

EMILY DICKINSON

Accidental Buddhist



RC Allen

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CONTENTS

Preface	13
FIRST CONSIDERATIONS	15
Amazing Grace	16
Accidental Buddhism	18
Awakening to Life: The Maturity of Fate	22
The Secret Life	24
Keeping It Secret	27
Paradox, the Language of Transcendentalism	29
Poetry of the Dharma: The Truth's Superb Surprise	32
Logos & Eros in the Poetic Enterprise	36
Puzzled Scholars	38
Puzzled Readers	41
Indra's Net, the Root of Compassion	44
Transcendentalist Love Poetry	48
Perception in Itself	52
IMPERMANENCE (ANICCA)	55
ED AS ACCIDENTAL BUDDHIST	76
THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS	97
1. Life is Suffering	99

2. Suffering is Caused By Attachment	114
3. Liberation From Suffering Is Bliss	142
4. Liberation May Be Attained Through Meditation & Right Conduct	207
BIBLIOGRAPHY	260
INDEX	263
INDEX OF FIRST LINES	267

PREFACE

This book is self-contained & independent of any previous commentary; at the same time it is a kind of sequel to my earlier study, *Solitary Prowess: The Transcendentalist Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, part of an ongoing immersion in the poetry of ED, the Buddha of Amherst. Like *Solitary Prowess*, this book consists of a series of close readings of transcendentalist poems by ED.

This format meets a need unrecognized in Dickinson criticism. All the usual Dickinson books deal in generalities about the possible relationship between her poems & her private life. Professor Wolff's tome, *Emily Dickinson*, includes some close readings, but they are embedded in discussions of theology and egocentric matters. Conventional readers of ED – including all her commentators – do not even suspect that there is an alternative to egocentric understanding. Buddhist belief & practice, however, are based on the reality of ego-transcendence, the central feature of ED's experience of life, & so it comes as no great surprise that her poetry should dwell on the same archetypal realities.

ED was an amazing wordsmith because she was not limited by the ego-self. Each transcendentalist poem is a special non-ego insight into the dharma, the way things are apart from the ego-reality – their “suchness” (Buddhist *tathata*). ED creates an ad hoc semantics, as does every great poet. This means that the most effective approach to understanding her poems is to examine them one by one, without regard for the private affairs of Emily Dickinson.

In P-501, “This World is not Conclusion,” ED wrote that her dharma poetry would “puzzle scholars,” as indeed it has. Since mid-

twentieth century, scholars have been publishing commentaries on her poetry, all of them egocentric, innocent of any dharma awareness. With the vigorous growth of American Buddhism in the past few decades, however, it is no longer possible to accept or condone academic ignorance of the dharma. Nor is it helpful to categorize ED as a “great American poet,” because ED-consciousness transcends the provincial consciousness of Emily Dickinson. She herself comments on this in P-285, “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune,” where she says that she speaks “New Englandly” only because she was born in New England. The language of her poetry is contingent upon that – but the dharma of her poetry is not.

The title of my earlier study, *Solitary Prowess*, refers to P-750, where ED says that “Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature” must achieve its “difficult ideal”

Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life –

Any Buddhist engaged in formal meditation recognizes “the solitary prowess of a silent life.” ED certainly lived a meditative life, where everyday activities were experienced with a Zen attitude, an identification of mind/matter. Little wonder that gardening was one of her favored activities.

All of the above remarks make clear the title of this second study of ED’s poetry, *Emily Dickinson, Accidental Buddhist*. The Buddha said that anyone who experienced ego-transcendence would experience the Four Noble Truths, just as he did. ED wrote many poems about the Four Noble Truths (as my study shows), not because she knew anything about Buddhism, but because she awoke in the dharma.

FIRST CONSIDERATIONS

AMAZING GRACE

The “wisdom of awakening” is Amazing Grace, church or no church. “Wisdom” means “understanding beyond the limits of ego.” The parameters of the ego-self are largely determined by a person’s cultural background, but the ego-self is not immutable, & may be altered considerably, both deliberately & accidentally.

Ego-transcendence can produce such an alteration. It can be mild or profound; it can awaken one to a sense of reality far beyond the limits established by the collective ego of one’s society.

The highest form of ego-transcendence carries one beyond the limitations of dual thinking (I “in here,” the world “out there”), for the transcendent reality is Oneness, or Oceanic Consciousness, where the mind is experienced as an ocean wave, a transient aspect of the ocean itself. There is no substantial self separate from the World Reality.

One’s ego-self has been created gradually from childhood, by social conditioning. Ego-transcendence awakens the mind to unconditioned awareness, traditionally called Buddha Mind, Awakened Mind, or the Higher Self.

The wisdom of awakening burst forth by itself in nineteenth-century Amherst, in the person of Emily Dickinson. We like to think of her as a great American poet, but actually there is nothing especially American about her, precisely because Dickinson’s Higher Self – ED – is a universal phenomenon unlimited by the boundaries of the ego-self. In P-285 ED says she sees “New Englandly,” meaning that she finds her immediate subject matter in the place where she lives; but of course her transcendent

subject matter is not determined “New Englandly.” Unexpectedly she awakened to the transcendent difference between permanence & impermanence. In a flash she grasped that this was the issue concerning human life, as she observes in P-1257:

How everlasting are the Lips
Known only to the Dew –
These are the Brides of permanence
Supplanting me and you

The phenomena of Nature are “permanent,” in that they recur endlessly, as the Wheel of Life; you & I are “impermanent,” not only because we are mortal, but because no ego-self can ever recur, either here or in any afterlife.

