

EMILY DICKENSON'S 'PRIVATE RELIGION': UNDERSTANDING HER POETICAL RUMINATIONS AMIDST SHIFTING CONCEPTS OF GOD, IMMORTALITY, AND SOUL AS 'COSTUMELESS CONSCIOUSNESS'

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Abstract

The conventional concept of God as a 'Heavenly Father' did not satisfy Emily Dickenson, nor could she adhere to the Transcendentalist theory, that God is everywhere. The standard sources of comfort did not minister to her effectively, the concept of god as Heavenly Father only raised a series of question in her mind. Equally unsatisfactory was the doctrine of indwelling spirit central to the Transcendentalists vision: "They say that God is everywhere, yet we always think of HIM as somewhat of a recluse." Yet to the orthodox, God is simply invisible, led to the sceptical query: "Is he then non-existent?" Torn between doubt and belief, illusion and reality, Emily Dickinson was enamoured by the thought of immortality and HIM. Is there a paradise? Is there a Home where one can rest permanently? Is there a place of eternal rest from where one is not casually shunted off to some unknown land? Or to put it more brusquely, is man only a mere organism which grows, withers and is buried completely in the ground. Her puritan heritage forbade such atheism, and the age in which she lived, presented its problem of natural science and religion. She was never too naive to believe or disbelieve blindly. Thus moulded, she found a 'balmy resort' in her poetry, through which she could finally make her brave efforts at solving this dilemma, and the result was indeed astounding. These efforts flowered into some of her most beautiful poems, which expressed doubt, fear, acceptance, and affirmation-all fused in images of surprising intensity. This paper is an effort to highlight her struggles with this dilemma.

Keywords: Scepticism, Immortality, Ambiguous Existence, Religious Assurance, Sensibility

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Search for Immortality:

Torn between doubt and belief, illusion and reality, Emily Dickinson was enamoured by the thought of immortality and HIM. Is there a paradise? Is there a Home where one can rest permanently? Is there a place of eternal rest from where one is not casually shunted off to some unknown land? Or to put it more bluntly, is man only a mere organism which grows, withers and is buried completely in the ground. Her puritan heritage forbade such atheism, and the age in which she lived, presented its problem of natural science and religion. She was never too naive to believe or disbelieve blindly. She searched for the truth, and during the last thirty years of her span of life her letters and poems echo these probing alternately. She had to find her own answers but the process was painful enough to cast her entire sensibility into a tragic mode. Thus moulded, she found a 'balmy resort' in her poetry, through which she could finally make her brave efforts at solving this dilemma, and the result was indeed astounding. These efforts flowered into some of her most beautiful poems, which expressed doubt, fear, acceptance, and affirmation-all fused in images of surprising intensity.

She wrote to her preceptor Washington Gladden, asking "Is Immortality true?" She commented in a reply to Higginson's letter: "You mention Immortality that is the flood subject". To an intimate friend Charles H. Clark of the Rev. Mr. Wadsworth, she questioned after his death "Are you certain there is another life?" And she expressed her fears immediately, "when overwhelmed to know, I fear few that there are sure". But none could answer her satisfactorily.

In the midst of her most creative years Emily Dickinson wrote:

"The only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immorality
The Only one I meet
Is God-The only Street-
Existence-This traversed."

"She never wrote truer lines, for the sublime light of immortality illuminated all areas of her poetic interests". She pleaded for religious assurance and with the losses of

Newton, her father, Bowles, Charles Wadsworth, Gib, her mother and Judge Otis P Lord she questioned if immortality were true, remarks J.B. Pickard. She was forever preoccupied with this aspect of life and life beyond the grave. Referring to the aspect J.B. Pickard further remarks: "Immortality's unknown expanse excited her inquiring mind, while her perplexity with its mystery became a strategy for achieving poetic tensions."

