated state (*some madder holiday*) in which they succeeded in visiting in spirit that metaphoric land lying somewhere eastward, past the dawn (*beyond the amber line*).

Since that chance illumination, such seekers try to recapture the experience, to reascend the dawn-sky colored heavens, *the purple moat* of their one-time ecstasy, still visible in memory but impossible to pass over into.

Once they were *birds* capable of such an ascent, but now they are more like fallen angels. They *fumble at the strain the blessed ether taught them*, they are unable even to express with suitable music, that is, in adequate language, the mystical experience which *the blessed ether taught them*.

Their glimpse of a higher reality is now an infinitely distant (*transatlantic*) morning, the situation when Heaven seemed to be easily within their grasp, *too common to miss*, and it seemed *too sure to dote upon*: they took it for granted.

326 (262)

The lonesome for they know not what . . .

The lonesome for they know not what
the Eastern exiles be,
who strayed beyond the amber line
some madder holiday

and ever since the purple moat
they strive to climb, in vain,
as birds that tumble from the clouds
do fumble at the strain

the blessed ether taught them
some transatlantic morn
when Heaven was too common to miss,
too sure to dote upon.

336

Before I got my eye put out . . .

Dickinson *got* her *eye put out* by a blinding spiritual insight. Before this, she saw the world as others do. But had she known that she might experience the world in unmediated intensity, with her whole being, to see the world not as something external but as part of herself (*mine*), her heart would have burst (*split*) because the experience would be too startlingly immense (*for size of me*) for her physical perceptions (*my finite eyes*). The experience would be a passing beyond the mortal condition (*would strike me dead*).

The *amber road* is the sun's golden course up the dawn sky.

It would be safer to do no more than simply infer (*guess*) that God is real and present, to merely "window shop" for religious experience, and not to be open to blinding illumination (*incautious of the sun*).

336 (327)
Before I got my eye put out . . .

Before I got my eye put out,
I liked as well to see
as other creatures that have eyes
and know no other way,

but were it told to me today
that I might have the sky
for mine, I tell you that my heart
would split, for size of me.

The meadows—mine;
the mountains—mine;
all forests, stintless stars,
as much of noon as I could take
between my finite eyes,

the motions of the dipping birds,
the morning's amber road—
for mine to look at when I liked—
the news would strike me dead.

So safer guess with just my soul
upon the window pane
where other creatures put their eyes,
incautious of the sun.

355 (510)
It was not death, for I stood up . . .

Here we have a panorama portrait of existential angst to rank with the paintings of Edvard Munch. The speaker describes a state that was neither death nor life, but as distressing as either can be. It had a darkness that was spiritual, an interior night, in which sounds were jarringly over-loud, like all the bells tolling at once. The image of the bells wagging their clappers like tongues is purposefully grotesque: the experience is hallucinatory, like a foretaste of madness.

A *sirocco* is an oppressively hot wind that blows up from Africa into southern Europe. A *chancel* is the front part of a church where the altar stands; here it is used simply to mean a stone building. The speaker's feet were cold enough to chill cold stone. Dickinson is hot and cold at once, both burning and shivering, as with a fever.

Then the speaker sees herself as living-dead, like a figure laid out for burial.

355 (510)

It was not death, for I stood up . . .

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,

Her being is diminished to where a coffin can encompass it (*as if my life were shaven and fitted to a frame*). Her respiration is arrested, locked (*and could not breathe without a key*).

It was somewhat like midnight (*'twas like midnight, some*) but even more frightening than the ordinary "witching hour", because, as the silence betrays, time itself is in abeyance (*everything that ticked has stopped*), and space is now not physical extent but emptiness as far as the eye can see (*space stares all around*).

It was like a frosty autumn morning which is *grisly* (causing horror, terror, or extreme fear)—because such a cold silent dawn looks like the universal death of nature; it *repeals* (revokes, rescinds, annuls) the very life of the earth. The ground is described as formerly *beating*, as though it were a living heart, now stilled.

The speaker concludes that her condition was most like chaos: without any firm reality to rest upon (*stopless*), utterly indifferent (*cool*). It is like being lost on the ocean, without any hope of rescue (*without a chance*), without even a mast or yard-arm (*spar*) of her sunken ship to cling to, without any notion of how far off land is, so she can't even despair, but must hover in exhausting uncertainty like one who treads water. She is in existential free fall.

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.

373 (501)
This world is not conclusion . . .

The physical world, declares the speaker, is not *conclusion*—all there is to existence. The ironic full stop gives this statement the air of a *conclusion*, like the last part of a syllogism—but the statement here is, amusingly, not in fact conclusive, since the idea is developed in the following lines.

The perception of a further world beyond the material, she calls a *species*. When we say *species* we usually mean "class" or "kind," but Dickinson here employs another primary meaning of this word: "visible or outward form." To call this *species* "*invisible*" goes beyond irony. It is a mystical paradox.

Dickinson goes on to make her case for an unseen realm, by analogy with music, which is likewise *invisible* but nonetheless *positive*, measurably real.

She notes that the problem of a deeper reality whose existence we feel but cannot prove is one that *philosophy don't know* the answer to. When we die, we must confront this conundrum which mocks our limited wisdom: and *through a riddle, at the last, sagacity must go*.

The word "martyr" comes from a Greek root meaning "to bear witness or give evidence," so we might understand the allusion to those who suffered for their faith, and phrase *crucifixion shown*, to mean "showed the most absolute confidence in the afterlife."

373 (501)

This world is not conclusion . . .

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.

The faithful person is strong enough to regard her human wavering with good humor (*Faith slips, and laughs and rallies*). Though she bears witness to the truth, she does not make a conceited display of their attainments (*blushes if any see*). She is able to sustain her belief by the merest hints and subtlest signs (*plucks at a twig for evidence*) and attends to inner "leadings." *And asks a vane the way* alludes to John 3: 8,

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

The sound and fury of conventional piety (*gesture from the pulpit . . . strong hallelujahs*) has little to do with Dickinson's *species* that *stands beyond*. These are literally an "opium of the people," but Dickinson uses the metaphor not to dismiss religion absolutely, but to demand a more authentic version of it than that provided by conventional Christianity, one which will address the existential doubts which trouble the soul relentlessly as a toothache. The closing critique of commonplace piety makes the foregoing allusions to the crucifixion and to the Gospel of John ironic rather than dogmatic.

