

**“A Poet of Despair”: Re-reading of
Emily Dickinson’s Poetry of Despondency; A Philosophical
Interpretation**

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson was a prominent American poet . She wrote altogether 1,775 poems, whose themes could be divided into about despair, agony, nature, love, and religion. Separation, death and loss are major themes in her poetry. Her despair poems have already been interpreted from a variety of Perspectives. In the context of her psychological deterioration in life, it is great significance realistically to reread Dickinson’s despair poetry from a new angle whose aim is to explore her mind and thought. Though her poetry was not written during the modern era (cited after Eliot’s Alfred Purfrok), however it is considered a modernist poetry due to its main themes and her technique: fragmentation, obscurity, uncertainty, and paradox.

This paper aims at a better understanding of her poetry of despair; a look into her grim sad poems in an attempt to find a philosophy behind it. Her main search is for heavenly ecstasy which has a close relation to human despair: in order to attain God’s mercy, one should go through life’s adversity. This is her own experience that makes “despair” a “human condition”, and her ultimate conclusion. For her, the eventual problem is not to master despair, but as to transform her experience into great fine poetry.

Key words: Emily Dickinson ; despair poetry ; modernist poet ; Circumference, Death, Dickinsonian Self-Reliance”; awe, sublime, pit.

Emily Dickinson is not an easy poet; her personality has affected her poetry writings representing the many-sided characteristics inside herself. Many critics evaluate her works in relation to her psyche, and among them is Charles R. Anderson who meticulously describes her unique attributes as a “poet of despair”. The case of her poetry is unique as she has experienced despair. The ultimate problem is not to master despair, but to turn the experience of it into great memorable poetry. Thus, great poems have been found on her experience of suffering. It is her attempt, in other words, to give shape to shapeless quality of despair. Despair is amorphous and for her, it needs to be embodied into some palpable form. In order to do so, she uses abundance of images in one attempt to envisage despair.

In spite of her “modernism,” Dickinson’s verse drew little interest from the first generation of “High Modernists.” Hart Crane and Allen Tate were among the first leading writers to register her greatness, followed in the 1950s by Elizabeth Bishop and others. The New Critics also played an important role in establishing her place in the modern canon. From the beginning, however, Dickinson has strongly appealed to many ordinary or unschooled readers. Readers respond, too, to the impression her poems convey of a haunting private life: : detachment from her mother, loss of relatives, friends, parting, death, and her split inner self “The Soul should stand in Awe—”(683). Her attitudes always fluctuate between the extremes of deprivation and refined ecstasies, however is often agonized , as she writes "I like a look of Agony,/Because I know it's true—" (241). Her

father's sudden death in 1874 caused a great emotional upheaval yet eventually led to "a greater openness, self-possession, and serenity". Her mother's death in 1882 (though the early distance with her) along with her successive tragedies in her life influenced her health and state of mind . As a result, she ceased seeing almost everyone, apparently including even her close circle of people . Misery aggravated her sense of despair. "She chose words rather than people as her ultimate source of comfort", (Wolff, 386)

It is worth noting that the poems about death and despair occupy a rather great part in relation to heaven, pit, awe, and grief: "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (340), she is highly obsessed with immortality and death "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died—" (591). Richard Chase remarks that what interests Dickinson most is "the achievement of status through crucial experiences "; the achievement "by undergoing pain , of the exalted status of Queen of Calvary, for instance" .At the same time, "her rich abundance—her great range of feeling, her supple expressiveness—testifies to an intrinsic poetic genius”:

Along with Poe and Whitman one of the three great poets of the nineteenth century, ...[Emily] permitted her discovery in the twentieth century, her poetry rose phoenix-like into a world that was ready to admire its great wit; its flashes of insight; its oblique confessional quality; its brittle, nervous strength; and its prosodic flexibility. (Shucard, 18)

Her poetry become widely read and translated into Japanese, Italian, French, German, and many other languages, and Dickinson has begun to attract readers as the one American lyric poet as she can occupy a place "at the centre of the corpus of American poetry" with her poetic sensibility .

