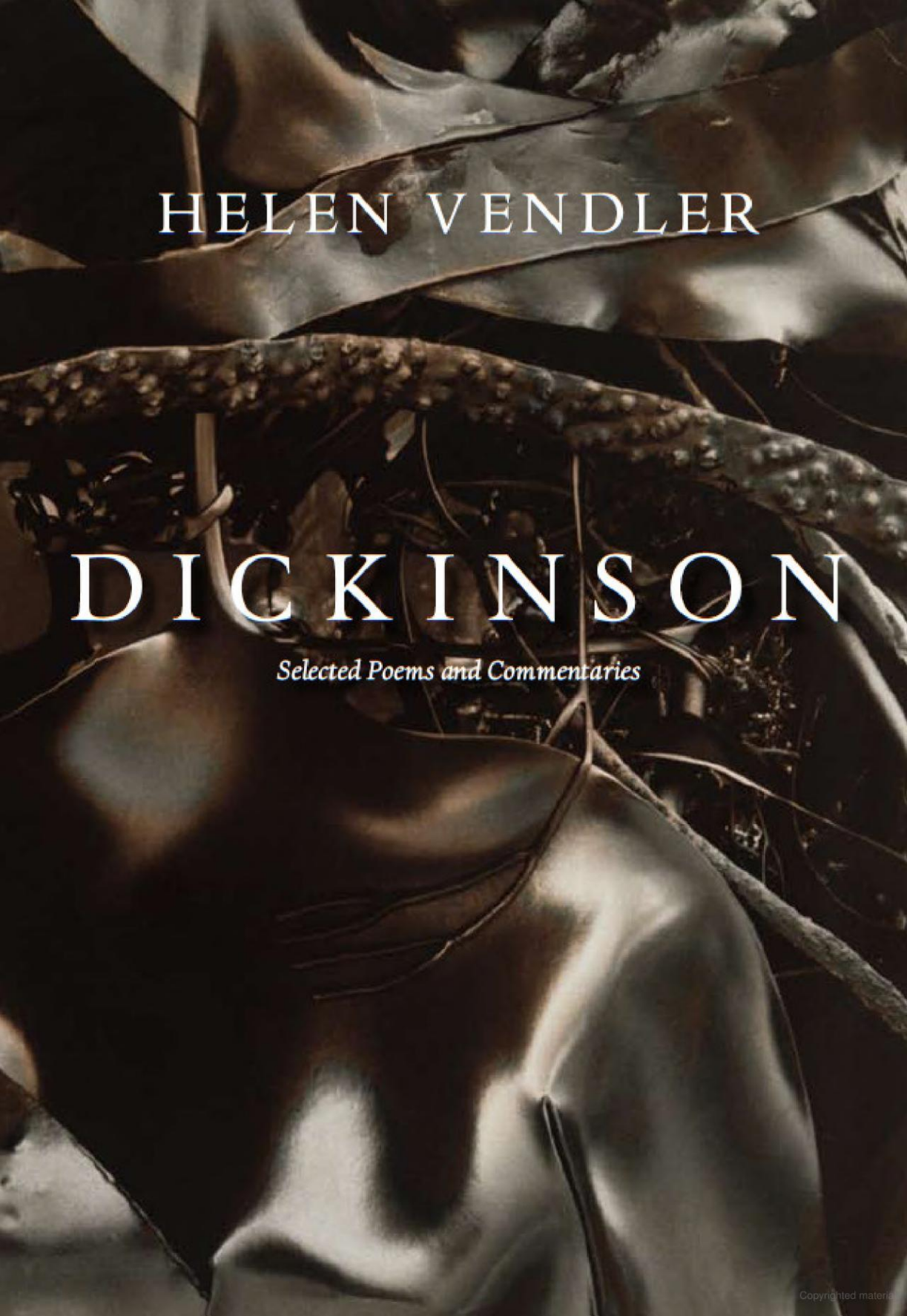

HELEN VENDLER

# DICKINSON

*Selected Poems and Commentaries*

# Dickinson

## *Selected Poems and Commentaries*

HELEN VENDLER

*The Belknap Press of*
Harvard University Press
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND
2010

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Dickinson, Emily, 1830–1886.
[Poems. Selections]
Dickinson : selected poems and commentaries / Helen Vendler.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-674-04867-6 (alk. paper)
1. Dickinson, Emily, 1830–1886—Criticism and interpretation.
I. Vendler, Helen, 1933– II. Title.

PS1541.A6 2010
811′.4—dc22 2010007090

# Contents

# Dickinson

# Introduction

## *Dickinson the Writer*

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) bequeathed to us nearly 1,800 poems; in some passionate years she wrote almost a poem a day. Like all capacious writers, she baffles complete understanding: to enter her poetics entirely a reader would have to know by heart (and by ear) all her poems. Ideally, too, her reader should possess the King James Bible as firmly as she did, and should have read the poetry of the English past as fervently as she had: she knew Shakespeare, Herbert, Vaughan, Milton, Wordsworth, James Thomson, Keats, George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and others. She had also read the famous male and female American poets of her day, mentioning in her poetry and letters Longfellow, Whittier, and Bryant. (She even mentioned Whitman, but only to say she had not read him, having heard that he was "disgraceful.")[1] Yet readers worldwide, even when they have lacked her background, have flocked to her poems, responding to her candor, her grief, and her wit. This selection of 150 poems by Dickinson, accompanied by a short Commentary on each, aims to bring readers to a deeper acquaintance with Dickinson the writer, the inventive reconceiver and linguistic shaper of her perennial themes: nature, death, religion, love, and the workings of the mind and of thought. This is a book to be browsed in, as the reader becomes interested in one or another of the poems commented on here.

The Dickinson household received the literary magazines of the day, and it was in one of these—the *Atlantic Monthly* of April 1862—that Dickinson read an article entitled "Letter to a Young Contributor," written by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Desperate for a literary eye to look at her poems, the

1. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 3 vols., L 261.

thirty-two-year-old Dickinson (representing herself as younger in the art of poetry than she actually was) wrote a letter (unsigned) to Higginson asking him to tell her whether her poetry "breathed" (L 260). She enclosed four poems on separate sheets of paper, and added, in a small envelope, her calling card. This brave act began her most important literary correspondence. Dickinson later told Higginson he had saved her life by responding to her plea.

Higginson, seeing the eccentricity of Dickinson's poems, made (as she might have expected) editorial suggestions that she gracefully acknowledged but did not obey. When he hinted that she might be seeking publication, she said that publication was as foreign to her mind "as Firmament to Fin - " (L 265). Even so, her longing for an audience is manifest in such poems as "This is my letter to the World" and in her dissemination of much of her verse in private letters. Her sense of her own genius led her to write to Higginson, "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - " (L 265). But Dickinson's suspicion that her poems would not please publishers was ratified when, after her death, her first editors emended her poems considerably—not only by substituting accepted punctuation for her running dashes and regulating her metrics, but also by flattening her uncommon diction and censoring her bolder speculations. In sending scores of poems to her extended family and friends, she carefully selected, among her poems, those that she allowed to be "published" in this intimate way; she did not forward her more irreligious poems, nor her most macabre or explicitly erotic ones. It was not until 1955 that a three-volume scholarly edition of Dickinson's poems by Thomas H. Johnson appeared, and not until 2007 that Johnson's chronology was corrected by the ingenious work of Ralph W. Franklin (who determined from watermarks and pinholes the order of the sheets of paper that Dickinson had folded and sewed together in the little booklets now called "fascicles"). My texts here follow, and are cued by poem number to, Franklin's one-volume *Reading Edition* (1999); readers wishing to see the many arresting variants of the poems, some of which I quote in the Commentaries, should consult Franklin's three-volume *Variorum Edition* (1998).[2]

2. Franklin's *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson,* in two volumes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), reproduces chronologically and in their original order the manuscripts of the poet's forty sewn fascicles and fifteen unsewn "sets," all presenting copies of poems of which

In choosing the 150 poems for inclusion here I wanted to exhibit many different aspects of the poet's work as a writer, from her first-person poems to the poems of grand abstraction, from her ecstatic verses to her unparalleled depictions of emotional numbness, from her comic anecdotes to her painful poems of aftermath. I have included many of the familiar poems, but I have wanted to make space, too, for daring poems that have rarely been anthologized or taught in school, and so have not reached a large general audience. There are poems of varying achievement here, the lesser ones included to show the conventional or occasional Dickinson, the greater ones to sustain her right to fame.

Dickinson the writer: How do we characterize her? She is epigrammatic, terse, abrupt, surprising, unsettling, flirtatious, savage, winsome, metaphysical, provocative, blasphemous, tragic, funny—and the list of adjectives could be extended, since we have almost 1,800 poems to draw on. What surprised (and still tends to surprise) readers was that Dickinson's mature poems were all so *brief.* Many of the writers admired by Dickinson had embarked ambitiously on epics, dramas, long narratives, sonnet sequences, and dramatic monologues, yet Dickinson never attempted such genres. Her tenacity in keeping to a miniature form caused some readers, even in the twentieth century, to patronize her work. She seems to have asked herself that fundamental question of the choice of size—why such short poems?—and answered it in a remarkable lyric, "Ashes denote that Fire was - " (*1097). Her poems, she says—defending their reduced form—are the Ashes of a previous conflagration that destroyed "the Departed Creature" now dead (although that Creature, at death, had briefly "hovered" over the Ashes of her former self). To understand the vanished Creature of whom the Ashes are the residue, one must become a Chemist, and deduce from the remaining Carbonates the nature of the person consumed by the Fire:

> Ashes denote that Fire was -
> Revere the Grayest Pile
> For the Departed Creature's sake
> That hovered there awhile -

---

she had discarded prior drafts, although revisions continued to be inscribed in some of these fair copies.