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.

413 (370)
Heaven is so far of the mind . . .

A brief and radical declaration of Heaven's presence, might suggest Jesus' words in Luke 17: 21, "The kingdom of God is within you"—one of the most mystical and least dogmatically religious statements attributed to Jesus.

Dickinson concedes that a further world of deeper reality might indeed appear to be a mere fantasy, *of the mind*, insofar as it does not have any demonstrable existence outside of our thought.

In the second quatrain she makes a Kantian argument for Heaven's existence, on the basis of our capacities and longings, for which it is plausible to assert a purpose.

413 (370)
Heaven is so far of the mind . . .

Heaven is so far of the mind
that were the mind dissolved,
the site of it by architect
could not again be proved.

'Tis vast as our capacity,
as fair as our idea;
to Him of adequate desire—
no further 'tis, than here.

573 (1053)
It was a quiet way . . .

In this poem of visionary ascent, the speaker has transcended all physical limits to motion: she is taken up by God and goes *with swiftness, as of chariots,* moving unimpeded by any obstacle. Be it noted that a heavenly ascent via chariot is absent from the New Testament, and is in fact so entirely Old Testament, so firmly rooted in the first chapter of Ezekiel, that "Chariot" (Hebrew, *Merkabah*) is the general term for Jewish mysticism in the first thousand years of the Common Era.

Distance means nothing now, for the speaker glides forward with the ease *of wheels*.[1] Then the earth (*acres*) falls away below the speaker, and she is airborne (*upon an ether street*) —"ether" is properly the clear sky, the upper regions of space beyond the clouds.

[1] Rising above the laws of space, which are the pre-conditions of existence in this world, is a classic mark of mystical experience. This is what is implied by ghosts gliding rather than walking; by Jesus walking on the water ("And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out for fear," Matthew 14: 26); by the yogic powers (s*iddhi*) of Buddhist adepts, such as diving in and out of solid ground as though it were water, walking through walls, flying through the air while sitting cross-legged). I offer this excursus to establish the archetypal authenticity of Dickinson's description

573 (1053)

It was a quiet way . . .

It was a quiet way
He asked if I was his,
I made no answer of the tongue
but answer of the eyes;
and then He bore me on
before this mortal noise
with swiftness, as of chariots,
and distance, as of wheels.
This world did drop away
as acres from the feet
of one that leaneth from balloon
upon an ether street.

The gulf, which means "profound depth," like "the deep," is a grand way of saying "the sea." The metaphorical ocean of the world she knew is now left behind, and she advances on undiscovered country (*the continents were new*).

This is an experience of *Eternity* before death (*before Eternity was due*. The metaphysical definition of Eternity is not endless time, but the abolition of time: in Aquinas' formulation, eternity is a *nunc stans*, an "ever-enduring Now." The sunrise of illumination did not give place to profane time, but became a steady state, *fastened it (*self) *in dawn*.

The gulf behind was not,
the continents were new,
eternity it was before
eternity was due.
No seasons were to us,
it was not night nor morn,
but sunrise stopped upon the place
and fastened it in dawn.

630 (506)
The soul's superior instants . . .

The soul's superior instants are periods of exaltation. Though the use of *superior* to mean "heavenly" or "spiritual" was obsolete by Dickinson's time, that is the sense in play here. They are *instants* by contrast with the *eternity* experienced in the final stanza.

Such experiences are solitary, and involve an *infinite* distancing from mundane concerns (*earth's occasion*) because one is no longer subject to the finite, contingent, determined circumstances of physical existence.

Raised above the material world, the soul needn't take any account of earthly limitations (*to too remote a height for lower recognition*)—she senses no limit to her power (*her omnipotent*). A yogi or a shaman would immediately understand what such omnipotence means: ability to fly, to understand the language of animals, &c. [2]

In the present poem, the speaker is no longer a physical being but an *apparition*, a spiritual entity that is physically visible, but bodiless and *subject* only to the wind, the *autocratic air*, like smoke or scent. This transcendence of the limits of physical form is another yogic power.

Such is the revelation (*disclosure*) of the spiritual realm (*eternity*, *the colossal substance of immortality*) to God's chosen (*favorites (a few)*).

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[2] Dickinson does in fact lay claim to such powers in her poems. Let the reader call to mind the many poems in which Dickinson conveys the communication and thoughts of birds, flowers, and winds and clouds, and understand why these verses are so different from the cutesy nature poems of her contemporaries. As to the ability to fly, the following poem (631, *I saw no way . . .*) is unambiguous.

630 (506)
The soul's superior instants . . .

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.

633 (378)
I saw no way . . .

This amazing account of a shamanic ascent to the heavens, comparable in its grandeur to that described by Dante in *Paradiso*, is perhaps the most extraordinary miniature depiction in world literature.

The speaker felt cut off from any higher reality. The path to it was lost (*I saw no way*) the heavens seemed shut to her (*stitched*). The *columns* which she felt *close* her in may have been those of a church building, or the "pillars" of traditional belief, or the four elements that support physical existence.

Then the planet seemed to rotate rapidly beneath her feet (*the earth reversed her hemispheres*) and she found herself on the top of the world, a position adjacent to outer space (she *touched the universe*). Next it seemed that the earth fell away (*and back it slid*) beneath her as she floated free.

She rose so far above the earth that she saw her size in relation to the entire planet (*a speck upon a ball*), then soared to the outer limits of existence (*circumference*).

She passed metaphorically *beyond the dip of bell* (this refers to bell-buoys, placed to guide boats) into uncharted cosmos.

633 (378)

I saw no way . . .

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.

690 (624)
Forever is composed of Nows . . .

Here *forever* means eternity. Dickinson distinguishes a transcendent state from the mortal condition defined by time and space.

We may approximate the notion of eternity by thinking of its as an infinite extension of time (*'tis not a different time except for infiniteness*.)

Eternity is likewise liberated from spatial limits. Its extent *(latitude*) is also endless.