Earth would have been too much-I see
 And Heaven-not enough for me-
 I should have had the Joy.
 Without the Fear-to justify-
 The Palm-without the Calvary-
 So Savior-Crucify.
 (313, III, 1-6)

Her poetry, by which she has proved being a difficult poet, which was neither read nor evaluated in her life, has received many literary criticisms during the last quarter century. Her originality and cognitive power has raised her poetry to the position of elevated difficult one. There have been always more ingenious and complex visions behind her poetry. This makes the critics divide between her “conceptualizations” and “verbal figures”. Albert Gelpi and David Porter mostly read her poetry in relation to New England in which they contextualize it, and mainly her early poetry to the tradition of New England. Sharon Cameron and Robert Weisbuch regard her inwardness to the Romantics’ “internalization of quest-romance.”

To distinguish her works from her male predecessors, Joanne Diehl and Margret Homans apply the insights of contemporary feminists criticisms to her poetry. In an attempt to investigate her inventiveness, and innovations in syntax and deviation from the traditional religious modes due to Civil War and American National Crisis, Shira Wolosky is more concerned with the poetic forms in her works. There are some characteristics which make Dickinson’s poetry more complex, subtle, and difficult. Above all is her cognitive strength, which let the audience while reading confront some genuine intellectual difficulties. Her originality is another aspect that allow the reader to meditate through her poetry to grasp sometimes a new idea, other times sole image. This is what creates her innovations or rather

what Harold Bloom has named as “mastery of craft”. Still, Dickinson has something unique in her writings- that has no precursors raised before to find it common in her poetry. Being different ever from the male model, due to the wilderness in her poetical writings adds to her strangeness:

I can not dance upon my Toes-
 No Man instructed me-
 But oftentimes, among my mind,
 A Glee possesseth me,
 [326]

In this lyric, 1862, the prevalent tone is influenced by Whitman, however “both gleeful arts respond to the Emersonian prophecy of American self-Reliance” (Bloom, Intro. I)

Because that you are going
 And never coming back
 And I, however absolute,
 May overlook your Track—

Because that Death is final,
 However first it be,
 This instant be suspended
 Above Mortality—

Significance that each has lived
 The other to detect
 Discovery not God himself
 Could now annihilate

Eternity, presumption
 The instant I perceive
 That you, who were Existence
 Yourself forget to live—

It is so obvious that in these opening quatrains of poem 1260 her battle is with the orthodoxy. She always rebels what is traditional, which proves her own uniqueness; what raises her to the rank of Shakespeare, Freud and Plato. She is always part of an “agon”, and being involved in a struggle with the whole tradition, and the Bible wraps her distinguished female existence among her precursors and contemporary male poets. The previous afore-mentioned lines-poem 1260 in 1873- was written with reference to the dying of either Samuel Bowles or Judge Otis Lord 1884. The two men are supposed to be her lovers. The poem closes with a conditional vision of God “refunding to us finally- as Bloom has described our “Confiscated Gods.” In her attempt to reverse the traditional pattern, Dickinson has called for Emerson’s “liberating gods.” In this regard, she has mastered Emerson, whose crucial work (Essays, The Conduct of Life, Society and Solitude, the poems) when she has spoken with her ambiguous way. The awareness of death is an essential beginning for understanding one being's, which is important because it helps one to fulfil oneself. However, Heidegger wasn't so much interested in moral consequence such as self- fulfilment. In comparing Whitman to Dickinson, Bloom has written:

Whereas Whitman masked his delicate, subtle and hermetic art by developing the outward self of the rough Walt, Dickinson set herself free to invest her imaginative exuberance elsewhere. The heraldic drama of her reclusiveness became the cost of confirmation as a poet more original even than Whitman indeed more original than any poet of her century after (and except) Wordsworth. (Bloom, Intro. II)

Whitman rethought the relation of the poet's self to his own vision, while Dickinson reconsidered the entire content of poetic vision. Wordsworth has done both, but in an implicit way in comparison to the American poets themselves.