Adjust the Pace - elude the Coarse -
Escape the lurking Wrong -

We can see why Dickinson (like so many earlier poets) was drawn to the symbolic plane of the Flower: its maneuvers could present a light sketch of the strenuousness of self-authentication, which elsewhere—as in "Shall I take thee, the Poet said" (*1243)—she treated on an exalted religious plane, rewarding the Poet with a Vision endorsed by Cherubim, those angels nearest the seat of God.

Dickinson chose a secluded life; she never married, and lived till her death with her parents and her sister Lavinia in the family house in Amherst, Massachusetts. Only after her death, with the posthumous publication of her poems, did others become aware of her as an author. However, Dickinson knew that poetic influence does not die with the death of the writer. In one of her startling openings, she gestured away the importance of personal death:

The Poets light but Lamps -
Themselves - go out -

But—she continues—if "vital Light" is given off by those surviving Lamps, "Each Age [becomes] a Lens / Disseminating their / Circumference - " (*930). Her own "Lamps," from their first publication through the present, have shone through four such "Age[s]," interpenetrating ones, which might be named "The Age of Publication," "The Age of Biography," "The Age of Editing," and "The Age of Commentary." The poems appeared, from 1890 on, in several volumes but in regrettably emended versions; only in 1955 did Thomas H. Johnson establish a reliable text of the poems with variants.[3] Jay Leyda's book *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960) and Richard Sewall's 1974 biography securely established for the first time the main life-events, family relations, and Amherst context of the poet. These books gave rise to a flood of commentaries, further stimulated by Ralph Franklin's work on the manuscripts and his revisionary edition of the poems (1998). The bio-

3. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955).

graphical, the editorial, and the critical endeavors continue vigorously at present, and I have been very grateful, in teaching Emily Dickinson's poetry and in writing about her, for the invaluable publications, over the past fifty years, of modern editors and critics.[4] Interested readers will deepen their knowledge of Dickinson as they go beyond this restricted set of poems and the accompanying brief Commentaries. Yet I hope, by focusing here on Dickinson the writer—inventor of a new form of poetry on the page—to emphasize, more than thematic studies can do, Dickinson as a master of a revolutionary verse-language of immediacy and power.

As the "Lens" of each Age has disseminated the circumference of her "vital Light," Dickinson has come to be more securely placed in her historical moment. Critics have compared her poems to those of other nineteenth-century writers, male and female, who also treated the topics to which she constantly returns. This scholarly and critical work has served to intensify our sense of the way Dickinson differs from those contemporaries in her force of will, her skeptical mind, her idiosyncratic imagination, and her ceaseless wresting of language to her own purposes. And although she has been much imitated, one can distinguish Dickinson from her imitators by her unmatched capacity for concentrating, into a small poem, an unqualified passion, an intricate and often counterintuitive logic, a keen analytical penetration, and an unpredictable vision. Precisely because she was so conscious of the tradition of lyric in which she worked, Dickinson was particularly concerned to distinguish her own conception of poetry, and her manner of expression, from that of others. She borrowed from Shakespeare, for instance, the idea of poetry as an essential fragrance remaining after the death of its natural source in the flower, but whereas he saw it (in Sonnet 5) as "distilled," she saw it as a painful "gift of Screws - ":

> Essential Oils - are wrung -
> The Attar from the Rose

4. A substantial bibliography of such work in English is available in Fred D. White, *Approaching Emily Dickinson: Critical Currents and Crosscurrents since 1960* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2008), 195–213. "The Emily Dickinson Lexicon" is an online resource offering a concordance—still under revision—of all of Dickinson's uses of any given word.

Be not expressed by Suns - alone -
It is the gift of Screws -

[*772]

My Commentaries here draw attention above all to the imaginative and linguistic "Screws" that Dickinson applied to emotional experience in order to extract and frame its essence. Although I provide paraphrases of difficult passages, what I most want to bring into view is the manner in which Dickinson's ardor and grief found words, sentences, phrases, enigmas, proverbs, impersonations, scenarios, and strategies adequate to the sequence of human emotions, personal and impersonal, that she was impelled to bring into visibility. She told Higginson that when she said "I" she meant "a supposed person"—that she intended her constructions to be relevant to others' experience (L 268). It is tempting to read the poems as direct reports from Dickinson's own life, and to forget that a poem, no matter how personal its origin, always requires a selection from, and a linguistic attitude toward, that personal source. It is hard, but necessary, to keep in mind that there are always two Dickinsons on every page: the "Representative" speaker and the poet who is creating her. I use the word "Dickinson" for both, trusting the reader to understand when I mean the speaker and when I mean the creator of the speaker, that alert conscious author of the speaker's lines. Dickinson's deliberate "naïveté" and consistent use of a first-person speaker are strategies to make us forget the intricate shaping accomplished by language and art. We can read backward from the "Ashes" to the conjectured "Fire" and the "Creature" consumed by it, as the poet suggested, but those readings remain our constructions deduced from the never-changing but ever-rich words of a particular poem. As she said about her own search for poetic structures:

For Pattern is the Mind bestowed
That imitating her
Our most ignoble services
Exhibit worthier.

[1219]

Supremely aware of the embarrassments, crudities, and shames of raw life, Dickinson counted on her aesthetic Patterns to make more worthy on the

page what may have been ignoble in experience. Dickinson made ignoble service "worthier" by a devotion to the discipline of "Pattern" that in earlier times would have been exerted in the discipline of the soul.

Choosing patterned abstraction in part to be "Representative" and to "Exhibit worthier" her emotional and intellectual material, Dickinson also found abstraction congenial to her deep wish for privacy. In her commitment to the abstract, she obeyed her own injunction (in *240, Version A) to "Deal with the soul / As with Algebra!" (*She* would offer a symbolic *x* and *y,* and *we* were to supply our own personal variables.) Although she sometimes did write the sort of first-order poem that reads like a transcription of a life-event, such as a vigil around a deathbed, more often she found a second-order "algebraic" equivalent for emotional occasions, whether rapturous or troubling. Often, her symbolic equivalents arise from emotional torture:

> Before I got my eye put out -
> I liked as well to see
> As other creatures, that have eyes -
> And know no other way -
>
> [336]

But often, too, her symbols are generated by transports of joy, especially in the revelation of love:

> To My Small Hearth His fire came -
> And all My House a'glow
> Did fan and rock, with sudden light -
> 'Twas Sunrise - 'twas the Sky -
>
> Impanelled from no Summer brief -
> With limit of Decay -
> 'Twas Noon - without the News of Night -
> Nay, Nature, it was Day -
>
> [703]

On her second-order symbolic plane, events do occur, but they present themselves, like the savaged eye-put-out, surreally: "In Winter in my Room / I came upon a Worm / Pink lank and warm" (*1742). We are immediately

forced to become interpreters of the encounter: What are we to understand when the poet says of the Worm (turned snake) "He fathomed me - "? The energy of decoding that Dickinson ignites in us is testimony to her resourcefulness of expression, and yet the decoding to which we are compelled remains necessarily a reduction of the whole, which is restored only by a return to the shaped words and sounds of the poem.

One of the exhilarations in reading Dickinson arises as we become acquainted with the almost illimitable set of templates on which she mapped her poems:

the temporal scale of years, seasons, hours, and minutes;
a circular geometry of center, circumference, and the "spokes" connecting them;
a vertical scale extending from "under the beetle's cellar" to the stars;
a horizontal scale extending from the East of dawn to the West of sunset;
geographic coordinates stretching from New England to the poles;
a cultural plot of myth, with subsets of Greece, Rome, Jerusalem;
a spectrum of foreignness by way of Europe, Asia, Africa, and India;
a grid of time, space, and temperature, voiced in notches, gauges, degrees, steps, and plunges;
a scale of population, from a single person to a mob;
a theory of belief ranging from prayer to despair;
a pathology of emotion stretching from insensibility to derangement.

The list could be continued. These ingredients, taken one by one, are mainstays of lyric. But what disorients Dickinson's reader is the way that the poet maps these templates or grids one upon another, enabling her to leap from plane to plane:

From Blank to Blank -
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet -

[484]

The enigmatic "Blank" could arise from a number of grids: it could be a trackless waste, a benumbed sense, or a sightless passageway; the "Threadless Way" suggests the mythical labyrinth; the "Mechanic feet" imply that the self

she said (*256), and her provinciality became her great resource in reinventing nature writing—to which we might add "human-nature writing." She observed like a Linnaeus the human fauna of her Massachusetts village, finding ample subjects for satire, from the "Gentlewomen" of "What Soft - Cherubic Creatures - " (*675) to the "afflictive" "Presbyterian Birds" of the churches (1620). She had a personal flower garden, enabling allegories such as the energetic "Bloom - is Result - " (*1038) and the chilling "A Visitor in Marl - " (*558). She scrutinized, throughout the year, the surrounding fields and hills, adorned by Nature and populated by "Nature's People" (*1096)—birds, snakes, crickets, hummingbirds, butterflies, beetles, squirrels. She "never saw the Sea - " (*800), but she had the sky always overhead, day and night, ornamented with the sun, the stars, the moon, and (on at least one spectacular occasion) the Northern Lights. Storms visited her Massachusetts village, and so did floods; frost and snow came in their turn. And she also took an interest in the more curious manifestations of nature: a cocoon, a lightning bolt, a diamond. In her hands—by a figure or an adjective—the staples of nature poetry are transformed. The lightning is a "yellow Fork" (1140); a "Silver Fracture" indicates the surface of a winter river (950); the snow "Heaves Balls of Specks, like Vicious Boy" (622). She comes by stealth upon her reader, beginning a list of common things and then pitching it into an unnerving other. Her bland summary of things seen in nature, for instance, is at first an anodyne one:

> "Nature" is what We see -
> The Hill - the Afternoon -
> Squirrel -
>
> [721]

And just when we are becoming lulled by this conventional list, what do we encounter following Dickinson's genial "Squirrel"? "Eclipse." Pure darkness. Or she will praise the "Bronze - and Blaze - " of the Northern Lights (*319) and then, just when we might expect an echo of "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19), Dickinson announces that the auroras' majestic indifference to herself engenders in her a self-deceiving pose desiring to resemble their majesty, a false grandeur that "Infects my simple spirit / With Taints

of Majesty - ". (In the 1896 *Poems,* "Infects" and "Taints" were removed, and in their place the editor put "It paints" and "tints": Dickinson's surprises were not always welcome ones.) Dickinson's nature poetry alternates disturbingly between tenderness and violence, and is almost always a vehicle for an observation on human life: "Nature, like Us is sometimes caught / Without her Diadem - " (*1121).