She viewed it from all sides, doubt, belief, stoicism, scepticism which eventually all found their way into her writings. Almost any aspect of doubt and belief can be found in her writings on immortality; she desired personal immortality and asserted that the soul never changed; yet she denied the orthodox vision of paradise and even feared that eternity would be cosmic annihilation. Being a strictly individualistic person, she stoutly maintained, or one should say, rather, protected personal identity. If immortality meant a deprivation of that identity, she was never prepared to accept it. The physical world, despite its disparity, its incompatibility, and its mad chaos, held her in trance because of its immensely panoramic beauty. What would the other world be like, it was hard to guess J.B. Pickard remarks:

"While she felt that the very intensity and significance of human existence forecast its continuance after death, she continually wondered if paradise could ever surpass earthly beauty or human love. Her confidence that love endured beyond the grave bulwarked her hopes for immortality. Her poems associate love, eternity, beauty, God and even circumference with immortality. Though never certain that death was the threshold of immortality, she firmly believed that the soul's identity could not be lost."

Her Own Society: Her Own Religion:

This is what Emily detested about her church, while Congregational churches practiced infant baptism, baptized persons were not considered full members until they could give a satisfactory account of their personal experiences of grace.

The process of conversion was described in different ways, but most ministers agreed that there were 3 essential stages. The first stage was humiliation or sorrow for having sinned against God. The second stage was justification or adoption characterized by a sense of having been forgiven and accepted by God through Christ's mercy. The third stage was sanctification, the ability to live a holy life out of gladness toward God.

During the spate of conversion, when one by one her friends consecrated themselves to the service of religion, she firmly resisted the temptation and maintained her independence of mind. But her mental agony is evident in the following lines:

"At least-to pray-is left-is left-
Oh Jesus -in the Air -
I know not which thy palace is-

I am knocking – everywhere –
Thaw starriest Earthquake in the South-
And Maelstrom, in the Sea-
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth –
Hast thou no arm for me?"

Since she felt, the 'arm was amputated now' she constructed a private religion out of her poetry. The conventional concept of God as a 'Heavenly Father' did not satisfy her. And she could not adhere to the Transcendentalist theory also, that God is everywhere. C.R. Anderson believes the standard sources of comfort did not minister to her more effectively. For example, the concept of god as Heavenly Father only raised a series of question in her mind. How one envisions this super image of man, she asked:

"Hast thou a Hand or Foot
Or Mansion of Identity?"

Nowhere in Romanticism or Transcendentalism, do we find anything approaching the intensely symbolic power that Dickinson accords the word.: "They say that God is everywhere, yet we always think as somewhat of a recluse." Yet the orthodox one, that God is simply invisible led to the sceptical query:" "Is he then nonexistent?"

Immortality A Cosmic Jest:

"I know that he exists,
Somewhere – in Silence-
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.
'Tis an instant's play,
'Tis a fond Ambush-
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprises!
But should the play
Prove piercing earnest-
Should the glee-glaze-
In Death's-stiff-stare-
Would not the Joke
Look too expensive!
Would not the the jest-
Have crawled too far!"

Emily puts the question of God's existence front and centre. The first stanza is a frank admission of God's existence, that his, 'rare' and precious life is invisible to 'our gross eyes'. Man's life is made of crude clay in comparison to the refined life of God, hence the

inability to see him. Perhaps, she goes on to say, this inability to see God is just a game of hide-and-seek on the part of God himself: so that when the exact moment of discovery takes place, it will add to the happy surprises. People will do what they can to have a direct experience of God. Some try through suffering or self-denial others through mind-altering experiences or substances; still others through meditation; prayer; supplication. She capitalizes 'Bliss' the divine discovery. But the word 'fond Ambush' a loving strategy of making man credulous might lead the joke too far. What would happen, Dickinson asks, if the seeker finds God? Bliss? The game could well become "piercing earnest"—she employs the word piercing for its suggestion of stabbing.

The game, she explains in the last stanza, might prove too expensive, considering the risks it involves. Dickinson is not blaming the God seeker for unwise presumption. It holds something of outrage. It drips with sarcasm. The bliss and glee might end in 'death stiff stare'. Look what you've done is the implied accusation People can't really survive direct contact with the almighty. This 'jest'—again to trivialize the hiding game God plays— "has crawled too far". Thus, to say that 'He exists' may only be a conjecture, and the truth is, that life ends in a grave and that is end of the affairs.

Commenting on this poem C.R. Anderson says:

In a more serious strain, a yearning for the old –fashioned belief that those who died went to God's right hand ... and the doctrine that God is simply invisible to material eyes is exploded by suggesting that this may be cosmic jest for his nonexistence. In such poems, one can trace the ups and downs of her religious history.

