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THE IMAGERY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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RUTH FLANDERS McNAUGHTON



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA STUDIES

January, 1949

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THE IMAGERY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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RUTH FLANDERS McNAUGHTON

NEW SERIES NO. 4

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

To Emily

We call her “Emily”—
Who interposed
The gnomon of her hand between
The sun and me.

No dignity for one
Who took the heart
With bladed song and exorcised
Oblivion.

Of all the poets, who
Is so addressed?
It’s “Emily” we say, and know
Her rendezvous.

How wise of us to be
Familiar in
The plot of narrow ground she made
Infinity!

Bernice Slote

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PREFACE

Emily Dickinson's poetry is now accepted by most students of literature as an American classic. In this brief study, I have tried to show one of the reasons why this has come about. After her first two volumes appeared in 1890 and 1891, many of the reviews were extremely critical. Typical of these is one which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* of January, 1892.

If Miss Dickinson's *disjecta membra* are poems, then Shakespeare's prolonged imposition should be exposed without further loss of time, and Lord Tennyson ought to be advised of the error of his ways before it is too late. But I do not hold the situation to be so desperate. Miss Dickinson's versicles have a queerness and a quaintness that have stirred a momentary curiosity in emotional bosoms. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood.¹

In spite of the fact that many early critics agreed with this appraisal and many constant readers of poetry still insist that they do not care for her work, Emily's fame has gradually grown until, when her last volume, *Bolts of Melody*, finally appeared in 1945, it was received with almost universal acclaim by leading contemporary critics and the general reading public. Writing in *Poetry*, Babette Deutsch summarized this attitude thus:

From the start mystery and miracle have been the fibre of Emily Dickinson's literary life, and time has done little to destroy it.²

These two widely divergent estimates of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, written approximately fifty years apart, indicate the gradual growth of her literary fame as well as the continued controversy over the enduring value of her work. However, even those who do not consider her poetry of first rank must concede that she is no longer to be classed among "forgotten poetesses."³ One reason for this is the quality of the imagery in her poetry. The fragmentary nature of many of the poems, their irregularity of form, the grammatical aberrations which occur at times, the elaborate conceits and occasional mixed metaphors cannot dispel the unusual power of the imagery, the most salient characteristics of which are vividness, boldness of conception, interplay of

¹ The *Atlantic Monthly*, 69, January, 1892, p. 144.

² Babette Deutsch, "Miracle and Mystery," *Poetry*, 66, August, 1945, p. 274.

³ See Warwick James Price, "Three Forgotten Poetesses," the *Forum*, 47: 361-366, March, 1912.

the concrete and the abstract, variety of sense appeals, drama, freshness and surprise. On the other hand, the most abstruse and cryptic of her "versicles" and those most likely to be neglected are the ones lacking in imagery. When at last those poems of enduring value have been winnowed from the chaff of the obscure and ephemeral, certainly those rich in imagery will be the ones to survive. This is true, it seems to me, because Emily Dickinson's poetry satisfies man's perennial desire for an enhanced appreciation of the significance of life, death, nature, love, and immortality; and it does so chiefly because of imagery that clarifies the ideas expressed, intensifies the emotions aroused, and through overtones of suggestion releases the imagination from its accustomed bounds. Those of us who value the poems do so because we enjoy leaning with Emily against the sun and glimpsing for a moment with delight, doubt, hope, and a touch of gay irreverence the Paradise she visioned.

This study was written as a thesis in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of M.A. in the department of English at the University of Nebraska. At the time it was written, there was no thought of its eventual publication. This fact accounts, of course, for the limited scope of the study and to some extent for the manner of presentation. However, I was given complete freedom in choosing my subject by Professor Ray W. Frantz, chairman of the English Department, and writing under the supervision of Professor Walter F. Wright, I was encouraged to work out the problem in my own way. I wish to express my special indebtedness, then, to Professor Wright for his untiring enthusiasm and for his many suggestions for the improvement of the thesis. I also wish to thank all the members of my examining committee who recommended "The Imagery of Emily Dickinson" for publication in the Nebraska Studies series. Professor Lowry C. Wimberly is responsible for the title and the limitation of the study to the imagery. Professor Ruth Odell was especially helpful in suggestions for the bibliography. Professor C. A. Forbes, at that time a member of the Classics Department at the University of Nebraska, offered several suggestions for the improvement of the study and first proposed the possibility of its publication. I am indebted to Professor T. M. Raysor for valuable help on the general subject of the relationship between imagery and sensuous response. I am very grateful to Miss Emily Schossberger, University Editor, for undertaking and accomplishing the task of seeing the manuscript through the press. Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to the Publications Committee for the additional grant of money to cover the cost of obtaining copyrights.

I realize fully that there is much more to be written on Emily Dickinson's imagery, a work which I may eventually continue myself. At this time I am more interested in exploring what I shall call the intellectual quality of her poetry, for want of a better phrase; for, the more I study her poetry, the more convinced I became that she is the most keenly discerning, the most reasonable, the most comprehending of all women poets whose work we read and remember. For the present, if this study helps to disclose to the student of poetry some of the joy to be found in reading Emily Dickinson's work, my task is rewarded.

RUTH FLANDERS McNAUGHTON.

Lincoln, Nebraska, November, 1948.

Introduction

A critical study of the poetry of Emily Dickinson is fraught with many difficulties owing to the fact that, appearing posthumously, her work was not prepared for publication by the poet herself. Because of the numerous problems involved in deciphering and interpreting the variant readings in the manuscripts, the final form in which many of the poems appear had of necessity to be determined by the editors. We can never be certain just what Emily Dickinson's own choice would have been. Another difficulty in criticism arises, too, from the fact that the chronology of the poems has not yet been fully established; therefore, it is impossible to trace the growth and development of the poet's style and ideas. With these limitations taken for granted, however, there is much that can be done in the way of interpretation and criticism; and we can but be grateful to the editors, chiefly Mabel Loomis Todd, for saving the work of this unusual genius from oblivion.

For a study of the poetry, two volumes, containing approximately all the poems, are best for reference. These are *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, and published by Little, Brown, and Company, 1937, and *Bolts of Melody*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, and published by Harper and Brothers, 1945.

Although the mystery of Emily Dickinson's outwardly uneventful life has led several biographers into divergent interpretations of the scanty factual material available especially regarding Emily's unknown lover, the best critical biography is conceded to be *This Was a Poet*, by Professor George Frisbie Whicher of Amherst College, published by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938. This book is valuable not only as the most thoroughly documented biography, but also as an excellent critical analysis and interpretation of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Appearing, however, before the volume *Bolts of Melody*, which contains some of Emily Dickinson's finest work, it suffers, of course, from lack of inclusion of a discussion of the poetry of that collection.

Professor Whicher also compiled an excellent bibliography on Emily Dickinson, which appeared in 1930, published by the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts. This is a valuable work, although it is now out of date.

There are several collections of Emily Dickinson's letters which give added insight into her personality, the best and latest of these

being *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, published by Harper and Brothers, 1931.

The introductions to the various collections also contain excellent biographical and critical material by her two chief editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and Martha Dickinson Bianchi.

There is a wealth of periodical material on Emily Dickinson, dating from the early reviews which appeared following publication of the first slender volume in 1890. A perusal of these articles shows that, despite intermittent periods of neglect, there has been a gradual increase in the understanding and appreciation of her genius. As Professor Whicher has so aptly stated, "Emily Dickinson's poems . . . have quietly attained the rank of an American classic."¹ I think there are few now who would dispute this claim.

Although many critics have remarked upon the unusual qualities of Emily Dickinson's imagery, there has been no study made exclusively of this aspect of her poetry. Professor Whicher has compared her use of imagery to that of Japanese artists who "study bird or fish or flower until they have absorbed it into themselves, and when they paint, paint not an object before them but a mental image."² Louis Untermeyer has characterized her imagery as "gnomic" and "tremendous in implication."³ He has also said that Emily Dickinson anticipated the imagists, fashioning "her imagist etchings fifty years before Imagism became a slogan."⁴ These expressions indicate the growing interest in the imagery of Emily Dickinson. Therefore, a study of her imagery should throw a little added light on the elusive quality of her genius. Such a study is the purpose of this thesis.

In my method of approach I have been guided to some extent by the example of that monumental work of Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, published by Macmillan and Company, 1935, and, to a lesser degree by C. Willard Smith's *Browning's Star-Imagery*, published by the Princeton University Press, 1941. I have made no attempt, however, to make an exhaustive count or tabulation of images, such as formed the foundation of Caroline Spurgeon's work; nor have I gone into the structural and symbolic significance of Emily Dickinson's images to the extent that C. Willard Smith has done in his detailed

¹ George Frisbie Whicher, *This Was A Poet*, New York, 1938, Preface, vii.

² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

³ Quoted in the Introduction to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Boston, 1937.

⁴ Louis Untermeyer, "Colossal Substance," *Saturday Review of Literature*, V, March 16, 1929, p. 770.

study of Browning's star-imagery. Within the limited scope of this paper, I have been able to examine only in a very general way the sources and subject-matter of Emily Dickinson's imagery, and its primary sense appeals. Finally, I have made analytical studies of the poet's use of imagery in her poems on those themes which dominate her work: nature, love, life, death, and immortality.

CHAPTER I

Imagery and Poetry

*Of pictures the discloser—
The Poet, it is he
Entitles us by contrast
To ceaseless poverty.*¹

One of the chief delights of poetry lies in its imagery. Certainly it is through the sensuous image that the creative imagination works most powerfully in the presentation of both ideas and emotions. Emily Dickinson expresses her belief in its importance in the lines quoted above. It is by his "pictures," his imagery, in other words, that the poet "entitles us by contrast to ceaseless poverty." It is the imagery which gives richness to poetry, and wealth of imagery is one of the chief elements which distinguish poetry from prose.

The vital importance of imagery to poetry is generally conceded without argument. On the other hand, a completely satisfactory definition of the term is difficult to formulate. It may be defined simply as "the act or art of forming images or representations;"² and it is often identified with "figurative description in speech; also, the mental images produced by the use of figurative language."³ This leads us to a definition of the term "image." Miss Spurgeon in her book, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, has explained it thus:

We know that, roughly speaking, it [an image] is . . . the little word-picture used by a poet or prose writer to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his thought. It is a description or an idea, which by comparison or analogy, stated or understood, with something else, transmits to us through the emotions and associations it arouses, something of the "wholeness," the depth and richness of the way the writer views, conceives or has felt what he is telling us.⁴

This definition is a very good one, if we take the term "word-picture" to mean any appeal to the senses, which is what Miss Spurgeon actually does in her treatment of Shakespeare's imagery.

¹ *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 281, x.

² *Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary*, New York, 1938.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, New York, 1935, p. 9.

Images, then, may be regarded literally as sense representations, or figuratively as symbols of thought and emotion. In actual practice, however, it is almost impossible to separate the two usages. Therefore, I shall employ the term *imagery* interchangeably in its two meanings.