ACCIDENTAL BUDDHISM

When enlightenment occurs outside the confines of a theistic religion, a new value system springs into being. It seems inevitable that this would be a kind of “accidental Buddhism,” because this is the value system that Gautama Buddha himself discovered. When you do not attempt to adapt ego-transcendence to a theistic framework, then the world Reality has no preordained “explanation,” no underlying dogma at work. There is no theistic agenda. The Buddha himself made a point of telling one & all, “Do not take my word for this; experience it for yourself, & you will discover exactly what I have discovered.” It was not “his” non-ego reality, it was *the* Reality of unconditioned awareness. We call it “Buddhist” because the Buddha’s articulation is universally known & carefully detailed. If you experience the same Reality, it is “accidental” in the sense of “unexpected.” ED had no special interest in Buddhism so far as is known, nor had she any inkling that ego-transcendence would transform her life forever. But the “accident” led to the inevitable, given her genius for articulating the stupendous drama of her inner life. As Awakened Mind she was the Buddha of Amherst.

ED’s transcendent experience occurred within the confines of an American Protestant culture, but for her it transcended not only ego, but the collective ego of her society. I believe that her disinterest in any theological foundation was induced primarily by her sense of Oneness with Mother Nature. By this I mean Mother Nature in the form of her own Psyche – Mother Nature in the form of Emily Dickinson. This Oneness is full & complete,

like a cornucopia, & has no room for Christianity as a patriarchal system of virtue & sin, of reward & punishment.

Ego-transcendence is the experience of *ego-death*. This is a self-validating event. It becomes instantly evident that ego is an illusion created over time, created by accretion, as ED points out in P-970:

Color-Caste-Denomination-
These-are Time's Affair –

“Bliss” is one of ED’s several terms for ego-transcendence.¹ When you savor the bliss of being centered in your own being, inevitably it will occur to you that suffering has vanished. Even if you are lying on a bed of pain, it will cease to “matter,” so to speak. “You” no longer identify with the pain; the pain is there, but it is not “your” pain. Ego-transcendence liberates one from ego-suffering.

Thus the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha emerge naturally & effortlessly. The Buddha arranged them in this logical order:

1. Life is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by ego-attachments
3. Liberation from ego extinguishes ego-attachments
4. It is possible to live your life in such a way as to obtain liberation

Ego-transcendence as a sudden, unexpected event is the experience of the Third Noble Truth. This makes it clear that whatever is unsatisfactory about how you are arranging your life has to do with ego’s leadership; for it is intent upon having its own way (First, Second Noble Truths). Then it dawns upon you that you don’t have to keep kowtowing to ego; you can conduct

1 See poems 271, 338, 340, 343, 359, 1179, 1611.

your life differently in order to keep alive the spiritual vitality that has suddenly blossomed (Fourth Noble Truth).

It is obvious that no one can do this for you. You are in charge of your spiritual health. As the Zen adage puts it, "If you don't get it from yourself, where will you go for it?" So you will likely not "join a church," but rather embark upon a *mindful* life, ever aware of the ego-identity as an existential convenience, but not the ground of the world reality.

ED remained unaffiliated with any church, of course, but she continued to use Christian terminology. She called unconditioned awareness "God," & "Lord," but this should not lull us into thinking that she is a Christian poet, or even a fallen-away Christian poet.

ED also used "Master," & "Sire." Transcendentally they are synonyms for "God" & "Lord," whatever they may mean in a common, everyday sense. ED's commentators treat "Master" as a code word for a secret lover whom she didn't want to name. I call this the tabloid approach. The famous three "Master letters" excite a tabloid interest (were these letters actually sent to anyone?). What is important here, I think, is to distinguish between letters & poems. Emily Dickinson wrote the letters, but ED wrote the transcendentalist poems. Letters & poems are not a continuum, or common territory. Anyone can write a letter, but only ED can make an ED poem. Her "cryptic" style is not a code for her personal life, but rather the inevitable language of non-ego discourse.²

2 The 1952 anthology *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Louis Untermeyer, represents the state of Dickinson studies in mid-twentieth century. In his introduction Untermeyer reviews the theories concerning ED's "love story," & the possible identity of her "mystery man," the frustrated love underlying the anguish of an "unrealized ecstasy" (xix). As if ED's transcendentalist poems were not brimming with *realized* ecstasy!

990

Not all die early, dying young -
Maturity of Fate
Is consummated equally
In Ages, or a Night -

A Hoary Boy, I've known to drop
Whole statured – by the side
Of Junior of Fourscore – 'twas Act
Not Period – that died.

AWAKENING TO LIFE: THE MATURITY OF FATE

It has long been apparent to me that ED's enlightenment was proactive, not reactive; it was not causally related to her time & place. She had not prepared for it, it just happened. There were no buddhas, no gurus available; the wisdom of awakening burst forth by itself. In P-990, "Not all die early," ED considers this phenomenon in the light of her own experience:

Not all die early, dying young -
Maturity of Fate
Is consummated equally
In Ages, or a Night -

"Maturity of Fate" is her name for her own sudden awakening, "consummated in a night" – "overnight," one might say. One day she was ignorant, & the next day was enlightened. One day she was a separate self in a given time & place, & the next day she was in the dharma. At first she didn't know what to make of it (might she be crazy?), but she soon recognized the truth of nonduality, & accepted that Maturity of Fate was a great gift bestowed upon her, as she says in an early poem (P-454):

It was given to me by the Gods –
When I was a little Girl –
They give us Presents most – you know –
When we are new – and small.

In the present poem she recognizes that one's chronological age

at the time of death is irrelevant to one's spiritual progress on the path of life. I have know men in their twenties whom I considered to be "young fuddy-duddies" – "Hoary Boys," ED calls them.

If you do not seriously identify with the ego-identity assigned you, then you retain access to the archetypal Self, which is beyond clock time. It is neither young nor old; it is simply vital. At the chronological age of 80 one may simply be a "Junior of Fourscore."

So ED distinguishes between two kinds of death: Death of Act, & Death of Period. Obituary notices of elderly people may say, "died of natural causes," meaning that after a long period of time one just ups & dies. This is dying of old age – what ED calls here a "Period that dies."