To understand what she means, Dickinson suggests that we first suspend disbelief (*without debate*) and picture *this experienced Here*, our present location in time and space. Then we should subtract from *this experienced Here* every notion of measured time, every *pause*, all *dates, months, years* and even holidays (*celebrated days*). Once we allow such reckonings to evaporate (*dissolve* and *exhale*), we can begin to understand the relation of sacred time, the *anno Domini* or "year of Our Lord," to ordinary time, the secular *year*.

690 (624)
Forever is composed of Nows . . .

Forever is composed of Nows,
'tis not a different time
except for infiniteness –
and latitude of home.

From this experienced Here
remove the dates, to these
let months dissolve in further months
and years exhale in years

without debate or pause
or celebrated days:
no different our years would be
from *anno Dominies*.

740 (789)
On a columnar self . . .

The only obscurity here is in the last two lines. The *assembly* is that of the saved in heaven, which is *not far off from* (the) *furthest spirit* (that is, the supreme being, *God*.)

740 (789)
On a columnar self . . .

On a columnar self,
how ample to rely
in tumult or extremity.
How good the certainty

that lever cannot pry
and wedge cannot divide
conviction, that granitic base.
Though none be on our side,

suffice us for a crowd
ourself and rectitude
and that assembly not far off
from furthest spirit, God.

776 (741)
Drama's vitallest expression . . .

This poem is Dickinson's spiritual declaration of independence. The meaning and grandeur of life is to be found in the everyday, *the common day* which is always around us (*that arise and set about us*). Forget about life's high-literary onstage imitation (*other tragedy perish in the recitation*), the greatest performance is that carried out in real life by living people (*this the best enact*) without an audience to applaud, or connoisseurs to appreciate from the best seats (*the boxes*). In this world there is no shortage of real life Hamlets and Juliets unrecorded by a Shakespeare.

With the phrase *infinite enacted in the human heart*, Dickinson proclaims that lived life is holy, in itself, and not a mere prologue to a post-mortem pay-off.

776 (741)
Drama's vitallest expression . . .

Drama's vitallest expression
is the common day
that arise and set about us.
Other tragedy

perish in the recitation,
this the best enact
when the audience is scattered
and the boxes shut.

"Hamlet" to himself were Hamlet
had not Shakespeare wrote;
though the "Romeo" left no record
of his Juliet,

it were infinite enacted
in the human heart,
only theatre recorded
owner cannot shut.

849 (797)
By my window have I for scenery . . .

The pine tree here is a metaphor so metaphysically extended that we may fairly class it with the World Trees of mythology, the Norse Yggdrasil and the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

The world tree in the thirty-second canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*, planted in the Garden of Eden on the mesa top of Mount Purgatory, provides an instructive parallel to Dickinson's pine.

> Its top was in the ground, its roots were in the air,
> the upside-down and inverted mirror image
> of a tree from our world; evidently flora
> native to the beyond,
> a spirit tree,
> soaring great as its meaning, taller
> than any physical arrow could fly,
> in fact, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,
> which Adam ate, for which we die.
>
> To this, that fabled great Banyan tree of India,
> likewise rooted upwards and branching down,
> whose leaves are the Vedas — was but a shrub!
>
> The four-and-twenty elders, who are living scriptures,
> roared this song in a circle around
> the almighty arbor, the tree of the world . . .

Dickinson's pine, whose trunk is described as a *stem*, fills the window with its *sea* of needles. Though such unreflective creatures as birds and farmers may *deem it* merely *a pine*, it is an ocean, that is, a symbol of the infinite.

849 (797)

By my window have I for scenery . . .

By my window have I for scenery
just a sea with a stem.
If the bird and the farmer deem it a pine,
the opinion will serve for them.

This sea *has no* apparent *port* by which it may be entered: a delicious irony, since this very poem is the harbor entrance to this infinite. *Nor*, Dickinson continues, does it have a *line*, that is, a fleet of ships in ordered row lined up at its docks—except for *the jays that split their route to the sky*, that is, who part the air before them as a ship's prow would the waves. The *squirrel* can reach the tree's high-up branch, its *giddy peninsula*, by wending its way through the midst of this green sea of needles.

This evergreen ocean has as its shores (*inlands . . . upper side*) *the earth* below and *the sun* above. The air that passes through the tree is pine-scented (*spice . . . odors*), thus the metaphor of merchant ships and the spice trade.

The sound of the wind through its boughs is a music beyond the power of human speech (*dumb*) to define.

This music prompts a sense of the divine (*faith*), which deepens our ability to see God as present in the natural world (*suggest to our sight*), so that even when we no longer see this visionary tree, we preserve the *conviction* that we have indeed seen God (*somewhere met that immortality*).

The final stanza plays on the phrase "fellow of the Royal Academy of Science," to pose the question, was this vision a scientific fact, not an illusion? To which Dickinson makes the reply, such conscious perceptions (*apprehensions*) are the way God introduces us to spiritual reality, and should be regarded as holy.

It has no port, nor a line, but the jays
that split their route to the sky,
or a squirrel, whose giddy peninsula
may be easier reached this way—

For inlands, the Earth is the under side
and the upper side is the sun,
and its commerce—if commerce it have—of spice—
I infer from the odors borne.

Of its voice to affirm when the wind is within—
can the dumb define the divine?
The definition of melody is
that definition is none.

It suggests to our faith,
they suggest to our sight.
When the latter is put away,
I shall meet with conviction I somewhere met
that immortality.

Was the pine at my window a "Fellow
Of the Royal Infinity"?
Apprehensions are God's introductions,
to be hallowed accordingly.

(1004)

There is no silence. . .

This is the silence of God. It was in fact famously given utterance by Nietzsche, whose "God is dead," if it did not actually discourage nature, did succeed in haunting the world, for a century, with a sense of loss.

1004 (1004)

There is no silence. . .

There is no silence in the earth so silent
as that endured
which, uttered, would discourage nature
and haunt the world.

1020 (1056)
There is a zone . . .

Mystical reality transcends the limits of space and of time. Dickinson takes account of this by confounding the two. The region or tract (*zone*) here is described entirely in temporal terms. Space has turned into time.

The *solstice* is the longest or shortest day of the year, these two could be seen as the most irregular days occurring in the otherwise *even years*.