Emily Dickinson's own theories regarding the use of imagery may be inferred from an analysis of several poems. It is the figurative use of images which is implied in "Tell all the truth but tell it slant."⁵ The use of sensuous imagery is one of the ways in which poetry tells the truth but tells it slant. The same idea has also been expressed by C. Willard Smith in his *Browning's Star-Imagery*: "The poetic image was for him the oblique way of telling truth, or doing the thing that shall breed the thought."⁶

The paradoxical way in which the image may elucidate the idea, while seeming to obscure the meaning, is revealed by Emily Dickinson in a pithy quatrain:

The thought beneath so slight a film
Is more distinctly seen,—
As laces just reveal the surge,
Or mists the Apennine.⁷

The image is the film which enables us to see the thought more distinctly.

Another poem illustrates Emily Dickinson's realization of the value of the use of the image for its own sake and the powerful emotional effects it produces:

Inconceivably solemn,
Things too gay
Pierce by the very press
Of imagery.

Their far parades
Halt on the eye
With a mute pomp,
A pleading pageantry.

Flags are a brave sight,
But no true eye
Ever went by one
Steadily.

⁵ *Bolts of Melody*, New York, 1945, p. 233, No. 449.

⁶ C. Willard Smith, *Browning's Star-Imagery*, Princeton, 1941, p. 3.

⁷ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 233, No. 449.

Music's triumphant,
But a fine ear
Aches with delight,
The drums to hear.⁸

According to the poet's own testimony, then, imagery pierces, pleads, and causes us to ache with delight. Realizing this fully, she used the image to arouse strong feeling as well as to reveal the truth obliquely.

Before proceeding further to a discussion of the imagery of Emily Dickinson, I believe it will prove helpful as a background to discuss in a general way some of her ideas about poetry and poetic inspiration, as disclosed in her poems and letters. Her briefest and simplest characterization of poetry is the line, "This is my letter to the world," which appears on the title-page of the first section of her *Poems*. Here the idea of poetry as communication is ingenuously expressed in a homely image. Elsewhere she defines it much more elaborately:

To pile like Thunder to its close,
Then crumble grand away,
While everything created hid—
This would be Poetry:
Or Love,—the two coeval came—
We both and neither prove,
Experience either, and consume—
For none see God and live.⁹

Such a definition of poetry places it on a parallel with love and describes it as one way of seeing God. It also implies our inability to experience poetry completely and shows Emily Dickinson's mystical attitude toward it. The imagery of the first three lines expresses the dynamic quality of poetry. It shows, too, the emotional intensity of Emily's feelings about it, which is also revealed in her most-quoted pronouncement on this subject, made to Colonel T. W. Higginson, her literary mentor, in an interview:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is *poetry*. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is *poetry*. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way? ¹⁰

⁸ *Poems*, p. 21, xl.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 271, cxliii.

¹⁰ *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, Boston, 1894, Vol. 2, p. 315.

Yet Emily's approach to poetry was not entirely emotional. That she labored painstakingly to perfect her own compositions is evidenced by the manuscripts, which show repeated revision, especially in the matter of choosing the exact word, phrase, or image to convey the intended thought and feeling. Contrary to a widely accepted opinion, she was a very conscious artist. This fact is confirmed by the poet herself:

"Shall I take thee?" the poet said
To the propounded word.
"Be stationed with the candidates
Till I have further tried." ¹¹

Here we can almost see the poet at work, "probing philology"; and finally, in the midst of her sedulous labors, appears the *vision* concomitant with the *word*, not by conscious nomination but by revelation. Thus we have from the poet herself a glimpse of the way in which inspiration and judgment interact in the composition of poetry. She also tells us:

Your thoughts don't have words every day,
They come a single time
Like signal esoteric sips
Of sacramental wine,¹²

The image used to express this idea carries with it all the mysticism of the sacrament, the *words* being the outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace represented by the poet's *thoughts*.

Emily Dickinson's misgivings concerning the successful expression of her ideas are revealed in her letters to Colonel Higginson:

I had no monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself; and when
I try to organize, my little force explodes and leaves me bare
and charred.¹³

She also asks to be told whether her "verse is alive," ¹⁴ and whether or not she has "told it clear." ¹⁵ Often she falls short of clarity, but her

¹¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 228, No. 436.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 228, No. 435.

¹³ *Letters, op. cit.*, p. 307.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

verse is always alive. One of the chief sources of this vitality is the imagery, and her best-loved poems, as well as many less widely known, are those in which imagery gives life and makes the meaning "more distinctly seen."

CHAPTER II

Sources of Emily Dickinson's Imagery

The chief source of Emily Dickinson's imagery was her world of everyday experience. Very few of her images are literary or conventional and, although many are whimsical to the point of conceit, they are always fresh and accurately observed. Nature, in all its aspects, supplies more images than any other single source. Next in importance are those drawn from the domestic and feminine life of the household. The religious imagery of the church also frequently appears. Other sources less prevalent, but interesting because of the unique way in which they are used, are semi-precious stones, legal terminology, geographical names, and the titles of royalty and the nobility.

Emily Dickinson's attitude toward nature and her special treatment of it will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. Throughout all her poetry, however, on whatever subject she writes, there is such a wealth of imagery drawn from nature that it should be treated briefly in connection with the sources of her imagery. Nature was Emily's familiar companion. Sunrise and sunset were great events in her day. The passage of the seasons, rain, snow, storms, and wind supplied drama in her circumscribed life. As a child and young woman, she loved to roam the fields, hills, and woods around Amherst, with her dog Carlo. Even after her complete retirement from the society of all but her own family, one of her chief pleasures was working in her flower garden, on which she lavished much of her time and devotion. Frequently in the late evening she could be seen in her white dress, kneeling upon a piece of old red carpet, pulling weeds. Always she lived intimately with nature, and what she observed she incorporated into her imagery.

Flowers, both cultivated and wild, which Emily knew so well, appear again and again in the imagery, and they are usually designated by name. The simple daisy is a favorite, but many others are used, including the buttercup, arbutus, gentian, leontodon, iris, rose, anemone, batschia, crocus, Indian pipe, lily, jessamine, aster, tulip, daffodil, rhododendron, orchis, and even the lowly dandelion.

Among these flowers dart continually creatures with wings—bees, butterflies, and birds. As Professor Whicher has observed, "Wings, in

fact, are one of her most pervasive images."¹ Especially does the poet seem preoccupied with bees: meadow-bees, bumblebees, aged bees, baronial bees buzz and skim through her pages as they must have through her garden. She also loved birds, especially the friendly robin. Other birds used in her imagery are the oriole, jay, phoebe, crow, owl, and humming bird.

While acutely aware of the vivid life and movement above, Emily Dickinson did not neglect the creatures of the grass. Snakes appear several times to create vivid images. The cricket and the spider are two insects the poet uses, and there is also a tortoise. Not even the usually abhorred rodent is omitted: rats and mice both appear.

The larger aspects of nature that the poet draws upon most frequently for images are the sunrise and sunset, the passing of the hours, rain, snow, storms and wind, thunder and lightning, and the course of the seasons. Appearing less frequently are the mountains and the sea, no doubt because both were outside the range of the poet's immediate experience.

Especially indicative of Emily Dickinson's femininity is the wealth of imagery drawn from domestic life. Although it is impossible to distinguish between a feminine and a masculine style, certainly there is evidence in Emily Dickinson's imagery of a particularly feminine type of interest and observation. Being a woman, Emily saw and noticed things which would mean little to a man. She was not especially interested in food or the art of cookery, and images of this type appear scarcely at all. From the kitchen, sieves and cutlery are used, and spices are a favorite, but these are practically all. On the other hand, the art of sewing furnishes numerous images, such as fittings, the placing of pins, hems, hooks, thread, ravellings, and, most numerous of all, seams. Especially did fabrics of all kinds appeal to Emily, plush being her favorite. Other materials she mentions are velvet, tulle, wool, gauze, muslin, organdy, chintz, brocade, satin, serge, broadcloth, dimity, tapestries, veils, laces. The poet even names one kind of lace, which is mechlin. The unique way in which she uses this type of image to elucidate an idea is illustrated in a spirited poem expressing her contempt for the straight-laced gentlewoman of her day:

What soft, cherubic creatures
These gentlewomen are!
One would as soon assault a plush
Or violate a star.

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 253.

Such dimity convictions,
A horror so refined
Of freckled human nature,
Of Deity ashamed,—

It's such a common glory,
A fisherman's degree!
Redemption, brittle lady,
Be so ashamed of thee.²

The two fabrics, plush and dimity, were carefully chosen by a connoisseur; the first, with its long, soft nap, to suggest softness and lack of resistance; the second, a fine thin cotton material, to convey the idea of over-refinement and fragility.

Strictly feminine wearing apparel and accessories which the poet uses are garters, petticoats, nightgowns, parasols, ribbons, brooches, millinery. Emily reveals an especially feminine fondness for hats, but the unexpected way in which she uses them is capricious indeed. Who wear the hats? It may be the moon, with a silver one; or a lark with a bonnet so attractive the poet wishes to borrow it. Or perhaps March enters and puts down his hat, indicating he will stay awhile; or the sunshine throws away his hat after a brief summer shower. According to Emily, autumn's arrival can be inferred from a cloud's millinery. This giving of hats to natural phenomena is only one example of the many original ways in which she personifies nature.

In addition to such feminine occupations as knitting and the stringing of beads, even the unpleasant tasks of housecleaning are sources of imagery. Day has a parlor, and nature a dining room. The grass threads the dews like pearls. Nature is the housewife who uses many-colored brooms to do her sweeping. From these varied examples, it may be readily seen that Emily Dickinson possessed the rare gift of metamorphosing the simplest interests and activities of her everyday experience into the magic of poetry through the use of imagery distinctly feminine in origin.

Imagery drawn from the church and the Bible is frequent and reveals the poet's background and early training. Although she herself never joined the church, the other members of her family were stanch adherents of the somewhat Calvinistic Congregational Church in Amherst and attended regularly, as did Emily when a girl. Some of the religious images she uses are the Trinity of God the Father, the

² *Poems*, p. 58, cxxx.

Son, and the Holy Ghost; Calvary, crucifix, heaven, heavenly bridal, sealéd church, Eden, sacrament, communion, consecrated bread, sacramental wine, grace, faith, judgment-seat, the devil, angels, saints, cherubim, and seraphim. In speaking of the Savior, she prefers *Jesus* to *Christ* or *Our Lord*. Emily knew her Bible and was especially fond of Revelations, rich in imagery. Moses was her favorite Old Testament character and she seemed to feel a certain kinship with this prophet denied, unjustly she believed, the fulfillment of entrance into the promised land. Judas, David, Goliath, and Elijah appear in various poems.

Emily Dickinson's use of religious imagery is sometimes orthodox and conventional. Again it may seem entirely pagan in spirit, or rebellious. Eden as a favorite image for her experience of both nature and love is more or less conventional. Her use of the sacrament of communion to characterize the same two is much less so. Her repeated use of the image of Calvary for the denial of love's fulfillment is quite heterodox, and she calls herself the Empress of Calvary. This image will be treated in more detail in a later chapter.