On the other hand, vital people die in the act of living. This is the "Act that dies." For most people, to live means to stay in the rut of an ego-identity until their period of time is up. For people whose vitality cannot be contained by an ego-identity, living becomes spiritual action, or individuating. The sense of self is always evolving, day by day. Like Zen adepts, they seek to live in the Now.

So when a vital person dies, his or her effective action comes to an end. As ED puts it, 'twas Act that died. Living in the dharma, she already knew that clock time does not exist except for ego. When she became enlightened she knew that "Period" had died. Clock time ceased to exist, as she says in P-287, "A Clock stopped." Now she knows that whenever she dies she will simply be caught in the act of living. Enlightenment caught her in the act of non-living; death will catch her in the act of living.

THE SECRET LIFE

Ego-transcendence means the awakening of a new awareness, unfamiliar (or even alien) to the person's experience. It may come as a shock, & it may generate anxiety: is it friend or foe, benign or ominous?

Conrad Aiken's short story, "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," contains a lucid & eloquent description of the early stages of such an ambiguous consciousness as it unfolds in the mind of a twelve-year-old boy, Paul Hasleman. His first problem relates to his parents: the new experience "increasingly had brought him into a kind of mute misunderstanding, or even conflict, with his father and mother. It was as if he were trying to lead a double life." This could well be a description of ED's early experience of ego-transcendence, when she had to face the fact that she was living among egocentric people, *including Emily Dickinson*, all of whom would suspect some kind of pathology. In an early poem (410), she asks, "Could it be Madness – this?" This is a rhetorical question, to be sure, but in P-435 she recognizes that in the matter of "sanity,"

“Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –

In a late poem (1717) she continues to recognize the ego-identity as “that revolving reason / Whose esoteric belt / Protects our sanity.” Aiken’s protagonist immediately recognizes his dilemma:

On the one hand he had to be Paul Hasleman, and keep up the appearance of being that person...; on the other, he had to explore this new world which had been opened to him. Nor could there be the slightest doubt...that the new world was the profounder and more wonderful of the two. It was irresistible. It was miraculous. Its beauty was simply beyond anything... But how then, between the two worlds, of which he was thus constantly aware, was he to keep a balance?

The boy is assaulted by the everyday, existential questions: “How was one to manage? How was one to explain? Would it be safe to explain? Would it be absurd? Would it merely mean that he would get into some obscure kind of trouble?”

ED herself surely reflected often on these same questions, always reaching the same, “tentative” conclusion: caution was her protection, the policy that kept her secret career alive & functioning. It unfolded in secrecy, as she created her poems & turned them into a hidden stash of handmade booklets, which she called her “slow riches” (P-843). Their intrinsic value was evident, however obscurely, to her survivors, who intuited that these slow riches fully accounted for all the weirdness of the eccentric Lady in White.³

3 Aiken’s “Silent Snow, Secret Snow,” appears in the anthology *Look Who’s Talking* (Bruce Weber, ed.), 155-173.

381

A Secret told –
Ceases to be a Secret – then –
A Secret – kept –
That - can appal but One –

Better of it – continual be afraid –
Than it –
And Whom you told it to – beside –

KEEPING IT SECRET

In a number of poems ED refers to ego-transcendence as both exhilarating & “appalling,” as in P-281, “’Tis so appalling – it exhilarates,” or in P-673, “’Tis this – invites – appalls,” “convicts – enchants.”

Emily Dickinson regarded ED as her secret identity, sometimes joyful, sometimes worrisome. Loss of ego-identity can be frightening when one is isolated in a community where such a thing appears tantamount to madness. Indeed, ED herself considered the matter more than once.⁴ Even though she knew, in her heart of hearts, that she wasn’t crazy, nevertheless her obvious “heresy,” if made public, could be her undoing. A radical departure from the collective worldview could be regarded as subversive, as she has pointed out in P-435, quoted a few pages above:

Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you’re straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –

In the present poem Emily Dickinson ponders the advisability of letting the world in on her secret identity, the Secret Truth of her life. Loss of ego-identity in that provincial Victorian community was both “exhilarating” & “appalling,” for it could strike fear into your heart, isolating you from the rest of humanity.

But there was no one with whom to share this burden, no guru, no possible confidant. If she were to reveal her Truth to

4 See poems 362, 410, 435, & 1717.

an egocentric person, then she would become vulnerable in ways
not even imaginable:

Better of it – continual be afraid –
Than it –
And Whom you told it to – beside

PARADOX, THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

A paradox is a statement contrary to accepted opinion, seemingly contradictory or illogical. Transcendentalism abounds in paradox, and may even be its native source, like the speech of the ancient Greek oracles.

“Transcendentalism” refers to an actual experience, not to any doctrine or philosophy. This is the experience of ego-transcendence, when dual awareness becomes nondual awareness. Ego-speech depends on duality: “I/It,” “I/you.” Non-ego awareness cannot even be named (just call it the Tao, the Way). It cannot be “imagined” by an egocentric person, any more than erotic fulfillment can be “imagined” by a virgin. It is possible, however, to describe the dynamics of ego-transcendence in order to resolve the paradoxes expressed by the transcendentalists.

Since ego-transcendence is universal, this means that anyone who experiences it will use the same kind of language to talk about it, no matter from what culture, no matter from what century. This also means that the study of the poetry or sayings or sutras of any given transcendentalist is bound to involve *comparative studies*. The Buddha did not invent ego-transcendence, he simply awakened. That’s all “buddha” means, after all — “awakened.”

Throughout the twentieth century ED’s poetry was much studied, and the Dickinsonian bibliography grows apace; yet no commentator I have read has yet recognized that ED was a buddha, that she awakened in Amherst; her critics appear to believe that she devoted her life to writing “cryptic,” “puzzling” poems. What she was doing, however, was talking about transcendent matters that had been talked about innumerable times before her day — & there has been no letup since.

