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A Thesis Presented for the
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By

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First Reader: Helen Blair Sullivan; Associate Professor of Education
Second Reader: Edward J. Eaton; Professor of Education
Third Reader: George K. Makechnie; Associate Professor of Education
"Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be;
Attended by a Single Hound--
Its own Identity."

Genius, strangely enough, is usually willing to humble itself and to our misunderstanding vision it appears at times to be indiscriminate in selecting its medium. Contrary to anticipation it rarely garbs itself consistently in pomp, curiously preferring to disguise itself with a less ostentatious masque. It has a sly gaiety which seems to delight in confounding men by appearing unexpectedly. Indeed, if one is to judge by the many times it goes unnoticed on account of its inappropriate dress, one is forced to conclude that, after all, pomp may not be its favorite garment.

In the drowsy college town of Amherst, Massachusetts, there was born one hundred thirteen years ago to one of the community's most upright families a tiny girl-child with a shock of her father's red-gold hair and eyes "the color of the sherry that guests leave in their glasses." To the townspeople the event was not one of major importance. Squire Dickinson, it was true, was the best lawyer in Amherst; he was backed by an illustrious family whose members had been prominent in the early history of America and of Amherst College. But the birth of a daughter to this respected gentleman failed to stir the villagers with excitement or
even a mild curiosity as to what the baby would be named. New Englanders in those days were strangely non-committal. It was as if they had derived from the earth, with which their pioneer fathers had communed so closely, a certain wisdom which permitted them to be outwardly indifferent to the affairs of life. Their interest in life had been sublimated by a Puritan concentration on Immortality, "the sweetness and the light of Heaven, Hell-fire, and Damnation."

To Squire Dickinson's wife lying in the shadowy bedroom in which her child had been born, with the rustle of bare elm tree boughs on the tall windows, and the steely cold of December frosting the panes, the event was tinged with emotion. Even a Puritan mother, her heart filled with wifely devotion to her lord and master, felt a tenderness and affection towards her new-born infant which transcended the statement of her husband that here was another disciple of Christ to tread life's arduous path. With all her maternal joy and pride, however, Mrs. Dickinson was not in the slightest degree clairvoyant; she was in no sense aware that the tiny child catching its breath in sobs she could hear from the next room was destined to be a genius. And had she been living fifty-six years later it is doubtful if Mrs. Dickinson would even then have recognized genius in the daughter who lay slowly dying of Bright's disease.

Emily Dickinson was born, lived, and died in her father's house at Amherst. In her entire life she was away
from it for but one or two brief spells. It is readily understandable why when some of her poems were first published in 1894 it was so difficult to get sufficient material for a biography. The story of her life is, perhaps, more definitely the story of a soul's evolution than that of almost any other poet. Emily never knew the hard, bright surfaces of the reality of our modern novelists, for instance. She did not exist at any fevered, speedy pace in which she attempted to "live life" so that she might write about it in the security of first-hand knowledge. The decorous span of her fifty-six years was punctuated outwardly by the death of an intimate friend, by an unfulfilled love affair, and by a life-long devotion to her father. The first event, in the light of the last two, is negligible.

No one can consider Emily's love affair without also considering her devotion to her father who was, as she said, "in the habit of her." The two are bound up so very closely that her devotion to father answers for the unfulfillment of her love affair. Contrary to tradition George Gould, the man she loved, was not married when she first met him, nor did any secret sorrow or sin prevent their marriage. Upon first sight of him she instinctively recognized a kindred spirit, and wrote:

"As the eyes accost and sunder
In an audience,
Stamped in instances forever--
So may countenance  
Entertain without addressing  
Countenance of One  
In a neighboring horizon,  
Gone as soon as known."

He was a talented young minister, as skillful a dealer in 
words in his own way as was Emily herself. She says of him:  
"Had but the tale a warbling teller  
All the boys would come--  
Orpheus' sermon captivated;  
It did not condemn."

