

Intimations of Immortality in Dickinson's Poetry

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Costumeless Consciousness—
That is he

In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley writes that the poet's language is "vitally metaphorical," and that "it marks the before unapprehended relations of things."¹ Emily Dickinson's poetry is rich in such striking imagery as marks "the before unapprehended relations of things." Like E. E. Cummings after her, Dickinson can also be considered as magician of words. Somewhat boastingly she writes: "A word is dead/When it is said,/Some say./I say it just/Begins to live/That day" (Poem 1212).² Yet, at the same time all poets know that "the deep truth is imageless."³ And Dickinson is also aware of the fact, as she confesses in Poem 581:

I found the words to every thought
I ever had—but One—
And that—defies me—
As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races—nurtured in the Dark—
How would your own begin?
Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal—
Or Noon—in Mazarin?

This "One" that defies her may be the Sun, Noon, Heaven, or God—namely immortality.

We all think of immortality—whether of soul, or of body, or of both. It is the unifying theme of Shakespeare's sonnet-sequence, in

which the poet gropes for some evidence of immortality, until he reaches a resolution, in such sonnet as No. 146—"Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth,"—that soul survives after death :

.... Is this thy body's end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more:
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

For even though we admit that absolute fact of death which comes like the "faithful Frost that [keeps] the Date" (Poem 1230), and perhaps "readiness is all" there is to it, something within us refuses to accept the fact of mere extinction. The more intensely we have felt, and loved, that is, the more conscious we are of life here, the stronger is our desire for life hereafter. Immortality is, indeed, the "Flood subject,"⁴ which overflows into and through Dickinson's numerous poems on love, truth, beauty, death, eternity, or God. My purpose in this short essay, then, is to see how her image-making power of imagination plays with the idea, and what words it finds for this "Flood subject."

In the letter in which she refers to immortality as "Flood subject," Dickinson continues, "I was told that the Bank is the safest place for a Finless mind." Yet, like Melville's Bulkington she pushed off from the lee shore into the unknown sea of eternity, because "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth."⁵ Or, "Finite—to fail, but infinite to venture—" (Poem 847). Unlike Bulkington's (or Ahab's), however, her venture was strictly the venture of the mind, and staying on shore, Dickinson wrote and left jewel pieces of poetry. For "The Brain is deeper than the sea—/For—hold them—Blue to Blue—/The one the other will absorb—" (Poem 632). Also, it is the poet who comprehends the whole—the Sun, Summer, the Heaven of God (Poem

569).

It becomes evident, now, that the image cluster in Poem 581 quoted at the outset of the essay is the recurring image pattern in Dickinson's poetry: Blaze in Cochineal—the blue of the sea, the Brain, or as we shall see later, consciousness. All this and more the poet's mind comprehends: "The Brain is just the weight of God—" (Poem 632). Also hers was a better way than either Bulkington's (or Ahab's). Instead of striking straight through the blank mask of appearance, Dickinson employed the strategy of indirection: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies," for "The Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind—" (Poem 1129). We might as well remember the episode Melville tells, in "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter, of the infidel who, refusing to wear colored glasses, gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud.⁶ Curiously enough, for both Melville and Dickinson—or for Shelley, or Poe, examples will be numerous—whiteness represents the ultimate truth, eternity, God, or the inscrutable mystery of the universe. And Dickinson instinctively knew that the "Golden Fleece" is never to be found, that we can never know Truth—except in fragments: "Alas, that Wisdom is so large—/And Truth—so Manifold!" (Poem 568). So, only through a series of momentary illuminations, slant-wise, she was able to have a glimpse of "Eternity's White Flag" (Poem 615). It also seems that Dickinson never reached such a philosophical resolution of immersing herself in the Emersonian "Oversoul." She had too distinct a sense of "Self" or "Soul" to embrace such an amorphous, however comforting, reconciliation. Her mind is more attuned to the complexity of dissonance than to that of harmony.

In this perspective, Dickinson is more akin to Thoreau than to Emerson—the Thoreau who writes, "We are not wholly involved in Nature... However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you."⁷ In Dickinson's poetry

man and nature (not-me) are always a separate entity and remain so to the end. Only through man's perception an object assumes reality, and it is perception that gains in the transaction: "Perception of an object cost/Precise the Object's loss—/Perception in itself a Gain" (Poem 1071). Thus, to Dickinson "consciousness," the soul's "awful Mate" (Poem 894), becomes a most important evidence—almost the evidence—of reality. And this "Soul's awful Mate" or "spectator" consciousness separates man from the "unthinking" nature. Dickinson is radically different, in this sense, from the romantics—say Wordsworth—or her American contemporary, Whitman. For these poets nature is invariably the symbol of eternity—the everchanging changelessness. If they emphasize spring and dawn, as these assure them of renewal and rebirth, Dickinson concerns herself with summer and noon, the height of experience. "Ripeness is all," as it were.