Love and nature were sacred to Emily Dickinson, and in them she found a mystical exaltation which the orthodox practice of religion failed to give. For example, the emotions aroused in her by the tenuous beauty of Indian summer are climaxed in an image Christian in origin but almost pagan in spirit:

These are the days when birds come back,
A very few, a bird or two,
To take a backward look.

These are the day when skies put on
The old, old sophistries of June,—
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh, fraud that cannot cheat the bee,
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear,
And softly through the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf!

Oh, sacrament of summer days,
Oh, last communion in the haze,
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake,
 Thy consecrated bread to break,
 Taste thine immortal wine! ³

Emily Dickinson's use of legal terminology ⁴ as a source of imagery may seem strange, unless we know that both her father and brother were lawyers and that she must often have heard them discussing cases. This source furnishes a good illustration of her effective use of abstract imagery to clarify an idea. Legal terms which she employs are warrant, conviction, equity, judgment, case, guaranty, trust, affidavit, larceny, legacy, surrogate, bailiff, claim, action, counsel, justice, the law, magistrate, deputies, and litigants; she even draws on the legal implications of the Inquisitional *auto-da-fé*. One of her most interesting poems of this type is one in which she explains Christ's forgiveness of the thief at the crucifixion:

"Remember me," implored the Thief—
 Oh magnanimity!
 "My Visitor in Paradise
 I give thee Guaranty."

That courtesy will fair remain,
 When the delight is dust,
 With which we cite this mightiest case
 Of compensated Trust.

Of All, we are allowed to hope,
 But Affidavit stands
 That this was due, where some, we fear,
 Are unexpected friends.⁵

Such an image of divine law is made more meaningful through the use of exact legal terms from man-made law. The Guaranty of the thief's salvation is understood as a binding agreement, the execution of which is guaranteed by the Savior himself. "This mightiest case" is one of a Trust, a property interest in heaven which Christ holds for the benefit

³ *Ibid.*, p. 106, ff., lxxviii.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the poet's use of legal terminology, see Genevieve Taggard: *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*, Ch. XVI, p. 275 ff.

⁵ *Poems*, p. 256 ff., xcvi. The lack of punctuation in verse 3 of stanza 1 may be attributed to the nature of the Emily Dickinson manuscripts, in which the punctuation was not clearly indicated and in which many dashes appear. See *Bolts of Melody*, "Introduction," p. ix.

of all sinners, and we have assurance that it will be compensated even though we know it is a property in which we have no legal ownership but only an equitable right or interest. Finally, we have the Affidavit, Christ's sworn statement recorded in the Bible, as proof that salvation "was due." This Guaranty that we shall receive our Trust we have from Christ and not from "unexpected friends." Thus the poet carries the image through to the end, throwing new light on one of the major tenets of Christianity.

The other sources of Emily Dickinson's imagery to be treated here are not drawn from her immediate experience but represent special interests and quirks of fancy that are typical of her art. Her use of gems and especially semi-precious stones for images no doubt represents a natural feminine tendency and might be regarded as arising from her own experience, but I seriously doubt whether she or any other woman of the Amherst of her day owned many jewels. Much more likely seems the inference that she delighted in them because they represented the strange, the non-experienced, the unusual. Similar in nature seems to be her predilection for imagery using the names of far places and the titles of royalty, both of which also held a special magic for her.

Although Emily sometimes uses for imagery such jewels as the diamond, pearl, emerald, ruby, and opal, one is struck by her more frequent reference to semi-precious stones, such as onyx, chrysoprase, beryl, amber, quartz, alabaster, garnet, and amethyst. Sometimes she uses them simply for their color, but often in a figurative sense, in such phrases as "amethyst remembrance"⁶ and "quartz contentment."⁷ The choice of imagery in the second phrase seems especially significant. The poet is describing the feeling which comes after one has experienced great pain. The contentment is understood in the image as a process of crystallization following pain, deprivation, and sorrow. Is there any other possible concrete image which could have better expressed the abstract idea of such an adjustment or could have qualified it more exactly?

Emily Dickinson seems to take almost a child's delight in the names of titled personages. She frequently uses these to suggest something above the common level of experience. Earl is a favorite, which she applies at times to the man she loved. Others are king, queen, emperor, empress, prince, czar, duke, duchess, count, countess and marquis. From the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church she uses

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144, xxxiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 365, clviii.

cardinal. The poet usually employs imagery of this type in a symbolical sense, to convey the idea of nobility of character rather than to create actual images of the outward trappings of royalty and the peerage. In fact, she appears to embody in her conception of titled personages all the qualities of nobility which the medieval mind invested in the all-inclusive *gentillesse*. A typical example is:

We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies.

The heroism we recite
Would be a daily thing,
Did not ourselves the cubits warp
For fear to be a king.⁸

Here the image *king*, while undoubtedly carrying a vague aura of associations with royal pomp and splendor, is used chiefly in a symbolical sense to carry the idea of heroism beyond attainability in our daily lives. Yet the use of *king* carries much more emotion and suggestiveness than an abstract statement of a quality could do.

Although Emily Dickinson spent most of her life in Amherst, with the exception of a year at South Hadley Female Seminary, a brief visit to Washington while her father was a congressman, one trip to Philadelphia, and a few months in Boston for treatment for her eyes, her imagination carried her to the far corners of the earth. Even a partial list of the place-names employed in her imagery will serve to illustrate this fact: Lapland, Teneriffe, South America, Circassian land, Tunis, Peru, Zanzibar, Chimbarazu, Vevay, Caspian, the Alps, the Apennines, the Pyrenees, Bosphorus, Africa, Asia, Burmah, San Domingo, Vera Cruz, the Bahamas, Finland, Brazil, Norway, Britain, the Don, the Dnieper. Her use of such images is often not for their concreteness, but rather for their power of suggestion of the strangeness and elusiveness of the distant and unknown. In fact, she expresses this very idea most aptly:

A hint of ports and peoples,
And much not understood,
The fairer for the farness
And for the foreignhood.⁹

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45, xcvi.

⁹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 16, No. 17.

Chimbarazu—how many have heard of this strange place? Will it call up a picture in the mind? Not to many; but from the context we know it is a mountain:

Love, thou art high,
I cannot climb thee,
But, were it two,
Who knows but we,
Taking turns at the Chimbarazu,
Ducal at last, stand up by thee? ¹⁰

Chimbarazu—in that one word lies much of the unusual, the unique, the difficult, the exciting, that the poet associated with the struggle to reach the heights of love. If we take the trouble to investigate, we discover that Chimbarazu (spelled *Chimborazo* in the new *Funk and Wagnall's*) is a volcanic peak in the Andes in Ecuador. A volcanic peak—those words create a definite image which carries with it the idea of hidden danger and sudden eruption. The poet might simply have written “a volcanic peak”; but how much more stimulating to the imagination is the choice of Chimbarazu! The poet's choice of place-names is not made at random, we see. “I judge from my geography,” ¹¹ she tells us; and she must have spent much time and thought poring over maps and reading the text of her geography, seeking just the right locality to convey the idea she wished to express. A careful study of Emily Dickinson's imagery is always rewarded with enlightenment and the pleasure of discovering unsuspected meanings which do not lie on the surface.

I have examined here only some of the chief sources of Emily Dickinson's imagery, and some of the most unusual, but enough of them, I hope, to show how she found poetry in everything; and to reveal that, although she gleaned most of her imagery from what she experienced immediately, nevertheless, in her search for expression, her imagination carried her often far afield, from the sometimes prosaic world of democratic America to the magic lure of foreign titles, and “from Amherst to Cashmere.” ¹²

¹⁰ *Poems*, p. 350, cxxx.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264, cxix.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 437, xcvi.

CHAPTER III

Appeals to the Senses

*Had we our senses—though perhaps
'Tis well they're not at home,
So intimate with madness
'Tis liable with them—*

*Had we the eyes within our heads—
How well that we are blind!—
We could not look upon the earth
So utterly unmoved.¹*

Emily Dickinson's passionate and paradoxical protest against our habitual blindness to earth's beauty reveals her intense emotional response to sensuous experience. Although it is well that we remain unaware of most of the appeals that continually impinge upon our senses because, if we responded actively to all of them, we should soon be "intimate with madness," indeed, and the practical affairs of the world would suffer; nevertheless, in the poem quoted above lies the opposite implication that we are *too* "utterly unmoved" and that we miss much joy thereby. We cannot all see with the inward eye, but I know of no poet better able to make us, so customarily insensible, perceive the entire world of sensation with fresh and renewed vigor than Emily Dickinson herself, who certainly was not unmoved by it. Rather, her response was so acute that she at times feared it, and undoubtedly she found relief and return to sanity in the strenuous and absorbing activity involved in transforming her sensory impressions into words. Her poetry abounds in vivid appeals to all the senses: sight, sound, touch, temperature, taste, smell, and sensations in the vital organs and muscles. The kinaesthetic sense, sight, and sound are dominant, but not a single sense is neglected completely. Open a volume of her poems at random and at once you live intensely in a world of form, color, movement, song of birds, spicy fragrance—a world of sense as well as idea, a world in which there is a constant interplay of the concrete and abstract, making you see, hear, and feel.

Without making a complete classification of all the images used, a task which is impossible within the scope of this paper, I find it diffi-

¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 35, No. 54.

cult to generalize concerning the predominance of a single sense in Emily Dickinson's poetry. As I have pointed out above, Professor Whicher regards wings as one of her most pervasive images, and certainly it is true that there is a continual sense of motion. Even in those images that appeal primarily to the sense of sight, through form and color, there is much movement, with a concomitant appeal to the kin-aesthetic sense. Only in some of the poems dealing with death is there complete quietude, but this is rare. In fact, it is almost impossible to find a still-life picture in Emily's poetry.

An excellent example of the image of wings is cited and analyzed by Professor Whicher:

A route of evanescence
With a revolving wheel;
A resonance of emerald,
A rush of cochineal;
And every blossom in the bush
Adjusts its tumbled head,—
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy morning's ride.²

"Here," says Professor Whicher, "is the whole sensation of humming-bird." He goes on to analyze the poem, pointing out the sense of the movement of wings, the color, the sound in the whirl of the reiterated *r's*.³ I would also call attention to the excessive speed implied in the last two lines. It is such imagery as this which led Louis Untermeyer to characterize Emily Dickinson as a forerunner of the imagists.⁴

There are numerous other examples which might be cited to illustrate the poet's use of this predominating image of wings. Birds, bees, and butterflies are recurrent mediums. There is the meadow-bee "upon a raft of air" rowing "in nowhere all day long."⁵ There are the two butterflies who went out at noon

And waltzed above a stream,
Then stepped straight through the firmament
And rested on a beam:

And then together bore away
Upon a shining sea,—⁶

² *Poems*, p. 74, xv.

³ *This Was A Poet*, p. 262.