Nothing, however, was more abhorrent to Squire 
Dickinson, secure in provincial aristocracy, than to have 
his daughter, his dear, dear Emily, marry a penniless Con-
gregational minister, one who did not even have a church. 
One wonders why, if Emily loved George Gould so intensely, 
she did not escape from her father's stern discipline into 
her lover's arms--she whose poetry breathes out the spirit 
of revolt against authority!

Squire Dickinson, it must be remembered, had been 
the center of Emily's life long before George Gould begged 
her to marry him. There was a curious relationship between 
father and daughter which both probably would have found 
embarrassing to acknowledge. The stern, impenetrable,
uncommunicative nature of Edward Dickinson found a voice in
the person of his daughter, Emily. He loved her, and Emily
returned his love with a devotion not the less sincere be-
cause of its mixture of fear. She realized with an intuition
which was a literary characteristic just how much her father
"had the habit of her," just how much he needed her in the
house despite the presence of her sister, Lavinia, and of
her mother. In marrying George Gould she would be defying
her father's wishes and that, according to Puritan principles
and her own, would be a grievous sin. After a few secret
meetings, some kisses, the exchange of vows, she renounced
Gould unequivocally.

"I took one draught of life--
I'll tell you what I paid,
Precisely an existence,
The market price, they said."

And again she described in verse her experience with love--
an illusion of reality, some women would undoubtedly term
it. She did not deem it so.

"I rose because he sank,
I thought it would be
Opposite,
But when his power bent
My Soul stood straight.
I told him Best must pass
Through this low arch of
Flesh;
No casque so brave
It spurn the grave--
I told him worlds I knew
Where monarchs grew
Who recollected us
If we were true.
And so with thaws of hymn
And sinew from within,
In ways I knew not that
I knew, till then--
I lifted him."

The depth and clarity of her love for him is evidenced in such lines as:

"Where Thou art--that is Home,
Cashmere or Calvary--the same,
Degree--or shame,
I scarce esteem location's name
So I may come.

What Thou do'st is delight,
Bondage as play be sweet,
Imprisonment content
And sentence sacrament,
Just we two meet!

Where Thou art not is Woe--
Though bands of spices blow,
What Thou do' st not--Despair--
Though Gabriel praise me, Sir!" or:

"So well that I can live without--
I love Thee."

and:

"Till death is too brief loving"

After she sent George Gould away the years closed
in on Emily with deadly, monotonous regularity. More and
more she retired into solitude, becoming what Amherst so
unfeelingly called "queer," not only a spinster like her
sister, Lavinia, but a recluse. She voiced her disdain for
any opinion of her Amherst might have:

"Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye,
Much sense, the starkest madness."

She illuminated her long period of retirement from
the world with an energetic activity which no one, not even
Lavinia, suspected. How could she whose experience had
been so narrowed express in deathless images what each one
of us has always felt about birth and life, death and im-
mortality, in that shadowy region, our own soul? It is the
secret of her genius.

"I rise because the sun shines and sleep has done with me. I brush my hair and dress and wonder what I am and who made me so... And then I help wash the breakfast cups, and anon wash them again, and then 'tis afternoon and ladies call, and evening and some members of another line come in to spend the hours, and then the day is done. And prithee, what is life----?" So she asked and answered herself in the characteristic Puritan manner by fixing her attention upon death. The days were spent in the garden, tending the flowers which were the only decoration to the visible austerity of her life, but at night by candlelight, away from the vigilance of family, she would pour out her soul not effusively, but in her own idiom, surely and sparingly adjusting each word in its place. Everything in nature and in life caught her attention, and she preserved her impressions in lucid, axiomatic style. Death was a principal concern; it meant much to her—a reunion with George Gould, for as the years tiptoed by, she realized that she would become a bride only when the grave conferred the privilege upon her.

"A Wife at daybreak I shall be,
Sunrise, hast thou a flag for me?
At midnight I am yet a maid--
How short it takes to make it bride!
Then, Midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East and Victory.