J.B. Pickard's comment on this particular poem is interesting, "Closely related to her poems on immortality are those on orthodox subjects like the Trinity and the doctrine of the last Judgment, and such broader philosophic issues as the relation of heaven to earth and the identity of the soul. 'I know that he exists', typifies her approach to religious subjects. The initial assumption of faith is qualified by the rest of the poem, until doubt and unorthodox position creep in. She knows that God's elusiveness is merely a pose which will increase our happiness in immortality. Yet, immediately she wonders if this game of hide – and seek could be in earnest."

Although she doubted yet she could not doubt in earnest. In the manuscript of the poem mentioned above, she jotted down: 'God cannot discontinue himself'. This appalling trust is at times all that remains.'

The poem 'I know that he exists', creates the same macabre effect by using alliteration, especially in the second last stanza:

"Prove piercing earnest –
Should the glee-glaze-
In Death's –stiff-stare"

The alliterative 'glee-glaze' and 'stiff -stare' create almost grotesque images. She goes on to speculate, this heavenly reality exists only in the mind. And the following poem puts her speculations in verse:

"The Brain – is wider than the sky-
For –put-them side by side-
The one the other will contain
With ease- and you –beside-
The Brain is deeper than the Sea
For-hold them- Blue to Blue-
The one the other will absorb-
As sponges –Buckets –do-
The Brain is just the weight of god-
For heft them-pound for pound-
And they will differ-if they do-
As syllable from sound"

The range of the brain she says is vast, more expansive than the sky. The brain, or here it means the consciousness, can easily contain the sky and everything, it thereby emphasizes the vastness of the consciousness which can absorb the entire universe.

Secondly, she compares the brain to the depths of the sea which can be easily 'sponged' by the brain.

The last stanza, poses a problem, for here, the mind's perception of reality, both spiritual and natural are symbols ; like the poet's words ('Syllable') they stand for the truths ("Sound") that can be grasped by it from outside." Thus she magnifies the importance of consciousness. It is difficult to decipher even the meaning of the new faith, because it is the awareness of man which creates truth, truth of God or immortality, whatever it may be.

C.R. Anderson comments on the technical excellence of the poem: "Thus elaborate rhetorical devices, with balance and parallelism worked out to the last detail, give this a logical structure as to make it more like a Euclidean theorem than a poem. With a remarkable independence of mind, she emphasizes the point that one can view the truth if gifted with adequate, perceptive powers."

Faith Is Doubt: A Paradox:

She believed it is better to be in a state of unbelieving search than accept a creed based on habit or authority. Her musings swing from one polar end to another. 'Faith is Doubt', she uses her favourite paradox and further she says:

"The Riddle that we guess
We speedily despise."

She explored continually, 'Doubt' has the wisest men undone. This thought was an essential aspect which drove her to produce some of her best poems on the immortality. It is a fact that with many great religious thinkers, doubt is an essential part of faith, these are the ones who know despair as well as ecstasy and this is what keeps them believing 'nimble'.

This tension marks the vitality of Dickinson's religious life and describes her best poems on immortality. And this also deeply underlines the tragic in her poetry.

"Mirth is the Mail of Anguish" she says in one of her poems and preserves this helmet of wit and banter by treating God and Biblical terms in an amusing fashion. Mr. Thomas H. Johnson believes that: "It was the very intensity which she felt for the person of God that enabled her to engage in such a banter".

Her best poems about religion wittily comment on conventional piety and orthodox beliefs. The following poem is a good example of her technique.

Diagnosis of Bible by a boy-
"The Bible is an antique Volume-
Written by faded Men.
At the suggestion of Holy Specters-
Subjects-Bethlehem-
Eden-the ancient Homestead-
Satan the brigadier-
Judas-the Great Defaulter-
David-The Troubadour-
Sin-a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist-
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome
Other boys are "lost"-
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller-
All the Boys would come
Orpheus' Sermon captivated-
It did not condemn."