What distinguishes Dickinson from her male precursors is her subtle ambiguous way in writing. When Shelley wrote "Epipsychidion" addressing Emilia Vivian; under the name of Emily, Emily Dickinson favours to reply since both have the interest in the image of volcanoes. In honour of Judge Lord, she wrote ten days before his death a prominent quatrain influenced by Shelley when he wrote:

Possessing and possessed by all that is
 Within that calm circumference of bliss
 And by each other, till to love and live
 Be one (II, 37-40)

Dickinson wrote:

Circumference thou Bride of Awe
 Possessing thou shalt be
 Possessed by every hallowed knight
 That cares to cover thee.
 (1620)

Shelley prolongs on the lover's apocalypse:

One hope within two wills, one will beneath
 Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,
 One heaven, one Hell, one immortality,
 And one annihilation.
 (II, 71-74)

Emerson in his essay entitled “Circles” insists that “the only sin is limitation”, adhering the same idea of both Shelley and Dickinson. Emerson clarifies in his essay that “there is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us.” In her poem (378), Dickinson again is “out upon circumference”. Emerson denies the “outside”, and like him she finds limitation a sin. For her, “circumference” is what can be opposite to freedom; it is the boundary against which she can believe to live in. The Bible, for her, dealt not with the Circumference; however it dealt with the Centre. The Central, for Emerson is his anticipation for the Central Man who would come. Thus, “Circumference” is Dickinson’s image for the Sublime. Thus, “Circumference” which was for Shelley a “Spenserian cynosure, a Gardens of Adonis vision”, is for Emerson “not part of us or another challenge to be overcome by the Central, by the Self-Reliant Man” as Bloom states and he adds that “if the Bible’s concern is Centre, not Circumference, it cannot be because the Bible does not quest for the Sublime”. And he resumes “If Circumference or Dickinson is the bride of Awe or the authority of Judge Lord, then Awe too somehow had to be detached from the Centre”(intro, 5). Dickinson wrote an elegy for Judge Lord:

No man saw awe, not to his house
 Admitted he a man
 Though by his awful residence
 Has human nature been.

Not deeming of his dread abode
 Till laboring to flee
 A grasp on comprehension laid
 Detained vitality.

Retuning is a different route

The spirit could not show
For breathing is the only work
To be enacted now.

“Am not consumed,” old Moses wrote,
“Yet saw him face to face”-
That very physiognomy
I am convinced was this.
(1733)

In this poem, Dickinson is trying to assimilate Awe to Circumference since it is “laboring to flee” returning via “a different route” where it is not antithetical any more to each other. She used “vitality” as another synonym for Circumference or Sublime. In this “proleptic” elegy, identifying herself to “Old Moses”:

In some sense, she chose this fate, and not by extending her Circumference to Bowles and to Lord, unlikely pragmatic choices. The Spiritual choice was not to be post-Christians, as with Whitman or Emerson, but to become a sect of one, like Milton or Blake. Perhaps her crucial choice was to refuse the auction of her mind through publication. Character being fate, the Canaan she would not cross to was poetic recognition while she lived.
(Bloom, Intro.5)

Moses did not accept entrance into Canaan, however he denied it. For Emily, it “wasn’t fairly used”, and thus her destiny has become to be excluded.

Emily’s poem 627 written in 1862 is considered to be a manifesto of what so called by some critics “Dickinsonian Self-Reliance”

The Tint I cannot take-is best-
The Color too remote
That I could show it in Bazaar-

A Guinea at a sight-
 The fine—impalpable Array-
 That swaggers on the eye
 Like Cleopatra’s Company-
 Repeated –in the-sky-
 The Moments of Dominion
 That happen on the Soul
 And leave it with a Discontent
 Too exquisite-to-tell

The eager look-on Landscape-
 As if they just repressed
 Some Secret-that was pushing
 Like Chariots-in the west-

The pleading of the Summer-
 That other Prank-of Snow-
 That Cushions "Mystery with Tulle,
 For Fear the Squirrels-know.