Midnight, "Good night"
I hear them call.
The angels bustle in the hall,
Softly my Future climbs the stair,
I fumble at my childhood's prayer--
So soon to be a child no more!
Eternity, I'm coming, Sir,--
Master, I've seen that face before."

Mercilessly and fearlessly she viewed the actual moment of passing from life here to life hereafter:

"Behind me dips Eternity,
Before me Immortality,
Myself the term between--
Death but the drift of Eastern gray
Dissolving into dawn away
Before the West begins.

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'T is Miracle before me, then,
Then Miracle behind, between,
A crescent is the sea
With midnight to the north of her
And midnight to the south of her,
And maelstrom in the sky."
And what is Eternity?

"As if the sea should part
And show a further sea—
And that a further, and the three
But a presumption be
Of periods of seas
Unvisited of shores—
Themselves the verge of seas to be—
Eternity is these!"

Then, as a last, touching expression of hope:

"Not what we did shall be the test
When act and will are done,
But what our Lord infers we would—
Had we diviner been."

Death, she felt, would answer all her questions about life; if she found it good, life would be good also. She constantly rehearsed herself for the experience; her obsession with death forced her to scrutinize the dying carefully.

"I like a look of agony
Because I know 'tis true;
Men do not sham convulsion
Nor simulate a throe.
The eyes glaze once, and that is death.
Impossible to feign
The beads upon a forehead
By homely anguish strung."

And again she wrote about death with a pitiless curiosity:
"I've seen a dying eye
Run round and round a room
In search of something, as it seemed,
Then cloudier become;
And then obscure with fog,
And then be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be,
'Twere blessed to have seen!"

For Emily, wilfully, perhaps, but nevertheless arbitrarily shut off from the reality of being wife and mother, life resolved itself into a process of elimination. Truth was her only creed, but it must be pulled up by the roots, shaken to rid it of any clinging dirt, inspected well for its authenticity, and then replanted with her own implements. She gazed at life with a narrow eye, impersonal and precise, determined to distill only the essentials of existence. She was heterodox; in spite of her Puritanism her values were her own. The life of "one fainting robin" was as important to her as the life of any human creature. The Dickinsons were Amherst's leading family, but position did not exist for her. She expressed her sentiments by briefly saying that:
"The pedigree of honey
Does not concern the bee;--
The clover any time to him
Is aristocracy."

She fulfilled her destiny governed by an individ-
uality which dictated the universality of all creatures, the
nobility that invests the lowliest soul, constructed as it
is from God's own image. She never hesitated for fear of
what the public might say; truth was her one concern, the
pursuit of which left no time for vague apprehension. Nor
did she rely upon the world to furnish her with any sus-
tenance. She had, to use her own phrasing, "a little brook
in my heart where bashful flowers blow."

As a child Emily had stamped her foot at Sunday
School; she never outgrew her dislike of formalized re-
ligion. Some critics have hinted at her atheism, but such
an observation is certainly superficial. Her relationship
with God was a curious mixture of intimate faith, of
childish petulance, and of downright Puritan fear. As she
matured she still insisted upon thinking of herself as a
naughty child whom God, the Father of all, was going to
punish.

"I hope the father in the skies
Will lift his little girl,--
Old-fashioned, naughty, everything--
Over the stile of pearl."

And again, with the childish mood still upon her, she would slyly play with the Creator:

"Lightly stepped a yellow star
To its lofty place.
Loosed the moon her silver hat
From her lustral face.
All of evening softly lit
As an astral hall--
"Father," I observed to Heaven,
"You are punctual."

After all, this was Emily in her lighter mood. Squire Dickinson had mentioned Judgment Day, but his daughter preferred not to discuss it with him, realizing full well its presage. Perhaps with this very day in mind she had renounced George Gould. Anyway, with all the instincts of Puritanism, and she was Puritan to the core, she recognized its reality, however much she quailed before the thought of it.

"Myself would run away
From Him and Holy Ghost and All--
But--there's the Judgment Day!"

