

Emily Dickinson's Search for God

by

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Emily Dickinson has often been associated with metaphysical poetry because of her Platonic concern with the invisible. Her poetic world consists of the profound mystical visions of the mixture of the physical and metaphysical, and her poems contain unique qualities which cannot be seen even in the poetry of such metaphysical poets as John Donne. Some of the qualities are despair, suffering, earnestness, and boldness, for instance, revealed in her persistent search for a sacramental union with God; her epistemological method in search for God was largely intuitive. Reasoning power was also important but not absolute, and she knew that intuitive power was necessary to perceive the truth of the universe and God. Her poetry is thus marked with keen intellect and sharp sensibility.

What is particularly intriguing about Dickinson's poetry is that it presents a vivid allegory-like world (yet implying no moral sense), which is highly personalized enough to be called a kind of self-myth. Dickinson established the private world by focusing on her relationship with the universe and God, which consequently revealed emphatically her indefatigable quest for truth and wavering belief in God. Her relationship with God is central in her poetic vision, and therefore this essay will endeavor to investigate how she was concerned with it.

First of all, what is important is to examine the nature of Dickinson's poetic vision. Allan Tate says in his suggesting and elaborate essay that the New England culture in Dickinson's age was appropriate for her poetic creation:

In Miss Dickinson, as in Donne, we may detect a singularly morbid concern, not for religious truth, but for personal revelation. The modern word is self-exploitation. It is egoism grown irresponsible in religion and decadent in morals. In religion it is blasphemy; in society it means usually that culture is not self-contained and sufficient, that the spiritual community is breaking up. This is, along with some other features that do not concern us here, the perfect literary situation.¹

According to this critic, Dickinson constantly tried to discover aesthetic truth in the almost egoistic expansion of her personal consciousness. The critic also implies that Dickinson was not interested in discovering religious truth but was absorbed in an aesthetic view of life, aspiring for truth and beauty in that regard. This criticism is noteworthy in pointing out Dickinson's inner desire for self-expression, but it seems to be a little exaggerating in discussing the poet's artistic egoism in connection with the social milieu of her age. Dickinson's dedication to personal revelation was not caused by the religious and moral decadence of her community. It originated from her inner passion for self-realization, which she tried to attain in the equilibrium between the physical and metaphysical. In fact, Dickinson hardly dealt with the subjects of such decadence in her poetry; moreover, her search for self-realization in accordance with the meaning of the universe showed what could be more than simply a quest for aesthetic truth. Martha H. Shackford says, "To gratify the aesthetic sense was never Emily Dickinson's desire; she despised the poppy and mandragora of felicitous phrases which lull the spirit to apathy and emphasize art for art's sake. Poetry to her was the expression of vital meanings, the transfer of passionate feeling and of deep conviction."²

Although the nature of Dickinson's conviction about her life and art may not be easily assessed, it is clear that she had a certain conviction about religion, because all through her life she continued to reject conventional Christianity—in her case, Calvinistic religion particularly. Her conviction was that religion, which was man-made, often became

so formalized and authoritative as to hamper man's true relationship with God. For Dickinson faith in her society appeared highly nominal: "'Faith' is a fine invention / When Gentlemen can see / But *Microscopes* are prudent / In an Emergency" (P 185).³ Once faith is conventionalized, it tends to lose its fundamental meaning. Besides, religion highly depends upon man's interpretations of language in it. John Crowe Ransom notes a catch in religion one may easily lapse into: "Religion depends for its ontological validity upon a literary understanding, and that is why it is frequently misunderstood."⁴ For Dickinson, religion was created by human need and by men of great mind; and she could do the same thing—to create a sort of religion based on her poetic truth.

The meanings of the universe and her earthly existence posed serious questions for Dickinson. Some of the questions were, what is the significance of this world?—Is this world governed by the Divine Will?—How is man's life concerned with the life of the universe? To understand Dickinson's cosmology, one need first examine her ideas on nature. Like Emerson and Thoreau, she embodied spiritual and symbolical meanings in nature, regarding it as one form of the revelations of divinity. Dickinson conceived the idea that nature was created by God's infinite design, which Dickinson tried to perceive. However, for Dickinson it was also something she could not perceive well: "Who built this little Alban House / And shut the windows down so close / My spirit cannot see" (P 128). On this point, Joanne F. Diehl says that Dickinson "rejects an Emersonian nature which educates man; she proceeds to imagine the world as a deceptive text that cannot be read right, and so must remain a deeply equivocal mystery."⁵ Dickinson felt that some mysterious secrets were inherent in nature and that nature seemed isolated from its creator though it was created by God. Dickinson perceived the manifestation of the universal principles and order in nature, but she could not necessarily believe in the harmonious correspondence between man and nature. Charles R. Anderson says that Dickinson "kept man and nature separate, but as a sensitive and

perceptive poet she was constantly drawn to speculate on its possible meanings for her . . .”⁶ For Dickinson nature always remained incomprehensible, and what she could do with it was to explore momentary manifestations of order in it.