But the regularization of time in this poem is far more extreme than evening up the solstices. Time itself has stopped at a *perpetual* hour of noon. The *seasons wait*, *summer* has became fixed and permanent *in summer*. This state of affairs will continue forever, till the *centuries* of profane time, in which *June* is followed by July and *August*, have ceased, and human consciousness becomes absolute and shadowless, a *noon* of pure awareness.

1020 (1056)
There is a zone . . .

There is a zone whose even years
no solstice interrupt,
whose sun constructs perpetual noon,
whose perfect seasons wait,

whose summer set in summer, till
the centuries of June
and centuries of August cease,
and consciousness is noon.

1068 (949)
Under the light . . .

This parade of paradoxes begins with a simple verbal ambiguity. The dead are, technically "under the sun," but that does not mean they are still in the sun's light. They are far, but in a way that defeats any notion of distance, even that of a light-year (a term in use by the 1850's, thus accessible to Dickinson for this 1865 poem).

A *comet's chimney* is a very indirect expression for its height and flaming nature; a *cubit's head* means the upper limit of our ability to measure distance.

A disc to the distance is a wheeled vehicle that could carry us that far.

This poem is a poetic sounding of the limits of metaphysical knowledge, rather more in the spirit of Kant than of Blake.

1068 (949)
Under the light . . .

Under the light, yet under,
under the grass and the dirt,
under the beetle's cellar
under the clover's root;

further than arm could stretch
were it giant-long,
further than sunshine could
were the day year-long;

over the light, yet over,
over the arc of the bird,
over the comet's chimney,
over the cubit's head;

further than guess can gallop,
further than riddle ride—
oh, for a disc to the distance
between ourselves and the dead!

1245 (1235)
Like rain it sounded till it curved . . .

The first onset of wind was so sudden that it sounded, from inside houses, as though it might be the coming of a rainstorm, but when the wind shifted (*curved*) and continued to blow noisily without the accompanying patter of raindrops, it was understood to be just wind.

The wind flowed by with the smooth ease of a liquid (*walked as wet as any wave*)—but this prelude was a dry wind scouring rather than moistening (*swept as dry as sand*).

When the wind was well past, thunder sounded, with a roar like that of approaching armies (*a coming as of hosts was heard, that was indeed the rain*).

The water *warbled in the road*, that is, made sound with rapid modulations of pitch. The rainwater now rushed down from the hills like liquid from a barrel when the plug is pulled out. (*Spigot* still meant plug in Dickinson's time, though nowadays it may be used to mean "faucet.")

When Dickinson says the rain *stirred . . . the sites of centers*, she probably means it moved various landmarks, a "tall tale" statement for which we should have been prepared by the line *it loosened acres, lifted seas*.

Elijah left the world in a whirlwind (Dickinson's *wheel of cloud*), riding a chariot of fire drawn by flaming horses (2 Kings: 2). The aptness of the allusion is not exhausted by this: one of Elijah's signature miracles is the bringing of rain (1 Kings: 18).

1245 (1235)

Like rain it sounded till it curved . . .

Like rain it sounded till it curved,
and then we knew 'twas wind;
it walked as wet as any wave
but swept as dry as sand.
When it had pushed itself away
to some remotest plain,
a coming as of hosts was heard—
that was indeed the rain.
It filled the wells, it pleased the pools,
it warbled in the road,
it pulled the spigot from the hills
and let the floods abroad.
It loosened acres, lifted seas,
the sites of centers stirred,
then like Elijah rode away
upon a wheel of cloud.

1523 (1448)
How soft a caterpillar steps!

A poem of exquisite observation. *Plush* is cloth with a nap longer and softer than velvet, giving it an almost fur-like quality.

The subtly undulant motion of the creature finds unexpectedly auditory expression in *how soft a caterpillar steps.*

The otherworldly weirdness of caterpillars, which becomes more apparent the more closely one observes them, is conveyed by *my slow terrestrial eye* and *from such a velvet world it came*.

1523 (1448)

How soft a caterpillar steps!

How soft a caterpillar steps!
I found one on my hand.
From such a velvet world it comes,
such plushes at command.
Its soundless travels just arrest
my slow, terrestrial eye.
Intent upon its own career,
what use has it for me?

1532 (1503)

More than the grave is closed to me . . .

This poem from 1880, when Dickinson was fifty, which appears skeptical to the casual reader, is entirely consonant with her earlier mystical flights. Christianity regards the soul's immortality as of the utmost importance. Islam follows Christianity in this, though the Koran's view of the afterlife has struck most Christians as being somewhat deficient in transcendence.

The Jews, on the contrary, were never overly concerned with postmortem existence. Some seven hundred years elapsed between Moses and the development of such beliefs in the Second Temple period, which began around 500 BCE. And even then, doctrines like the resurrection of the body didn't become dogma until the first century CE, and were not universally accepted even then.

The Jews didn't go out of their way to deny such ideas any more than they were concerned to affirm them. Dickinson, whose religious ideas came from the Hebrew Bible, and who rejected Christian belief except as a source of picturesque metaphors, logically arrived at a worldview that is Jewish in its existential emphases.

Jews insist on the supreme moral value of life in this world. This makes guessing speculations about an afterlife seem irrelevant. And this is Dickinson's viewpoint expressed in the poem's first three lines: our inability to know anything about the afterlife, *that eternity to which the grave adheres*. Dickinson's moral being does not depend on a future existence (*I cling to nowhere till I fall*). Whether she dies expecting her reward will be nothing or everything (*the crash of nothing, yet of all*) makes no difference (*how similar appears*).

1532 (1503)

More than the grave is closed to me . . .

More than the grave is closed to me,
the grave and that eternity
to which the grave adheres.

I cling to nowhere till I fall:
the crash of nothing, yet of all,
how similar appears.

1627 (1576)
The spirit lasts, but in what mode?

This late poem (from 1885, when Dickinson was 55, a year before her death) offers a summary of her mystical thinking. She makes the subtle argument that the activity of matter, sufficient to account for noise, cannot explain the origin of speech, music, or consciousness.

She goes on to make the even more interesting argument that spirit and matter are necessary to each other (*estranged, what would the either be?*) This is entheism—that is, the belief that the spiritual and material worlds are not identical, but form a perfect unity. This is the belief of Moses and the Prophets: that God's secret name is "Existence." (The Hebrew name for God, YHVH, sometimes Englished as "Jehovah," is a form of the verb "to be").