There is, however, a spirit in her religious poems alien to anything I have thus far mentioned. It was an abiding faith, an experience in mysticism which often sus-
tained her, a spirit which would always return after railing
God, after a period of doubtful misery. I have no doubt that
she often longed to free herself from this faith, "a fine
invention!" Her poems display sometimes a mockery of skep-
ticism directed at herself. Nevertheless, she was powerless
to exorcise this belief. A firm faith in the Unseen pervades
her verses as unmistakably as does her harsh concepts of the
Judgment Day. She speaks from her heart as simply as a child
would.

"I never spoke with God
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given."

Emily, the gentle dove, sheltered from the harsher
side of life by Squire Dickinson, passionately longed in her
verse for poverty and for physical hunger and thirst. She
always wished to share her material wealth with the world;
she loved every one, the least caterpillar "measuring an
inch" on a leaf, and the boy who daily passed her garden
whistling the blithest of songs. With one thing only was
she frugal—words! They were an ardent passion with her
and she hoarded them. In her own room on a narrow bookshelf
next to the Bible stood Noah Webster's Dictionary over which
Lavinia would often see bent her little head with its red-
gold braids. The margins of the original manuscripts of her
verses are filled with synonyms, with phrases, with various ways of expressing what already had been said so well. She was never generous with words; she wrote as she talked, hurriedly, but not so hastily that she would not place each of the enchanted phrases in correct position one to the other. She loved the quatrain form best of all, a heritage, perhaps, from her Puritan hymn book. But there the resemblance to early American hymns ceased; her rimes were never orthodox. Indeed, many of her contemporaries regarded that last characteristic as the one great detriment to her talent and worth.

She passionately loved poetry, the figures of Robert and Elizabeth Browning and of the Bronte sisters being as real to her as Sister Sue who lived next door. To her, poetry was the deepest reality; a poet encompassed everything significant in experience. Unknowingly her own verse gave a definition to her personality and to her art which no critic can ever transcend.

"This was a Poet
It is that
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary
Meanings;
And attars so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the door
We wonder it was not
Ourselves
Arrested it before.

Of pictures the Discloser--
The Poet, it is he,
Entitles us by contrast
To ceaseless poverty.

Of portion so unconscious
The robbery would not harm;
Himself, to him, a fortune
Exterior to time."

-II-

Reluctantly do I begin a critical account of her work. The mention of her name is indissoluble in my mind with a mystery and detachment that can be dispelled by no criticism, however technical and discerning. Divest her of the haze or sense of unreality that tradition has cast on her personal life and she remains, in the body of her verse, mysterious. This mystery is central, it is the lowest common denominator, as it were; she may be reduced to that one quantity but no farther. The explanation may be her concentration on Immortality and Eternity, in themselves
shadowy, a concentration often akin to mystical contemplation, for life itself to her was but a pattern in terms of Infinity.

"This world is not conclusion
A sequel stands beyond,
Invisible as music
But positive as sound."

But certainly this mystery is not wholly due to an other-worldliness; it derives also from her ability to establish a connection between her faith and a set of experiences alien to that faith. In a quatrain she can manage supreme detachment from reality and then can write with a pitiless candor:

"I like a look of agony
Because I know 'tis true...."
or

"What terror would enthrall the street
Could countenance disclose
The subterranean freight
The cellars of the soul."

There is no denying the riddle of one who could face life with such a vivid sense of its reality and yet never in any way be shackled by it.

Emily Dickinson, in the minds of many, America's most notable poet, was born during the diminuendo of the Romantic Movement, in 1830. She lived and wrote the major
portion of her verse during the height of the Victorian age of middle-class consciousness and sentimental adherence. By neither school, however, does her work seem to have been influenced; her restraint is too disciplined for Keats, and her gaze too dissecting for Tennyson. She was unique in her own day, in her apprehension and her art, and that she was aware of her individuality is apparent in both her letters and her verse. She wrote to Mr. Higginson, quite evidently feeling the burden of dissimilarity: "Myself the only Kangaroo among the beauty, sir, if you please...." And in her verse she revealed herself as if in defense of her own position:

"Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye,
Much sense the starkest madness.
'Tis the majority in this
As in all prevails.
Assent and you are sane,
Demur, you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain."