The poem seems to be about religious doubt, or at least resistance to the "faded" old men who wrote and try to control the interpretation of the Bible, that "antique Volume." The poem is full of sly mockery, including suggesting that "scripture" may in fact be empty, a mere spectre or ghost of our own fears and desires. Dickinson's beliefs, were not against God or spirituality, but rather against organized religion as it was practiced in her time.

The word 'antique' means not the precious or treasured one, but it "connotes something out-dated and impractical rather than rare and precious." The Bible, was written

by 'faded men' over whom oblivion has cast a veil of antiquity. It was inspired not by any divine inspiration, but by the spectres and visions. Then she enumerates, one by one, the actors or rather the characters of the book and its main theme, the 'distinguished Precipice' of sin. And in the last four lines she brings down the hammer on the 'antique Volume' for enforcing its commands' on all. With almost a Browning's sequel image of the 'Pied Piper', she says that the tale would have charmed everyone by its smooth flowing music, like the one of 'Orpheus' if it had not condemned those who did not believe. For, those who did believe were equally puzzled, and those who did not, were 'lost'. In fact, the Bible by its highbrow attitude, fails to attract worshippers, they are more awed than drawn willingly towards it.

"Whenever" says C.R. Anderson, "the formulas of conventional religion are invoked' the resistance of her inquiring mind rises to cancel them out or at least to balance them in a precarious equilibrium"

She uses this strategy in the following poem which illustrates the bitter-sweet nibbling of pain, despair, and doubt:

"This world is not conclusion.
A species stands beyond-
Invisible as Music-
But positive, as Sound-
It beckons and it baffles-
Philosophy-don't know-
And through a Riddle, at last-
Sagacity must go-
To guess it, puzzles scholars-
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And crucifixion shown-
Faith slips-and laughs, and rallies-
Blushes, if any see-
Plucks at a twig of Evidence-
And asks a Vane, the way-
Much Gesture from the Pulpit-
Strong Hallelujahs roll-
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul"-.

The first line is a clean, direct statement of her profession of faith, almost in a ritual manner of the Church. The finality of the statement is aptly marked by the clever use of the

full-stop at the end of the world 'Conclusion'. But the moment she attempts to describe heaven, doubts begin to assail her. The word 'Species' clearly indicates the kind of world that exists beyond this one. "It beckons and baffles" her both. Emily Dickinson's most typical approach to the problem of immortality is seen in "This world is not conclusion'.

In the face of uncertainty, Faith is the usual antidote prescribed. But Dickinson puckishly likens faith to a young girl embarrassed by a stumble and blushing if anyone saw her. She "Plucks at a twig of Evidence" to help her balance and glances up at a weathervane to see if any directions are forthcoming. Yes, faith is nice, but it would be better if we were offered a bit of evidence and better directions.

She used a similar set of ambiguities in the poem : 'My cocoon tightens - colors tease' complimenting Emily Dickinson on her use of paradox in the poem C.R. Anderson says: "For one who worked best in paradox it was most expeditious to stay strictly within the cocoon, and this manner produced her best poem on the silken cage,."

"My cocoon tightens - Colors tease-
I'm feeling for the Air-
A dim capacity for Wings
Degraded the Dress I wear-
A power of Butterfly must be-
The aptitude to fly.
Meadows of Majesty implies
And easy Sweeps of sky-
So I must baffle at the Hint
And cipher at the Sign
And make much blunder, if at last
I take the clue divine"-

In this poem, like many others, she borrows a fact in nature and transforms it into a living metaphor. The 'Cocoon' is just a conceit, and the real concern is immortality. Just as the insect is woven around with a cocoon and tugs at it to gain its release; so is the case with the soul. It yearns to release itself from this 'Magic prison', and fly away to the land beyond this one. All seems well not the surface, but the innocently scattered words like 'tease', 'dim', 'baffle', 'blunder', 'hint', all belie her hopes of belief. For, her own research into the problem baffles her, and she would commit blunders if she accepted the propounded theories on their face-value.

The charm of the poem lies in her unrivalled use of conceits and symbols. Her search for new symbols of belief was as endless as the nibbling of old doubts was persistent. Being the kind of poet, she was, she knew her best strategy was through the language of surprise, which might discover the meanings of her special religious experience. Once again, she

turned to the new scientific thought for effective terms to phrase her dilemma. For she was well aware that the supposed conflict between religion and science, which shook the Christian world at mid-century, dramatized the very real conflict between man's belief in immortality and his doubt of it.