Dickinson, like other writers of religious poetry, encountered the special difficulties enumerated by Dr. Johnson in his life of Edmund Waller: "Omnipotence cannot be exalted; infinity cannot be amplified; perfection cannot be improved." Yet omnipotence, infinity, and perfection (together with their cognate subjects immortality and eternity) are among Dickinson's most frequent subjects. Religious texts—the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Christian liturgical ritual—offered Dickinson her only metaphysical vocabulary; my allusions in these Commentaries are to the King James Version of the Bible, the one she knew. She never found a congenial substitute for religion as a system of order (as others of her era adopted Darwinian evolution, or as later skeptics would ally themselves to psychoanalysis or Marxism). Yet her intellectual honesty forbade her taking Jesus as her savior (as all her fellow students in her college did); as an adult, she ceased to attend church with her family.[5] Her remarks about religion and its preachers were often wry, as in "He preached upon 'Breadth' till it argued him narrow - " (1266), but her remarks about Jesus are sympathetic; it was a consolation to her that human beings had at last conceived of a Deity capable of suffering. Her conviction that certain abstractions—Virtue, Love, Hope—were as real (on an invisible plane) as visible objects and persons were (on the material plane) could locate no ground except in the transcendent realm claimed by Christianity. But the theological faith, hope, and love identified by Saint Paul eluded her attempts at firm definition; hope, lacking an identifiable object (such as an afterlife), "sings the tune without the words - " (*314); faith "slips - and laughs, and rallies" when questioned (*373); and as for love, it not only seemed inapplicable to God, that "Burglar! Banker! - Father!" (39) but was also inevitably

5. In 1873, her father wrote on a card, "I hereby give myself to God," and signed and dated it (L 389, note).

frustrated in life—"Born - Bridalled - Shrouded - / In a Day - " (*194). Yet the lexicon of Christian belief, toward which she bent her minute attention and ceaseless investigation, never ceased to appear in her verse. We can say of her writing what she said of the light shed by Death on judgment:

'Tis Compound Vision -
Light - enabling Light -
The Finite - furnished
With the Infinite -

[*830]

The Christian promise of personal Immortality was the doctrine that most tempted her: one of the last dated poems printed by Franklin (1683) says that "every way we fly / We are molested equally / By immortality." The thought that on the Last Day she would be reunited with those she had loved was so moving to Dickinson that she wrote some of her most gripping poems about that imagined reunion:

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

[*279]

Considered against the usual hymns envisaging "Jerusalem the Golden" as it was described in Revelation, this poem is sharply irreligious; God does not figure in it, nor do the evangelist's joys of heaven. On the Last Day, with no celestial apparatus mentioned, only two figures stand visible: Dickinson

and her beloved. The vocabulary of the heavenly reunion is not "Golden" but dry: we hear such technical terms as "Elected" "Subterfuge," "intrinsic," "Drama," "Atom," "preferred." Although impossible without the Christian imaging of the Last Day, this poem could not have been written by a Christian believer: "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage," says Jesus (Matthew 22:30). All of Dickinson's poems that resort to Christian imagery and language rework Christianity in some way—intellectually, blasphemously, or comically: see, for instance, her poem drawing on Longfellow's "Courtship of Miles Standish," "God is a distant - stately Lover - " (*615), for her joke on the doctrine of the Incarnation. And along with the New Testament, the poet read with fascinated intensity the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament (as she would have called it). In her poems, she often embedded, with a mocking impudence, its plots and promises:

> Abraham to kill him
> Was distinctly told -
> Isaac was an Urchin -
> Abraham was old -
>
> [*1332]

And Dickinson reshaped the pious Christian idea of death—in which the resolved and virtuous soul, at peace with itself and God, expires without protest—into many macabre reinventions of elegy. Death was for her the great mystery in which spirit was extinguished and the corpse became a thing dishonored: in her axiomatic phrase, "Dust is the only Secret" (166). Gazing upon a corpse in an open coffin in "Oh give it motion - " (1550), she constructs a morbid fantasy of reanimating it, step by step, in a backward parody of the steps of God's creation of Adam. Death was the wall she could not breach, the veil she could not lift. A corpse is laid out by mourners, "And then an awful leisure was / Belief to regulate - " (*1100). Belief, as she knew, cannot be "regulated" or controlled; it is present or it is not. To Dickinson, Death was the unintelligible riddle: "And through a Riddle, at the last - / Sagacity, must go - " (*373). Dickinson's own sagacity, which was intellectual and independent, engaged in a lifelong standoff with that riddle. The incom-

prehensible extinction of human beings by Death provoked from her one poem after another, elegy upon elegy.

Dickinson succeeded brilliantly in outstripping her American poetic contemporaries (with the exception of Whitman) in writing of both nature and death; as for her defiant critique of Christianity and her uninhibited scrutiny of its concepts, it is unequaled among other poets of her day. Dickinson's most acute remark on God is made in the wake of contemplating the powers of the human brain:

> The Brain - is wider than the Sky -
> For - put them side by side -
> The one the other will contain
> With ease - and You - beside -
>
> The Brain is deeper than the sea -
> For - hold them - Blue to Blue -
> The one the other will absorb -
> As Sponges - Buckets - do -
>
> The Brain is just the weight of God -
> For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -
> And they will differ - if they do -
> As Syllable from Sound -
>
> [598]

Her first two stanzas here are unremarkable in their Romantic claim that the Brain is capable of containing or absorbing, in its fullness, not only vast natural phenomena (Sky, sea) but also the human being perceiving those phenomena—"and You - beside - ". But the first two stanzas clearly exist for the sake of the third, when Dickinson forsakes natural phenomena in order to examine the concept of God. What is the relation of the Brain to the Divine? Abandoning metaphors of containment and absorption, she turns to the significant power of each of her two entities: the Brain and God. They weigh the same, she says—as we can see when we lift them, using our two hands as

does not deny the sphere of the repellent. In her search for equivalents of the suffering inherent in love, Dickinson went so far as to imitate, in her dactylic rhythms ("Gush after Gush, . . . / Scarlet Experiment!"), the successive arterial spurts of pulses of blood from a dying lark "split" by her lover's accusation of infidelity:

> Split the lark - and you'll find the Music -
> Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled -
> Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning
> Saved for your Ear, when Lutes be old -
>
> Loose the Flood - you shall find it patent -
> Gush after Gush, reserved for you -
> Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
> Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?
>
> [*905]

Although this love poem participates in the female lyric tradition of love-suffering, its outraged tone is anything but conventional. And although "The Soul has Bandaged moments - " (*360) participates in the female Gothic tradition of the macabre, Dickinson's plot is more explicitly sexual than we might expect. As the woman speaker suspects her lover of infidelity, he is replaced in her mind by a doppelgänger. In her torment of suspicion, she feels "some ghastly Fright come up / And stop to look at her - " and

> Salute her, with long fingers -
> Caress her freezing hair -
> Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
> The Lover - hovered - o'er -
> Unworthy, that a thought so mean
> Accost a Theme - so - fair -
>
> [*360]

Such encounters with the uncanny take numerous forms in Dickinson as she meditates on the interior specters that haunt the mind (see *407, "One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted - ").

Instead of using ordinary punctuation, Dickinson chose (for the most part) to place, in her own fair copies, a dash between phrases or even between single words. (She did resort to conventional punctuation, often, in sending poems to friends.) Her dashes served a multitude of purposes. Sometimes, as in "I cannot live with You - " (*706), the dash becomes an enactment of separation: "You - here - I - there - ". It is evident that a comma ("You, here, I, there") would not produce the same effect of painful distance. Or the dash can indicate a break in continuity, as the poet revises a first utterance to a second thought, creating a semi-parenthesis: "For you served God - you know - / Or sought to - ". An ominous dash can correct a narrative: "We passed the Setting Sun - // Or - rather - He passed Us - " (*479). The dash becomes especially significant when it concludes a poem. Dickinson was certainly willing to use forms of normal punctuation, such as the question mark and the exclamation point, when they were appropriate—"Dare you see a Soul at the 'White Heat'?" (*401) or "Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!" (*341). She was equally willing to close with a period when she was inscribing a finished event:

> The Robin for the Crumb
> Returns no syllable
> But long records the Lady's name
> In Silver Chronicle.
>
> [810]

But Dickinson's concluding punctuation was almost always the dash. What does a final dash convey? Often a state of suspended being: "First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go - " (*372). Sometimes a state of continuing action: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul - " (*373). Elsewhere, the concluding dash broadens into infinity:

> When Bells stop ringing - Church - begins -
> The Positive - of Bells -
> When Cogs - stop - that's Circumference -
> The Ultimate - of Wheels -
>
> [601]

In short, each final dash is an invitation to the reader to ponder what it may imply. Because many of Dickinson's manuscripts were lost, our only authority for some poems is a transcription made by a recipient or by one of Dickinson's early editors. In such cases, conventional punctuation may appear, but we cannot be sure it is Dickinson's own. Consider the famous undated poem, its manuscript lost, "My life closed twice before its close" (*1773). As we have it in a transcription by Mabel Todd (herself working from a transcribed copy), it contains a semicolon, commas, and two periods:

> My life closed twice before its close;
> It yet remains to see
> If Immortality unveil
> A third event to me,
>
> So huge, so hopeless to conceive
> As these that twice befell.
> Parting is all we know of heaven,
> And all we need of hell.