What little of her verse was published during her lifetime was looked upon as literary curiosity. Mr. Higginson, himself a notable figure in the columns of the Atlantic Monthly, was unable to give a word of constructive criticism when she first wrote to him and submitted four short poems
on trial. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, in a striking instance of the misunderstanding with which she was regarded, suggested that through slight changes here and there her poetry might be made acceptable to the reading public. Here is an example of his conventionalizing intent. Emily had written:

"I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats along the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!"

Aldrich, not satisfied, had the temerity to suggest that they might well be changed to:

"I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats along the Rhine,
No tankard ever held a draught
Of alcohol like mine."

The grotesque conversion of "From tankards scooped in pearl" to "In vats along the Rhine" is sufficient condemnation.

Even after a generation of Imagist verse Emily still strongly impresses us with her economy of words, the impact of her metaphor, her love of paradox. Somehow, over a period of years, she still retains a slightly foreign flavor, and though we may now have the sense not to change her characteristic mode of speaking, as her contemporary critics did, her method of surprise has not worn off all its newness. But it is a mental confusion, it seems to me, that deems her technique the source of her strangeness, for it
was merely a means in an expression of a more fundamental difference between herself and the "majority." She did not decide to be an individualist and then hunt out the technique that would best express her personality. As in the case of all great artists her exterior individuality, unique as it was, was inevitable, an index finger pointing to a greater individuality that lay in her heart. In "Discovering Poetry", Elizabeth Drew says, "Style is that habit of language nicely corresponding with the characteristic mode of the poet's life, that special harmony of vision created by the poet and communicated to the reader." Before we can discuss her "habit of language", we must attempt to find out what lies behind it. She is no equivocator:

"I reason life is short
And anguish absolute,
And many hurt;
But what of that?

I reason we could die,
The best vitality
Cannot excel decay;
But what of that?

I reason that in heaven
Somehow it will be even,
Some new equation given;
But what of that?"
She demonstrates her clear-sighted gaze continually, her capacity for stripping life of everything but its essentials. In four short lines she is able to indicate her own honest way of dealing with herself:

"The soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend,
Or the most agonizing spy
An enemy could send."

Or:

"My soul accused me
And I quailed
As tongue of diamond
Had reviled.

All else accused me
And I smiled,
My soul that morning
Was my friend.

Her favor is the best
Disdain
Toward artifice of Time
Or Men,
But her disdain—'t were
Cooler bear
A finger of enameled fire!"

Nor is she less self-deceiving when she faces Death. About
it she felt a constant curiosity; its approaching presence fascinated her. Whenever she had opportunity she would study it minutely.

"The admirations and
Contempts of time
Show justest through
An open tomb--
The dying, as it were
A height,
Reorganizes estimate,
And what we saw
Not--
We distinguish clear,
And mostly see not
What we saw before.
'Tis compound vision--
Light enabling light--
The Finite furnished
With the Infinite--
Convex and concave witness,
Back toward time,
And forward toward
The God of Him."

Yet Emily's vision is not so simple as it is clear. She saw an object, at the same time perceiving its implications. The pattern of life in her mind was evident but not
precise, as inexact as the scrawl of lichen on a rock. Thus it is that she takes one subject and presents it to us in all its subtle aspects, each aspect retaining the marvellous clarity I pointed out in the preceding paragraph. Anticipation, she feels, is superior to realization but she is yet capable of seeing around anticipation and judging it variously. Here it takes form under graphic analogy:

"Undue significance a starving man attaches
To food
Far off; he sighs and therefore hopeless
And therefore good.
Partaken it relieves indeed, but proves us
That spices fly
In the receipt. It was the distance
Was savoury."