Likewise, if it is just another day to "any happy Flower" (Poem 1624), to man's consciousness each day is different, unique and sufficient in itself. "Had this one day not been,/Or could it cease to be/How smitten, how superfluous/Were every other Day!" (Poem 1253). In man's consciousness nothing can replace a single Noon, or a single Flower:

It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon—
The Flower—distinct and Red—
I, passing, thought another Noon
Another in its stead

Will equal glow, and thought no More
But came another Day
To find the Species disappeared—

...

The single Flower of the Earth
That I, in passing by
Unconscious was—Great Nature's Face
Passed infinite by Me. (Poem 978)

The stress is obviously on the uniqueness of every single moment, on a particular flower, rather than on the general. So, eternity itself

is not something to be reached in after life, but is something to be gained in each moment, since "Forever—is composed of nows" (Poem 624). The Cummings-like use of "forever" and "nows" contributes to emphasize the distinctness of each moment. In this respect, among the romantics, Dickinson is closest to Keats, who also ponders and dwells on the passing moment—not sentimentally, to be sure—but cherishing it, and Epicurus-like, getting most out of it. Again, "Ripeness"—Summer, Noon—is all.

Now, if it is consciousness that distinguishes man from the unconscious nature and other animals, it is this "Consciousness," if anything, that gives us intimations of immortality.

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men— (Poem 822)

Dickinson suggests, we are living the "interval Experience" for this moment of Death. For death makes familiar objects significant; it is, as Dickinson writes, "the first form of Life which we have had the power to Contemplate.... Of our first Creation we are unconscious and of living, too, until death forces us to be conscious of it."⁸ Paradoxically, it is the consciousness of death that brings us the intimations of immortality. Somewhat in the same vein of thought, Henry James writes, in his essay on immortality—"Is There a Life After Death?"—that death strikes us either as a welcome extinction and termination, which idea for him as for Dickinson is hard to take, or as "a renewal of the interest, the appreciation, the passion, the large and consecrated consciousness, in a word, of which we have had so splendid a sample in our life here."⁹

Dickinson, therefore, concentrates on this "Consciousness" that is

aware of the Sun, Neighbors, and Death. She writes about a "Dying Eye" which surveys the room in desperate search of something. But it fails to see "what it be" (Poem 547). Or a fly interposes and the speaker in the poem who is on the verge of death "[can] not see to see" (Poem 465). Indeed, "'Twere blessed to have seen" (Poem 547). Yet, all the same death is the "most profound experiment appointed unto Men"; it is the "White Exploit," an adventure into the unknown, infinity, and silence. "Silence is Infinity/Himself have not a face" (Poem 1251). As whiteness is the visible absence of color, so silence is the noiseless sound, both symbolize the inscrutability of truth, eternity, or God. However hard we may try, we cannot ascertain anything beyond the grave, for no traveller returns from the "undiscover'd country." But, if we cannot be sure of immortality, we need not be, because James continues in the essay referred to earlier: "it isn't really a question of belief, —it is a question of desire, but of desire so confirmed, so thoroughly established and nourished, as to leave belief a comparatively irrelevant affair."¹⁰

"A letter always feels to me like immortality," Dickinson writes to Higginson, "because it is the mind without corporeal friend... there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone."¹¹ It is interesting to note that she associates immortality with thought, or the mind without corporeal friend, which becomes "Costumeless Consciousness" in Poem 1454. For immortality is a "form" of knowledge in white raiment. If to Wordsworth the intimations of immortality reside in the recollection of childhood innocence, to Dickinson the intimations of such lie in the continuity of consciousness after death, which is first made aware, as it were, at the moment of death. Then, death becomes only an illusion—"the Hyphen of the Sea"—the vast sea of eternity. And "Costumeless Consciousness" survives, as it has always been :

Those not live yet
 Who doubt to live again—
 "Again" is of a twice

But this—is one—
 The Ship beneath the Draw
 Aground—is he?
 Death—so the Hyphen of the Sea—
 Deep is the Schedule
 Of the Disk to be—
 Costumeless Consciousness
 That is he— (Poem 1454)

If Dickinson was never convinced of a literal resurrection, as her revision of Poem 216 indicates—“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers, the Meek members of resurrection lie, not sleep”—she was able to believe in the continuity of consciousness, or in the immortality of soul, which is liberated at death :

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. (Poem 976)

There is no struggle with death ; the spirit quietly turns away, as if it were not worth arguing, just laying off an “Overcoat of Clay.” Thus considered, like Shakespeare in his “Poor soul” sonnet quoted earlier, Dickinson sounds very platonic. Socrates, it is said, chided his disciple : Bury me in any way you please, if you can catch me to bury. Where shall you bury my body? Then bury it in any manner and in any place you please. Likewise, the answer to the question “The Ship beneath the Draw/Aground —is he?”(Poem 1454) is a definite “No, he is not aground.” In Dickinson’s poems, death often comes as suitor (but unlike a human lover, this suitor comes as faithful and punctual as frost), with a “bisected Coach” which bears us away to the “Troth unknown” (Poem 1445). Liberated, the soul lives on—the soul without an “Overcoat of Clay” is synonymous with “Costumeless Consciousness.”