Perhaps—as seems likely—Dickinson's original manuscript may have read:

> My life closed - twice - before its close -
> It yet remains to see
> If Immortality unveil
> A third event to me -
>
> So huge - so hopeless to conceive -
> As these that twice befell -
> Parting - is all we know of heaven -
> And all we need - of hell -

As we compare the two possibilities, which seems more Dickinsonian? And what inference does a final dash allow that Todd's terminal period does not? A closing dash assumes a hell still continuing into the present, as the pang of parting goes on in the mourning soul. Although this case is purely specula-

tive, in Dickinson's own manuscripts her processes of thought are secreted not only in her words, but also in her enigmatic dashes.

When we encounter for the first time a poem by Dickinson, we feel that something—as yet unanalyzed—is persuading us to value this arrangement of words and sounds. We find ourselves enabled either to recognize or to remember a human sentiment—or a human presentiment:

> Presentiment - is that long shadow - on the Lawn -
> Indicative that Suns go down -
>
> The notice to the startled Grass
> That Darkness - is about to pass -
>
> [487]

Reading "Presentiment - " we may insert our own experience into Dickinson's symbolic "algebra," and feel the threatening intimation of an end—betrayal, disease, death—that is approaching us. After reading Dickinson's words, we can scarcely see a long shadow on the Lawn without recalling not only the startled Grass and the Darkness it fears, but also the foreboding Latinity of the abstract "Presentiment." The more we read this poet, the more she fills up our atmosphere—natural, intellectual, moral—with her abstractions crossed with her images, with her unexpectedly conversational tones, from grave to gay. After being persuaded by a poem, we begin to ask ourselves how the poet has made it unforgettable, our curiosity launching us into an analysis that persuades us once more, this time in an aesthetic way, of the sentiment governing the poem. In entering Dickinson's poems through both their sentiments and their strategies, we become bearers of her "Slant of light" (*320), of that "internal difference - / Where the Meanings, are - ".

# 23

In the name of the Bee -
And of the Butterfly -
And of the Breeze - Amen!

This light—but blasphemous—little poem parodies the Trinitarian formula of baptism, initiated by Jesus' commandment to his disciples that they should go forth baptizing all nations "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). That formula relies on an established doctrine (the Trinity), but Dickinson relies—as we first think—on simple alliteration to bind her poem together: Bee, Butterfly, and Breeze make up a natural spring "trinity." But there were other B-nouns that Dickinson could have used: if alliteration were all she was after, she could have said "Bird" in lieu of "Bee," or "Buttercup" in lieu of "Butterfly." We have to look a little more curiously at the import of her three successive nouns.

Dickinson has assumed here the authority of the minister who inaugurates a ritual with his "In the name of the Father" and ends it with his "Amen." As the representative of God, he holds the highest spiritual rank in any nineteenth-century Christian town, surpassing that of magistrate or mayor. It is Dickinson's conviction of her intellectual and aesthetic authority that enables her to stand, however whimsically, against the church, and offer Nature as a better object of worship than the Trinity. The authority of the poem is so sweetly exerted that its sting is felt only after its charm: this mixture of comedy and satire is characteristic of many of Dickinson's early poems.

Dickinson's first editors thought that this short invocation couldn't be a complete poem. Making one poem out of three poems transcribed by Dickinson on a single page, they tacked this little tercet onto the end of their compound assembly. And in fact such a short poem raises the question of what counts as a poem at all. Using "In the name of the Bee - " as our example, we could say that what a poem needs above all is imagination. In this tiny poem we see a first, second, third, and fourth effort of imagination.

First: the poet invents the idea of a parody of a Christian form of words,

while retaining a trace of its source in its closing "Amen." And second: the poet decides on the three nouns to be substituted for the three Persons of the Trinity. And third: the poet has to make her trinity of nouns "mean something" in relation to one another (as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are related). While Bee and Butterfly are named and capitalized living beings (as are the Father and the Son), the Breeze is a motion of air (as was the Holy Spirit at Pentecost). And fourth: the nouns chosen must have a "spiritual" quality, must be symbolic as well as "real"; the Bee (for Being), the Butterfly (Psyche, the resurrected Soul), and the Breeze (the Spirit) all fit that criterion. While the imagination is doing its work, a parallel investigation is being carried out by the ear, creating a link of sound—Bee, Butterfly, Breeze—to substitute for the "familial" links of the Trinity.

Dickinson keeps a secular Sabbath in the open fields, her ear open to the bee's hum, her eye open to the butterfly's flight, and her skin open to the caress of the spring breeze; but she sanctifies them by making them "match" the Christian Trinity. It is her own imaginative effort that Dickinson is "baptizing" here, calling on the authority of Nature, not of God.

[J 18]

# 32

The morns are meeker than they were -
The nuts are getting brown -
The berry's cheek is plumper -
The Rose is out of town.

The maple wears a gayer scarf -
The field a scarlet gown -
Lest I sh'd be old fashioned
I'll put a trinket on.

We see here the look of a Dickinson list before it becomes cryptic, or wild, or eccentric. Nonetheless, the list migrates oddly from category to category: time of day; high-up fruit of nut tree; ground-low fruit of berry vines; an absent flower; a vertical tree; a horizontal field. We can't at first deduce the idea generating this heterogeneous series. But then enlightenment arrives: we are following Dickinson's eye as she goes out on an early-morning walk. She notices first the altered behavior of the morning, with its "meeker" sun, and the comparative tells us she is looking back to a now-vanished season, summer. She looks up at the darkening nuts, then down to the "plumper" berries (both elements suggesting Keats's Autumn, who arrives "to plump the hazel shell / with a sweet kernel"); she grieves at the absence of the Platonic Form of the summer Rose that used to adorn the rose garden. Then the comparative returns, this time one of color; she has gone (like Keats) beyond the kitchen garden and rose bed, and now looks up at the reddening maple, then to the horizontal field, scarlet (with fallen leaves?). The berry's plump cheek may be that of a baby of unspecified gender, but the Rose is a lady, and so are the maple and the field, with their "gayer" scarf and scarlet gown. The comparative "gayer" is asserted in favor of the season's livelier hue, to compensate for its parallel initiating comparative, the "meeker" behavior of the sun. Dickinson's list, like Keats's list at the opening of "To Autumn," is one of directed motion from domestic surroundings to an agricultural field, as the poet explores the new qualities ushered in by a change of season.

As a consequence of her observations, Dickinson decides that she should participate in the new fashion of self-adornment. Will she don a "gayer" scarf? Will she acquire a vivid new "gown"? Her conclusion mediates between the meek and the gay: a trinket is a sign of gaiety, but of a minor sort—a meeker sort, one could say. She satirizes the impositions of fashion on women, but admits she notices the vagaries of its rules; she agrees to observe the new mode, but without ceding to its flamboyance. "Trinket" is an example of Dickinson's characteristic understatement; a trinket is neither encompassing like a scarlet gown nor a substantial accessory on the order of a "gayer scarf." "When fashion changes, I notice, and I'll even obey, but I'll conform in my own New England way; I'll concede to a trinket, but won't go all the way to a scarlet gown." Rebuking the extravagance of noticeable accessories and intensifying color, she defines the plane on which she will live.

Dickinson's economy is such that she implies, rather than states, the sequence of actions generating the order of the list. She casts the poem as an informal report to an absent friend who knew the earlier look of the scenery, when the mornings were bolder, the berries smaller, and the nuts paler. We can imagine reproaches made to Dickinson for her "old-fashioned" plainness of dress—or her "old-fashioned" hymn-meter style. This defense of her own fashion suggests that in her poems we'll find "trinkets" of modernity that have never turned up in ancestral hymns. Her wry self-portrayal as a wearer of a single piece of modest jewelry is the fruit of the unexpected word "trinket." Its last syllable, "-et," makes the word a diminutive, and yet jewelry is, in its essence, adornment: purely decorative, it lacks the utilitarian function of a scarf or gown. The whole point of the difference between other "people" and herself would be lost if Dickinson announced that she would put on a utilitarian pair of new gloves. And despite the apparent superiority of the energetically fashionable maple and field, Dickinson's small joke is that the maple wears a GS ("gayer scarf"), the field an SG ("scarlet gown"): they are obedient to the same conventions, only reversed; and it's a short jump from "scarf" to "scarlet." Only "trinket" both escapes and—with its "-et" echoing "scarlet"—participates in the graphic and phonetic atmosphere with which Dickinson surrounds high fashion.

Dickinson's comedy notwithstanding, one sees that she loves Nature's ever-changing scene, and in part the poem asserts that if there are losses (the

brighter sun, the beautiful Rose) there are also gains in gaiety. Yet for all this balanced evaluation, there is a large void in the middle of the poem. The autumn beings are continuous with their former selves—they are merely meeker or plumper or gayer. But the Rose does not appear in a lessened or heightened form of herself: where she was, there is nothing. Loss often prompts human assertions of compensation; but for the disappearance of the Rose, no compensation can be imagined. However mildly Dickinson puts it ("The Rose is out of town"), that absence defeats all the neighboring "sensible" attempts at illustrating the qualities of the season. The Rose is Eros, always—poets are conscious of the anagram—and we see here a plainspoken elegy for Eros.

This poem, which is more ingenious than it first appears, maintains the same rhyme-sound throughout. It exhibits a perfect chiming in "brown," "town," and "gown," but is plainer in its dress, like Dickinson, in its closing simplified "on."

[J 12]

into the kingdom of God." Natural species, "born again," return in spring in identical form; so if one entertains doubts (as Dickinson did) of a rebirth in Jesus, one finds "Nicodemus' Mystery" sufficiently and literally answered by the annual reawakening of the natural world. It is startling to find Nicodemus, summoned from his wholly other context in the Gospel, keeping company with the flippant fly and Chanticleer. We thought we had "solved" Dickinson's descriptive riddle when we encountered the flower expected everywhere, but we hadn't. Dickinson's natural riddle is a spiritual riddle as well: How is one to find a rebirth of the spirit and of desire? Rather than sending Nicodemus to baptismal water and the spirit, Dickinson sends him to the expected flower (and the rest of her list, comic as well as tender). We can hardly tell whether she is naturalizing the spiritual or spiritualizing the natural; often the two converge in her mind. The "vermillion foot" is surely no human foot, but rather the rosy foot of Spring; yet it, like the alliterating purple finger, casts a "human" color on the landscape, preparing the arrival of the human "look."