⁴ See "Introduction," p. iv.

⁵ *Poems*, p. 136, cii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75, xviii.

Here, instead of the speed of the humming-bird, there is the graceful movement of the butterfly, expressed in the verb *waltzed*. The motion is punctuated by pauses, until at last the two butterflies completely disappear, as mysteriously as they have come:

Though never yet, in any port,
Their coming mentioned be.

If spoken by the distant bird,
If met in ether sea
By frigate or by merchantman,
Report was not to me.⁷

In addition to the image of wings, there are many others of motion, appealing more directly to the muscular or kinaesthetic sense, as does *waltz* in the above quotation. Verb-forms giving movement are *frisk*, *gambolled*, *strolled*, *fluttering*, *caper*, *prance*, *plucking*, *grapple*, *split*, *pursued*, *rowing*, *skirmishing*, *seesawing*, *lift*, *tramp*, *jostled*, and *dance*. Emily Dickinson is always very careful to select the verb which will express exactly the movement she wishes to re-create. To illustrate her precise selection of kinaesthetic imagery as well as her characterization of the abstract through the concrete I quote a stanza. The poet is speaking of "suspense's vague calamity," which is

Staking our entire possession
On a hair's result,
Then seesawing coolly on it,
Trying if it split.⁸

Here the entire emotion of suspense is imaged in the seesawing on a fragile hair; and we experience not only the muscular tension involved, but through it, the whole emotional complex associated with a feeling of suspense.

In Emily Dickinson's imagery there is noticeable a great amount of color as well as movement. Acutely appreciative of both, she mentions them as among the deprivations of death:

How still the dancer lies,
While color's revelations break,
And blaze the butterflies.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 235, No. 455.

⁹ *Poems*, p. 201, xcix.

and she reveals a truly feminine appreciation of color variations. Color was indeed a revelation to Emily. Her constant use of flowers as images, of course, gives color; she runs the whole gamut of the rainbow. Not only red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet appear, but also scarlet, crimson, flame, carmine, cochineal, rose, vermilion, pink, azure, iris, purple, gilded, golden, indigo, brown, orange-brown, russet, silver, iodine, umber, and auburn. White and black also appear frequently. Often the poet uses gems for color, including amber, amethyst, emerald, sapphire, beryl, opal, onyx, and chrysoprase. There are eight different tints and shades of red, and Emily describes the hue of autumn as that of blood. Purple, however, is her favorite color. Often she employs it for its connotation as the symbol of nobility, a practice which is similar to her usage of titles for the same purpose:

Purple is fashionable twice—
This season of the year
And when a soul perceives itself
To be an emperor.¹⁰

She is not, however, always so conventional in her symbolism:

The color of a queen is this—
The color of a sun
At setting, this and amber;
Beryl and this at noon; ¹¹

White has a varied symbolism for Emily Dickinson. After she renounced her love and became a recluse, she wore only white, which fact seems to indicate that she identified it with love and especially with love's renunciation. At other times it is associated with death. This use of white to symbolize both love and death seems on the surface to be one of Emily Dickinson's paradoxes which it is difficult to reconcile; and yet, since she was denied love's fulfillment in life, it is natural that she should associate it with death and death's promise of immortality:

Mine by the right of the white election!
Mine by the royal seal!
Mine by the sign in the scarlet prison
Bars cannot conceal!

¹⁰ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 254, No. 499.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24, No. 34.

Mine, here in vision and in veto!
 Mine, by the grave's repeal
 Titled, confirmed,—delirious charter!
 Mine, while the ages steal! ¹²

The symbolism of white, as used in this poem, is obvious in its reference to love's fulfillment after death. The symbolism of "the scarlet prison" may refer to the fact that the man she loved was already married. At any rate, Emily Dickinson's uses of color in a symbolical sense present one of the most interesting problems in connection with a study of her poetry.

The poet's use of the image of light is almost always symbolical. At times it is used merely for its effects on the sense of sight, as in such words as *sheen*, *glittering*, *glow*, *blaze*, *tinsel*; but usually it is symbolical of life itself. In a poem on death, this idea is brought out:

Image of light, adieu.
 Thanks for the interview
 So long—so short.
 Preceptor of the whole,
 Coeval Cardinal,
 Impart, depart.¹³

If there is light, there is life; if not, there is death.

Almost as prevalent as images appealing to the sense of sight and the kinaesthetic sense are those appealing to the sense of hearing.

The earth has many keys.
 Where melody is not
 Is the unknown peninsula.¹⁴

Thus Emily expresses her keen awareness of the many keys in which earth's melody is played, and many of them appear in her poems as images of sound. Favorite images in this classification are the song of birds, the murmuring of bees, bells, and the voice of the wind. Musical instruments used to create images are the violin, organ, guitar, mandolin, castanet, flute, fife, cornet, and drum. There is one reference to "perfect Mozart," and one is not surprised to find that this composer of clear and flowing melody is Emily's favorite. Evidently

¹² *Poems*, p. 127, i.

¹³ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 222, No. 428.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75, No. 139.

she had some knowledge of music, for she speaks of the octave's run and uses musical terms, such as *ritardando*. Other sounds which appear are the shrill singing of an axe in the woods, the bleating of sheep, thunder, the pounding of horses' hooves, the ticking of clocks, the brook's laugh, the elegy of the cricket's voice. No sound is too small or too large to escape the poet's appreciative attention.

The most striking feature of Emily Dickinson's use of images of hearing is her ability to re-create the peculiar quality of each sound. For example, she seldom writes simply of the songs of birds in general. Instead, she chooses some specific bird—the oriole, the jay, the robin, the bobolink, the blue bird, the phoebe, or the owl—and describes its own special way of singing. Writing of the "little bluebird," she describes her song thus:

First at the March, competing with the wind,
Her gallant note exalts us like a friend,
Last to adhere when summer swerves away,
Fortitude stanch'd with melody.¹⁵

The jay's strident note is entirely different:

The jay his castanet has struck,¹⁶

Then there is:

Brave bobolink, whose music be
His only anodyne!¹⁷

The shy phoebe, according to Emily, fitted into place

The little note that others dropped.¹⁸

In that one line, one can almost hear the echoing tones of the phoebe, repeated again and again.

Another interesting illustration of the poet's ability to characterize sound appears in a poem on the frog, whom she calls Demosthenes, the orator of April.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61, No. 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76, No. 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62, No. 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63, No. 112.

He rises on a log
And statements makes.¹⁹

He is "hoarse today," she adds in her puckish manner.

The murmuring of bees is a favorite image of hearing which the poet describes in many different ways. It was a sound in which she found a peculiar witchery and one of her most vivid portrayals of it appears in an extraordinary simile:

Like trains of cars on tracks of plush
I hear the level bee: ²⁰

The voice of the wind spoke often to her, too, and in many different keys. Sometimes

His fingers, if he pass,
Let go a music, as of tunes
Blown tremulous in glass.²¹

Again he rocks the grass

With threatening tunes and low,— ²²

Heralding the approach of a storm,

There came a wind like a bugle; ²³

It seems Emily was always listening, listening; even when she tried to close her ears, she could not escape, for she tells us:

To my quick ears the leaves conferred;
The bushes they were bells:
I could not find a privacy
From Nature's sentinels.²⁴

And when Nature was not invading her privacy with its bells, then the church bells would be ringing, calling the faithful to worship or toll-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59, No. 102.

²⁰ *Poems*, p. 100, lxxv.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82, xxx.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 85, xxxvii.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 80, xxvi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114, xcii.

ing a funeral knell. This latter sound, seldom heard today except in small villages, must have moved Emily profoundly, for she uses it repeatedly in her imagery, usually with the symbolical significance of victory or joy. Writing of the uncertainty of life's outcome, she makes the following apostrophe:

And if I gain—oh, gun at sea,
Oh, bells that in the steeple be,
At first repeat it slow!²⁵

On another occasion, expressing the solace she always found in her books, she says:

It may be wilderness without,
Far feet of failing men,
But holiday excludes the night,
And it is bells within.²⁶

One use of sleigh bells, in a trenchant definition of peace, is startling in its metaphorical implications:

Peace is a fiction of our faith.
The bells a winter night
Bearing the neighbor out of sound—
That never did delight.²⁷

Whether we interpret peace here as meaning simply peace of mind, or more broadly, world peace among nations, the metaphor is equally applicable. Evidently Emily Dickinson regarded peace as unattainable, always fading into the distance as do departing sleigh bells, leaving only a sense of loss and sadness and deep regret. The metaphor is a conceit but movingly suggestive in its simplicity.

Next in frequency to appeals to the sense of hearing are those to the sense of touch, involving such sensations as soft or hard, smooth or rough, sharp or blunt, wet or dry, hot or cold. Chief among images of this type are the many fabrics the poet uses which will be especially vivid to feminine readers: velvet and plush for their softness and smoothness, organdy for its stiffness and sharp resistance, tulle for its softness and flimsiness, serge for its harshness. Wetness is imaged in

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4, iv.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35, lxxiv.

²⁷ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 278, No. 553.

the many references to dew and in the descriptions of rain storms. Wetness, coolness, and softness all appear in a description of a "boggy acre," where the poet walks barefoot.²⁸ Sensations of temperature occur quite often, and images of this type are unusually vivid, as in the following description of fear:

Icicles upon my soul
Prickled raw and cool,²⁹

Equally spirited is a description of despair:

It was not frost, for on my flesh
I felt siroccos crawl,—
Nor fire, for just my marble feet
Could keep a chancel cool.³⁰

Thus Emily takes the homely image of *cold feet* and through the alchemy of poetic imagination transmutes it into a finer metal.

Of interest in connection with appeals to the sense of touch is the fact that they are often coupled with appeals to the kinaesthetic sense. This is evident in such phrases as "striving fingers," "mesmeric fingers softly touch," and "the wizard fingers never rest"; or in lines like these:

The fingers of the light
Tapped soft upon the town³¹

Although the sense of smell is not often appealed to, it is not totally neglected; and in her definition of a poet, Emily Dickinson uses *attars* most effectively in a symbolic meaning:

This was a Poet—it is that
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary meanings,
And attars so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the door,
We wonder it was not ourselves
Arrested it before.³²

²⁸ *Poems*, p. 79, xxiv.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 369, clxiv.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 192, lxxv.

³¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 11, No. 1.

³² *Poems*, p. 281, x.