And again she develops the same theme, this time with her usual, characteristic sparseness. (Perhaps develop is too suggestive of expansion; outline is the better verb.)

"Expectation is contentment;
Gain, satiety.
But satiety, conviction
Of necessity."

In a third instance she twists the sense and utters rather subjectively:

"It might be easier
To fail with land in sight, 
Than gain my blue peninsula 
To perish of delight."

In addition to her way of writing at length on one subject, Emily expressed her sensitivity to the subtlety of human values in what appears on the surface to be contradiction. It is vain to imagine that one can ever arrive at the essence of her attitude towards anything; she seems to delight in mocking her reader with her inconsistency. She is capable of stating with the calm irony of a Dorothy Parker:

"We outgrow love like other things
And put it in the drawer,
Till it an antique fashion grows
Like costumes grandsires wore."

But the next instant her mood shifts and she writes almost lyrically:

"Alter? When the hills do.
Falterm? When the sun
Question if his Glory
Be the perfect one."

Or:

"That I shall love alway
I offer thee
That love is life
And life hath immortality."

Certainly diametrically opposed!
Sometimes she will assume two roles almost simultaneously, here for example the roles of offender and offended:

"I think just how my shape will rise
When I shall be forgiven,
Till hair, and eyes, and timid head
Are out of sight in heaven.

And so, until delirious borne
I con that thing---"forgiven"
Till with long fright and longer trust,
I drop my heart, unshriven!"

The very use of the word, delirious, would serve to convince the reader of the weight of her sin, of her fierce desire for absolution. But the verses that follow only two pages later reverse the position; has not Emily been sinned against?

"They won't frown always,--some sweet day
When I forget to tease,
They'll recollect how cold I looked,
And how I just said, "please."

Then they will hasten to the door
To call the little child,
Who cannot thank them, for the ice
That on her lisping piled."

Genevieve Taggard in The Life and Mind of Emily
Dickinson says that Emily dissolved her secret when she spoke of herself as being both shy and bold. Throughout one is conscious of the shift in her verse; her constant habit is to present herself under contrasting guize: timid, courageous; humble, proud; intense, restrained. Of this dualism Miss Taggard says, "It was the technique of double; it was the device of keeping attracted opposites far enough apart to use their tension. It was a control of life that depended on spinning everything between two poles." A control of life? Possibly, but to me this faculty for seeing both sides of a situation, for so vividly projecting herself into sets of opposites, sprang from something more instinctive, more fundamental than a "control of life." This seeing double, I believe, was an intrinsic part of Emily, another indication of a mind that worked under the impelling pressure of constant dissection and analysis. She could not be content until she had perceived every implication, and this sudden and diametric shift in her line of attack was merely a manifestation of this desire—the requirement she demanded of herself—the supreme effort to comprehend the whole.

In her concern for life, however, Emily was not a practical person. I have stated previously that life to her was merely a pattern in terms of Infinity; there is no denying the fascination that the enigma of Eternity held for her:

"Meanwhile he is so near,
He joins me in my ramble,
Divides abode with me,
No friend have I that so persists
As this Eternity."

Death, to her, was not a shadowy shape that might sometime catch up with her; he was solid, and his figure, looming larger and larger, influenced everything she wrote. Fundamentally she was never afraid:

"Afraid? Of whom am I afraid?
Not Death, for who is he?
The porter of my father's lodge
As much abasheth me."

Often a note of longing can be detected, suppressed but nonetheless present:

"At last to be identified!
At last the lamps upon thy side
The rest of life to see."

Then a touch of bravado, as if in an attempt to convince herself:

"We pray to Heaven,
We prate of Heaven--
Relate when neighbors die,
At what o'clock to Heaven
They fled.
Who saw them wherefore fly?
Is Heaven a place, and Sky a face?
Location's narrow way
Is for ourselves;
Unto the Dead
There's no geography."