Their Graspless manners mock us-
 Until the Cheated Eye
 Shuts arrogantly-in the Grave-
 Another way to see.

The concluding lines are most poignant and ironic; the other way of “seeing” feelingly is after death in the grave. That is when the eye is “cheated” and “shuts arrogantly”. “Her eye and will are receptive, not plundering, so that her power to un-name is not Emersonian finally, but something different, another way to see.” (Bloom, Intro, 7) .It is to see feelingly “beyond the arrogance of the self in its war against process and its stand against other selves. Her interplay of perspectives touch apotheosis not in a Nietzschean or Emersonian exaltation of the will to power , however receptive and reactive, but in suggestions of an alternative mode, less an

interpretation than a questioning, or an othering of natural process. Bloom concludes on this poem, “the poem, like so much of Dickinson at her strongest, compels us to begin again in rethinking our relation to poems, and to the equally troubling and dynamic relation of poems to our world of appearances.” (7)

In her great poem on despair, her experience was intense “It was not Death, for I stood up.....”, she begins the poem with “It was not death” and ends up with it is “despair”. She has used the technique of giving one negation followed by an opposing affirmation . In between the first and the last line, there are a series of mere similes of possibilities . In stanza one, the image of death prevails the scene. The opposition between the erect figure of the poet and the recumbent dead highlights the main theme. Despair is “amorphous”, and needs to be embodied into some palpable form. In doing so, she uses the technique of throwing up a shower of images. The opening words of the first stanza are “it was not death”, but the concluding lines comes “to justify despair”. In between, there are abundant of images, similes of possibilities, use of negations followed by affirmations:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down—
It was not Night, for the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

The lines are marked with paradoxes: “stood up” and “lie down”; “night” and “noon”. The image in the first and the second lines is that of death symbolized by “dead” and its recumbent state as opposed to the “standing up” figure symbolizing life. Line three and four represent an image of “midday” (noon) reinforced by the sound of “Bells”, and their swinging

motion; in contrast to the night of death. However, there are overtones irony in that all: while word “Bells” stands for life’s motion and sound, it can refer to death of somebody, when linked to “funeral image”. Whereas “Noon” refers to both the height of the day’s life, it also implies the beginning of the sun’s decline. For Emily Dickinson, it is a recurrent image for the escape out of time in her poetry.

In stanza II, “marble feet” is also an image of death:

It was not Frost, for on my knees
I felt Siroccos—crawl—
Not fire—for just two Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool

And yet, it tasted like them all,
The figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me of mine—
(5-12)

The same technique is repeated in the third and fourth stanzas where the burial theme prevails. The typical image of death is “As if my life is shaven, and fitted to a frame”, imaging her own burial:

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And ’twas like Midnight, some—
(13-16)

“Frame” refers to the coffin in a box. Out of her despair, she wants to release her soul out of this body of despair. Spirits are locked into bodies, coffins and corpse become one. In stanza five, “when everything that ticked has stopped” is a recurrent image of the escape out of time.

When everything that ticked—has stopped—
 And Space stares all around—
 Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
 Repeal the Beating Ground—
 (17-20)

It is an image of death; the pendulum has stopped referring to the state of lifelessness. As significant motifs in her poetry, “autumn” and “winter” are indicatives of despair. The other end of the clock’s cycle stands for the moment of death. It is an image of midnight of black despair, when “space stares all around” with the glazed eye of death. It moves to the blank whiteness of autumn morning; indicative of despair. When “frosts” repeal the “Beating ground”, ticking life ceased in the silence of night. The pulse of life is abrogated by the coming of winter. In stanza six, images flow on; it is not death, nor noon, nor stone, nor blank silence. Yet, “it tasted them all.”