Ssu-hsin, a Chinese Zen master of the eleventh century, listed what he called the four “pivotal truths” of Ch’an (Zen):

1. There is life within death.
2. There is death within life.
3. There is permanent death in death.
4. There is permanent life in life⁵

These truths are explained logically as follows:

1. Unconditioned awareness (Life) arises when ego dies.
2. Ego-death can occur within one’s lifetime. This is called Realization.
3. Physical death is permanent death of the person, both as body and as ego-self.
4. Realization can become a permanent part of one’s life. This is called Actualization.

ED herself described the four pivotal truths in two terse poems, P-816, and P-1017:

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become –
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun.

To die – without the Dying
And live – without the Life
This is the hardest Miracle
Propounded to Belief.

Can anyone distinguish between ED’s words and those of Ssu-hsin?

5 *Teachings of Zen* (Thomas Cleary, tr.), 66.

1129

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –

Buddhism so kindness! So freedom! So special!
Always say the truth. It's just natural. Everyone
needs Buddha mind.

Tsung Tsai, Buddhist monk.
(*Tricycle*, Spring, 2000, 98)

POETRY OF THE DHARMA: THE TRUTH'S SUPERB SURPRISE

Tsung Tsai & ED (in the present poem) are both talking about nondual awareness. The monk simply praises it, but ED speaking to herself, recommends that she “tell it slant,” for nondual awareness is alien to our cultural mainstream.

She recommends (& practices) circuitous discourse, consisting of paradox & metaphor. Her bliss & her liberation transcend that of egocentric happiness, which is “infirm.” It is the same old frail thing, attachment to duality, “I/it,” “I/you.” ED describes her own awakening as “The Truth’s superb surprise.” Her task, as witness/poet, is to convey this Truth to an egocentric reader, by way of “kind explanations” in the form of striking language that can often be enjoyed even egocentrically.

Satori is lightning in the mind. It may “appal” (P-381), because the sudden death of the ego-self may raise the spectre of madness. ED suggests creating a “gradual dawning” (Buddhists recognize the existence of both sudden & gradual enlightenment). Perhaps long immersion in ED’s poetry will make you eventually realize what she is talking about.

The last two lines seem to say that the Truth will blind, if suddenly sprung, whereas her poems will dazzle little by little. At

the same time these two lines mean that if you don't gradually dazzle people with the Truth, then they will remain blind, or unawakened.

ED seems to have imagined an ideal reader, gradually led into nondual awareness by immersion in her poetry. In our profoundly dualistic society this is not likely to happen. Well over a century after her death, ED's poetry is still universally regarded as "cryptic" & "enigmatic." None of the considerable literature about ED's poetry (or about Emily Dickinson herself) even considers the possibility of ego-transcendence. This is bound to change, given the growing acceptance of American Buddhism into the mainstream.

1668

If I could tell how glad I was
I should not be so glad –
But when I cannot make the Force,
Nor mould it into Word,
I know it is a sign
That new Dilemma be
From mathematics further off
Than from Eternity.

69

Low at my problem bending,
Another problem comes –
Larger than mine – Serener –
Involving statelier sums.

I check my busy pencil,
My figures file away.
Wherefore, my baffled fingers
Thy perplexity?

Not when we know, the Power accosts –
The Garment of Surprise
Was all our timid Mother wore
At Home – in Paradise

(From P-1335)

LOGOS & EROS IN THE POETIC ENTERPRISE

In P-1668, “If I could tell,” ED describes the dilemma facing the transcendentalist witness/poet: how to reconcile Logos & Eros, how to make them partners in the poetic enterprise. Eros is pure Life Force, sheer Becoming; Logos is naming, a static differentiating. The flowing river of time becomes a measurable phenomenon of seconds, minutes, & hours, of months & years, whereas ego-transcendence lifts you into the Eternal Now, where there is no “you.” How can such an experience be captured in written words?

The first two lines of P-1668 show the poet playing with the subject pronoun:

If I could tell how glad I was
I should not be so glad –

For the transcendentalist there are always two referents for “I”: the ego-dominant “I,” & the ego-transcendent “I” – which is actually the eternally present Mind. In the first two lines of this poem the two referents may be expressed like this:

If Emily Dickinson could tell how glad ED was
Emily Dickinson/ED should not be so glad –

“Glad” is one of the many words used for ego-transcendence. Here, Emily Dickinson, speaking as poet/witness, muses on the dilemma which has always faced her: how to express Eros in terms of Logos. Her own private expression for this is “making the

Force.” “Moulding it into Word,” she adds. There have always been times when, as poet, she could not make the Force, & she takes this as a sign

That new Dilemma be
From mathematics further off
Than from Eternity.

Ego-transcendence is “Eternity,” & her poetic discourse wants to be farther & farther away from Logos (mathematics) & closer to Eternity. All her life she has worked with this challenge, which is what makes her poetry seem so “baffling” to egocentric readers. Each time she goes to make the Force she finds herself caught between the contrary demands of Eros & Logos. When she cannot make the Force she takes it as a sign that her expression “baffles” on the side of non-ego (Eternity) – i.e., it threatens to become unintelligible to egocentric people who rely on Logos.

P-69, a very early poem, expresses the difficulty described above. There she refers to the “mathematical” problem as one involving “statelier sums.” Her “baffled fingers” are perplexed, reflecting the dilemma of the transcendentalist poet challenged to put down in writing (Logos) the experience of the Force (Eros).

The four lines from P-1335 illustrate ED’s use of “Power” as a synonym for “Force”; when ego-transcendence occurs it is experienced as the Power, or Force, “accosting” the mind. This is always unexpected – it happens “Not when we know.”

PUZZLED SCHOLARS

This World is not Conclusion,
A Species stands beyond...
It beckons, and it baffles...
To guess it, puzzles scholars...

(From P-501)

Professor Harold Bloom is the editor of the recent anthology, *The Best Poems of the English Language* (2004), and he includes a discussion of Emily Dickinson and her poetry.