This is a view of physical existence very different from the Christian or Islamic ones, which rely on an afterworld to atone for this one. The Koran is one long apocalypse, a single sustained insistence on the Day of Judgement and postmortem accountability. The New Testament promises apocalypse through all four Gospels, and if Paul's letters hadn't been interpolated, the fifth Gospel would have been the Apocalypse of John.

Dickinson is amusedly unconcerned with the afterlife. Does the departed soul know what becomes of its dead body (*does that know, now that which to this is done)*? Does it cease to exist entirely (*or does it cease*)? Is there a resurrection of the dead when those dead now and those to be shall be gathered for judgement (*resuming at a mutual date with every future one*)?

1627 (1576)

The spirit lasts, but in what mode?

The spirit lasts, but in what mode?
Below, the body speaks
but as the Spirit furnishes;
apart, it never talks.
The music in the violin
does not emerge alone,
but arm in arm with touch, yet touch
alone is not a tune.
The Spirit lurks within the Flesh
like tides within the sea
that make the water live—estranged,
what would the either be?
Does that know, now (or does it cease?)
that which to this is done,
resuming at a mutual date
with every future one?
Instinct pursues the adamant,
exacting this reply:
adversity if it may be, or
wild prosperity.

Though we cannot help wondering, the problem is impenetrable (instinct pursues the adamant). Dickinson makes the jocose observation that life after death may not actually be desirable (*adversity if it may be, or wild prosperity*. A *prognostic* is a pre-indication or omen.

Dickinson so liked these last four lines than she used them again in two other poems written in the same year. The repetition suggests her pounding on the door of a mausoleum, demanding an answer that could not come. In a way, this is the most Christian feature of her mystical poetry. A truly Jewish poet would not have been troubled by such questions.

The rumor's gate was shut so tight
before my mind was sown,
not even a prognostic's push
could make a dent thereon.

Susan Gilbert

Emily Dickinson was a lesbian in a time when such love was entirely forbidden. To express herself, Dickinson had to hide under altered pronouns and misdirecting punctuation.

The object of her affections, Susan Gilbert, was married to Dickinson's brother Austin, and lived next door.

We don't know much about Gilbert, but the details we have provide a portrait that tracks with Dickinson's account of hapless passion. Gilbert was a vain, beautiful, charismatic woman, who was unenthusiastic about sex with her husband (she called it a "low practice") and gave him three children with the greatest reluctance—she aborted four others.

Austin, exasperated by Gilbert's ambivalence, had an affair with Mabel Todd—who published Dickinson's verse after the poet's death—a task initially entrusted to Gilbert, who kept saying she "would" but never did.

Gilbert was a brilliant hostess and socialite. Dickinson describes her as "overcharged with scintillation." Austin describes her circle in Amherst as given to "sprees" and "riots" that turned the house into a "tavern."

From these domestic details we see Gilbert as the sort of person who doesn't have or want friends or lovers—only conquests.

Dickinson was not by nature shy or tongue-tied. Her letters make it clear that she was fascinating and charismatic in her own right. But she gave her heart to Gilbert, who enjoyed the adoration without understanding either its emotional or literary value. And so Dickinson became the reclusive old maid dressed in white, Susan Gilbert's virgin votary.

165 (175)
I have never seen volcanoes . . .

The volcano poems, and the justly famous *Loaded Gun* poem, are the tip of a psychological iceberg. One is tempted to explain their obvious anger in social terms—as a reaction to the constraints then upon every aspect of women's liberty. Undoubtedly these frustrations added fuel. But I doubt the poems would have all their power were the motivation purely political.

I suggest that repressed and frustrated erotic longing is the mainspring of the volcanic poems. The description of the fires as hungry suggest longing as much as violence, and the words *smouldering*, *palpitating*, and *loving* here, imply sexuality more than geology.

The last three stanzas of this poem are rhetorical questions. We should supply a "I wonder" before each "if."

The first two of these stanzas both ask, may we not assume, on the analogy of volcanic activity, that long repression of strong feeling will likewise result in a destructive eruption?

The last stanza asks whether we not also assume that on some metaphorical Day of Judgement, (*Resumption Morn*), a psychologist, an archaeologist of the emotions, *a loving antiquary*, may yet take up (the literal meaning of "resume") what was lost, and gladly return to conscious awareness the entire buried history, the lost *Pompeii* of this psycho-history?

165 (175)

I have never seen volcanoes . . .

I have never seen volcanoes,
but when travellers tell
how those old phlegmatic mountains,
usually so still,

bear within appalling ordnance,
fire and smoke and gun,
taking villages for breakfast,
and appalling men . . .

—if the stillness is volcanic
in the human face
when upon a pain titanic
features keep their place,

—if at length the smouldering anguish
will not overcome
and the palpitating vineyard
in the dust, be thrown?

—if some loving antiquary,
on Resumption Morn,
will not cry with joy "Pompeii"
to the hills return!"?

200 (208)
The rose did caper on her cheek . . .

This is a classic poem of lesbian-bisexual jealousy, a theme made immortal by Sappho. Dickinson here describes her attraction to Susan Gilbert, who married Dickinson's brother Austin.

In the first line, a blush (the *rose*) suddenly appeared (*caper* means leap) in Gilbert's cheek.

200 (208)

The rose did caper on her cheek . . .

The rose did caper on her cheek,
her bodice rose and fell;
her pretty speech, like drunken men,
did stagger pitiful;

her fingers fumbled at her work.
her needle would not go—
what ailed so smart a little maid,
it puzzled me to know

till opposite I spied a cheek
that bore another rose,
just opposite, another speech
that like the drunkard goes,

a vest that like her bodice, danced
to the immortal tune
till those two troubled little clocks
ticked softly into one.

203 (210)
The thought beneath so slight a film . . .

A film is here "a slight veil or covering of mist, haze or the like." What is being obscured is the attraction between two women, which neither of them dares to more openly express. But, for the eye practiced in reading such signs, the meaning *is more distinctly seen*. Just as when *laces just* (barely, teasingly) *reveal the surge* (the swell) of a bosom, or mists the Apennine mountain range in Italy.

203 (210)

The thought beneath so slight a film . . .

The thought beneath so slight a film
is more distinctly seen,
as laces just reveal the surge,
or mists, the Apennine.