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
 Without a Chance, or Spar—
 Or even a Report of Land—
 To justify -- Despair.
 (21-24)

The last metaphor refers to a shipwreck and to the chaotic nature of despair: there is no “report of land”. She is nowhere, and substance and experience become one. The effect increased by the insistent beat of 4 accented syllables in succession fall like hammer blows: “But, most, like, Chaos stoples, cool”. This image “removes the last signs by which suffering man can identify himself as human.” (Bloom, 29). The poem is chaotic like despair itself. Its only form is the multiform formlessness. In this poem, her attempt to make communication between substance and experience to overcome the versatile condition into fixed one. She has used the technique

of throwing up a shower of images, series of similes of possibilities followed by opposing affirmation.

“There’s a Certain Slant of Light” ,a four stanzas poem, is her finest poem on despair. The poem begins with this “ slant of light” reflecting hope. In stanza three, the seal of despair appears. There is “the look of death” in the last stanza. She starts with the image that evokes despair “winter sunlight”. Critics have categorized it as a nature-poem. Her experience is not explicitly stated, but it is realized in a web of images. To begin with, the first line represents an important metaphor extended in the second stanza:

There’s a certain Slant of Light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the meanings are,--

According to Bloom, grammatically the antecedent of the neutral ‘it’ refers to this “certain slant” of light and its transformation make up the action of the poem. However, on a figurative level, ‘it’ implies the “Heavenly Hurt”: “this is a true metaphor , sensation and abstraction fused into one, separable in logic but indistinguishable and even reversible in a poetic sense. “(30)

None may teach it—Any—
 ‘Tis the Seal Despair
 An imperial affliction
 Sent us of the Air—

When it comes, the Landscape listens—
 Shadows— hold their breath—
 When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance
 On the look of Death.

The protean condition of despair has been illustrated through a set of images which are vividly discrete and separate. However, they seem to grow out of each other in harmony to create the poet’s meaning. Though light signifies the glimpse of hope; here the hidden ray that can be apprehended but not grasped implies the amorphous quality of ‘despair’; the first image of the poem “slant of light”. It is “slanting” as it has not certain source, and left no tangible impact, as the feeling of winter, and that of despair. The afternoon’s pale light or “Winter afternoon” light indicates the approaching of death when both day and year are coming to an end. This stands in opposition with the implication of joy and the full-living happiness on the other side with summer. Actually, she feels the winter of her soul—the loss of hope—and the growing feeling of frustration.

The extreme feeling of sadness and desolation become like “the Heft/of Cathedral Tunes.” The light waves have been converted into sound waves felt by the whole body. “Heft” signifies this heaviness and dullness of soul “Heavenly Hurt”. Accordingly, This homely word also “clashes effectively with the grand ring of ‘Cathedral Tunes,’ those produced by carillon” opening wide range of rich probabilities of meaning. As long as this music ‘oppresses’ the association of funeral is added to “the Heavy resonance of all

pealing bells”, and as long as the double meaning of ‘Heft’ has connotations , “despair is likened to both the weight of theses sounds on the spirit and the imponderable tonnage of cast bronze”. (Bloom, 31)

Behind “Heavenly Hurt” in stanza two, there is a religious note as it might refer to what Bloom has called “the pain of paradisiac ecstasy,” coming from Man’s awareness of his suffering since his Fall. In other words, it is a realization of a blight Man was born for as in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Spring and Fall”. This despair or rather ‘hurt’ is like ‘slant of light’ felt but never grasped. The last stanza returns to the image of ‘winter afternoons’ as indicative of death; or rather despair. And ‘Air’ is back to a ‘certain slant of light’ in a way enhancing the pathetic fallacy where nature sympathizes human suffering.

As the sun drops toward the horizon just before setting, ‘the Landscape listens’ in apprehension that the Very light which makes it exist as a landscape is about to be extinguished; ‘Shadows,’ which are about to run to infinity in length and merge with each other in breadth until all shadow, ‘hold their breath.’ This is the effect created by the slanting light ‘when it comes.’ Of course no such things happen in nature.(Bloom, 31-32)

It is neither the light inflicting suffering , nor the landscape, the victim. These are images of despair.