This comparison of the creation of poetry from the ordinary, everyday experiences of life to the distillation of rare perfume from familiar flowers applies perfectly to Emily's own poetic gift, as we see it revealed in her imagery. Her appeals to the sense of smell are through common odors with which all of us are familiar. The savour of spices seemed to appeal especially to Emily, and she uses it more frequently than any other. Next in importance are the fragrance of pine and new-mown grass. In a poem on the grass, all three of these appear:

And even when it dies, to pass
In odors so divine,
As lowly spices gone to sleep,
Or amulets of pine.³³

Gathered no doubt from the poet's walks in the woods near Amherst is another delightful image of scent:

Fern-odors on untravelled roads,—³⁴

As fond as Emily was of flowers it seems strange that she did not use them more often for their fragrance, but they appear seldom in appeals to the sense of smell. The first arbutus is described as aromatic; the odors of jessamine and balm are used to point up one of the poet's favorite themes:

Kill your balm, and its odors bless you;
Bare your jessamine to the storm,
And she will fling her maddest perfume
Haply your summer night to charm.³⁵

These four lines illustrate vividly Emily Dickinson's power to express an abstract idea through a concrete image, thus making us *feel* rather than merely *comprehend* what she has to say. If we try to transcribe this idea into prose without the imagery it becomes vague or trite, but in its poetic expression through the immediacy of the sense experience evoked, we know by direct intuition what is meant. It is a matter of sensation and feeling rather than ratiocination.

Appeals to the sense of taste are rarer even than those to the sense of smell. As was pointed out in Chapter II, food did not interest Emily

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 97, lx.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70, ix.

³⁵ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 289, No. 586.

Dickinson as a source of imagery, and she seldom employs it in appeals either to smell or to taste. Spices, however, are used for their flavor as well as their fragrance, as in the following epigrammatic simile:

Surprise is like a thrilling pungent
Upon a tasteless meat—
Alone too acrid, but combined,
An edible delight.³⁶

It is interesting to note that the food mentioned here is qualified as "tasteless."

Other foods that the poet uses, honey and bread, are employed strictly in a symbolical sense. Honey for Emily was a nectar sipped by the bee and not something to be eaten; and she uses it as a symbol of rare delight. Bread represents an ultimate end, unattainable, perhaps, but nevertheless a shining goal:

The beggar at the door for fame
Were easily supplied,
But bread is that diviner thing,
Disclosed to be denied.³⁷

The Christian connotation of Jesus as the bread of life may also reside in this image.

Significant in connection with Emily Dickinson's symbolical use of *bread* is her employment of *crumb* as an image to characterize her own life. She attained so little of those worldly ends prized by most of us—love, fame, wealth, and success—yet she accepted her limited life so courageously and blithely, she lived so intensely in her restricted sphere, that her experience of life as expressed in her poetry seems far greater than that of most who do attain those goals. This fact is exemplified in such a poem as the following:

God gave a loaf to every bird,
But just a crumb to me;
I dare not eat it, though I starve,—
My poignant luxury
To own it, touch it, prove the feat
That made the pellet mine,—
Too happy in my sparrow chance
For ampler coveting.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 286, No. 575.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235, No. 455.

It might be famine all around,
I could not miss an ear,
Such plenty smiles upon my board,
My garner shows so fair.
I wonder how the rich may feel,—
An Indiaman—an Earl?
I deem that I with but a crumb
Am sovereign of them all.³⁸

The *crumb* to which she refers here is undoubtedly the love she “dare not eat.” Love was food and drink to Emily. “I took one draught of life,” she says, concluding

They handed me my being’s worth—
A single dram of Heaven.³⁹

Accepting her “dram of Heaven” as her due, she gained from it one of the chief inspirations for the poetry which has given her a place among the immortals.

Although Emily Dickinson’s most-quoted poem opens with the line, “I taste a liquor never brewed,”⁴⁰ the primary image here is one not of taste, but of intoxication, which is a favorite with her and one which she uses in many less well known poems. “The little tippler” of air and dew often employs wine primarily for its intoxicating effect rather than its taste. Burgundy and Rhine she mentions by name. Hock and ale also appear. Wine must have been served in the Dickinson home, for in a letter to a friend she described her eyes as the color of the sherry the guest leaves in the glass. No doubt Emily herself was allowed a glass of wine on special occasions or when she was ill; and she must have delighted in the exhilaration it produced as well as in the taste, for she tells us:

Impossibility like wine
Exhilarates the man
Who tastes it; possibility
Is flavorless . . .⁴¹

The sensations of hunger and thirst are favorite images, too, which she uses to symbolize her craving for impossibility, especially for the fulfillment of love:

³⁸ *Poems*, p. 27, liii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 345, cxx.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 345, cxx.

⁴¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 277, No. 550.

I had been hungry all the years
 My noon had come to dine;
 I, trembling, drew the table near,
 And touched the curious wine.

'Twas this on tables I had seen,
 When turning, hungry, lone
 I looked in windows for the wealth
 I could not hope to own.

I did not know the ample bread,
 'Twas so unlike the crumb
 The birds and I had often shared
 In Nature's dining-room.

The plenty hurt me, 'twas so new,—
 Myself felt ill and odd,
 As berry of a mountain bush
 Transplanted to the road.

Nor was I hungry; so I found
 That hunger was a way
 Of persons outside windows,
 The entering takes away.⁴²

So, when love finally did come to Emily, she was satisfied just to be near "the ample bread" and "the curious wine" without partaking of the feast.

A discussion of the sense appeals in Emily Dickinson's poetry would not be complete without some mention of the startling ways in which she sometimes describes one sensation through appeals to another sense, such as sight through sound, sound through color, and smell through sound. For example, she writes:

There's a certain slant of light
 On winter afternoons,
 That oppresses, like the weight
 Of cathedral tunes.⁴³

In another instance she describes a song in a metaphor using color:

Sang from the heart, Sire,
 Dipped my beak in it.
 If the tune drip too much,
 Have a tint too red,

⁴² *Poems*, p. 36, lxxvi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 108, lxxxii.

Pardon the cochineal,
Suffer the vermilion,
Death is the wealth
Of the poorest bird.⁴⁴

In still another instance an odor is described through an appeal to the sense of hearing:

They have a little odor that to me
Is metre, nay, 'tis melody,
And spiciest at fading, indicate
A habit of a laureate.⁴⁵

Vivid and various as are Emily Dickinson's evocations of the outer world of sense, it is evident from a study of them that, although she loved the sensible world for its own sake, she nevertheless continually sought the inner meaning of all that she saw, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, and felt; and it is in her imagery that she reveals most completely her own reaction to experience. This idea is expressed in a forceful way by the poet herself:

The Outer from the Inner
Derives its magnitude;
'Tis duke or dwarf according
As is the central mood

The fine unvarying axis
That regulates the wheel,
Though spokes spin more conspicuous
And fling a dust the while.

The Inner paints the Outer;
The brush without the hand
Its picture publishes precise
As is the inner brand

On fine arterial canvas—
A cheek, perchance a brow.
The stars' whole secret in the lake
Eyes were not meant to know.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 144, No. 261.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50, No. 88.

⁴⁶ *Poems*, p. 410 ff., lx.

According to the poet's "central mood," then, the *Outer* derives its significance from the *Inner*, and although the spokes of sense fling the conspicuous dust, it is the guiding axis which regulates. What meanings Emily Dickinson found in the outward aspects, the imagery, that is, of life, nature, death, and love, I shall try to show in the following chapters. Obscure and paradoxical as these meanings sometimes appear, they are always worth the effort involved in the attempt at understanding, and there is ever the lure of discovering.

The stars' whole secret in the lake
Eyes were not meant to know.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER IV

Imagery of Nature

*Nature is what we see,
The Hill, the Afternoon—
Squirrel, Eclipse, the Bumble-bee,
Nay—Nature is Heaven.*

*Nature is what we hear,
The Bobolink, the Sea—
Thunder, the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony.*

*Nature is what we know
But have no art to say,
So impotent our wisdom is
To Her simplicity.¹*

Nature for Emily Dickinson was what she saw and heard, what came to her through her senses; yet she went beyond this to a sort of implied pantheistic doctrine, often identifying nature with Heaven or God. Acutely aware of nature in all its diversity, she, nevertheless, felt the harmony of natural law binding the whole together. Beyond the minute and entrancing fragments of nature which so absorbed her attention and which she sought to embody in her poetry, she knew intuitively that there was a reality she could never completely understand or express. Although she was seemingly engrossed with the particularities of nature—the hill, the afternoon, a squirrel, an eclipse, the bumble-bee, the bobolink, the sea, thunder, the cricket—yet in them she found manifestations of the universal. Professor Whicher has observed that her attitude toward nature was that of the artist rather than the philosopher, and that although there is a religious significance implicit in her treatment of it, this implication is but lightly stressed.² It is true that it is a part of Emily Dickinson's art that the philosophical and religious significance is never emphasized, but there is no doubt that for her it was important. In nature she found a symbol of faith, a mystical ecstasy, and an answer to her questions about reality.

¹ *Poems*, p. 233, xxxiv.

² *This Was A Poet*, p. 262.

The rainbow never tells me
That gust and storm are by;
Yet is she more convincing
Than philosophy.

My flowers turn from forums
Yet eloquent declare
What Cato couldn't prove to me
Except the birds were here! ³

The rainbow, her flowers, and the birds were testimony enough, for Emily, of a higher reality. The selection of *rainbow* as an image recalls, too, God's covenant with Noah, a symbol of the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature upon the earth.

Nature was, then, in a sense, both philosophy and religion for Emily Dickinson; and the tender and perceptive care with which she observed and recorded it in all its manifestations attests in itself her reverential attitude. In one poem on autumn, she officiates at summer's funeral, closing with the benediction:

In the name of the bee
And of the butterfly
And of the breeze, amen! ⁴

Although the mystical and religious runs as an undercurrent through much of Emily Dickinson's poetry of nature, she perceives nature in many different forms, replete with varied imagery. Thus she makes concrete and believable the abstract generalizations of theology and metaphysics. Nature is not only heaven and harmony, but it is also mother, housewife, countryman, spacious citizen, juggler, and showman.

Even when the poet employs so conventional an image as that of mother nature, she does it in such a fresh and unconventional manner that she escapes the commonplace and trite and gives us a new insight into an old conception.

Nature, the gentlest mother,
Impatient of no child,
The feeblest or the waywardest,—
Her admonition mild

³ *Poems*, p. 305, xlviii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90, xlvii.

In forest and the hill
By traveller is heard,
Restraining rampant squirrel
Or too impetuous bird.

How fair her conversation,
A summer afternoon,—
Her household, her assembly;
And when the sun goes down

Her voice among the aisles
Incites the timid prayer
Of the minutest cricket
The most unworthy flower.

When all the children sleep
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light her lamps;
Then, bending from the sky,

With infinite affection
And infiniter care,
Her golden finger on her lip,
Wills silence everywhere.⁵

This personification of nature as the gentlest mother is intimate and familiar, and the feeling of her tenderness for all her children is conveyed through successive images, ranging from the larger aspects of forest and hill to squirrel, bird, "the minutest cricket," and "the most unworthy flower." The sense of sight and sound both are appealed to, vague, general images, such as "her conversation," being interspersed with the more specific. "The timid prayer" of the cricket and the flower introduces a reverent attitude, as does the image of *aisles*. The blessed quietness of peaceful night after nature has lighted her lamps is perfectly conveyed in the last two lines. "Her golden finger on her lips" creates a vivid image of nature's infinite love and care, recalling to each, from childhood memories, a picture of his own mother making a similar gesture at bedtime. The use of the adjective *golden*, with its connotations of preciousness and purity, enhances the vision. The verb *wills* gives purposefulness to nature's activity and increases the feeling of security. It is evident that it is the adept use of imagery,

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65, i.

rather than the idea itself, which raises this poem from the level of the ordinary and succeeds in conveying the comforting thought, by inference rather than direct statement, that mother nature watches over man, too, perhaps the feeblest and waywardest child of all.