205 (211)
Come slowly, Eden!

The Yellow Jessamine is a flowering vine that covers fences and trees in the American south. Its long, trumpet-shaped blooms have a candy-like smell. The poem is a lesbian valentine in the style of Georgia O'Keefe.

205 (211)
Come slowly, Eden!

Come slowly, Eden!
Lips unused to thee,
bashful, sip thy jessamines
as the fainting bee,

reaching late his flower,
round her chamber hums,
counts his nectars,
enters–and is lost in balms.

207 (214)
I taste a liquor never brewed . . .

Tankards scooped in pearl probably refers to ornamental cups made from nautilus shells, which were often featured in a *Wunderkammer*, a private collection of natural and artistic curiosities. The passion for such collecting extended from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, and nautilus cups are not infrequently found in Dutch still lives.

Frankfort berries are grapes from the Frankfurt region, still synonymous with Rhine wine.

Inns of molten blue are of course skies; *molten* is an oblique way of saying "liquid," which can mean clear, transparent, or bright.

The *foxglove* is a plant with tall stems from which clusters of bell-shaped purple flowers hang in late spring. *Butterflies* nourish themselves principally from flower-nectar, which they drink by extending a long proboscis.

A moment's reflection will understand the "liquor never brewed" tasted from a shell-like cup, as a parallel to the flower "nectars" of the preceding poem. Dickinson, like Shakespeare, had something of the schoolboy about her, and enjoyed a bit of polished bawdry, of which the parade example is poem 1482 (1377)

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
That lawful Orchards mocks—
How luscious lies within the Pod
The Pea that Duty locks—

207 (214)

I taste a liquor never brewed . . .

I taste a liquor never brewed,
from tankards scooped in pearl–
not all the Frankfurt berries
yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
and debauchee of dew,
reeling thro' endless summer days
from inns of molten blue.

When "landlords" turn the drunken bee
out of the foxglove's door—
when butterflies renounce their "drams"–
I shall but drink the more

till seraphs swing their snowy hats
and saints to windows run
to see the little tippler
leaning against the sun!

242 (244)

It is easy to work when the soul is at play . . .

Physical pain in the flesh (*rind*) or bones is a straightforward (*simple*) torment, but mental suffering (*gimblets among the nerve*) is a far subtler (*daintier)* and far frightening (*terribler*) affair.

Gimblet is an eccentric spelling of the boring tool, the gimlet.

The glove here is the physical body. The characterization of this pain as *a panther* hidden in a *glove* suggests the pain of anger suppressed, all the more terrible for being daintily gloved over by good manners and social constraint.

Here, as in the volcano poems, the power comes from its suppressed sexual undercurrent. An awareness of this subtext adds startling clarity to the two final lines

242 (244)

It is easy to work when the soul is at play . . .

It is easy to work when the soul is at play–
but when the soul is in pain,
the hearing him put his playthings up
makes work difficult then.

It is simple, to ache in the bone or the rind,
but gimblets among the nerve
mangle daintier, terribler,
like a panther in the glove.

314 (254)
"Hope" is the thing with feathers . . .

This 1862 poem, written when Dickinson was 32, occurs in a series of poems describing her hopeless love for Gilbert. This is not, properly speaking, a poem about Hope at all, which is why Dickinson puts *"Hope"* in quotation marks—it's a poem about doomed, unspeakable (*the tune without the words*) erotic longing, which persists despite the lack of so much as *a crumb* of encouragement. If we understand *the thing with feathers* as Cupid rather than a moral abstraction, we understand the inner heat of the poem—which is nonsense if we read it as a motivational pep-talk.

The identification of Hope here with Cupid gains plausibility when we bear in mind that the name "Cupid" simply means "desire" (Latin, *cupido*). To express the psychological fact of desire by its manifestation as hope, is the kind of poetic misdirection Dickinson most enjoyed.

The closing, *yet never, in extremity, it asked a crumb of me*, is a grim attestation of how little return Gilbert ever made for Dickinson's idolatrous devotion, and Dickinson's masochistic enjoyment of this neglect.

314 (254)
"Hope" is the thing with feathers . . .

"Hope" is the thing with feathers
that perches in the soul
and sings the tune without the words
and never stops at all,

and sweetest in the gale is heard
and sore must be the storm
that could abash the little bird
that kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land
and on the strangest sea,
yet never, in extremity,
it asked a crumb of me.

458 (479)
She dealt her pretty words like blades . . .

Gilbert was a narcissist, *glittering*, charismatic, and without empathy. This poem bears vivid witness to her unconscious cruelty. Dickinson deploys the verb "to wanton" with harrowing and surgical precision. It can mean "to play lasciviously or lewdly," but also "to play heedlessly or without restraint: said especially of children or young animals." Dickinson has chosen a word that telescopes into two syllables Gilbert's cynical flirtatiousness, and her *steel*, inhuman unawareness of another's feelings.

I have supplied quotation marks for the last two lines of the second stanza, which express Gilbert's point of view. She finds a *grimace*, a distortion of the countenance (*the flesh* of the face), *vulgar,* inappropriate for polite society. Gilbert is astonished at how *ill* these *creatures* (she doesn't regard others as human beings like herself) bear what she considers her fun.

In the last stanza, Dickinson replies that pain is a feeling, not a social response. *The film upon the eye* is the tears to which Dickinson has been reduced. She explains to Gilbert, who is clearly a stranger to the human condition, that this is how mortals behave—when you administer a killing pain, their eyes cloud over.

458 (479)

She dealt her pretty words like blades . . .

She dealt her pretty words like blades—
how glittering they shone!
—and every one unbared a nerve
or wantoned with a bone.

She never deemed she hurt—
that is not steel's affair.
"A vulgar grimace in the flesh—
how ill the creatures bear!"

To ache is human, not polite;
the film upon the eye:
mortality's old custom,
just locking up to die.

485 (762)
The whole of it came not at once . . .

Gilbert cruelly toyed with Dickinson's affections.

The third and fourth lines need unpacking. After a swipe of the paw (*a thrust*), the cat gives the mouse the *bliss* of an apparent chance at life, then *cauterizes* that happiness by another assault. To cauterize is to "burn or sear with a hot iron or caustic."