In another poem, she describes this ‘presentment’ foreboding something evil to happen reflecting her state of mind pre-occupied with despair and fear of it. The poem is “Presentiment—is that long Shadow—on the Law—”:

Presentiment—is that long Shadow—on the Lawn
 Indicative that Suns go down—
 The Notice to startled Grass
 The Darkness—is about to pass—

Again, the conjugation between the present of shadows and the setting of the sun is indicative of the approach of the Night of her mind. Darkness is falling and she is overwhelmed by feelings of pain. The suggestion that this ‘presentiment’ is indicative of some ‘unbearable pain’ is implied; since ‘darkness’ donates the idea of the anticipation of dread thing to come. It might symbolize death as well. In her poem “Give Little Anguish”,

Give Little anguish will Fret.
 Lives will Fret.
 Give avalanches
 And they’ll slant,
 Straighten, look cautious for their breath,
 But make no syllable—
 Like Death,
 Who only shows his
 Marble Disc—
 Sublimer sort than speech.

From Emily Dickinson (1830-86), Complete Poems, 1924. Part Five: The Single Hound poem 310 CXLII

“They’ll slant” in the fourth line echoes the “slant of light” when ‘it goes’, with the sunset and the approaching of Darkness; a metaphor of death. This slant of light when it goes is like ‘the Distance on the look of Death.’ This Distance is a reference to the distance between the poet and her experience; life and death; feeling and the state of her mind rebounding despair. Thus the final presence of landscape reflects her ‘inner difference’.

This distance or rather the difference is presented as parallel in her poem; in her conjuring between life and death, hope and fear, ecstasy and despair; and above all that of mercy and “pit”. Her finest poem, “A Pit and Heaven over it”, has been written in a very ambivalent phrases ever can be found in her poetry:

A pit and Heaven over it
And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad,
And yet a Pit—
With Heaven over it.
(1-4)

Before we dig deep into that awesome poem, one has to admit the poem is an outcome of special circumstances that influenced Emily and the later writers in which she was specifically affected by the upheaval changes of the period of instability, chaos, and above all war. To cope with the surrounding world, she has to create her own “new language” best mirroring her conflicting states of mind. Her attempts to do so remain a blight between accepting and rejecting the inherited beliefs her world has “shaken” them.

Shira Wolosky in her article “A Syntax of Contention” describes the case of this poem as “a lost sense of wholeness” where Emily can not find a fixed ground, and always has a growing feeling of slipping down. This is a sense of a lost being between all past and all future. The poet can not neither belong to the above (referring to “Heaven” nor to the below “abyss”. This is apparently a reflection of a “psyche” of someone who is at a disaster of fear.

However, the recurrent image of “pit” and the insistence that Heaven is over it mirrors her state of mind and gives her repetitive assurance that each pit

should be presented by Mercy over it. The image is that of hope; rather that of despair which adds to the special nature of the poem. The poet can see and feel the glimpse of happiness; and release of her fear somewhere in the horizon, in heaven; in the coming- even if this coming is death. This is why we find after each pit, there is no dread; but a way out; that is always God's mercy there. The idea is reinforced once more by religious manifestations in her poetry in spite of her religious practices detachments in life.

The depth is all my thought-
I dare not ask my feet-
'T would start us where we sit
So straight you'd scarce suspect
It was a pit...
(stanza III, 1-4)

Fear immobilized her ability to look forward to heaven instead of gazing into the abyss below. She is suspended between the two, and her feelings are tenuous and to look down more is to collapse. Her collapse is actually a moral and mental collapse. The whole poem is verbless, and the use of prepositions dominate. The pit is not defined by an action, but rather a vast space. In this space, the use of the conditional infinitive and clauses "to stir", "to look" reflects the poet's inability to move due to great fear.

She refers to life's cycle "seed-summer-tomb". She might find in death her heaven, and an end to this 'pit' in her mind she suffers throughout her life. However, she has been always a poet of "despair"; she has this conjoining and a belief in hope after all.