There was no experience but must be put to the test of Death, the supreme adventure of Life, for it was the most disclosing. Renunciation, like anticipation a dominant theme, was interpreted in terms of another existence. Had it not been for Immortality, renunciation would have been infinitely more painful for Emily; perhaps, but who can tell, impossible? Death meant recognition; she felt her personal sufferings would be cancelled, what she had denied herself would be recovered—dazzlingly. Her dependence upon self, ever marked by a more subtle withdrawal inward, was constantly emphasized in her verse:

"Growth of man like growth of nature
Gravitates within..."

"The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door..."

But this aloneness, too, was made possible by its very temporariness; death would dispel isolation.

There is something, however, that is eluding us, a quantity that were it to be excluded would render Emily an almost insufferably egocentric person. Faith, basic in
her nature, emphatic in her verse, strips her of self, for if death made life possible, faith acted on both, and made death but an illusion of the flesh:

"Death is a dialogue between
The spirit and the dust.
"Dissolve," says Death. The Spirit, "Sir, I have another trust."

Death doubts it, argues from the ground. The Spirit turns away, Just laying off for evidence An overcoat of clay."

Her relationship with Divinity is a curious blend of Puritan theology and personal acquaintanceship. The latter predominates, for one is conscious always of the unique character of her attitude towards God. It is basically reverent, yet intimate.

"Why do you shut me Out of Heaven? Did I sing too loud? But I can sing a little minor, Timid as a bird. Wouldn't the angels try me Just once more?
Just see if I troubled them--
But don't shut the door!

Oh, if I were the gentlemen
In the white robes,
And they were the little hand
That knocked--
Could I forbid?"

Yet this, perhaps, is an unfair illustration. To one who is unacquainted with Emily's occasional flippancies, the above is certainly not indicative of depth. "My period had come for prayer" points the finger at her essential attitude:

"My period had come for prayer,
No other art would do,
My tactics missed a rudiment,
Creator, was it you?

God grows above, so those who pray
Horizons must ascend,
And so I stood upon the North
To reach this curious Friend.

His house was not; no sign had He
By chimney nor by door,--
Could I infer His residence?
Wide prairies of the air
Unbroken by a settler,
Were all that I could see;
Infinitude, hadst Thou no face
That I might look at Thee?

The silence condescended,
The Heavens paused for me,
But awed beyond my errand
I worshipped—did not pray!

In spite of her faith and her concentration on Immortality, Emily escapes being a mystic. If one eye was focused on God, the other was shrewdly observing the ways of life around her. Though she may have longed to give rein to her feelings for Divinity, she was prevented from doing so through the natural structure of her mind. A mystic never analyzes and Emily was powerless to regard anything without scrutinizing it from every angle. Her relationship with Spirit was tinged with the same mental characteristics I have previously pointed out. Indeed, I have traveled a circle and am approaching the beginning. Emily disclosed the essential character of her being in her attitude towards God: the effort to see clearly but comprehensively, that same desire manifested in her ability to write at length on one subject, to project herself into sets of opposites. She herself has given the best expression to the peculiar quality of her faith in:
"Faith is a fine invention
For gentlemen who see,
But microscopes are prudent
In an emergency."

-III-

Hers is a technique of precision, accurately tuned to the pitch of her mind. As in her initial approach to any subject her habit is to eliminate the superfluous, so when she comes to writing the verse she is never diffuse. Her words are scant in number, but each one bears the stamp of a selective genius calculated to express the exact nuance of feeling:

"This was a Poet—it is that
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary meanings
And attars so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the door,
We wonder it was not ourselves
Arrested it before."

The thought is trite and often voiced. Notice, however, Emily's treatment. "Distills" has a muscular connotation, but its denotation is emphasized by "attars", meaning anything essential, usually the oil from rose-petals.
Rose-petals in turn suggest fragrance—and thus a picture of poetic truth is built up in exactly ten words: "....a Poet.... Distills....attars so immense, From the familiar species...."

This technique of precision, this aphoristic style, is best distinguished by Emily's use of metaphor. She employs the figure more than any other, with bewildering force.