In the early stage of her poetic career, Dickinson attempted to discover the truth of the universe and God logically. But soon she came to realize that eternity and God could not be successfully perceived by logic: “In broken Mathematics / We estimate our prize.”⁷ She eventually resorted to feeling and intuition. Just as Emerson and Thoreau depended upon intuition, Dickinson tried to know God by her sensory power. The ultimate stage of her sensory perception was ecstasy. Dickinson’s ecstasy was caused by her consciousness realizing in its expansion a certain rapport with the Divine. In an ecstatic moment, she could liberate her mind from earthly shackles and unite with celestial life. It was as if the human divinity [“Of human nature just aware / There added the Divine” (P 1286)] mingled with the Divine Life.

However, there is a point to note about Dickinson’s ecstasy. It is that her ecstasy was also partly created by her imagination. This means that she attained ecstasy by perfecting her poetic imagination. In the poem below, ecstasy occurs in the speaker’s imagination while the soul progresses toward eternity:

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses—past the headlands—
Into deep Eternity—

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land? (P 76)

Here ecstasy is achieved by the speaker’s imagination, and the poem describes not an actual but an imaginative experience. Her ecstasy

seems to be the ultimate result of her rhetorical speculations, different from the traditional sense of ecstasy shared by the Puritans that "ecstasy and vision came legitimately to the Puritan only in the moment of vocation."⁸ Donald E. Thackrey says, "Emily Dickinson approached the writing of poetry inductively—that is, through the combining of words to arrive at whatever conclusion the word pattern seemed to suggest, rather than using words as subordinate instruments in expressing a total conception."⁹ Dickinson used language, which was equal to her consciousness, as a material or medium rather than as a tool for her purpose; Dickinson's ecstasy was in language. For the poet language was an experience, and it had a physical and sensational basis. Wallace Stevens aptly says, "Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language,"¹⁰ referring to a pleasure intrinsic in the momentary perfection of language (consciousness). The perfection of language suggests the perfection of the soul's image, which alternatively means the perfection of personality, and it implies the perfection of its surrender in the ecstatic unity with the Divine. Dickinson's ecstasy was often created by a process of deliberate thought.

Ecstasy was a supreme experience for Dickinson to ascertain the truth of God, and only though it she could glance into the depth of eternity; thus she says, "Take all away from me but leave me Ecstasy" (P 1640). However, her pursuit of ecstasy was destined to be endless, because by nature ecstasy always needed to be further intensified. In order to feel deeper, she had to seek much more intense ecstasy. Poem 359 describes such an instance:

I gained it so—
By Climbing slow—
By Catching at the Twigs that grow
Between the Bliss—and me—
It hung on high
As well the Sky
Attempt by Strategy—

I said I gained it—
This—was all—
Look, how I clutch it
Lest it all—
And I a Pauper go—
Unfitted by an instant's Grace
For the Contented—Beggars' face
I wore—an hour ago—

Bliss (or ecstasy) is just momentary and slips easily through man's fingers. The "I" must be in constant search of a next moment of bliss. Much deeper and more intense Dickinson's ecstasy progressed. Yet there was something she had to face all along—a mysterious revelation of silence. For Dickinson the Infinite (or God) was totally mute and seemed indifferent to human beings: "Silence is all we dread. / There's Ransom in a Voice— / But Silence is Infinity. / Himself have not a face" (P 1251). To perceive the true nature of God was a great issue for Dickinson, but silence—the Inscrutable—often overwhelmed her attempts.

Dickinson regarded silence as a striking manifestation of the universe, and it filled her mind with dread. In the universe God seemed to be homeless, and she felt lonely in a world of insecurity and confusion. She felt as if being isolated from God, and therefore she persistently endeavored to seek the Divine grace. How much the problem of silence occupied the poet's concern can be seen in the following poem:

There is no Silence in the Earth—so silent
As that endured
Which uttered, would discourage Nature
And haunt the world. (P 1004)

The great Silence has not yet engulfed the earth; but the speaker feels that the silence, out of which no Creator's voice can be heard, may wipe out the significance of human life on the earth. The silence would

nullify the possible correspondence between man and the universe, and this world would be meaningless while nature loses its spiritual significance. The silence was the basis of Dickinson's skepticism on God's nature and his abode, heaven. For her God seemed indifferent to man and heaven was "the House of Supposition" (P 696), which might only bring "despair" (P 510). Although she did not deny the existence of the Deity, the silence continued to make her doubt the meaning of the design of the universe and the intention of God.