The poem binds its surprising variety of list-items closely together by housing them in couplets (a form not only primitive, like the first season, but intellectual, like Nicodemus' question and Jesus' reply). We could scarcely associate Chanticleer and the "flower expected everywhere" if they didn't rhyme; but once we see the rhyme, we see Dickinson's union of the humorous and the vernal.

[J 140]

# 122

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!

Although the poem was cast, in all of Dickinson's fair copies, into six stanzas, its rhyme shapes it into three parts, rhyming (except for lines one and two) *aabccb:* "Bee . . . plausibility . . . belief"; "bear . . . air . . . leaf"—two tetrameter couplets, each followed by a trimeter which binds, by its rhyme, every two stanzas together, making three double-stanzas. Because Dickinson does not repeat this strategy, the form remains unique.

The poem goes in and out of direct address to its "Indian Summer" (the title the first editors gave it). Dickinson addresses the season as "Oh fraud," "Oh sacrament," and "Oh Last Communion"—epithets summing up in brief the evolving course of her feelings. She begins remotely, describing the sea-

son in the third person: "These are the days . . . These are the days." But she cannot remain fixed in her "objective" critique of what she initially calls "The old - old sophistries of June - " (as if June, seeming to promise eternal skies of blue and gold, were a philosopher manipulating the truth) and secondly names as "a mistake" (as though June were a prophet in error). Defending the wisdom of bees against Keats's pity ("until they think warm days can never cease"), Dickinson vigorously asserts that they were not deceived, that the season's "fraud" (as if Indian Summer is a plausible swindler) cannot "cheat the bee."

But what of herself? Abandoning her resentment that she was so deeply deceived by the "sophistries" of June that she could at first see only a "fraud" in their brief autumn recurrence, she admits gratitude for the unexpected return of a departed and despaired-of warmth. Like the birds, she takes a "backward" look; with her usual determined objectivity, she substitutes that adjective for her pathetic earlier variants "final" and "parting," since neither "backward" (merely directional) nor "parting" (sentimentally anthropomorphic) declare termination as "final" does.

The poem turns on the "until" of stanza 4, ushering in the certainty that fall has come, as seeds "bear witness" to the disappearance of flowers, and the "timid leaf," afraid of the experience of falling, "softly . . . hurries" to the ground as the fall wind shakes the boughs. Why must Dickinson now turn into a child? Because only a child can feel the innocent religious belief which the adult skeptic cannot share. As a child, the poet can resume her faith in the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the bread and wine are emblems of Christ's body and blood. Taking her "Last Communion," she will "partake" in the religious emblems and "take" consecrated bread and immortal wine, while her adult self looks on in tender memory of the child's trust. For her original choice of "break," Dickinson substitutes "take," dropping active participation in the breaking of material bread in favor of a more neutral verb derived immediately from its preceding cousin, "partake." In this "Communion," because it is a virtual one, she can "partake" of emblems, but cannot "break" actual bread. The poem's permitted fantasy of childlike belief ingeniously both contradicts and ratifies the earlier adult awakening from Nature's sophistical promise of eternal joy (in spring, in love, in youth). Yes, she

can dream again, in the autumn haze, of untroubled belief, but it is not available to her except in nostalgic remembrance.

Why does Dickinson make her six-stanza poem also a three-part one (by rhyme) and a two-part one (turning on the hinge-word "Till")? The six-stanza shape represents the six temporal segments of her evolving plot, from "These are the days" to a "last Communion"; the three rhyming-units (introduced by "These are"; "Oh fraud"; and "Oh Sacrament") track her emotional changes from objectivity through resentment to yearning; and the solemn binary shape, divided by the "Till" to which the seeds bear reliable witness, leads us to—and from—the cusp where the balm of Indian Summer returns to the "altered air" of true autumn. Dickinson often combines two or more "shapes" in a single poem to alert her reader to the separate import of each superimposed division, each of which is real, and each of which bears meaning, so that we are here reading three poems at once: a poem of six parts, another of three parts, and another of two parts.

The closing rhyme of "join" and "wine" is legitimated by earlier poetic practice, while the slant rhyming of "back," "look," and "mistake"—in the midst of other, perfectly conventional rhymes—is pure Dickinson. The monosyllabic and disyllabic rhyme-words are conventional, too, but the "unbalanced" rhyme of the monosyllabic "Bee" with the five-syllable "plausibility" enacts the difference between the frankly real and a complex deceptiveness.

[J 130]

# 124

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
Untouched by Morning -
And untouched by noon -
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

Grand go the Years,
In the Crescent above them -
Worlds scoop their Arcs -
And Firmaments - row -
Diadems - drop -
And Doges - surrender -
Soundless as Dots,
On a Disc of Snow.

The second stanza of this famous poem exists in three versions (given below). Because Dickinson's most recent editor, Ralph Franklin, takes as his "reading text" the last version of each poem, he has line 4 begin with "Sleep" —derived from a copy sent by Dickinson to Higginson in 1862—rather than "Lie," as in the last copy the poet made for herself, transcribed in Fascicle 10 around 1861 (the first version, using "Sleep," was transcribed in Fascicle 6, about 1859). It seems to me that Dickinson may have substituted "Sleep" in Higginson's copy because the conventional religious phrase is "to fall asleep in Christ." In 1 Corinthians 17–18, Paul says, "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain. . . . Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished," implying that the Christian dead *will* be awakened from their sleep: their faith is not vain, since Christ was resurrected. Dickinson doubted that the dead would be raised; that is why, presumably, she eventually rejected her 1859 exact allusion to Paul for an allusion that—by substituting "Lie," the conventional opening verb on a gravestone, "Here lies"—refutes Paul on resurrection, and emphasizes instead the buried body. I believe that the poem should be anthologized in the future with "Lie." (The poem was printed in

lack any satin-lined comfort. The Chambers are so cold that the echoes of spring zephyrs, encountering them, undergo rigor mortis, and the aristocratic alabaster has mutated into memorial marble, with frosted windows forbidding sight and a numb door that can never open:

> Springs - shake the Sills -
> But - the Echoes - stiffen -
> Hoar - is the Window - and numb - the door -
> Tribes of Eclipse - in Tents of Marble -
> Staples of Ages - have buckled - there -

Just as the pious townspeople thought they were "safe" in their graves, so these "tribes" thought they were nomadic, their burial "tents" pitched temporarily until they could move to heavenly mansions, where they could "[shine] as the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12.3). Instead they are eclipsed, and their cloth "tents," in rigor mortis like the spring echoes, stiffen to marble. Not only that; the dead have not moved for ages. Like the "stapled feet" of those awaiting execution in "They put Us far apart - " (*708, J 474), they are fastened, by immemorial metallic staples, in their tombs. Susan's reaction to this stanza is not recorded, but Higginson in 1890 printed, in the *Christian Union,* the whole first version and appended this second substituted stanza, commenting, as Franklin tells us, that the stanza struck "a note too fine to be lost."

Dickinson went on to revise this newly substituted stanza, but although she transcribed the revision into Fascicle 10, there is no record of her sending it to Susan. The revision, with its Arctic landscape, becomes even more frigid and threatening and absolute than its predecessor, not allowing, within its total sealed silence, even a stiffening echo of resurrected birdsong. Although Dickinson concedes that spring in the Arctic produces some motion, as a warmer sun allows frosts to "unhook" and icicles to "crawl" out from caverns, human death is irreversible; no sun will rise to light its midnight or warm its chill:

> Springs - shake the seals -
> But the silence - stiffens -
> Frosts unhook - in the Northern Zones -

Icicles - crawl from polar Caverns -
Midnight in Marble -
Refutes - the Suns -

Although Dickinson pluralizes "Sun" into "Suns" (perhaps to avoid the possible Christian pun "Sun/Son"), there could be no firmer repudiation of the resurrection than this perpetual and permanent Midnight that will not allow successive Suns to rise. The Suns here (normally rising predictably every morning) resemble supposedly impregnable philosophical propositions (such as Edgar's "The worst returns to laughter" in *King Lear*). But the logic of death "refutes" them permanently and conclusively (there is no such thing as a temporary or merely apparent refutation).

The pious Christian belief that one is "safe" in one's death chamber is articulated with mordant irony in Dickinson's first line. We know this because the speaker of the poem immediately corrects this naïve faith with her own counter-remark that being "safe" entails total separation from all life, even that of the Sun: the dead are "untouched" by Morning light and "untouched" by noon warmth. Although they are patiently "meek," willing to await the great morning that will mean Resurrection, that morn will never come. In their past faith, they thought themselves members of one spiritual assembly, the resurrective gathering of the Last Day; but now each lies in an isolated tomb. The Amherst cemetery where Dickinson now lies is full of Dickinsons—and those "meek members of the Resurrection" must have seemed to her like ancestors and cousins. She alone distinguishes herself from the family flock—the unbeliever commenting on the deluded faithful.

[J 216]

# 129

Our lives are Swiss -
So still - so Cool -
Till some odd afternoon
The Alps neglect their Curtains
And we look farther on!

*Italy* stands the other side!
While like a guard between -
The solemn Alps -
The siren Alps
Forever intervene!

It is hard to imagine why Dickinson's first editors entitled this poem "Alpine Glow": the Alps in it don't glow, although perhaps the blocked *"Italy"* might, if only one could get there. Dickinson frequently imagines something opaque impeding vision or access. Here, while the blocking Alps are obscured by mist, one cannot even speculate about what lies beyond; but when they let down their guard, and forget to draw the curtain over their landscape, one can see, beyond the passes, an ecstatic vista. The still, cool, white life of an Alpine region remains untroubled until one senses a possible warmth. If only one could traverse the mountains! These Alps, in their monumentality, resemble the Decalogue, which "intervenes" between ourselves and our desires: "Thou shalt not" say the *solemn* Alps. But just as the thing forbidden is the most desired, so the peaks are also the *siren* Alps, resembling Homer's sexual sirens luring seamen to destruction. The binding sound between the two stanzas is "s": "Swiss" and "still" introduce the sound as one of propriety and quiet. But those adjectives are then confronted with the contradictory adjectives "solemn" (denoting moral authority and duty) and "siren" (denoting transgressive sexual appetite).