The *award* passed on all life is *to die*. (Here *award* means "judicial sentence.") One might accept this ruling more contentedly if it were enacted at once, rather than being drawn out in a series of mock executions (*dying half*). These make one more fully aware of one's demise when it does come (*consciouser eclipse*).

485 (762)

The whole of it came not at once . . .

The whole of it came not at once,
'twas murder by degrees;
a thrust—and then for life a chance—
the bliss to cauterize.

The cat reprieves the mouse,
she eases from her teeth
just long enough for hope to tease,
then mashes it to death.

'Tis Life's award, to die:
contenteder if once,
than dying half, then rallying
for consciouser eclipse.

488 (762)
You constituted Time.

In this poem, Dickinson says that Gilbert, though a contingent historical being (*you constituted Time*) seemed to her a manifestation of the eternal world. Gilbert was for her a face of God.

In this love Dickinson experienced the *absolute* reality, God (*Him*), transcending ordinary, merely *relative* experience. She had to *adjust* herself to this higher reality. Secular time, always experienced as fleeting, seemed to *slow* as she experienced an eternal mode of being. The term *idolatry* acknowledges that this experience of the divine is mediated through a human form.

488 (762)
You constituted Time.

You constituted Time.
I deemed Eternity
a revelation of yourself—
'twas therefore deity.

The absolute removed
the relative away
that I unto Himself adjust
my slow idolatry.

517 (601)
A still volcano, Life . . .

Suppressed anger and eros are like a volcano, of whose faint pre-eruption glimmerings we only get a *flickering* glimpse when it is sufficiently dark to set them off (*dark enough to do without erasing sight*).

A person's outward calm can be compared to the stillness before an earthquake which sets off a volcano. Those who live far in the "north" (New England) might never guess the existence of such subterranean energies. But the residents of Naples in southern Italy, home to Vesuvius, know that the mouth of a volcano may at any moment glow intensely red (*coral*), and pour out lava to carry whole cities off in fiery ooze.

There is of course more than geology at work in the *torrid symbol* of the oozing, pink (*coral*) *lips that never lie*.

517 (601)
A still volcano, Life . . .

A still volcano, Life,
that flickered in the night
when it was dark enough to do
without erasing sight—

a quiet, earthquake style,
too subtle to suspect
by natures this side Naples,
the North cannot detect—

the solemn, torrid symbol,
the lips that never lie,
whose hissing corals part and shut
and cities ooze away.

554 (398)
I had not minded walls.

The *silver* of *his silver call* means "having a clear gentle resonance like that of a silver chime; soft-toned, melodius."

The "his" pronoun is here, as often, merely camouflage. The poem is addressed to Gilbert next door (*the other side the block*).

The obstacle to love, implacable as a rock wall illimitably thick, is *a law*—the Biblical prohibition of homosexual activity, though adultery may also be implied. This law is a *cobweb* (without real basis or validity). It is *wove in adamant* because this law, false as it is, is enforced. Adamant is a mythical mineral, of fabled hardness. The same paradoxical characterization of a law that is binding but not based on reality is expressed by a *battlement of straw*.

Meshes can be the threads or cords that make up a netting, as well as the network overall. The veil, the lady imprisoned in dragon-guarded *citadel* (which is really a fortress, but in this context must mean castle)—all this courtly love imagery makes it clear that the male pronouns are just window-dressing.

Dragons in the crease pauses the momentum of the courtly-love metaphor. If this is the moat, what are dragons doing in it? The riddle is solved when we accept imagery's unmistakably lesbian emphasis. *I'd tunnel till my groove pushed sudden into* hers—an action which is met by grateful pleasure (*then my face take her recompense, the looking in his* (her) *eyes).*

The crease which is being defended by metaphorical *dragons* will bear only one interpretation, for which the complete absence of pick, spade, or auger in a poem about tunneling, has the force of a corollary.

554 (398)
I had not minded walls.

I had not minded walls.
Were universe one rock,
and far I heard his silver call
the other side the block,

I'd tunnel till my groove
pushed sudden thro' to his,
then my face take her recompense—
the looking in his eyes.

But 'tis a single hair,
a filament, a law,
a cobweb wove in adamant,
a battlement of straw,

a limit like the veil
unto the lady's face—
but every mesh a citadel,
and dragons in the crease.

611 (518)
Her sweet weight on my heart a night . . .

In this poem about an erotic dream, the correct pronoun and the intimate insight are counterbalanced by unusually puzzling language.

Dickinson's lyrics acknowledge Burns' influence from time to time by assuming the accents of a stage Scotsman, as here, where *a night* means "one night."

Dickinson has dreamed of Gilbert, and the pleasure of the dream was so intense it woke her—thus the dream-*bride had slipped away*.

611 (518)

Her sweet weight on my heart a night . . .

Her sweet weight on my heart a night
had scarcely deigned to lie
when, stirring for belief's delight,
my bride had slipped away.

Dickinson now ponders: was it real, *a dream made solid*? If so, that would be enough to make Dickinson believe that God is fair (*just, the heaven to confirm:* that is, "to confirm that heaven is just").

Or did she just dream about Gilbert (*or if myself were dreamed of her*, that is, "If I myself dreamed about her")?

Dickinson does not *presume* to decide which was true, she leaves the verdict up to God, who gave her a dream of happiness which seemed so satisfyingly real—far more so than the pallid promises of conventional religion. Her dream was *a fiction superseding faith.*

It is not for the sake of being poetically vague that Dickinson declines to decide whether the dream was "just a dream." Rather, she asserts thereby that her emotionally true dream of love is in its own way as "real" as any real event—a point on which a psychologist would concur.

The extraordinarily twisted syntax of this poem would have been even less intelligible had I left in the camouflage of eccentric punctuation. This needed to be standardized in the interests of the poem's being readable.

But we must take account of this deliberate deformation of the texts. It is dreadful testimony to Dickinson's need to conceal her lesbianism. Repression produced desires so cruelly corseted that the verse escaped her from between em-dashes, as if in a series of gasps.

If ’twas a dream made solid, just,
the Heaven to confirm,
or if myself were dreamed of her—
the power to presume

with Him remain who unto me
gave, even as to all,
a fiction superseding faith
by so much as ’twas real.