"Fame is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate...."

"Mirth is the mail of anguish
In which it caution arm...."

"Exhilaration is the Breeze
That lifts us from the ground,
And leaves us in another place
Whose statement is not found...."

Through the impact of such terse, implied comparisons she is able to convey her meaning plus her feeling about the meaning far better than were she to enter upon a philosophical discussion concerning the nature of fame, or mirth, or exhilaration. She is able to open up relationships previously hidden to us; their newness in conjunction with their vividness constitute their strength. Metaphor with Emily is no cultivation; it is a basic mode of expression and comprehension, a method of presenting truth in the garment which she first sees it wearing.
Closely allied with her use of metaphor is her use of conceits. It is curious to think that Emily probably never read the one poet in the English language with whom she might have felt a kinship, who might have eased the burden of being "the only Kangaroo among the Beauty:" John Donne. He it is who brought all his learning and his reading into direct relation with his emotional experiences. Assuredly Emily's reading and learning were less distinguished, but she, too, was intent upon co-ordinating intellect with emotion. There is a difference, though. Donne's conceits emphasize the complexity of his thought; Emily's the precision. Where Donne is vigorous, hearty; Emily is dainty, crisp. But with all this difference between masculine and feminine genius, there is a remarkable similarity between their colloquial use of language and their speech rhythms.

"What if I say I shall not wait? 
What if I burst the fleshly gate 
And pass, escaped to thee? 
What if I file this mortal off, 
See where it hurt me—that's enough— 
And wade in liberty? 

They cannot take us any more,— 
Dungeons may call, and guns implore; 
Unmeaning now to me, 
As laughter was an hour ago,
Or laces, or a travelling show,
Or who died yesterday."

Donne could have appreciated that—the drama of "What if I say I shall not wait?", the uneven tumble of the lines, the image of wading in liberty, the subtle irony of the close—all would have struck a tonic chord in his being. To Emily's evident sincerity, the push of passion behind such an outburst, Donne would have given first recognition, for it is the outstanding quality of the piece, accounting for the force with which the poem hits the reader, and corresponding to Donne at his best.

Is Emily always so evidently sincere, so impassioned? It is a matter of personal decision but, in my opinion, she is not. Like all metaphysical poets, her intellect is the ready servant of her emotions; sometimes her intellect gets in the way and catches her up and the result is poetry that just seems to miss greatness. Since these moments are rare, however, it is safe to give them little consideration. Few poets can hold the note of ecstasy as long as she did.

To me her imagery is her enchantment. Her concern for words was one of her chief cares, a concern springing from the same desire that impelled her use of metaphor and conceit: the desire for precision. The impressions in her mind were many, each subtly distinct from the other, and her choice of words was governed by an effort to convey these
distinctions to her reader. She speaks about the moon sliding down the staircase to see who's there, about a little, frightened robin unrolling his feathers and rowing himself softly home, about the sound of a dog's feet like intermittent plush, about the snap of a buckle as her lover put a belt around her life. Conceived imaginatively, strengthened by emotion, these images are presented to us in the terse, economical language peculiarly fitted to them. They cannot but strike the reader with their uniqueness and inevitability.

However queer she might have seemed once, Emily found the "habit of language" that best expressed the strong, individual cast of her mind. It was not superimposed but sprang spontaneously from her mind and heart. The broken, personal rhythms; the brief, packed verse forms; the use of colloquialisms; the impact of her metaphor; the almost archaic flavor of some of her conceits—all these apparent characteristics were merely the best symbols to express a mind that was ever pushed and propelled by its desire to dissect, to analyze, and to comprehend. Judged by Professor Lowe's standard, "The purpose of all art is to stir us with the sense of imperishable beauty," Emily was indeed a great artist; the beauty of her lines is immortal.
"To make routine
A stimulus,
Remember it can cease--
Capacity to terminate
Is a specific
Grace!"
BIBLIOGRAPHY