Prof. Bloom is the most prestigious scholar I've read on this subject. He is currently Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale; former Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard; Shakespearean scholar, author of "more than 25 books," and recipient of numerous awards (this information comes from the jacket blurb). Therefore one must take note of what he has to say about Emily Dickinson and her poetry.

Prof. Bloom acknowledges that ED's poetry is baffling. Even though it "looks simple" it is "very difficult," because she is so "cognitively original" (575). That is to say, ED's "cognition" is unique, seemingly impossible to get a handle on. Prof. Bloom says, "Though I read and teach her constantly, I remain a bewildered idolator, struggling to understand her enigmatic sublimities" (578).

In *Solitary Prowess* (20) we have quoted Prof. Cynthia Wolff's admission of puzzlement in her tome *Emily Dickinson*: "...much of

Dickinson's strongest poetry is inaccessible – that is, it is difficult to determine precisely what such poetry is 'about'" (140). ED appears to be Prof. Wolff's wayward student:

Had she couched her sentiments in lines that scanned and rhymed with regularity, the verse might be more accessible; had she been content with less radical compression of imagery or less violent ellipsis, her readers might tolerate the straining of traditional language more easily. Yet moderation did not figure in her plan. Perhaps she suffered from...self-limiting pride... (441)

The academic intellectual is set in his or her egocentric ways, accustomed to "mastering" the subject-matter in terms of a predetermined, rational vocabulary consistent with a dualistic grasp of reality. There is no alternative. If the subject-matter violates the dualistic premises, any presumed "context" vanishes. As Prof. Wolff puts it, one can no longer see what it is "about." Whenever "I study that" is replaced by "I *am* that," then ego is at sea.⁶

On the other hand (the one clapping?), nonego discourse speaks directly to nonego experience. For two millennia Eastern scholars of Buddhism have understood and commented on the sutras, simply because *they know what they are talking about*. An egocentric scholar discussing transcendentalist discourse literally does not know what he or she is talking about, and if honest, will admit to bafflement, like Profs. Wolff and Bloom. Bloom calls himself "a bewildered idolator, struggling to understand her enigmatic sublimities." This amuses ED: "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!" (P-842)

Prof. Bloom calls ED's poetry "the Gospel of Emily Dickinson"

6 *I Am That* (1973) is the title of the modern transcendentalist classic by Nisargadatta Maharaj.

– “Gospel,” in the sense of “good news” (Gk. *euangélion*), as evangelists like to point out. But then he goes on to say that ED “has, though, no good news to proclaim. Despair, mourning and melancholia, psychic pain, erotic suffering: these are her *materia poetica*” (576). Is he talking about ED, or Edgar Allan Poe?

ED’s primary subject is not suffering, but ego-transcendence, which is liberation from the stifling prison of the ego-self. This is her *materia poetica*.

PUZZLED READERS

“Whatever is unintelligible would be certainly
transcendental.”

-Charles Dickens in Boston, on
his 1842 tour of America.⁷

ED’s many fans are mostly ordinary readers who don’t pretend to understand her puzzling language; in fact, they make a virtue out of it, which is easy to do. It is cryptic, compelling, & elegant, all at the same time. It is often Shakespearean, as in P-1384, “Praise it – ‘tis dead”:

Invest this alabaster Zest
In the Delights of Dust –
Remitted – since it flitted it
In recusance august.

This is bardic stuff – spellbinding, deeply satisfying – *no matter what it may mean*. “It is beauty that doesn’t always ask for pure analysis.”

That is how Brenda Hillman puts it, in her introduction to the small volume – a vade mecum – *Emily Dickinson: Poems*, one of the Shambhala Pocket Classics series. Hillman is a humanities teacher, not a scholar, & ED seems to be her favorite poet to

7 *American Notes for General Circulation* [see *Antiques Magazine* [Sept., 2003], 122.]

“teach.” When her students confess puzzlement at the “strange diction,” Hillman recommends a way to deal with it:

Occasionally when students tell me it’s hard to know how to read the poems, I tell them, read them quickly and let them shock you. If a line stays, read it again until you feel it is yours, and let the strange capital letters and the dashes carry the poems to the place in your unconscious that won’t worry what they mean.⁸

I myself, as a humanities teacher with a different temperament, approached poems differently, for I would always “worry what they mean.” Well, maybe not “worry”; I would “wonder what they mean,” wonder where the poet was coming from, that he or she could say these things all new to me. It made me feel that my understanding of life was very limited, & that the poet, as an oracle, could raise my consciousness. The poem was a koan, & it was my task to focus on a reality more sophisticated than what I was used to calling “real.” I felt that the oracle was opening the “doors of perception,” & that it was up to me to somehow imagine my way through those doors.

But that’s just how I am, & why I am writing these pages. Others enjoy the very mystery of oracular poets, & this I can understand – for to be enjoyably puzzled by ED is to be enjoyably puzzled by life itself.

8 Hillman, xiv.

645

Bereavement in their death to feel
Whom We have never seen –
A Vital Kinsmanship import
Our Soul and theirs – between –

For Stranger – Strangers do not mourn –
There be Immortal friends
Whom Death see first – 'tis news of this
That paralyze Ourselves –

Who, vital only to Our Thought –
Such Presence bear away
In dying – 'tis as if Our Souls
Absconded – suddenly –

INDRA'S NET, THE ROOT OF COMPASSION

ED, the “not-self,” intuited the ecological Oneness of the phenomenal world. “Ecology” is a commonly understood idea today, though even fifty years ago, very few people had ever heard of an ecosystem. Today a sophisticated idea like the “butterfly effect” has even made its way into the dictionaries.

The idea that all the organisms in an environment are vitally interconnected seems to rise naturally into ego-transcendent awareness. Ego-mind is dual, creating a separateness between itself & the world “out there.” Indeed, this is the only way ego-mind can exist. Ego-transcendence obliterates this duality, & each transcendentalist makes this discovery anew. Anyone can grasp the *idea* of ecology, but actually to experience oneself as part of an ecosystem requires an awakening from the anti-ecological isolation of ego. For ego, our skin is an armor; for non-ego it is a porous sponge.