The eternal silence of the Infinite kept tormenting and prompted her to think of the truth of divine grace, bliss, and heaven. She desired to know whether there is really a heaven, whether the resurrection and immortality are certain, and whether God is really benevolent and caring; however, evidently, she could not get any definite answers to them. Therefore, she asks thus:

The look of thee, what is it like
Hast thou a hand or Foot
Or Mansion of Identity
And what is thy Pursuit?

Thy fellow are they realms of Themes
Hast thou Delight or Fear
Or Longing—and is that for us
Or values more severe?

Let change transfuse all other Traits
Enact all other Blame
But deign this least certificate—
That thou shalt be the same. (P 1689)

Dickinson's God does not fit in the category of conventional Christian God, because hers shows many traces of humanity. She almost brings down God from his high seat as if to befriend Him; and dare say, in a skeptical note, that she hopes that God would be always the same—

merciful and caring—whether on earth or in heaven. Only Dickinson could have uttered such a bold statement.

The way Dickinson attempted to perceive God in the world of silence is a delicate point to investigate. If God is totally silent, how could she know God? One way she employed for this purpose was to take the risk of believing in God. It was not a logical but emotional approach, and in this way she could successfully feel the presence of God in the world of infinity. God could be perceived by the supremely ecstatic and conscious experience of man's emotions. Dickinson based the ultimate ground of the certainty of God on her emotional experience. The poem below shows a moment of such experience:

One Blessing had I than the rest
So larger to my Eyes
That I stopped gauging—satisfied—
For this enchanted size—

It was the limit of my Dream—
The focus of my Prayer—
A perfect—paralyzing Bliss—
Contented as Despair—

I knew no more of Want—or Cold—
Phantasms both become
For this new Value in the Soul—
Supremest Earthly Sum—

The Heaven below the Heaven above—
Obscured with ruddier Blue—
Life's Latitudes leant over—full—
The Judgment perished—too—

Why Bliss so scantily disburse—
Why Paradise defer—
Why Floods be served to Us—in Bowls—

I speculate no more—

(P 756)

What is described here is a moment of ecstasy, which redeems the poet out of her genuine fear and doubt about the certainty of God. The poet's mind is perfectly replete with divine bliss, and she could feel the real presence of God. In Dickinson's idea ecstasy is the most genuine and ultimate way to perceive God. In a moment of the intensified ejaculation and suffusion of overflowing feelings she unites with the eternal life of the universe. In all, ecstasy meant a rebirth or regeneration—a sort of self-transcendence, and new life could be found in the death of a former self.

Dickinson consistently sought to attain ecstasy, but not in a systematic way in any sense. Ecstasy made her feel the certainty of God, but it was deadlocked; for emotions, if they were intensified further, would not help form any rational understanding of God. Dickinson needed to create a structure of belief, which she found difficult to attain since it would be highly based on emotion. David Porter says, "Emily Dickinson is the only major American poet without a project. That vacancy at the heart of her consciousness provided a tragic freedom that constitutes her identity."¹¹ Dickinson had no definite idea of belief in God because her ecstasy was a substitute for it.

As seen above, God was frequently associated with silence and it made Dickinson question and meditate on the truth of the universe. Like Melville's God, Dickinson's God wore a mask and seemed indifferent to man: "Of Course—I prayed— / And did God Care?" (P 376). She tried to see what was concealed behind the mask but was often confronted with menacing silence, which threatened her with human loneliness, helplessness, emptiness, nullity, and despair. Nowhere was the bleakness of human existence more clearly manifested than in the constant menace of death. In connection with eternity and resurrection, death was one of Dickinson's greatest themes. Dealing with death she struggled with the insecurity of human existence and the problem of human certainty. Death was always in her mind, but to say that she

attempted to overcome it in hymnal celebrations of life would be totally meaningless and misleads the poet's fundamental poetic vision. Dickinson never tried to overcome death but accepted it as part of the cycle of human life, although she was afraid of it. Struggling with the problem of death, she could develop her sense of eternity, immortality, and resurrection.