Like Henry James after her, Dickinson seems to have emphasized the cultivation of consciousness, since for her and James, as we have seen, the "large and consecrated consciousness" is the only intimation of immortality. In proportion that we have lived, that we are aware of our life here, the greater is the evidence of such consciousness after life. Or, vice versa, "Those not live yet/Who doubt to live again —" (Poem 1454). Dickinson once told Higginson in their interview,¹² "I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough." Somewhat playfully she writes :

Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the Shepherd's arm!
...
I'm glad I don't believe it
For it w'd stop my breath—
And I'd like to look a little more
At such a curious Earth!
... (Poem 79)

Because Heaven sounds dim, "I'd like to look a little more/At such a curious Earth!" Dickinson is not negating Heaven, but her greater concern is with life here. This comes very close to Strether's exhortation to little Bilham: "Live all you can, it is a mistake not to." And to both James and Dickinson, more often than not living is seeing. Their business in life is to expand consciousness, to have a clear vision of things. It seems to be no coincidence that the persona of Dickinson's poems often reminds us of a Jamesian heroine, who lives in the richness of "crowded consciousness."

"Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind—" Dickinson says in the poem quoted earlier in the discussion. But in eternity, where (and when) "Consciousness—is Noon," we can gaze, undazzled, at the "Eternity's White Flag" :

There is a Zone whose even Years
No Solstice interrupt—
Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon
Whose perfect Season wait—

Whose Summer set in Summer, till
The Centuries of June
And Centuries of August cease
And Consciousness—is Noon.

(Poem 1056)

Here, the ideal season is summer rather than spring; the time of day is noon rather than morning. The picture the poem presents is an awful expanse overflowing with pure light—the “white radiance of Eternity.” The tableau also reminds us of the image of Blake’s Albion who, surrounded by fiery nimbuses, is looking out from the center into the expanding space, or of that “golden clime” where Blake’s sunflower wishes to go. Immortality/eternity is simply the extension of this wide-awake “Noon-Consciousness.”

However, intimations of immortality—the moments of illumination—is necessarily a personal experience: “The Soul’s Superior instants/Occur to Her—alone—” Besides, the revelation comes only in momentary flashes and fragments: “Eternity’s disclosure/To favorites—a few—/Of the Colossal substance/Of Immortality” (Poem 306). As her short, cryptic lyric form suggests, the revelation never remained, it seems, long enough for Dickinson to become a confirmation of Heaven. Nonetheless, the “Soul’s Superior instants” she experienced of immortality, of “Manifold” truth, are equal, in intensity, to such a grandiose revelation Melville gives at the end of *Moby Dick*: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea (whiteness is still implied) rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.”¹³ The difference is one of expression: epic and lyrical modes, a symphony and shall we say, a flute or a spinet?

Throughout the discussion, I have used many—perhaps, too many—of Dickinson's poems, in the hope that the arrangement of such poems itself, more than anything else, would clarify the point I have tried to make in the essay. The selection has been a difficult one to make, and it is by no means all-inclusive, but, hopefully, adequate.

The Sun, Blaze, Noon, Sea, Brain, Soul, Consciousness, truth, beauty, death, Heaven of God, Summer: Dickinson has exploited all possible words to represent that "One" thought which has defied her description to remain "imageless." It now appears—too late—that she has been employing, after all, rather conventional images. However, in her poems they look and sound unique and novel. In a word, they come alive: "A word is dead/When it is said,/Some say./I say it just/ Begins to live/That day." What gives life to words is Dickinson's mode of expression, which is sometimes naively, often metaphorically, playful. Out of her material—words—Dickinson has created such superb visual abstractions as "Noon-Consciousness" and "Costumeless Consciousness," and associated them with immortality, her "Flood subject." Yet, she has given us only its intimations, because the illumination or the vision remains incommunicable. Like Keats's urn, the "Flood subject" teases us out of thought. We can only recreate the vision by a sheer act of desire.

Notes

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry, Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York, 1951), p. 496.
2. The numbers of the poems quoted in the discussion correspond to those in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1960).
3. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, II, iv, 115—16.
4. Emily Dickinson's letter to Higginson, *Selected Letters*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, 1965). # 319, p. 194.
5. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York, 1964), p.105.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
7. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York, 1966), p. 111.

8. Quoted in Charles R. Anderson's *Emily Dickinson's Poetry : Stairway of Surprise* (New York, 1960), p. 228.
9. Henry James, "Is There a Life After Death?" *In After Days* (New York, 1910), pp. 199—200. Italics mine.
10. *Ibid.*, 231.
11. Emily Dickinson, *Selected Letters*, # 330, p. 196.
12. *Ibid.*, 209.
13. *Moby Dick*, p. 565.

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