When ED made this discovery she used the notion of “kinsmanship” to talk about it, as she does in the present poem: “A Vital Kinsmanship.” As a Zen gardener she had always been aware of the Unity of Nature, of the bee & the rose as related, like kinsmen. In P-1709 she says that each year Autumn is “Invited to return” by “influential kinsmen.” In P-885 she calls the worms “Our little Kinsmen.” In P-380 she calls the grass “Near Kinsman to” a flower. In P-1137 she says, “The kinsmen of the Wind are Peaks...”

The younger ED was a warmly social person, & it was not difficult for her (as for St. Francis) to think of the critters & plants in her world as her extended family, her kinsmen.

This whole idea has been part of the Hindu experience since ancient times, in the form of Indra's Net, eventually adopted by Buddhist teachers as expressive of the "universal biome." Indra, the supreme Hindu god, is said to have a Net — a Net that we call the world, or the universe. At each intersection of the Net is a jewel, a specific being, whether person, plant, critter, or even phenomenon, that reflects all the other jewels in the Net. All of us mirror each other, & no one is anything else than this reflection. Ego-mind does not want to look into this mirror; in fact, its existence depends upon *not* looking into it. In order to exist ego needs samsara, the world of separate individuals unconnected:

Despite our apparent existence in separate "skin bags" (as Zen expresses it), we are actually one with everything in the universe. The notion that we are individual selves is simply a convenient illusion, one that helps us survive in the world of samsara. On a deeper level, the image of Indra's Net suggests that we have a responsibility to think and act for the benefit of everything in the universe. The care we give to this endeavor is simultaneously for our own good as well as the good of others.⁹

In the present poem ED says that when you feel compassionately connected with the world, you experience a "vital" kinsmanship. "Vital" means "visceral," an "import" (significance) between "Our Soul and theirs" (lines 3-4). Those strangers are not really strangers, because to the compassionate heart no thing is a stranger.

In this poem ED uses "vital" twice, in line 3 ("Vital Kinsmanship") & in line 9, "vital only to Our Thought." The death of a bird,

9 Jack Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 135.

a worm, a tree, a flower — this is a death “vital *only* to Our Thought,” not to our actual family in the world of samsara. This Thought is compassionate awareness.

1053

It was a quiet way –
He asked if I was his –
I made no answer of the Tongue
But answer of the Eyes –
And then He bore me on
Before this mortal noise
With swiftness, as of Chariots
And distance, as of Wheels.
This World did drop away
As Acres from the feet
Of one that leaneth from Balloon
Upon an Ether street.
The Gulf behind was not,
The Continents were new –
Eternity it was before
Eternity was due.
No Seasons were to us –
It was not Night nor Morn –
But Sunrise stopped upon the place
And fastened it in Dawn.

TRANSCENDENTALIST LOVE POETRY

Transcendentalist poetry often reads like profane love poetry, as we know from the Song of Solomon, the lyrics of Rumi, or of San Juan de la Cruz. Whether such poetry is sacred or profane is often inferred from our knowledge of the life of the poet. If little is known of the poet's inner, spiritual life, then such poetry may be understood literally as "erotic."

Such is the case with ED. None of the commentators I have read know or suspect her of being an authentic mystic in the non-sectarian tradition of transcendentalism. ED's commentators appear to be innocent of knowledge or interest in the subject of Enlightenment, evidently because they do not think it relevant to the writings of Emily Dickinson. Thus ED's famous "erotic" poem "Wild Nights" (P-249) impresses readers as a literal reference to a roll in the hay. This is a gratuitous impression.

The present poem, "It was a quiet way," may be useful in dispelling the idea that ED's "love poetry" refers to secret sexual activity, because here she uses traditional expressions of spiritual intimacy that evoke sexual intimacy. Physical orgasm & spiritual orgasm are analogous, so the latter must not be thought of as a "metaphor" for the former; the same language describes them both.

The first two lines of this poem could come from any popular love ballad. They may seem "profane" because of ED's reference to a man: "He asked if I was his." But "he" & "him" (like "man" & "mankind") are not necessarily gender specific in ED's writing (or in that of any other nineteenth-century writer).

ED makes a point of contrasting "quiet" (line 1) with "noise"

(line 6). This is a major issue in ego-transcendence (as in formal meditation), because the constant noise of the ego-world militates against inner peace, as ED says in P-1251:

Silence is all we dread.
There's Ransom in a Voice –
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.

The present poem describes merging with Buddha Mind. When ego falls away, Buddha Mind appears to beckon hospitably, like a genial host, as in P-1721:

He was my host – he was my guest,
I never to this day
If I invited him could tell,
Or he invited me.

So infinite our intercourse
So intimate, indeed,
Analysis as capsule seemed
To keeper of the seed.

[By “capsule” I understand “spore sac”; ego-intellect contains the seed, but is not part of it.]

Ego-transcendence is well named, because to transcend is to fly upward, or to be borne aloft, as in a balloon in this poem or in P-700, “You’ve seen Balloons set – Haven’t You?” One is carried aloft, beyond the “mortal noise” (line 6) of the everyday world.

The matter of noise vs. silence is basic to the transcendentalist experience, & recalls Timothy Leary’s famous admonition to “turn on, tune in, & drop out.” When one transcends (“turns

on,” chemically or naturally), one tunes in to the non-ego wave length & drops away from the “mortal noise.” This din is both the noise of the everyday world, & the noise of the chattering ego. What ED says in this poem, beginning in line 9, “This World did drop away,” describes the classic experience of ego-transcendence in terms of getting beyond the “mortal noise” of the everyday life that besets us all. Here it is worth quoting a similar description by a contemporary transcendentalist, Fleet Maull.