The moral poles of the poem are thus set before us in three sentences, each of which ends with an exclamation mark. The first expresses the excitement of unobstructed vision after the clouds lift; the second the exalted vi-

sion of an Eden that could be ours had not God's flaming sword (Genesis 3:24), here transmuted into the secular Alps, barred us from it; and the third denotes the exclamatory despair elicited by the damning word "forever." *Paradise Lost* promises us that our loss of Eden will last only until a "greater man" —Milton's "Son of God"—shall "restore us, and regain the blissful seat." Dickinson offers no such promise; our banishment is permanent.

After the proper iambs of the first stanza, the dactylic *"Italy . . . !"* comes like a shout of discovery; but it is immediately rebuked by the flaming sword of a counter-dactyl, "While like a [guard between]," and the rest of the poem subsides into the iambs of its beginning. At first the Alps seem feminine to Dickinson: they "neglect their Curtains" as she might herself. But then, as they turn into "a guard" paralleling the fearful "Cherubims" of Genesis at Eden's gate, they are masculinized. Their two alliterating adjectives—a "solemn" authority, a "siren" seductiveness—repeat the tension between the masculine and the feminine, but ascribe them both to the single moral realm of forbidding and the forbidden. Just as Dickinson has "rewritten" Genesis here, she will also, a bit later, rewrite her past despair into a hope of an erotic Eden. In a poem firm in recurrent trochees, taking its metrical signature from its governing trochaic noun, "Eden," (205, J 211), she writes:

> 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.

The rhythmic pattern of the first stanza, 3-3-4-3, changes in the second stanza to 3-3-2-4, Dickinson's last two dashes enacting the gradual penetration of the flower by the Bee.

[J 80]

# 134

Did the Harebell loose her girdle
To the lover Bee
Would the Bee the Harebell *hallow*
Much as formerly?

Did the "Paradise" - *persuaded* -
Yield her moat of pearl -
Would the Eden *be* an Eden,
Or the Earl - an *Earl?*

This is one of the early poems that was not entered into a fascicle; it is complete (in pencil), but not "preserved" in ink, perhaps because of Dickinson's judgment on its quality. Another Eden poem, it begins with an already anthropomorphized "lover Bee" and a willingly uncinctured flower (a "girdle" here is merely a belt). But Dickinson goes on to the actual human realm, introducing an "Earl" and his female "Paradise." The bourgeois taboo on premarital sexual intercourse—not from fear of pregnancy but from fear that the man will lose respect for the woman—is the object of Dickinson's mocking satire. Social shame always attached itself conventionally (as in *The Scarlet Letter*) to the no-longer-virginal woman; no one seemed to wonder whether a woman would respect a "fallen" man, or whether the world should condemn him as it does her.

After implying that nobody would pose the absurd question of the first stanza (because in the society of nature there are no sexual morals or conventions, let alone any "hallowing"), Dickinson comes to the human instance, which she locates at the highest English aristocratic rank, that of Earl (the word, and the consequent rank, perhaps prompted by the necessity of finding a rhyme for "pearl"). If the man is an Earl, and the woman, by convention, has to be idealized beyond the man, what can we name her but "Paradise," the highest concept of habitation? Like the twelve gates of Paradise, to which Dickinson consciously alludes, the woman manifests herself (enclosed in her "moat") as a single pearl: "And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: every sev-

shall have to see what she does with that voice as the poem evolves. Like Dickinson intuiting angels, Hopkins closes with reference to another, spiritual, realm that honors these quiet heroes: God estimates such a life rightly, and He

> Could crowd career with conquest while there went
> Those years and years by of world without event
> That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

We notice that after his martial octave, Hopkins has grown much more plainspoken in his close, telling us that the earlier flashing exploits of diction and syntax belong to the active life; to the contemplative life (after a last salute to the martial as he transfers its vocabulary to the saint's career crowded with conquest) belongs more properly the plain style suitable to a world without event.

Looking back to Dickinson, we see that her comparison of two kinds of gallantry, the "loud" and the silent, is phrased first positively ("*gallanter*") and then, to our surprise, negatively, as though she were making a negative from a positive print. The active hero's triumphs are seen by nations; his fall is observed by comrades; his death is regarded by his country "with patriot love." The silent hero or heroine, who faces a powerful cavalry of woe within, lives a life of subtracted homage: there are no nations watching such victories, no comrades mourning this fall, no proud Country meeting dying eyes with a gaze of grateful love. The childish speaker of the first line is, we see, speaking the naïve language of outward fights; the speaker of the second stanza has decided to negate the myth of the war hero and his popularity. There is by now a standoff: if Dickinson cannot use military language without complicity in its manner of evaluating heroism, to what language can she resort? To the language of luxury, we see with astonishment—as legions of angels ("Rank after Rank," angels to archangels to seraphim) pay homage in "plumed procession"—the most literary phrase in the poem, characterizing the angels by their downy wings, a sign of their regality. The uniforms of armies are always colored—Dickinson has noticed—with hues of smart pride, but the angels need no such advertising of their affiliations or ener-

gies. Pure among the pure, they are almost transparent in their "Uniforms of snow," unobtrusive in the gliding of their "even feet."

The anaphora of anonymity binding together stanzas 1 and 2—"Who charge . . . Who win . . . Who fall . . . Whose dying eyes"—is, as I have said, first positive and then negative, but it all refers to the silent heroes or heroines. To drop the anaphora—as Dickinson does in her last stanza—is to turn away from characterizing the silent inner warriors by relative clauses of any sort. She shifts her gaze from the earthly realm of disregard to a heavenly one of reward, where processions that honor the dead are composed not of soldiers and brass bands, but of legions of angels. "We trust," says Dickinson, and we recall Tennyson's "we trust" in *In Memoriam,* the word "trust" always arriving with an admixture of doubt:

> O yet we trust that somehow good
> Will be the final goal of ill . . .
>
> Behold, we know not anything;
> I can but trust that good shall fall
> At last—far off—at last, to all,
> And every winter change to spring.

But whereas Tennyson ends his canto in despair (as "An infant crying in the night"), Dickinson maintains her trust. The change from her initial "I" ("But *gallanter,* I know") to a final collective "we" ("We trust, in plumed procession") enables the turn to religious trust: her voice becomes that of a nation, rather than that of a single poet. To ratify the union of the two voices, she gives the rhymes associated with her closing "we" ("go" and "snow") the same vowel sound as that of the rhymes linked to the opening "I" (with its "know" and "Wo"). She, with her subtle ear, did not do such things unconsciously: the mutation of "I" into "we" is marked as a fusion rather than as a distinction.

[J 126]

# 165

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!

This poem tells of "a pain Titanic" repressed by the one suffering it, a pain expressed by no change of feature on the "human face" of the sufferer. Dickinson had been reading Keats: his *Hyperion* (published 1820) describes (in Book II, lines 22–28) the vanquished and fallen Titans convulsed with pain. The strongest of them exhibit a "Volcanic" convulsion. They

> Were pent in regions of laborious breath;
> Dungeon'd in opaque element, to keep
> Their clenchèd teeth still clench'd, and all their limbs

Lock'd up like veins of metal, crampt and screw'd;
Without a motion, save of their big hearts
Heaving in pain, and horribly convuls'd
With sanguine feverous boiling gurge of pulse.

Under the apparently unmoved face of Dickinson's protagonist boils the maelstrom of blood evoked by Keats, resembling the seething magma of a volcano preparing for eruption. It is this kind of eruption that Dickinson prophesies for the sufferer, when the "smouldering anguish" will lay waste the "palpitating Vineyard" and throw it in the dust. This seems a poem of erotic loss or betrayal undergone, followed by a subsequent great effort at suppression. Dickinson writes, in "I shall not murmur if at last" (1429, J 1410) of a similar repression in her own case, as she conceals a secret from her intimates (in a poem addressed, but apparently not sent, to her friend Catherine Anthon):

Divulging it would rest my Heart
But it would ravage theirs -
Why, Katie, Treason has a Voice -
But mine - dispels - in Tears.

Even treason is permitted utterance; but like the girl mentioned by the Duke in *Twelfth Night* who "never told her love, / But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud / Feed on her damask cheek," Dickinson's speaker in "I shall not murmur if at last" and the sufferer in "I have never seen 'Volcanoes' - " are destroyed by the secret they harbor.

In several poems, Dickinson compares the inner life, implicitly or explicitly, to a Volcano. Her meditation on "A still - Volcano - Life - " (517, J 601) ends with the hideous consequences of an eruption: the "hissing Corals" of the Volcano, those "lips that never lie," in a single action "part - and shut - / And Cities - ooze away - ". But in the earlier "I have never seen 'Volcanoes' - " Dickinson can still imagine a happy ending. (In envisaging it, she "blasphemously" redefines the action of the last day, from "resurrection"—an act performed by God on the passive dead—to "resumption"—an act

by which the dead actively take back, by themselves, their living bodies.) On "Resumption Morn" Pompeii too shall reappear, summoned not by the trumpet of Gabriel but by the voice of "some loving Antiquary" (perhaps the lover whose death or permanent absence caused the intolerable pain under the stoic human face). He will "cry with joy," calling his beloved Pompeii to return to her ancient hills, now permanently immune to harm.