The poem under consideration reveals the doubt-belief theme in surprising images:

“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers-
 Untouched by Morning
 And untouched by Noon-
 Sleep the meek members of Resurrection-
 Rafter of Satin,
 And roof of Stone.
 Light laughs the breeze
 In her Castle above them.
 Babble the Bee in a stolid Ear,
 Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence-
 An, what sagacity perished here.
 Grand go the years-in the Crescent above them-
 World scope their arcs-
 And firmaments-row
 Diadems-drop-and doges-surrender-
 Soundless as dots-on a Disc of snow”-

At first, the poem leaves a peaceful picture of the dead, safe in their stony chambers, awaiting 'Resurrection'. The elected ones smug and complacent, denote the puritan theory of God's election of only those who are fit for redemption. Here, they lie in their glory in the beautifully erected dome.

The second stanza contrasts the lifelessness of the dome with the world humming with activity. The babbling of the bee and the sweet song of the birds mock the inactivity of the 'meek members of the Resurrection': The dead lie lifeless, deprived of sunshine and pleasure. She contrasts the 'Sagacity' of the dead with nature's idle happiness.

The last stanza, bypasses religious and nature's mindless energy to suggest the actual grandeur of death. It suggests the vastness of the universe, were pain matters little. In this vastness of firmament, the soul, irrespective of its status, fall insignificantly on the whiteness of eternity which absorbs all alike, the great leveller without prejudice.

The poem moves from the linear, closed images of the tomb into circular, expanding one of crescents, scoops and arcs, away from temporal limitations to the grandeur of years and worlds and finally into the firmament herself. The vastness of this eternal cycle dwarfs all other considerations and reveals the insignificance of the waiting meek followers and

the childishness of nature's babbling eternity disdains, temporal time and material existence. The final lines show death's levelling power and portrayal's absorption into eternity as the insignificant dropping of a dot on a disc of snow. There is little religious consolation and no acknowledgement of personal immortality, for, in death man mingles with nature's white and alien over-soul without personality or sensation. A numbed blankness suggests the superiority even majesty of this ambiguous existence.

The poem thus presents neither the religious assurance nor the terror of death. It creates a sense of the sublime; that the soul merge into the vastness of the universe.

The excellence of the poem lies in the clever juxtaposition of the images, which alternately represent the sentiments of the mortals. She uses Biblical symbol of the Last Judgement and the Resurrection. Then she describes the physical world by employing the natural objects of nature and in the last stanza by sheer ingenuity, she uses astronomical symbols to convey her sense of immortality.

C.R. Anderson examines the poem in a newer light:

"The poet stands on the earth's surface and looks down into the grave, around her at life, and into the starry heavens. stanza one gives a religious view of death with a confident belief in personal immortality; two, a humanist view of life, in a world vibrant with sensations but precariously enjoyed, three, a scientific view of cosmic peace achieved by extinction."

The different parts are delicately interrelated. The idea, or the theological idea that the Resurrection is only for a few, and that those who lie in the translucent, tomb adorned with beautiful structure, lie there in vain. This idea comes into conflict with the last which represents the harsh concept of science. In between the two is the poet's choice of the physical world emphasized deeply by the exclamation: 'Ah what sagacity perished here'.

It brings into sharp focus the predicament of man. Death levels all into uniformity. There is no exclusion. 'Diadem's and Doges' perish alike in the white surface of eternity. This castle of brightness, in which man enjoys life is man's temporary abode. Where will the soul finally go? will the soul dwell in the 'alabaster' houses or in the disk of snow. Whiteness symbolizes death. She uses it frequently as 'Alabaster wool' or the 'White Exploit'; 'Snow' also signifies death, for it is the symbol of the dying year. It obliterates life from the earth. They simultaneously symbolize peace as well as immobility, and immobility means lifelessness. Thus, in the first and the last stanza, there is actually no hope.

Life at its meekest is simply buried in the ground. Life at its pompous tottering throne, and the collapse of the most magnetic symbol of the republican power in modern times makes no impression on the cosmic immensity. On this earth, by implication, both formerly shared the common glory of being alive.