Fleet Maull is a longtime Buddhist adept & activist who did fourteen years time in prison. Like ED, he realized that he had to escape the mortal noise of his prison (see ED’s poem 652, “A Prison gets to be a friend”): he could either identify with his prison, or he could transcend it:

I started practicing meditation...almost immediately. One evening, many months into my sentence, I realized that my mind was not moving. I was calm and my mind was steady. Regardless of the noise and anger around me, my mind was not pulled by it. I had had these kinds of experiences before, but in a quiet Buddhist retreat center. To find it in the midst of those circumstances was liberating.¹⁰

As ED puts it in the present poem, “This World did drop away.” She finds herself “Upon an Ether street,” in the Eternal Now, as in P-287, “A Clock stopped.” Sunrise (line 19), as a moment in clock time, becomes Dawn (last line), meaning Enlightenment.¹¹

10 Fleet Maull, “Practice with the Cell,” *Parabola*, (Summer, 2003), 26. Maull is the founder of Prison Dharma Network.

11 Why the “Ether” metaphor? Ether distances one from (ego-)suffering – indeed, from all ego-involvements. See Thoreau’s description of the ether experience (*Journal*, May 12, 1851), quoted in *Solitary Prowess*, 231.

1071

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object's loss –
Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to its Price –
The Object Absolute – is nought –
Perception sets it fair
And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far –

PERCEPTION IN ITSELF

This poem is an analysis of Perception, which of course involves both ego-perception & ego-transcendent perception. To perceive an object transcendently means to experience its “suchness,” as in most classical haiku. When this occurs, the object is “lost” (line 2) as a substantial thing “out there,” in relation to ego. It merges with the mind, as in Basho’s famous haiku:

The old pond;
a frog jumps in –
splash!

One might say that the frog leaps with a sudden splash into the mind experienced as an ancient, deep pond of water.¹²

Ego sees every object – & every person – in relation to itself, naturally. This relativity is “precisely” what is lost when an object shines forth in its surreal suchness. “Perception in itself” (line 3) is ED’s term for this phenomenon, which the Buddhists call *tathata*, a key concept in the Buddhist teaching of human psychology (the *abhidharma*). Ego-loss is the “Price” you pay for the Gain of Buddha Mind.

The suchness of an object is what ED calls “The Object Absolute” (line 5) – no longer relative. Experienced as such it is “nought,” which is to say that it has no independent existence (just as the ego-self has none). One now experiences Truth as Beauty, the “perfectness” of the transcendent reality. When you come

12 ED herself speaks of the mind as a well, as in P-460 (“a little Well – like Mine”); see especially her richly detailed P-1400 & P-1712.

back down from the experience you may “upbraid,” or regret the great distance it seems from everyday ego-perception. It is a “Sudden Guest” (P-1309) that seems to come & go fitfully.

Pure Perception reveals what the Buddhists call *anicca*, the not-self of phenomenal reality. This becomes the subject of a number of poems by ED, a few of which are discussed in the following section.

IMPERMANENCE (ANICCA)

Burning destroys nothing. It just shuffles the molecules.

(Old chemical slogan)

The core meanings of Buddhist discourse are determined by ego-transcendent experiences of Reality. When this discourse is translated into English, it is inevitably read from an egocentric viewpoint (the same is true of ED's poetic discourse). *Anicca*, "impermanence," – a basic term in the Buddhist discourse – offers a prime example of this cross-cultural confusion.

When the Buddhist states that everything is "impermanent," the Westerner sees no reason to disagree, because this seems obvious to any observer, East or West. One need only watch things live & die, or study the fossil records of life on earth: nothing lasts forever.

But the meaning of *anicca* is not confined to any such obvious fact of life. *Anicca* refers to the impermanence, or non-existence of any "thing in itself." The rainbow is a good example: the Westerner has no difficulty grasping that the rainbow is not a thing, in the sense that the oak tree is a thing; it is an optical illusion, "impermanent," not because it is ephemeral, but because it doesn't exist apart from the refraction & reflection of the sun's rays in raindrops. It is a mirage.

In the West, "permanent" means "enduring in stable form," as an oak tree or a housefly does. We all understand that while the oak or the fly achieves a stable – mature – form, it too, is finally impermanent, meaning that it has a limited lifespan.

But ego-transcendence reveals a reality beyond the question of longevity. The oak is "impermanent" in the same sense that the

rainbow is impermanent. As a “thing,” it is made up of atoms; & just as the atom is not a thing – a tiny, indivisible particle – so any thing made up of atoms is likewise “no-thing.” This is the Void of which the Buddhists speak, as this is expressed in the Heart Sutra (chanted daily throughout the Buddhist world):

Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form. Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this. ...all dharmas are forms of emptiness: not born, not destroyed, not stained, not pure, without loss, without gain.¹³

When you see an oak tree, think of it as a “rainbow oak,” an illusion like that of the rainbow, only lasting longer in clock time. Like the atom itself, it has no substantial, solid self.

Theoretically the liberal-minded Westerner might be able to grant the fundamental truth of *anicca*, even if not experiencing it personally; but when *anicca* is applied to the ego-self, then a big problem arises. This is because the ego-self, as an enduring, permanent “thing,” is *self-evident*, evident to itself: ego thinks, therefore ego is (*ego cogito ergo ego sum*). It has no way of deconstructing the wall of separation between itself & the world “out there.” All Westerners recognize that each human life on earth is impermanent, but when the person eventually dies, the ego-self is believed to survive as a soul, & to go to an afterlife, where it will abide “permanently.”

Westerners believe in the survival of a “permanent” soul, even when death is premature. Children are changing day by day as they grow into adults; but if the child should suddenly die, then the Westerner believes that the ego-self as soul instantly becomes “permanent,” & goes to heaven, where it will await the eventual arrival of its grief-stricken parents. All of this is taken

13 Quoted in Maguire, 79.

“on faith,” of course. Many Western pet owners even believe that their deceased dogs & cats have permanent ego-selves awaiting them in heaven.