In an entirely different mood, Emily Dickinson exuberantly pictures nature to us in her role of housewife instead of mother:

She sweeps with many-colored brooms,
And leaves the shreds behind;
Oh, housewife in the evening west,
Come back, and dust the pond!

You dropped a purple ravelling in,
You dropped an amber thread;
And now you've littered all the East
With duds of emerald!

And still she plies her spotted brooms,
And still the aprons fly,
Till brooms fade softly into stars—
And then I come away.⁶

Such a poem is very typical of Emily in her gayer moods. In it, she has drawn all her imagery from a familiar activity of domestic life. Who else would have dared describe a sunset in terms of a housecleaning? And who else would have succeeded in making such a homely task seem so perfectly delightful, especially when done so carelessly, with shreds left behind, purple ravellings and amber threads in the pond, and duds of emerald lying all around? The charming incongruity of the metaphor elicits a smile that leaves us refreshed in spirit; and, finally, although the chaos has been fun, we are pleasantly relieved when the housewife completes her arduous chore, order is restored, and the "brooms fade softly into stars."

In one poem, Emily Dickinson changes nature's sex to masculine:

How fits his umber coat
The tailor of the nut,
Combined without a seam
Like raiment of a dream? ⁷

The image of nature as tailor is startling in its piquancy; yet here it seems the only possible one to make us feel the artistry and skill

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87, xl.

⁷ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 77, No. 144.

involved in the creation of even the smallest growing thing. There is mystery in the seamless umber coat of the chestnut, "Like raiment of a dream." There is miracle in the suggested analogy with the seamless robe Christ is supposed to have worn on Calvary. Thus sophisticated man, with all his vaunted wisdom, is undone by nature, the simple countryman.

Emily Dickinson found much cause for wonder in all of nature's activities, from the smallest to the largest; and I think that she often felt nature was putting on a show just for her delight and inspiration. Sometimes she simply enjoyed the production and described what she saw; at other times she was puzzled; but she often had a ringside seat at the great spectacle of nature's drama.

We spy the Forest and the Hills,
The tents to Nature's Show,
Mistake the outside for the in
And mention what we saw.

Could Commentators on the sign
Of Nature's Caravan
Obtain "admission," as a child,
Some Wednesday afternoon.⁸

Here nature is the great showman, one of whose chief commentators is Emily. The images *Nature's Show* and *Nature's Caravan* illustrate her feeling for nature as drama; and, in spite of her puzzlement as to its inner meaning, I am sure that she, so much a child herself at heart, often obtained "admission" and glimpsed much more than the bare outward signs. Sometimes even, she saw God there:

Like mighty footlights burned the red
At bases of the trees,—
The far theatricals of day
Exhibiting to these.

'Twas universe that did applaud
While, chiefest of the crowd,
Enabled by his royal dress,
Myself distinguished God.⁹

The image of the theater used in this poem is built up dramatically from the first line to the last. First we see the footlights, which must

⁸ *Poems*, p. 237, xlv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87, xli.

be the reflections of the setting sun at the bases of the trees; then the play itself in "The far theatricals of day," the details of which are left to be filled in by our own imagination. Suddenly the spell is broken when the whole universe applauds. The climax comes in the very last word, *God*. How does Emily know Him? By "his royal dress," she tells us. Is this in the purple of the sunset, a color usually considered royal by the poet? Or is the "royal dress" only an abstraction representing divinity, the King of Kings? We must draw our own conclusions, as is so often the case with Emily Dickinson's cryptic verse and wayward images.

At times Emily stood apart and watched nature's theatricals in awe; at other times she herself became one of the participants in the play.

The bee is not afraid of me,
I know the butterfly;
The pretty people in the woods
Receive me cordially.

The brooks laugh louder when I come,
The breezes madder play.
Wherefore, mine eyes, thy silver mists?
Wherefore, O summer's day? ¹⁰

The bee, the butterfly, brooks, and the breezes were her friends. In another instance she writes of "A bee I personally knew." ¹¹ The image "The pretty people in the woods" suggests flowers, birds, ferns, whatever we recall from our own experience in tramps through the woods. It also illustrates how personal the poet felt her relationship to nature's children to be. She was one of them. They were her companions and she always seemed to feel more at home with them than with human-kind. The last two lines reveal the emotional intensity of her response to this companionship and a wonderment as to why she should be so moved to tears. Why, oh why? It is the eternal question of all lovers of nature.

The poet's delight and belief in even nature's smallest creatures and her tiniest manifestations are attested in a gnomic quatrain:

Convicted could we be
Of our minutiae,
The smallest citizen that flies
Has more integrity.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95 ff., lviii.

¹¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 68, No. 124.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 78, No. 146.

The minutiae of nature attracted Emily especially. The particularities of nature caught her eye. She witnessed not only "The far theatricals of day," but also the small dramas of existence. She not only saw dew and grass, but at times fastened her attention on a single drop of dew, a blade of grass. She describes minutely the activities of a bird coming down a walk, biting an angle-worm in halves and eating him raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
And let a beetle pass.¹³

Such images have the charm of a miniature painting, perfect in every detail; yet the picture is not static—it exists in time and changes and develops. It is a moving picture.

Another poem describes the entire existence of a drop of dew:

A dew sufficed itself
And satisfied a leaf,
And felt, "how vast a destiny!
How trivial is life!"

The sun went out to work,
The day went out to play,
But not again that dew was seen
By physiognomy.

Whether by day abducted,
Or emptied by the sun
Into the sea, in passing,
Eternally unknown.¹⁴

Here is more than a simple description; here is a whole philosophy suggested through imagery. Here is the implied metaphor that man's life and destiny is that of "a dew" and his ultimate end as great a mystery.

In a lighter, gayer mood, Emily Dickinson traces the life-history of the grass:

¹³ *Poems*, p. 78, xxiii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117, xcix.

The grass so little has to do,—
A sphere of simple green,
With only butterflies to brood,
And bees to entertain,

And stir all day to pretty tunes
And breezes fetch along,
And hold the sunshine in its lap
And bow to everything;

And thread the dews all night, like pearls,
And make itself so fine,—
A duchess were too common
For such a noticing.

And even when it dies, to pass
In odors so divine,
As lowly spices gone to sleep,
Or amulets of pine.

And then to dwell in sovereign barns,
And dream the days away,—
The grass so little has to do,
I wish I were a hay!¹⁵

Image follows image in quick succession in this poem. Color, movement, music, light, odors—all the sensations associated with grass—appear. The image of the third stanza is a feminine one, with the grass stringing dew like pearls. In this stanza also occurs one of Emily's images of nobility, a duchess. In the fourth and fifth stanzas we can almost smell the delicious odor of the hay piled in "sovereign [another image from royalty] barns." What a happy ending this little drama has! It is a perfect comedy, in miniature, with a joyous laugh at the end.

The use of such expressions as *a dew*, *a grass*, *a hay* is, I believe, unique in literature and is one of the distinguishing marks of Emily Dickinson as a true original. The indefinite article emphasizes the distinctness of the individual thing and is much more effective in creating the image the poet desired than the more conventional "a drop of dew," "a blade of grass," or "a wisp of hay" would have been. Moreover, such a usage reveals vividly the way in which the poet felt

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97, lx.

the separability as well as the harmonious wholeness of natural phenomena.

Emily Dickinson's love of flowers and her intimate knowledge of them appear frequently in her poetry of nature. Flowers are used continually to create images of form and color. The lowliest wild flower did not escape her attention, and even in the dandelion she found inspiration:

It's little ether hood
Does sit upon its head—
The millinery supple
Of the sagacious God—¹⁶

The image of the *ether hood* perfectly recreates the volatility of the dandelion gone to seed. "The millinery supple" is one of Emily's typically feminine images. Here, again, is imaged the eternal drama of nature and its significance. It is "the sagacious God" who has so wisely ordered the dandelion's existence and provided for its perpetuation—unfortunately, we think, but not so, Emily!

The struggle for existence, and duty and purpose in nature, are imaged in another drama of the life-cycle of a flower, "Bloom is result."¹⁷ The personification of a flower as having responsibility and of nature as capable of disappointment shows again Emily Dickinson's feeling of kinship with nature and her children. The six images in the third stanza dramatize animatedly the struggle of the flower to fulfill its purpose and serve to make us see and feel as well as understand how "bloom is result."

The drama of nature which Emily envisioned in even the smallest flower or insect is evident also in descriptions of morning, noon, and night, sunrise and sunset, the passage of the seasons, spring, summer, Indian summer, autumn, and winter, and rain, storms, and snow. In all of these she achieves the "feel" of the thing described chiefly through the use of images, as in this poem on spring:

An altered look about the hills;
A Tyrian light the village fills:
A wider sunrise in the dawn;
A deeper twilight on the lawn;
A print of a vermilion foot;

¹⁶ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 75, No. 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46, No. 78.

A purple finger on the slope;
 A flippant fly upon the pane;
 A spider at his trade again;

An added strut in chanticleer;
 A flower expected everywhere;
 An axe shrill singing in the woods;
 Fern-odors on untravelled roads,—
 All this, and more I cannot tell,
 A furtive look you know as well
 And Nicodemus' mystery
 Receives its annual reply.¹⁸

Here is the whole "feel" of spring, attained by piling image upon image. The use of *Tyrian* instead of simply *purple* adds that touch of the mystery of far places of which the poet was so fond. The "flippant fly," the "spider at his trade," "chanticleer's added strut" are typical of her observation of detail. At the end appears the suggestiveness of the "furtive look" and the final religious significance of the reply to "Nicodemus' mystery." Spring for Emily was more than what she saw and heard. It was the symbol of eternal life, the answer to Nicodemus' question, "How can a man be born when he is old?"¹⁹

Through her experience of nature, Emily Dickinson often discovered the answers to profound questions. From it, too, she gained her greatest religious inspiration. In one of her most-quoted poems, she tells us:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
 I keep it staying at home,
 With a bobolink for a chorister,
 And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;
 I just wear my wings,
 And instead of tolling the bell for church,
 Our little sexton sings.

God preaches,—a noted clergyman,—
 And the sermon is never long;
 So instead of going to heaven at last,
 I'm going all along!²⁰

¹⁸ *Poems*, p. 69, ix.

¹⁹ *John*, 3: 4.

²⁰ *Poems*, p. 95, lvii.

The images in this poem are not grand and solemn, but simple and intimate: the bobolink as chorister, the orchard as a dome. Such common delights gave Emily her wings; and what a relief to be free of the boredom of long sermons, many of which the poet must have sat through when a girl, going to church with her devout family!