She created a daring metaphor by uniting the scientific image with the religious and pious one. She used the scientific images not to profess any philosophy as such, but she juxtaposed the two radically different terms to shock and surprise. She knew that death was as inevitable as life, Immortality, was as doubtful as fame on this earth. Hence, what she could not believe in reality, she tried to render it in poetry.

C.R. Anderson says "Though immortality cannot be grasped by either theology or science, it can at least be rendered poetically as an aptitude of the soul, if right images are found and manoeuvred skilfully enough."

Thus in poetic terms she believed that life is not a discontinuation, immortality is in fact a 'Costumeless Consciousness'. In the poem entitled 'Easter', she delivers their symbolic sermon:

"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"-

In her characteristic style, she inaugurates the poem by using the quasi-Biblical text, aiming directly at doubters. Those who doubt immortality are dead in spirit. In fact they have never been alive. Immortality, according to her, is not to live 'Again'. For this world implies that immortality is altogether a new state, a renewed state. The process, then indicates that the soul has to undergo a process of annihilation and be born again in another kingdom. The thought in itself is controversial. Since the soul is indestructible, the state of immortality is only a continuance of the soul after it has left its physical garb – 'Constumeless consciousness'.

She demonstrates her conception in three disparate images of the ship, the hyphen, and the disk. The ship seems to be aground when viewed from the shore. It is in fact only an optical illusion. In the same way, the soul-ship passes into the eternal waters through a narrow channel, and death is just a drawbridge which opens up to welcome the ship into the wide sea. Death works as a connecting link between life and immortality. The word 'Hyphen' links itself with the draw-bridge.

Then the metaphor of the ship shifts and merges into the metaphor of the 'Disc'. It signifies the fleshless existence of the soul; 'the Costumeless Consciousness'. The soul thus sheds off its physical apparel and maintains its identity in the eternal waters. And that is, essentially the core of the being.

According to J.B. Pickard: "Here the conventional idea of immortality, with its insistence upon splendour and majestic transformation, is uniquely reworked to present her belief in the reality of the soul after death"

The image of 'hyphen' while substituting the death image of the draw-bridge also brings to the mind of the narrow river merging into the sea. This has also been read as her image for the link between the river of life and the sea of eternity. 'So' in the seventy line does a fleeting reference back to the preceding metaphor of the strait of death, through which the everlasting waters might be thought of as continuing to flow if one could only see' beneath the Draw. The soul-ship is not really 'aground' but waiting momentarily for the tides to bear it out into the unfathomable ocean.

The 'Disc' presents a problem for interpreting the poem in its proper sequence. Since the 'moon' has no affinity with immortality, this world could not be referred to, in connection with the setting and rising sun. Just as the sun plunges deep into the darkness, only to reappear again without losing its brilliance, in the same way the soul also undergoes this process, to attain immortality. And, may be, even this setting, and rising of the sun, is only an illusion a trick played on our eyes. The sun may be stationary and thus creating timelessness, in which the soul finds its eternal repose...tranquility. So - the sun in the centre of the Solar system.

The poem under consideration runs parallel to the concept of soul held by the Hindu theologians. The soul is indestructible. The body encases it for the allotted time and it merges into eternity after abandoning the earthly robe. She hovers between doubt and belief.

The dark-light pattern is sketched out in another poem, "Behind Me-Dips Eternity". The light stands for immortality and the darkness for the mortal state. She asserted her belief in immortality, she takes up the same theme here also. It contains her doubts and fears, the incessant fear, tugging at her heart, and yet, she gives expression to her unshakable assurance in immortality. The following poem uses the dark-light motif to interpret her theme:

"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 begin-
'Tis Kingdoms-afterward they say-
In perfect pauseless Monarchy-
Whose Prince-is Son of None-
Himself-Himself diversity-
In Duplicate divine-
'Tis Miracle before Me-then-
'Tis Miracle behind-between
A crescent in the Sea-
With Midnight to the North of Her-
With Midnight to the South of Her-
And maelstorm in the sky"-

The first three lines of this poem set up the image of the poet standing in the short space between the eternity that preceded her ("Behind Me – dips Eternity" –) and the immortality which will follow ("Before Me – Immortality") this brief interlude between—that is, her life ("Myself – the Term between –").