This complicated poem voices its last three stanzas in a long hypothesis, which would read, in paraphrase: "If it is not serenity one sees on this human face, but rather repression of pain, will not, at length, the smouldering anguish overcome the stoicism, and destroy the palpitating heart behind that face? And if that is so, will there not be, on the Last Day, some loving Antiquary, who will summon with joy his 'resumed' Pompeii?" What, we ask, necessitates Dickinson's convoluted phrasing of the possible future narrative of the broken heart? The syntax attempts to coerce the listener into a "Yes"—"Yes, the anguish will eventually burst into flame and lay waste the beating heart, but Pompeii will live again, along with her loving Antiquary, and they will be together once more." But Dickinson, with her ever-present doubt of an afterlife, can make no such confident prophecy of what is to come; instead she must resort to her hypothetical speculations and her imagined "Resumption Morn."

When we have seen the proliferating hypotheses of the last three stanzas, we are better placed to understand the two stanzas preceding them. These purport to represent what the stay-at-home speaker has been told by Travellers about eruptions: that the mountains, usually quiescent, actually bear within them something resembling not only the most appalling engines of military destruction but also the mythical dragons breathing fire on villages and eating men. The mountains are doubly animated by these comparisons: they are weapons of destruction ("Fire, and smoke, and gun - "), but they are also monsters "Taking Villages for breakfast." The strangest move Dickinson makes in stanza 2 is to affix the same word, "appalling," to both Ordnance and Men. The word appears as two different parts of speech, adjective and verb: appalling Ordnance is appalling Men. This exact reciprocity of attack and response compounds fire and victim into a single consuming and consumed dyad, a fusion reinforced in the same stanza by the grim rhyme of "gun" with "Men."

of mirth—and succeeds too well in making herself invulnerable. It would be easier to die from the already-inflicted wound than to wear this sort of social armor forever.

Dickinson's adverbial use of "cautious"—"Anguish cautiously arms itself with the mail of Mirth lest anyone spy her wound"—caused a persistent series of misprints, corrections, and substitutions (the word appears successively as "cautiouns," "caution," "cautious" ("corrected" by the printer to "cautions"), "cautious," "caution." It was not until 1945, with the appearance of the Dickinson collection *Bolts of Melody,* that the poem achieved its permanent correct form. This little editorial vagary, extending over fifty-five years, represents one of the many difficulties posed to editors by the Dickinson materials. Dickinson's peculiarities of grammar, here a subjunctive ("Arm") to replace a normal present tense ("Arms"), did not make the first editing easy.

In my paraphrase of the poem, I wrote, "She arms herself with the chain mail of mirth," but that is not quite accurate. The lines offer an allegorical Mirth: "Mirth is the mail of Anguish - ". "Anguish" is the "it" of the next line: "In which it [Anguish] cautious[ly] Arm[s] [itself]." The two lines together act as an aphorism summing up, in general terms, all the excessive display (leaping, gushing, springing) that has gone before. Dickinson might well have continued to the end, as she often does, in that aphoristic mode. Instead, the poem reverts acutely to the domestic scene and the possibility of excruciating sympathy that lurks there. The colloquiality of "You're hurt!" hurtles against the dry epigram, "Mirth is the mail of Anguish - ", as actual blood invades the mental determination to conceal. Just as the Hunter, the Deer, and the Brake lend some actuality to the beginning, so the visible blood does to the close; in between, as the sufferer seeks for more exempla—the Rock, the Steel, the Cheek—she never attempts even a sketchy narrative of the sort animating the little fable of the wounded Deer. In the exempla, everything is already over: the Rock has been smitten, the Steel has been trampled, the Cheek is already diseased.

The most noticeable stylistic gesture in the poem is the persistence of feminine endings ("highest, gushes, redder, Anguish") which take their sonic cue from the crucial two-syllable *"wounded."* The anomalous "masculine"

end-words are *"death"* and "blood"—both, one might say, truncated, lacking, by design, the final weak syllable common to their four counterparts. The abrupt cessation of life is stated by the monosyllable *"death,"* threatened by the monosyllable "blood."

[J 165]

# 187

Through the Straight Pass of Suffering
The Martyrs even trod -
Their feet upon Temptation -
Their faces - upon God -

A Stately - Shriven Company -
Convulsion playing round -
Harmless as Streaks of Meteor -
Upon a Planet's Bond -

Their faith the Everlasting Troth -
Their Expectation - fair -
The Needle to the North Degree
Wades so - through Polar Air -

In the middle of this poem we see a scene of celestial danger: a Planet hangs in the sky, within the bonds of its orbit, when suddenly there streaks by it the unloosed energy of a Meteor. This convulsion of matter does not hurt the Planet, however; unharmed, the Planet continues on its way. Dickinson was always aware of "Convulsion playing round - ", whether the convulsion was one of illness or death, grief or loss, rage or madness, doubt or fear. Electricity animates the atmosphere whenever she is in a state of high excitement, and the lulls in that electrical storm, occasioned by natural beauty or warmth of feeling, were moments she prized. Still, the vibrations of her nerves made her constantly alert to their oscillating state between anxiety and pleasure—or to their deadness, when pain numbed them. Convulsion seemed to her to inhabit the air she lived in, and she emerged from its worst onslaughts badly shaken. She envies those Martyrs whose faith preserved them from spiritual harm when they encountered violent Meteors—the headsman's axe, the burning grill—but that envy is mixed, here, with an unwillingness to share the martyrs' "Polar Air." She chooses Martyrs as her topic, rather than Saints, because they are "witnesses" (the etymology of their category), public saints,

if you will. Others watch them, and are edified, as they suffer in extremis. Their faith is open to inspection even unto death.

Like the angels "with even feet" who go in plumed procession for the unsung dead of the inner life in "To fight aloud, is very brave - " (*138, J 126), the martyrs walk with "even" tread. Nothing disturbs them, nothing affrights them. They have conquered Temptation, now vanquished under their feet; but if there was a struggle in that victory, no trace of that conflict now remains. Their conquest of evil seems frictionless, their faith unmixed with fear. George Meredith, contemplating, like Dickinson, the impassive serenity of celestial power, bitterly criticized a painting by Raphael that he saw in the Louvre. In it, Saint Michael is spearing the dragon Lucifer:

> In Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen
> The sumptuously-feathered angel pierce
> Prone Lucifer, descending. Looked he fierce,
> Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
> .....
> Ah Lucifer, when men the fiend do fight,
> They conquer not upon such easy terms.
> Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms,
> And does he grow half human, all is right.

Raphael's canvas teems with "convulsions" around the serene Saint Michael: in the background, we see a burning city; behind Saint Michael, there are monsters and scenes of hellish torment. These sufferings have no effect on the meditatively calm and youthful Saint Michael, as the dragon screams under his spear.

Dickinson's Martyrs travel with fortitude toward a nonastronomical Heaven. Unlike the natural sky, Heaven has no threatening meteors. The Martyrs are sinless: shriven, they have been absolved of any sins of their past. They are stately; they seem not to know the meaning of agitation. Their Thermopylae is "the Straight Pass of Suffering," but instead of remaining trapped in agony, they emerge from that pass facing God. Their confident faith that expectation will be rewarded and their adherence to the "Everlasting Troth" of God's care baffle Dickinson, and cause her to search around for

a comparison that will make their actions more intelligible to her. The compass that serves as her metaphor is almost destroyed, conceptually, by her description of it. A compass needle does not "wade" through any medium; it always points effortlessly to the North. But to progress to the pure, and even inhuman, Polar Air of the divine requires effort (Dickinson is thinking of the almost insuperable difficulties of Arctic exploration); the Martyrs "wade" through suffering as if through a deep current. God awaits them at the Pole; the Martyrs have a single aim, His presence. They always know the direction in which to go, no matter what suffering they must endure in making their way to Him. Their internal compass is always set to the Polar chill of sacrificial death, and their eyes are on their goal.

I have been speaking of the Martyrs in the present tense, coerced into such presentation by the cunning of the poem. At the beginning, the Martyrs certainly are creatures of the past, their verb tense ("trod") conveying their legendary past existence. But as the poem advances into the second stanza, the atmosphere around them is voiced in the present participle, which we interpret as "convulsions [ever] playing round." And in the third stanza, Dickinson's suppression of the copula that would have defined temporality draws attention away from the pastness of the Martyrs and gives them a certain eternal witnessing: "Their faith [was then, as ever] the Everlasting Troth, / Their expectation [was then, as ever] fair." And the closing metaphor—employing in "wade" the present tense of perpetual and unvarying forward progress—gives us the Martyrs before our eyes, their struggle continuing, their steadfast faces turned toward a superhuman ideal. Dickinson's imagination both states their pastness and implies the perpetuity of their example, contrasting them with more secular martyrs of present suffering.

[J 792]

pronounce them they "stroke" the Melody as they enunciate the words. Since the words "My Husband" are devoid of Melody in any ordinary sense of the word, their Melody when they are spoken by women is conferred solely by intonation. Dickinson tries out in the poem what it would be like to say the forbidden phrase, asking her reader to listen, and to pronounce on the authenticity of the two forbidden words from her lips, so unused to them: "Is *this* [the phrase pronounced aloud and pointed to by the illustrative "*this*"] the way?" The confirmation has to be pronounced by someone not herself, who will judge her conformity, as she says the phrase, with the usual way of "Stroking the Melody - ". The poem ends, in this version, with an emphasized turn to a witness (another missing ingredient in her marriage ceremony), and a real question. All this becomes considerably more pallid with Dickinson's later removal of the italics and the question mark: it loses its original urgency, as did the opening of the poem, when its exclamations (deprived of their exclamation marks) were turned into observations.

I have not so far mentioned the outrageous claim Dickinson makes in describing her new state: she is "Empress of Calvary!" The degree of "cognitive dissonance" (as we say) between these two terms is shocking. Granted, the words "King of the Jews" were affixed to Christ's cross (John 19:19–20: "And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS"). The mere mention of Calvary parallels her "Title" to that of Jesus. If He is King of the Jews, She is, so to speak, his royal consort in suffering, Queen of Calvary. She too hangs on a cross, if an interior one, and Her suffering is like His. Why "Empress" instead of "Queen"? Jesus' title sets him as the ruler of an ethnic group, the Jews; her "Title divine" will outdo his, naming her as the ruler of an entire Empire. This self-aggrandizing self-crowning (it is the only time she names herself "Empress") is "objective," the title having been bestowed on her by Divinity. Fate has placed her in this extraordinary marriage, just as Jesus was placed on the cross by others, his "royalty" conferred by Pilate, commanding the inscription. Dickinson mentions God and Jesus here in her usual unorthodox (not to say blasphemous) way. God's function is to send women divine titles and the sexual "Swoon"; Jesus is seen to lack a female consort on Calvary, a lack which Dickinson will immediately supply.