There are times, however, when Emily writes of her communion with nature in a much more deeply emotional tone:

A something in a summer's day,
As slow her flambeaux burn away,
Which solemnizes me.

A something in a summer's noon,—
An azure depth, a wordless tune,
Transcending ecstasy.

And still within a summer's night
A something so transporting bright,
I clap my hands to see;

Then veil my too inspecting face,
Lest such a subtle, shimmering grace
Flutter too far for me.

The wizard-fingers never rest,
The purple brook within the breast
Still chafes its narrow bed;

Still rears the East her amber flag,
Guides still the sun along the crag
His caravan of red,

Like flowers that heard the tale of dew,
But never deemed the dripping prize
Awaited their low brows;

Or bees, that thought the summer's name
Some rumor of delirium
No summer could for them;

Or Arctic creature, dimly stirred
By tropic hint,—some travelled bird
Imported to the wood;

Or wind's bright signal to the ear,
Making that homely and severe,
Contented, known, before

The heaven unexpected came,
To lives that thought their worshipping
A too presumptuous psalm.²¹

In this passionate recital of a "subtle, shimmering grace" too rapturous to be entered into completely, the poet reveals a mystical exaltation "transcending ecstasy." Nature emerges as the symbol of the "heaven unexpected" to come, a preparatory experience for eternal transport, even for those who, like Emily, think their hopes of everlasting bliss too presumptuous for fulfillment.

Great as was the inspiration Emily Dickinson found in nature, there came a time in her experience when nature was not enough:

I thought that nature was enough
Till human nature came,
But that the other did absorb
As firmament a flame.²²

This credo may seem strange, coming from one who spent the later years of her life as a recluse, and whose greatest experience of love was renunciation, but Emily Dickinson was ever paradoxical. Although she withdrew more and more into herself, I believe that it was not because of disgust with human nature, but because of the contrast she felt between herself and others and the difficulty she felt in communicating with others through the ordinary mediums of social intercourse. And so she wrote her "letter to the world," a message of her reflections not only on nature, but also on human nature, on the meaning of human experience, the significance of death, the inspiration of love, and intimations of immortality.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98, lxii.

²² *Bolts of Melody*, p. 80, No. 149.

CHAPTER V

Imagery of Death

"From the time when Emily Dickinson first began to write poetry until her last fading pencil marks on tattered bits of paper, the mystery of death absorbed her."¹ So writes the poet's latest editor, Millicent Todd Bingham, in *Bolts of Melody*. Without doubt, the early deaths of some of her schoolmates, as well as the deaths of her mother and father, became the inspiration for many of these poems. Because such a large proportion of her poetry is of death and because the imagery she employs to describe and explain it is so exceptional, I have decided to devote a chapter to this subject alone. It might seem that immortality should be included here, yet, because Emily Dickinson associates it more definitely with life and love, I shall treat it in connection with them. Although it is true that she often treats death as the door to eternity, it is especially engrossing to her as the negation of life, whereas nature, love and the belief in immortality constitute for her the chief affirmations of life.

Many of Emily Dickinson's poems deal with the physical fact of death, and I know of no poet who has described it so movingly, yet without morbidity. Indeed, Emily often leads us into the very presence of the dead:

How many times these low feet staggered,
Only the soldered mouth can tell;
Try! can you stir the awful rivet?
Try! can you lift the hasps of steel?

Stroke the cool forehead, hot so often,
Lift, if you can, the listless hair;
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble more shall wear.

Buzz the dull flies on the chamber window;
Brave shines the sun through the freckled pane;
Fearless the cobweb swings from the ceiling—
Indolent housewife, in daisies lain! ²

¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 5.

² *Poems*, p. 161, xi.

Here the idea of the immobility of the dead predominates, as in the images "the soldered mouth," "the listless hair," and "the adamantine fingers." The abrupt apostrophe in the repeated *Try!* gives immediacy and expresses our helplessness against "the awful rivet" and the "hasps of steel." The buzzing of the "dull flies" suggests the ultimate fate of all mortal flesh. There is tender pathos in the image of "the indolent housewife" who shall never again wear a thimble, disturb the fearless cobweb, or polish "the freckled pane;" yet there is a symbol of hope, perhaps—at least of peace—in the final image "in daisies lain."

Our bafflement and helplessness in the presence of death is a favorite theme of Emily Dickinson's, always elucidated with startling imagery.

Too cold is this
 To warm with sun,
 Too stiff to bended be,
 To joint this agate were a feat
 Outstaring masonry.
 How went the agile kernel out—
 Contusion of the husk,
 Nor rip, nor wrinkle indicate,—
 But just an Asterisk.³

Man, with all his skill of masonry, can do nothing about death. The agate, hard and brittle, will not respond to his expertness. Nor is there any clue as to how the "agile kernel" escaped. There is only the mysterious *Asterisk*. These are mixed metaphors, to be sure, but in the presence of death we are not often coldly logical.

This feeling of strangeness and confusion which we have in the presence of death, and our inability to believe in it when it comes, the poet expresses through the use of concrete imagery:

As sleigh bells seem in summer
 Or bees at Christmas show,
 So foreign, so fictitious,
 The individuals do

Repealed from observation—
 A party whom we knew
 More distant in an instant
 Than dawn in Timbuctoo.⁴

³ *Ibid.*, p. 249, lxxvi.

⁴ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 197, No. 367.

"I cannot believe he is dead," we say of those just "repealed from observation," those whom we can no longer see. The poet has expressed this feeling of incredulity in the two simple images of the first two lines of this poem. The last two lines give the shock of suddenness and distance in an image typically Dickinsonian.

Or again, we say of one just dead, "She is gone." Emily Dickinson has expressed this idea in a poem which she begins with an abstract image and then elucidates with a concrete one:

The overtakelessness of those
Who have accomplished Death,
Majestic is to me beyond
The majesties of Earth.

The soul her "not at Home"
Inscribes upon the flesh,
And takes her fair aerial gait
Beyond the hope of touch.⁵

The coined word *overtakelessness* is justified here, I believe, because of its unusual expressiveness. The simple image "not at Home," suggested by a social convention, startles by its appropriateness. Whereas in the poem just previously quoted, the fact that we can no longer see the one dead is the final confirmation of death, here it is our inability to touch. Death is the intangible as well as the unseen.

Death also means incommunicability and immobility.

This that would greet an hour ago
Is quaintest distance now.
Had it a guest from paradise
Nor glow would it, nor bow;

Had it a summons from the noon
Nor beam would it, nor warm—
Match me the silver reticence!
Match me the solid calm! ⁶

"I'll never hear his voice again," we think in the presence of one dead; and it is this thought that the poet conveys here most movingly. The reticence of the dead is cool and silver, not warm and golden; and the calm is solid, suggesting stability, rigidity, and perhaps reality and

⁵ *Poems*, p. 254, xc.

⁶ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 192, No. 356

completeness. Here again we observe Emily Dickinson's ability to choose the exact word to convey the idea completely.

Our wish to bring the dead back to life again is another emotion the poet expresses in an unusual way:

Oh, give it motion—deck it sweet
With artery and vein!
Upon its fastened lips lay words.
Affiance it again

To that pink stranger we call dust,
Acquainted more with that
Than with this horizontal one
That will not lift its hat.⁷

Here the "artery and vein" are carefully chosen symbols of vitality. The image in the last line is typical of the incongruous thoughts which so often occur to one when confronted with death, and for this very reason re-creates the experience.

Besides the physical fact of death, which Emily Dickinson was able to make so immediate through the use of imagery, there is another aspect of death which stirred her imagination. Just as she saw drama in nature, so did she see it in death:

This limitless hyperbole
Each one of us shall be
'Tis drama, if (hypothesis)
It be not tragedy.⁸

There is drama in the approach of death, in the actual act of dying, in the crises where life and death hang in the balance, in the necessary preparations and activities which death occasions, and in the dignity and pomp of the funeral, all of which Emily Dickinson observed and recorded in her poetry.

The drama of the crisis when life and death hang in the balance the poet has treated in several poems, the most completely developed of which is the one beginning "'Twas like a maelstrom, with a notch."⁹ Reading the poem, we experience the crisis, because of the forcefulness of the imagery. The maelstrom of approaching death with its

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192, No. 358.

⁸ *Poems*, p. 201, c.

⁹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 183, No. 339.

specific *notch*, ready to engulf, creates a feeling of fascinated horror. "The final inch" of the hem of delirium is one of the most vivid of the poet's homely images drawn from the domestic art of dressmaking. The "goblin with a gauge" creates a definite picture, making the delirium concrete. Helplessness and fading sensation follow. The crisis of the drama comes when God remembers. Death is here, because "the film has stitched" the eyes; but, suddenly, "Reprieve!", and the final return to complete consciousness. The fever is gone. We will live, but are so weak and spent we had almost preferred to die.

At other times, whether we wish it or not, there is no deferring death:

It's coming—the postponeless Creature,
It gains the lock and now it gains the door,
Chooses its latch from all the other fastenings,
Enters with a—"You know me, Sir?"
Simple salute and certain recognition,
Bold—were it enemy—brief were it friend,
Dresses each house in crepe and icicle,
And carries one out of it to God.¹⁰

The personification of death as "the postponeless Creature" is moving because of its shadowiness. The idea of inevitability is dramatized in death's unhesitating choice of the latch and its entering without knocking. It speaks, but whether enemy or friend, we are not sure. The simple image of *crepe* suggests all the appurtenances of mourning, and *icicle* chills us to the bone. The climax, which is one of affirmation here rather than negation, comes in the last line, where death carries the loved one to God, resolving the doubt as to whether it is enemy or friend.

That dying may be painful is a fact on which Emily Dickinson seldom dwells and, even when she does suggest its possibility, she finds in its expression a fine integrity often absent in the pretensions of life.

I like a look of agony,
Because I know it's true;
Men do not sham convulsion,
Nor simulate a throe.

¹⁰ *Poems*, p. 331, xcix.

The eyes glaze once, and that is death.
 Impossible to feign
 The beads upon the forehead
 By homely anguish strung.¹¹

Death is more often visioned by the poet as peaceful and calm:

She went as quiet as the dew
 From a familiar flower.
 Not like the dew did she return
 At the accustomed hour!

She dropt as softly as a star
 From out my summer's eve;
 Less skillful than Leverrier
 It's sorer to believe!¹²

The images of the dew that never returns and the falling star are so perfect in this instance as to seem inevitable. Our incredulity in the face of death appears again in this poem in the delightful reference to Leverrier. Not being astronomers, we find it hard to believe in the falling of the star.

There are several poems in which Emily Dickinson imaginatively describes what the actual experience of dying may be like, in a way no other poet has ever done.

I heard a fly buzz when I died;
 The stillness round my form
 Was like the stillness in the air
 Between the heaves of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,
 And breaths were gathering sure
 For that last onset, when the king
 Be witnessed in his power.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
 What portion of me I
 Could make assignable,—and then
 There interposed a fly.