Lastly, Dickinson's concept of circumference must be discussed, because it is a central issue for her relationship with God and his world as she says, "My Business is Circumference."¹² William R. Sherwood refers to circumference as being used to "describe and define an area of comprehension," arguing that Dickinson employed it "less pervasively and less ambiguously" than Charles Anderson asserts.¹³ Albert J. Gelpi goes a step further and explains it as the "farthest boundary of human experience" in touch with the Infinitude and as a kind of "defense perimeter" from God's mighty influence.¹⁴ In any case, circumference marks contacts between a mortal circle and the world beyond it, and Dickinson always tried to expand the mortal circle. The junction of the two worlds creates an ecstatic unity, which is often expressed in a form of marriage in her poetry: "Circumference thou Bride of Awe" (P 1620).

Dickinson consistently searched for the world of God and hoped to realize her personal identity in the unity with it; however, to become one with God meant the influx of the Divine Life into her private world, which, it seemed to Dickinson, might abolish her individuality. Although she knew, "Renunciation is a piercing Virtue—" (P 745), she could not give up her earthly existence. While she attempted to attain oneness with God, she desired to realize her identity. Her choice was hard to win. She often wavered between the desire of oneness with God and self-realization, and this fluctuating momentum produced the sheer suffering and profound sincerity in her poetry. The momentum for outer and inner self was not only typical to Dickinson. A number of transcendentalists in her age also showed the same type of dilemma, which can be summarized as follows:

the belief that individual virtue and happiness depend on self-realization, and that self-realization, in turn, depends upon the harmonious reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies: first, the expansive or self-transcending impulse of the self, its desire to embrace the whole world in the experience of a single moment and to know and become one with that world; and second, the contracting or self-asserting impulse of the individual, his desire to withdraw, to remain unique and separate, and to be responsible only to himself.¹⁵

Self-realization depends on an individual's involvement in the life of the universe. Man is part of creation, and in order to attain a self-realization he must live by the principle and order of the universe. Dickinson's pervasive desire was to preserve her individuality and assert her personal "i" toward an reconciliation with the universal "I"—the merge of a being into the Being. However, this desire was not easily accomplished. Dickinson often swayed between longing and fear, belief and doubt, finding it difficult to merge two opposite extremes.

In sum, Dickinson's poetic inclination was a sort of self-centered introversion, which may be called a kind of escapism; however, she could find a spacious, inner world in her mind and her business was to describe the soul's images. Dickinson consistently sought the meaning of the universe and her existence, and for this purpose intellectual and intuitive power was mobilized. She had a very sharp mind, but she felt that God could not be assessed by reason but by intuition. She persistently sought ecstatic moments of sensation, which she felt could assure her of the certainty of God's world secluded in deep silence. In a way, poetic ecstasy was a sort of spiritual salvation for Dickinson, who discarded an orthodox religion. Wallace Stevens says, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."¹⁶ Poetry enhanced Dickinson's life, which eventually aspired to the condition of art. For Dickinson poetry was the supreme expression of life, through which she attempted to realize her identity. She was dedicated to describing the moments of truth in life

as well as attaining profound ecstasy. However, she did not simply describe truth and beauty, but was more committed in her artistic expressions in such a way that she could react to the universe. For poetry is not a means to simply translate beauty and truth, but a process to explore them. Dickinson lived in a poetic world, where she could devote herself to the pursuit of the celebration of sensibility.

Notes

1 Allan Tate, "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1968) 162.

2 Martha H. Shackford, "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson," *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1968) 80.

3 Hereafter, the number of poem preceded by P will be shown in parentheses. All poems are cited from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1960).

4 John Crowe Ransom, "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. James Sculley (Glasgow: William Collins, Ltd., 1966) 102.

5 Joanne F. Ddiehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1981) 10.

6 Charles R. Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1960) 76.

7 Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, Volume II (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960) 351.

8 Norman S. Grabo, "The Veiled Vision: the Role of Aesthetics in Early American Intellectual History," *The American Puritan Imagination: Essays in Reevaluation*, ed. Scavan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974) 30.

9 Donald E. Thackrey, "The Communication of the Word," *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963) 51.

10 Wallace Stevens, "Selections from 'Adagia,'" *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. James Sculley (Glasgow: William Collins, Ltd., 1966) 157.

11 David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 152.

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¹² Dickinson, *Letters* 412.

¹³ William R. Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* (New York and London: Columbia UP, 1968) 219.

¹⁴ Albert J. Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (New York: Norton, 1965) 123.

¹⁵ Robert E. Spiller *et al.* ed., *Literary History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963) 353.

¹⁶ Stevens 153.