As she has been always concerned with issues of death, life, mortality, and faith; all these conflicting pre-occupations are put in collision in this poem.

She uses the word “pit” four times and “heaven” five times yet “pit” usurps her mind and soul. Though her ambivalence, she still has faith in the existence of Heaven-Mercy, God, Sky. In her case, “pit” may suggest evil, hell, grave, as all the implications are associated. The poem is fluctuating around these interpretations.

The first line echoes the Christianity response to death, “A Pit”; enough reason that makes it predominate both the poem and Emily’s mind. It is still a “Heaven” beside and abroad. The third line turns from this assurance and consolation, “And yet a Pit.” Thus comes the telling “yet” of this line as a another form of “but” in the first line. Then, the second stanza implies the static pose of the speaker reflecting the inert immobility over the pit being frozen in a very dejected state of desolation. The whole image suggests the grave as a suitable setting. Again “pit” prevails the whole scene, in which she can neither “stir”, nor “look”, nor “dream. There is no room for any glimpse of hope within; and consequently despondency culminates in the first line in the last stanza where “the depth” is all her “thought”. The culmination occurs once more when the “pit” is having “fathoms under it. There is an abyss below the “pit”, though there is still “heaven” above. The last line tolls “Whose Doom to Whom?” to end the circuit of this futile cycle of life; and the speaker is lost among the circulating echoes. The poem encapsulated the poet’s perception of “despair”; that is the cage she has been “imprisoned” by her utter choice and desire. She has been fluctuating in that static thought of dejection that immobilized her and deprived her of the normal dynamic indulgence in life; and eventually detached in a remote area of life unable to move due to this inert thought of “despair” and fear. This

conquers her heaven and jailed her in life and thought and ultimately imprisoned her in her “pit”. Being not able to freed herself from that gloomy thought, though she is completely aware that there is something good in store: “behind”, or “beyond” which is “Heaven”, “sky”, or “God”. However, she likes more to be entrapped by her “pit” of mind symbolizing by “evil”, “grave”, “death”, “fear”, and “despair”.

This is why she was closely more to be described as a “poet of despair” being more likely having this propensity to torture herself with the gloomy fears of life, and having so many indulgences with questions of faith, grave, death, immortality, and life. Dickinson's poetry epitomizes the core of human paradox “the poignant, inevitable isolation of each human being—the loneliness and the yearning to be seen , acknowledged , and known”, on one hand, and “on the other , the gleeful satisfaction in keeping one part of the self sequestered, sacred, uniquely powerful, and utterly inviolate—the incomparable safety in retaining a secret part of the c self that is available to no one save self” (, Wolff, 130)

There are many convictions that assume her exceptional unique case as a poet, close to metaphysical, however foreshadowing modernism in her poetry: “Dickinson poems announce how it is to live on the edge of such danger. Fear of falling assumes precedence over the possibility of flight” (Bloom, 157)

To stir would be to slip-
 To look would be to drop-
 To dream-to sap the Prop
 That holds my chances up.
 Ah! Pit! With Heaven over it!

The growing sense of loss of the world above gives her more feeling of the fathoms below.

It was a pit -- with fathoms under it-

Its circuit just the same.

Seed-summer-tomb-

Whose Doom to whom?

In this final stanza, the inflected verbs do reappear—but either as the copula “is” or as denial of action “I dare not ask”. The images are staccato, sudden and not expected. The lack of syntactic modulation reduces the poem’s thought and imagery. According to Bloom,

the circuit of the pit (path around it) is marked by the stages of life: the seed=birth, summer= maturity, and the tomb of death. The cycle of life itself walks on the edge, with no possibility of escape except a heaven that remains tantalizingly beside, abroad, and above it. The “I” is left with awe and the abyss, extremes that cause her to guard each step takes as she rounds the circle.(157)

The technique of the conjunction of ecstasy and despair: “A perfect—paralyzing Bliss/ Contented as Despair” (7-8), from Emily Dickinson (1830-86) Complete Poems: 1924, Part Three: Love

This is like Andrew Marvell’s “The Definition of Love”, and his conjoining of joy and pain:

One blessing had I, then the rest

So larger to my eyes
That I stopped gauging, satisfied,
For this enchanted size.