When the world is seen this way, death, instead of a ominous end, becomes a more quiet "Drift." Instead of envisioning it as the common allusion for nightfall, she sees dawn itself as death—life is the "Eastern Gray" that just precedes dawn, and death is the rising of the sun such that that life dissolves "into Dawn away."

The next stanza envisions what this immortality will look like. According to the Christian belief ("they say"), heaven is "Kingdoms" in "perfect – pauseless Monarchy." The "Prince," or Christ, ("Son of None" because his father is divine, not human). This "Dynasty" is "Dateless" because it goes on infinitely.

Using the traditional symbols, she passes on to her self-created version of immortality. The soul hangs expectantly between chaos and eternity. All around, are the whirling storms which signify chaos, and far beyond the glimmering hope.

Comparing it to the 'Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', J.B. Pickard states "Unlike some of her other lyric expressions, this poem is ordered by a consistent philosophic view and a carefully wrought structure. Somewhat like Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', the poem views human existence as a brief term, surrounded by the expanse of God, and pictures the soul as pre-existing in eternity and returning there after death."

That she was able to achieve perfection in art is beyond doubt. Her precision, economy of words and her ingenuity at working out striking contrasts is the secret of her poetry. That she was able to convey, her mighty doubts and growing fears, in such astounding metaphors is another wonder.

And the poem considered above is an example of her art. The very shape of this poem in a sense, symbolizes the pattern of all her best work. Its fine symmetry is achieved by balancing the certain change of death in the first stanza against the certain changes of life, in the third, with irony in the echoing words and repetitive structure, and in between the attempt to rise into the splendid motionlessness of eternity. Whichever pole she began with, she found it intricately related to the other- death or life, the outer world of forms vanishing as the inner world comes to life in the consciousness. And both were starting points for her ascent to immortality whether in the paradise of art or the other art.

It is difficult to ascertain whether she was finally successful in convincing herself, for, her world was fraught with chaos and confusion. The tension was so overwhelming, that she could not maintain her sanity without releasing it. And poetry was her only source of relief.

Loss of the faith in God is perhaps the deadliest wound inflicted on man. It undermines all confidence, all belief, and leaves him tottering and crying for help, that does not come. Emily Dickinson had lost her faith like Arthur Hugh Clough and many others, acutely susceptible to the predicament of modern man. The modern age is the age of disbelief. It is a terrible moment.

Clark Griffith says:

“Doubts have come; and with no externally imposed dogma to turn to, the religious sensibility can only fall back upon itself. But the self is without remedy. A personal symbolism has failed, so that God, the ‘You up there’, seems to have slipped outside experience. The private revelation has gone dark, so that experience, as far as the eye can tell, has become a clashing and contradictory, an ugly and impenetrable chaos ... Emily Dickinson transforms this doubt into a lifelong agony... For her, the dogma remains quite as unworkable as it is for Emerson or Whitman. Though her vocabulary still includes such terms as grace, redeem, election and salvation, the terms turn up in human or natural contexts never in connection with divine functions”.

In nature, in love and human relationships, in pain and death, she viewed the same disorderliness which characterised the universe in general. This despair and agony result from the vacuum created by the disintegrating force of religion.

Emily Dickinson possessed a sensitivity so acute that it was difficult for her not to feel sad. This sensibility is modern, for, it brings into focus all that the modern man feels and thinks. Left with only self and unable to force the self to believe, Emily Dickinson from poem to poem explores a situation, in which the older religious and philosophical orders with the values they guaranteed are dissolving into nothingness.

Emily Dickinson explored nature, man and all phenomena to find a final answer to her quests. Most of her poetry is tragic, which reveals the hurt which transmutes all painful

experiences into beautiful poetry. She could not find beauty in everyday world but found it in “the paradise of her art”.

This paper on Emily Dickinson is an attempt to secure a synthesis between her swinging poles of doubt and belief, fear and hope and the incessant tug-of-war between the mortal world which allured her, and between the immortal, which despite her doubts held some hope of eternal restfulness.