With ego-transcendence anicca is experienced as a reality, part of an awareness unconditioned by the local boundaries of the ego-self. The conditioned ego-self is seen to be a pseudo-reality, like a rainbow, conditioned by the reflections & refractions of a local culture.

In our commentary “Amazing Grace” (see above, p.17), we have noted how Buddha Mind enabled ED to write of “impermanence” as she does in P-1257 (“Dominion lasts until obtained”): of the morning dew, that most transient of phenomena, she says,

How everlasting are the Lips
Known only to the Dew –
These are the Brides of permanence
Supplanting me and you.

All recurring natural phenomena are “permanently” part of Nature’s eternal Becoming, whereas the individual ego-self occurs only once, never again (certainly not in any “afterlife”). The ego-self stands apart from Nature, & relates to Her as the Other – something to be dominated or possessed (or avoided). Dominion & possession are typically a part of the ego-self, as stated in the first stanza of this poem:

Dominion lasts until obtained –
Possession just as long –
But these – endowing as they flit
Eternally belong.

Dominion & possession “Eternally belong” to ego’s basic

experience of itself; they “endow” ego with a sense of its own reality – but this is a fleeting (or “flitting”) illusion.

985

The Missing All – prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World's
Departure from a Hinge –
Or Sun's extinction, be observed –
'Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.

—the Buddha

NIRVANA (“EXTINCTION”)

“To miss” has a number of meanings, two of which apply in the present poem: (1) to fail to perceive (be unconscious of), & (2) to regret the absence or loss of.

The Buddhist readily understands that the ego-self is “missing the All,” meaning the Oneness of world & mind. In order even to exist, ego demands a dual reality, I/world, inner world/outer world. Thus understood, the first two lines of the present poem say, “The ego-self, unaware of the higher Self (the All), prevented me from missing the absence of everything ‘out there’ in the world.” A second possible meaning: “It prevented me from overlooking the absence of everything out there.” “Everything” — each “thing” — exists only as a concept, one of the “thoughts” with which we make the world.

“If nothing larger” (line 3) means “anything less.” “Anything less than a cosmic event could not even excite my curiosity.” This is true of us all: we do not question the ontological premises of the ego-self. Everything in the “outer” reality is regarded as a permanent entity, just as we believe the ego-self to be substantial.

Rather than *see* the wind, or waves — or a stream or a cup or a book — as the constant flux that each is, we imagine them to be solid, persisting, separate...things. We attribute

this “thingness” to them in the same way that we attribute selfhood to human beings.¹⁴

This passage, from Hagen’s book on Buddhism, concludes with the observation that applies to the present poem:

Instead of *seeing* the thoroughgoing motion, flux, and flow of experience, we imagine a vast proliferation of innumerable, separated things. In short, we grant selfhood to whatever we find “out there.”

The selfhood of the things we find “out there” is what ED means by the “minor Things” of our egocentric reality.

Ego-transcendence reveals the Big Picture, the All, which is Oneness. Egocentric reality consists of an endless number of “minor things.” You can’t “miss” them, they are obvious, nor can you miss their absence. This is because the ego-self regards them as solidly present. Ego-transcendence, however, makes the ego-self vanish – poof! With this, all the “substantial” things & ideas of the “substantial” self also vanish.

The “cosmic event” (lines 3-5) is ego-transcendence, the “transvaluation of values,” that unhinges the egocentric world & extinguishes the Apollonian view of the world reality. Ego-transcendence is nirvana, which simply means “extinction” of the ego-self. When it occurs one may suddenly *see* how there is no “thing” out there. Every “thing” is a shimmering presence, like a rainbow, a Becoming. It seems a miracle that these shapes can steadily cohere. Such is the flux, the absence of all selfhood that the Buddhist & Hindu adepts have been experiencing down through the centuries. This is the “World’s Departure” from the sense of reality that hinges on our illusion of innumerable, separated things.

14 Steve Hagen, *Buddhism Plain and Simple*, 134-5.

ED's ego-transcendent experiences gave birth to her poetic style, as in this poem, notable for its lack of "form," avoidance of punctuation, & the freedom she took with established usage. I think of it as the Liberated, or Nirvanic Style.

1499

How firm Eternity must look
To crumbling men like me
The only Adamant Estate
In all Identity –

How mighty to the insecure
Thy Physiognomy
To whom not any Face cohere –
Unless concealed in thee

What is your original face, the one you had before
your parents were born?

Famous Zen koan

YOUR ORIGINAL FACE (I)

In this poem ED refers to herself in the masculine, which is not unusual for her,¹⁵ or for the times, when “men,” “man,” & “mankind” commonly meant “everybody.” When she says “men like me” (line 2) she means “people like me”; certainly she did not have in mind “women like me.”

This is a poem about the identity crisis commonly provoked by the experience of ego-transcendence: “Who am I?” One’s received ego-identity is “insecure” per se, & it “crumbles” in the face of the higher Self. The illusory ego is experienced as the “Nobody” of P-288 (“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”)¹⁶ In the present poem ED states that Eternity appears as a “firm” Identity, an “Adamant Estate,” or condition of life – unchanging, hard as steel or diamond (L. *adamantinus*).

The transcendentalist experiences the ego-identity as insubstantial & illusory, by contrast to the “Physiognomy” of the higher Self, which is the Faceless Face, the Face of Faces to which “not any (ego-) Face cohere.” One’s transcendent identity turns out to have been concealed all the time in the Face of the Higher Self, i.e. the Presence of the Higher Self. As such, this poem is an appropriate response to the Zen koan quoted above.

15 See, for example, P-1466, “...I am a rural man,” P-389, “...I used to – when a Boy,” or P-466, “I...who am the Prince of Mines.”

16 See our discussion of P-288 in *Solitary Prowess*, 98-100.

1090

I am afraid to own a Body –
I am afraid to own a Soul –
Profound – precarious Property –
Possession, not optional –

Double Estate – entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir –
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.

ED AS ACCIDENTAL BUDDHIST