(Stanza I)

It was the limit of my dream,
The focus of my prayer,
A perfect; paralyzing bliss
Contented as despair.

(Stanza II)

The last two lines echo Emily's lines, though paradoxical, they highlight a very human nature, the ability to combine two opposite sensations together. This reflects the complexity of human nature, the complexity of Emily as well. It is her being able to combine all of this fluctuating nature within her own soul; the depth and her richness inside herself.

The heaven below the heaven above
Obscured with ruddier hue.
Life's latitude leant over-full;
The judgement perished too.
Stanza IV, (14-17)

Why Bliss so scantily disturb,
Why Paradise defer,
Why floods are served to us in bowls,
I speculate no more.
(18-21)

This is "Bliss", not a mere joy or ecstasy, it is a Bliss surpassing all and it is an end to her day-dream. There is a heaven below (in reference to life), which is matching with heaven above (the after life).

Emily Dickinson has been always looking for heaven through her poetry, rather than through a theology she could not accept. In another similar poem, she wrote:

Of God we ask one favour,
That we may be forgiven—
For what, he is presumed to know—
The Crime, from us, is hidden—
Immured the whole of Life
Within a magic Prison
We reprimand the Happiness
That too competes with Heaven.
(1601)

Here is another essential theme: her yearning for the heavenly ecstasy she was deprived from on earth.

That joy that has no stem, nor core,
Nor seed that we can sow,
Is edible to longing,
But ablative to show...

The word “ablative” is the Latin word for “deprivation”. She dwells always in her prose and verse on this theme of opposites: love and death; ecstasy and despair; hope and fear; heaven and hell, and so on and so forth. This brings us one more time back to the ambiguous “certain slant of light” which pierced her from above with an “imperial affliction”, and it looks like “the way laying Light” that struck her once like lightning.

The Lightning was as new
As if the Cloud that instant's lit
And let the Fire through—
(It struck me—every Day, 2-4)

Her main search is for that heavenly ecstasy which has a close relation to the human despair: in order to attain God's mercy, you should go through life's adversity. This is her own experience, and her ultimate conclusion; "just as a kind of primitive wisdom had led her back to the juncture of love and death in the instinctual world. But these were only motions of the heart, up and down." (Bloom, 33). Eventually, she can mix perfectly thought and sensations; as a critic comments: "she perceives abstractions and thinks sensations." It takes her to a similar point with the metaphysical poets, like John Donne. Unlike her contemporaries, she has been considered as the only Anglo-American poet who could achieve this fusion between heart and mind; sense and sensibility.

Finally, she has to look inside deep down her soul to find out a meaning, and her search inside herself is like a search outside in the non-self. First, she has found in nature a sufficient subject for her poetry, then has explored the inside self: "the human nature" to eventually attain the ecstasy of the "Divine". At an earlier stage of her life, she could not make peace with God because "the world holds a predominant place in (her) affections." As a consequence, she withdrew from society after her adulthood. At this stage of her maturity, she has discovered the interior world of the self, concluding this with attaining the reality in the "paradise of art" perceiving "eternity" in her verse. The opposites highlighted in her poems form "the interlocking and reversible sequences". What adds to the distinctiveness of her poetry is "the direction of her emphasis, which is the opposite of that taken by her New England predecessors in the orthodox handling of these ambiguities". To exemplify, that "earthly suffering" in

Puritan view is “the ordained path to a heavenly reward of bliss”, however for Emily, it is a “momentary glimpse of ecstasy both measure and cause of the despair”; “the essence of the human condition.” (Bloom, 33):

This debate frames her perfect image for the earthly paradise where she wrestled with her angel. The mind and heart, the consciousness, the self, the soul—whatever word one wishes—this was the “Magic Prison” she always explored in her poetry. (Bloom, 35)

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