Amidst Emily's shifting concepts of God, Immortality, and Soul her world had Calvinism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism, each harping on their theories forcefully. Calvinistic theory stood for the God who showered his grace only on the chosen few. According to this concept, God came across as a capricious person to bestow his blessings only on the elected ones, which was not acceptable to Emily Dickinson. The Unitarian belief said “that man is essentially good and that man may trust his own perceptions of religious truth.”, it paved way for Transcendentalism which believed in the innate goodness of man, and the all-enveloping nature. Although Emily had faith in the Transcendental theories yet she could not fully rest in peace.

Though strongly chained to her Puritanical background she could not reset her faith in Calvinism or adhere to Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, the consequence was not a complete severance from belief but resulted in these moments of tragic plea.

“At least –to –pray-left-is-left
Oh Jesus –in –the –air-
I know not which thy Chamber is –
I am knocking-everywhere-“

She had knocked at all the doors of authority but no one opened to convey her the truth. She always hovered between belief and doubt. This utter chaos and disorder and the innumerable ‘maelstroms’ that churned in her, created the tragic tension and she rejected these theories in the process, lost her religious dimensions. This loss of dimensions resulted in her estrangement from society, nature, or so to speak with everything that existed in the world. Hence, every encounter was an assault on her consciousness which affected her outlook on life.

Despite the chaos created by Darwinism, Transcendentalism, and other spiritual creeds in Emily Dickinson's life, they helped in propagating the importance of the individual mind, will, and innate goodness and her search for them.

She desperately yearned for a pattern in life and believed to some extent, that life had some purpose. She nurtured grief, despair, pain, death, and love with almost an obsession. It is a unquestionable fact that personal experiences have contributed in making her a poet, but that she was a born poet is also an indisputable reality. It was this sensibility, and ‘tragic gaze’ as Clark C Griffith calls it, that was mainly responsible for the

vacuum created in her life. While others looked from a distance, she looked at everything through a mental microscope which magnified things to an enormous degree.

Mr. R. Tillich remarks "This is precisely the purpose of Dickinson's explorations of the self and external nature in her poetry often beginning with Biblical language and metaphor, then transmuting these into new forms through the creative power of words, to render her experience of what it means to be human."

This dilemma pursued her throughout her life. The order and pattern which she desired could only be realized through illusions. But reality was horrifying; one joyous moment would convince her, of the accuracy of Browning:

"God is in heaven
All is right with the world"

And yet another would plunge her deep into the well of despair:

"None may teach it-any-
'Tis the seal despair-
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air"

She could not pinpoint her suffering. It was in her heart, in nature, in the universe, everywhere. Every phase of natural phenomena brought suffering, a word without a scar, too deep to be described.

Our greatest problem in the universe is to keep our identity intact. Time is a fluid state. Life is in a flux, continuous fleeting state. Nature is just a process, a perception, it is impossible to arrest its motion. Death is the inevitable end of life, and immortality only a hope. Love brought pain, pain almost akin to that of death. Love is always accompanied with pleasure which is inevitably followed by pain. So, human relationships also are in state of continuous flow. This caused instability and apprehension. She had viewed the extinction of life with almost a morbid horror. With the exception of Lavinia, Sue and Austin, she was the last to die. Parents, beloved nieces and nephews, friend, loved ones, all left her, one after another. With every departure, the eternal problem was posed before her with huge mark of interrogation. And this mark of interrogation hounded her as it were, while she desperately tried to maintain her sanity.

Faced by this conflict and morbid horror her brain rejected the consolation offered by religious dogma. The sense of guilt, atonement, or purgation did not convince her, for, she felt no sense of guilt and hence atonement hardly held any value. Hence the question is rebounded with a still greater force – "why this suffering"? And she immediately held god as the malignant force.

This was Emily Dickinson's dilemma, her despair and agony which deeply underlines her vision of the universe. She tried to resolve the dilemma in her poetry, all the ordeal that she went through was her final solution to the problem.

Living amidst pain, experiencing all its aspects, she tasted life in its raw form. Yet in her poetry she sketches out a pattern of grief and joy, despair and hope, pleasure and pain. Throughout her life Dickinson showed much belief in God but little faith in doctrines. Dickinson's quarrel with God reflects the full range of human rebellion. Dickinson's God rarely seems to make her happy, yet she never breaks off the affair. She seems to have this idea that no matter how incompatible they may be, human and divine are made for each other.

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