The irregularity of form in this boast squares with its excited utterance:

the lines vary from monometer ("In a Day" could be read as a single anapestic foot, although it is probably a dimeter) to tetrameter ("Acute Degree - conferred on me - "). This Dionysian variation (when compared to Dickinson's common hymn-meter) almost demands the expressive exclamation marks to confirm its ecstatic origin. Even the rhyming, beginning in couplets, breaks down after three couplets into unrhymed line-endings ("Women . . . Garnet . . . Gold . . . Shrouded") before ending, not in the couplets of its beginning, but (in Version A) in an oddly rhymed quatrain: "Day . . . say . . . Melody . . . way." (It was the lack of an ear-rhyme for "Melody" that presumably suggested to Dickinson that she insert the extra line in B, "Tri Victory - ".)

Dickinson was severely limited, given the brevity of both her lines and her poems, in representing the ecstatic, the Dionysian, and the sublime (all of which usually demand length of utterance). Though we may flinch today at "Empress of Calvary!" we can see at least that Dickinson (in her first version of the poem) was working on every technical level—rhyme, rhythm, punctuation, structure, imagery—to convey ecstatic disruption. Instead of a "coherent" binary structure—"My marriage versus Their marriage"—she makes a "disorderly" four-part one—"My Marriage, Their Marriage, My Extraordinary Day, Their Utterance." Her daring (assimilating Calvary to her own purposes) and her modesty (the humble double ring of "Garnet to Garnet - / Gold - to Gold - ") cohabit in the poem, marking the distance between her transcendent, if ringless, exaltation and the simple sign of twin rings in common marriage.

The most unexpected feature of this boast-poem is the absence of the first person. We see no such form as "I am an Empress," "I'm royal," or (as in 225, J 199) "I'm 'wife' . . . / I'm Czar - I'm 'Woman' now - ". The conviction that her exaltation has been divinely decided makes Dickinson able to claim that the divine Title "is mine," that the Degree is "conferred on me." Only that conviction allows her to name herself "Empress of Calvary." As she thinks up that designation in her small upstairs bedroom, she displays to us the unconfined sense of huge expanses of time and space natural to her imagination.

[J 1072]

# 204

I'll tell you how the Sun rose -
A Ribbon at a time -
The Steeples swam in Amethyst -
The news, like Squirrels, ran -
The Hills untied their Bonnets -
The Bobolinks - begun -
Then I said softly to myself -
"That must have been the Sun"!
But how he set - I know not -
There seemed a purple stile
That little Yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while -
Till when they reached the other side -
A Dominie in Gray -
Put gently up the evening Bars -
And led the flock away -

This exquisite little poem—eight lines for the sunrise, eight for the sunset—affirms by its calm structural symmetry the order of the "old dependency of day and night" (as Wallace Stevens says in "Sunday Morning"). And it affirms by its absence of white space that the whole process of sunrise and sunset is a seamless whole. Although its first editors called it "A Day," it is precisely day—the period between sunrise and sunset—that Dickinson omits. In its original fascicle version, the poem was copied in four quatrains with white space in between them. Franklin comments that in the fascicle "Dickinson drew a horizontal line between the second and third stanzas, as though she considered making separate poems." I think she drew the line after stanza 2 because she thought of putting a white space only there, separating the poem into two separate eight-line stanzas, one for sunrise, one for sunset—the median choice between four quatrains, where she began, and one long sixteen-line poem, where she ended.

As I've written elsewhere *(Poets Thinking),* Dickinson chooses, as her

metaphor for the fine gradations of dawn's progress, the "ribbons" by which the sun rises. She then presents a sequence of four "ribbons" (each metaphorically representing one chromatic half-step in sunrise): the town steeple bathed in Amethyst light, the news of sunrise spreading as fast as Squirrels run, the Hills emerging from the morning mist, and the dawn chorus of the Bobolinks. Her gaze is wide enough to imply that no aspect has been omitted, scanning (in synecdoche, substituting the part for the whole) the town, the animals, the landscape, and the birds. "I'll tell you," says Dickinson, with absolute confidence in her ability to narrate the birth of the day. Ah—but what of the death of that day? "But how he *set,* I know not!" (Version A, the italics emphasizing the truth that whereas rising is a present visible miracle, setting is a future mystery). The end of life is indescribable because unknown—and through Dickinson's sudden withdrawal of certainty, we recognize that the poem concerns life and death, as well as sunrise and sunset. Her fantasy of sunset—in which little Yellow boys and girls climb continuously over a purple stile—ends in an allusion to the Twenty-Third Psalm: but instead of being looked after by Jesus, the good shepherd, this little Yellow flock are shepherded by "A Dominie in Gray," and after they reach the other side, the Dominie (schoolmaster) changes the purple stile into a series of "evening Bars," as the children are gathered into a fold from which they can never return. Dickinson is content to leave this imprisonment a soft implication in "Bars" (borrowing the word's visual meaning from a clause in Keats's "To Autumn": "While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day").

In an arresting later poem, "Who is the East?" (1085, J 1032), Yellow and Purple are more obscurely expounded: their state depends on an Atlas-like middle man, variously named "He . . . / That carries in the Sun" and "He . . . / That lets Him out again." This "He" himself (mighty enough, supposedly, to carry the Sun) is nonetheless sharply limited in power: "if He can" is the fulcrum on which each metamorphosis (Yellow to Purple, Purple to Yellow) turns:

> Who is the East?
> The Yellow Man
> Who may be Purple if He can
> That carries in the Sun.

Who is the West?
The Purple Man
Who may be Yellow if He can
That lets Him out again.

The East is (naturally) colored Yellow, because it is where the Sun comes up. The West is (naturally) colored Purple, because it is where sunset takes place. But, having the usual human desire for difference, Yellow prays to be Purple, and Purple prays to be Yellow. If the Carrier of the Sun into the East were able, he could carry the Sun out, and the East would turn Purple. If the imprisoner of the Sun in the Yellow East could release him, the Sun could go visit the West, and the Purple Man could turn Yellow. The emphasis on "if He can" suggests that He can't: Death cannot be reversed, Purple Sunset cannot be changed into Yellow Sunrise. As Keats says, "The sacred seasons might not be disturbed," even by a "primeval God" (*Hyperion,* I, 293). For Dickinson, the hope of a resurrection is as vain as hoping that the West could turn Yellow.

"Who is the East?", concluding in an enigma, is cousin to "I'll tell you how the Sun rose - ", but it wrenches the mind away from that poem's gentler panorama of sunrise and sunset. As the little Yellow children of the Sun pass the Purple Stile of Death, they enter a Stygian twilight foretold by the Dominie's Gray and the evening Bars. Everything nonetheless is as it should be: the little flock are obedient to their gentle shepherd of souls. The acute "wrungness" of "Who is the East?" comes from Dickinson's recognition that Purple can never return to Yellow, and that a gentle fantasy is no substitute for tragic reality.

[J 318]

# 232

He forgot - and I - remembered -
'Twas an everyday affair -
Long ago as Christ and Peter -
"Warmed them" at the "Temple fire."

"Thou wert with him" - quoth "the Damsel"?
*"No"* - said Peter - 'twasn't me -
Jesus merely "looked" at Peter -
Could I do aught else - to Thee?

Dickinson invokes, as an analogy to her own feeling of being forgotten, the forgetting by Peter of Christ's prophecy concerning him. (Among the accounts of the incident in the synoptic gospels, the closest to Dickinson's version is that of Luke 22, the only one that contains Christ's "look" at Peter.) After the Last Supper, Jesus speaks to Peter:

> And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death. And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me. . . . [Jesus undergoes his agony in Gethsemane, reproaching his disciples—among whom Matthew's Gospel mentions Peter—and urging them not to sleep, but to watch and pray. After Judas identifies Jesus with a kiss, Jesus is taken to the high priest's house.] And Peter followed afar off. And when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the hall, and were set down together, Peter sat down among them. But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, This man was also with him. And he denied him, saying, Woman, I know him not. And after a little while another saw him, and said, Thou art also of them. And Peter said, Man, I am not.

# 238

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

Stroke the cool forehead - hot so often -
Lift - if you care - the listless hair -
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble - more - shall wear -

Buzz the dull flies - on the chamber window -
Brave - shines the sun through the freckled pane -
Fearless - the cobweb swings from the ceiling -
Indolent Housewife - in Daisies - lain!

When Higginson published this poem in the *Christian Union,* he gave it a conventional elegiac Latin title, "Requiescat"—a shortened version of the phrase *Requiescat in pace,* "May she rest in peace." The poem contemplates a Housewife now dead, but formerly diligent in her work: sewing, darning, mending (while wearing a thimble); regularly airing out the house by opening the windows; cleaning the window panes vigorously to remove spots; and sweeping away cobwebs as far aloft as the ceiling. But the point of the poem is not her former diligence, nor yet her present "indolence": the point is the suffering she underwent in life, never to be revealed now that her mouth is "soldered." Dickinson's hyperbole replaces the embalmer's stitching with a harsher permanent "soldering" of the lips; and the casket becomes a dungeon from which the corpse will never be freed, attached as it is by an "awful rivet" and bound as it is by unremovable "hasps of steel." Dickinson, imagining the moment after death, feels how useless now are the mourner's earlier tender gestures—stroking the fevered forehead, lifting the hair, taking the hand: the forehead is cool, the hair listless, the fingers stony.

Dickinson never lacked for ways to represent that most difficult of subjects, Death. Here, she imposes on it an odd temporality: stanza 1 looks