764 (754)
My life had stood, a loaded gun . . .

This phallic phantasy of becoming a powerful firearm is to be placed in the same mountain range as the volcano poems. If the testimony of the shot's echo (*the mountains straight reply*) doesn't convince you my geography is sound, the emotional fire, the *cordial* ("of or belonging to the heart") flash (*light*) of the firing, glows with the pleasure of a *Vesuvian face.*

The firearm's defensive fellowship is entirely comparable to sleeping together on a down mattress (*'tis better than the eider duck's deep pillow to have shared*.)

The *yellow eye* in the fifth stanza is again the flash from the barrel. The *emphatic thumb* isn't on the trigger, it would have to be a finger for that. Thumb here may simply mean "touch," but I would not rule out a phallic metaphor in a poem which is an extended phallic fantasy.

764 (754)
My life had stood, a loaded gun . . .

My life had stood, a loaded gun,
in corners—till a day
the owner passed, identified,
and carried me away;

and now we roam in sov'reign woods,
and now we hunt the doe,
and every time I speak for him
the mountains straight reply;

and do I smile, such cordial light
upon the valley glow,
it is as a Vesuvian face
had let its pleasure through;

and when at night, our good day done,
I guard my master's head,
'tis better than the eider duck's
deep pillow to have shared.

To foe of his I'm deadly foe,
none stir the second time
on whom I lay a yellow eye
or an emphatic thumb.

In this context we might also consider a possible double entendre in *to die*. The use of this verb to mean "orgasm," common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is not unknown in this sense even in the twentieth, and Dickinson cannot have been unaware that the word could take this tint. The phrase *the power to kill without the power to die* would then imply the power to express sexual frustration through aggression and not the power to obtain sexual release.

This interpretation should not be taken reductively: it only suggests an unconscious subtext, which helps account for the weird charisma of the poem. We should hardly prize this composition as highly as we do if it were simply about a gun!

To ignore the phallic fantasy likewise misses some of the poem's lesbian glamour. It touches on the archetype of Artemis, the armed virgin huntress, who has, in George Eliot's splendid phrase "a certain fierceness of maidenhood in her."

Though I than he may longer live,
he longer must than I—
for I have but the power to kill
without the power to die.

1094 (887)

We outgrow love like other things . . .

Disenchantment is one of the phases of love here, and usually it describes more a wish or a decision than a state attained.

1094 (887)

We outgrow love like other things . . .

We outgrow love like other things
and put it in the drawer,
till it an antique fashion shows
like costumes grandsires wore.

1314 (1260)
Because that you are going . . .

This difficult poem is Dickinson's farewell to Gilbert. Dickinson died in 1886, at the age of 56, and Gilbert lived to be 83, so this is an elegy, not for the person, but for the love. The poignance of some of the lines (*until the realm of you; our confiscated gods*) makes it clear that Dickinson's deepest feelings were involved here.

This poem, with 488 (765) *You Constituted Time . . .* and 1274 (1219) *Now I knew I lost her. . .* form a triptych, one might say an altarpiece, joined by the word *idolatry* in the two earlier poems and the phrase *confiscated gods* here.

The poem is a masterpiece, as fine as the best of John Donne, which indeed it much resembles in its elaborate metaphysical images and elliptical syntax.

Dickinson acknowledges that someday, despite her nearly religious devotion (*however absolute*) to Gilbert, she will lose Gilbert to death, and be left behind to ponder her departure (*overlook your track*).

Dickinson observes with her usual playful irony that *however first* (however soon) that day comes, it will also be the last (*final)* in this love story, but she means to give immortal form (*suspended above mortality*) to her love, which, however long she cherished it, was all too brief (*this instant*).

The existential meaning (*significance)* of their having found one another is something God himself could not annul.

Eternity, the higher, holier form of *Existence*, which Dickinson experienced with Gilbert, will seem a baseless assumption (*presumption*) without her.

1314 (1260)

Because that you are going . . .

Because that you are going
and never coming back,
and I, however absolute,
may overlook your track—

because that death is final,
however first it be,
this instant be suspended
above mortality.

Significance that each has lived
the other to detect:
discovery not God himself
could now annihilate.

Eternity: presumption
the instant I perceive
that you, who were Existence,
yourself forgot to live.

Dickinson's happiness in this life will then appear no more than a dream, as *fictitious* as the Biblical accounts of *Paradise* seemed before Gilbert ruled Dickinson's life (*until the realm of you*), and showed what paradise was..

As for the afterlife in Heaven, *the life that is to be*, that is a prospect without interest for Dickinson (*a residence too plain*) unless God turns out to look very much like Susan Gilbert!

Anyone who doubts the existence of the soul and a life higher than the merely physical (o*f Immortality who doubts*) should trade places with Dickinson (*he may exchange with me*), and experience life as she did, shielded from mundane reality by the face of God which she saw in Gilbert's (*curtailed by your obscuring face of everything but He*).

Dickinson would be willing to set aside her skepticism regarding Christian theology (*of Heaven and Hell I also yield the right to reprehend*) if anyone provided her with a heaven in which the face of God were exchanged for that of merely mortal Gilbert (*commute this Face for His less priceless friend*).

Dickinson ends with a wickedly witty syllogism.

The New Testament provides the major premise that *God is Love*—which Dickinson supports, with the lemma that this is a legitimate inference from the Old Testament description of Jehovah as *a jealous god*—hence capable of love as we understand it.

The New Testament also provides the minor premise *that all is possible with Him*.

The conclusion is that God, since He is Himself a lover, and can do all things, will be so kind as to reunite Dickinson with Gilbert in Heaven, recognizing her idolatrous love of another woman as legitimate and holy.

The “life that is” will then have been
a thing I never knew,
as Paradise fictitious,
until the realm of you;

the “life that is to be,” to me,
a residence too plain,
unless in my Redeemer’s face
I recognize your own.

Of Immortality who doubts,
he may exchange with me,
curtailed by your obscuring face
of everything but He;

of Heaven and Hell I also yield
the right to reprehend
to whoso would commute this Face
for His less priceless friend.

If “God is Love,” as He admits,
(we think that he must be,
because, He is a “jealous God”
He tells us certainly);

if “all is possible with” Him,
as He besides concedes,
He will refund us finally
our confiscated gods.