With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,
 Between the light and me;
 And then the windows failed, and then
 I could not see to see.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161 ff., xii.

¹² *Poems*, p. 169, xxviii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 212, cxxviii.

Here the poet again uses the emotionally fraught image of the buzzing fly to herald death's approach. The simile in which she compares the stillness of death to that "between the heavens of storm" carries with it the connotation of ominousness and illustrates the effective use of nature as a source of imagery. In the second stanza the grief of those waiting at the bedside is dramatized through the use of concrete images. Death is king here and on the point of exhibiting his absolute power. There is pathos in the willing of keepsakes. The conclusive moment has arrived in the fading of the sensations of both sight and sound. Finality is emphasized in the redundancy of the last line. Thus the poet combines many elements to create a complete image of the physical act of dying.

The *dénouement* of the drama of death comes in the aftermath of necessary activities following this inevitable visit.

The bustle in a house
The morning after death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon earth,—

The sweeping up the heart,
And putting love away
We shall not want to use again
Until eternity.¹⁴

The simple word *bustle* calls to our minds all the little offices performed for the dead and the attendant homely household duties in which we seek escape and which become solemn through their association with death. The necessary task of sweeping becomes identified with "the sweeping up the heart," and we put love away until eternity as we put away the personal belongings of the one dead. It is the simplicity of the imagery of this poem which gives poignancy. Here also appears the affirmation of belief in immortality which the grief for those dead inevitably brings.

The funeral is the final scene in death's drama.

One dignity delays for all,
One mitred afternoon.
None can avoid this purple,
None evade this crown.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166, xxii.

Coach it insures, and footmen,
Chamber and state and throng;
Bells, also, in the village,
As we ride grand along.

What dignified attendants,
What service when we pause!
How loyally at parting
Their hundred hats they raise!

How pomp surpassing ermine
When simple you and I
Present our meek escutcheon,
And claim the rank to die.¹⁵

In death, even "simple you and I" achieve dignity. The funeral procession in Emily's time was much more regal than it is today, and she has captured perfectly in this poem its mid-nineteenth-century splendor. The imagery is drawn from the appurtenances of royalty—the royal purple, the crown, the coach, the footmen, ermine, and the escutcheon are all from this favorite source of the poet's. "Mitred afternoon" is an unusual figure of speech, with the sacred headdress of a bishop adorning the afternoon. The feeling of inadequacy and humility with which we face death appears in the phrase "meek escutcheon." But we do have a shield and feel it will be some protection in the great adventure which lies before us, so we step forward and claim our rank. Thus ends the drama of death, so far as this world is concerned.

Besides those already cited, there are many more images Emily Dickinson uses to describe death. To list only a few of them will give some idea of their scope and of the varied sources from which the poet drew them. Death is "that old emperor," "that democrat," "the parting west," "Night's possibility," "the latest leisure," "the securest fold," "the purple well," a journey toward the sun, the insect that menaces the tree, a dialogue between body and soul, a "ride to the Judgment," the stopping of a clock, the migration of a bird, "a long, long sleep, a famous sleep," "a supple suitor," "a little boat adrift," and "the white exploit." Sometimes the image is just mentioned casually; again it is developed into an elaborate conceit:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157, i.

A clock stopped—not the mantel's;
 Geneva's farthest skill
 Can't put the puppet bowing
 That just now dangled still.

An awe came on the trinket!
 The figures hunched with pain,
 That quivered out of decimals
 Into degreeless noon.

It will not stir for doctors,
 This pendulum of snow;
 The shopman importunes it,
 While cool, concernless No

Nods from the gilded pointers,
 Nods from the seconds slim,
 Decades of arrogance between
 The dial life and him.¹⁶

Death imaged as the democrat, who knows no distinction of race, creed, or color, is especially interesting, because it reveals Emily Dickinson's attitude on a pressing social problem about which we are much concerned today.

Color, Caste, Denomination—
 These are Time's affair,
 Death's diviner classifying
 Does not know they are.

As in sleep—all here forgotten,
 Tenets put behind,
 Death's large democratic fingers
 Rub away the brand.

If Circassian—He is careless—
 If He put away
 Chrysalis of Blonde or Umber,
 Equal butterfly

They emerge from His obscuring;
 What Death knows so well,
 Our minuter intuitions
 Deem incredible.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215, cxxxv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280, viii.

Thus has Emily Dickinson expressed her great tolerance. In this poem we find, too, the reassertion of her belief in immortality, which appears in the image of the butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. Death is not the end, then, but only one stage in our development, and can teach us much that

Our minuter intuitions
Deem incredible.

CHAPTER VI

Imagery of Life, Love, and Immortality

*That I shall love always,
I offer thee
That love is life,
And life hath immortality.¹*

The identification of love with life, both of which find their ultimate fulfillment in immortality, is a central idea in Emily Dickinson's philosophical poems. Her sincere and abiding faith in the immortality of the soul, seldom clouded by doubts, was intensified by the renunciation of her earthly love, which she gradually sublimated into a spiritual one, and this becomes an ever-recurrent theme of affirmation denying the finality of death.

The poems dealing with life, love, and immortality are on the whole more abstract than those dealing with nature and death, yet even when the poet probes the realms of metaphysics she often illuminates the thought with imagery. Her joy of life she expressed in her most-quoted poem, which is replete with images:

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

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxgloves door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun! ²

¹ *Poems*, p. 130, viii.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12, xx.

This image of the intoxication of life is one of the poet's most perfect expressions of the emotional intensity of her reaction to experience. There is no doubt that she drank deep of life, and the image of

... the little tippler
Leaning against the sun

is one of the most spirited she ever conceived to express the ecstasy of simply being alive. Perhaps because this poem is so well known, some students of Emily Dickinson have inferred that the poet found more bliss in life than suffering and sorrow;³ but she knew well that such moments of exultation are few:

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years,
Bitter contested farthings
And coffers heaped with tears.⁴

This image of life as a transaction in which we must pay dearly for joy is more typical of Emily Dickinson's philosophy than that of the little tippler; and the final image of the "coffers heaped with tears" reveals vividly the extent to which she found this to be true. In another poem she tells us:

The heart asks pleasure first,
And then, excuse from pain;
And then, those little anodynes
That deaden suffering;

And then, to go to sleep;
And then, if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor,
The liberty to die.⁵

³ Gilbert P. Voigt, "The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson," *College English*, III, (November, 1941), p. 195.

⁴ *Poems*, p. 19, xxxvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6, ix.

Here is the whole drama of life condensed in eight simple lines. The image "those little anodynes" is suggestive of all the little daily tasks we perform "to deaden suffering." God as Inquisitor, who tries and punishes, is uncommon with the poet, but reveals how she felt at times, as all of us do, that most of life is one long Inquisition.

At other times, the poet conceives life as a battle in which each of us charges within his bosom "the cavalry of woe." Or it is a "campaign inscrutable," a struggle of the will to attain its end, a chance we are given only once to vindicate our existence:

It aims once, kills once, conquers once—
There is no second war
In that campaign inscrutable
Of the interior.⁶

In another instance the poet creates an image of life as a still volcano, ready to erupt at any instant:

A still volcano—Life—
That flickered in the night
When it was dark enough to show
Without endangering sight.

A quiet, earthquake style,
Too smoldering to suspect
By natures this side Naples.
The North cannot detect

The solemn, torrid symbol,
The lips that never lie,
Whose hissing corals part and shut
And cities slip away.

Therefore we do Life's labor
Tho' Life's reward be done—
With scrupulous exactness
To hold our senses on.⁷

This picture of the precarious nature of life the poet makes real through the use of the image of the *volcano*, ready to engulf us at any moment with its "hissing corals." Yet that danger and suffering are necessary to the full appreciation of joy, Emily Dickinson was well aware:

⁶ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 241, No. 464.

⁷ *Poems*, p. 292, xxxiii.

Water is taught by thirst;
 Land, by the oceans passed;
 Transport, by throe;
 Peace, by its battles told;
 Love, by memorial mould;
 Birds, by the snow.⁸

We learn the true meaning of transport by contrasting it with throe, just as the sensation of thirst teaches us the appreciation of water, a dangerous sea voyage the comfort of land, battles the value of peace, death the importance of love.

Love, especially, and her renunciation of it gave both life and immortality added meaning for Emily Dickinson. Its value outweighed for her everything else that life had to offer:

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

They weighed me, dust by dust,
 They balanced film with film,
 Then handed me my being's worth—
 A single dram of Heaven.⁹

Just who this lover was who gave Emily Dickinson her "single dram of Heaven" is unimportant to an understanding of her poetry about love, which speaks for itself. Josephine Pollitt in *Emily Dickinson, The Human Background of Her Poetry* has given one version, Genevieve Taggard in *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*, another. The now generally accepted theory, also assented to by Professor Whicher, is the one which appears in the "Introduction" to the latest edition of the *Poems*.¹⁰ This theory is that the man Emily Dickinson loved was a young Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, already married, whom she met on a visit to Philadelphia with her father in the spring of 1854. Whatever version we accept, the undoubted fact remains that Emily Dickinson's experience of love, including the inevitable renunciation, became the central one of her life and inspired some of her greatest poetry. Although she says of it:

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215, cxxxiii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 345, cxx.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, "Introduction," p. vii. ff.

Love reckons by itself alone,
"As large as I" relate the Sun
To one who never felt it blaze,
Itself is all the like it have.¹¹

nevertheless, by many images she seeks to express its power and glory. Even in this quatrain, where she says, "Itself is all the like it have," there is the implied likeness between love and the sun.

The wealth and wonder of love Emily describes through the use of varied imagery. Love is gold, a pearl that slipped through her fingers; it is Golconda, or "India all day."¹² It is an ornament too grand, a "moment of brocade." Finally, in comparison with love,

All other riches be
As is the twitter of the bird
Heard opposite the sea.¹³

The heights of ecstasy reached by love Emily Dickinson likens to the climbing of mountains, or floating in a balloon:

The world did drop away
As countries from the feet
Of him that leaneth in balloon
Upon an ether street.

The gulf behind was not—
The continents were new.
Eternity it was—before
Eternity was due.¹⁴

Love is also like time standing still at dawn:

No season were to us—
It was not night or noon,
For sunrise stopped upon the place
And fastened it in dawn.¹⁵

Emily's worshipful attitude toward her lover she expresses through the use of many different images. She is the river and he the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264, cxvi.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 137, xxi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 426, lxxxiv.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 346, cxxii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

sea, or she is only a drop of water and he is the sea. At other times, she is the sea and he the moon, to whose least command she is obedient. She is the lark who sings for him. She is the daisy and he the immortal Alps. She would be his summer when summer has fled. As she knits, she chooses cochineal as the color for her lover but for herself:

And the little border dusker—
That resembles me.¹⁶

Love is Eden and Elysium; and sometimes she allowed her imagination to carry her away to a dream of what fulfillment might be:

Wild nights! Wild nights!
Were I with thee,
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile the winds
To a heart in port,—
Done with the compass,
Done with the chart.

Rowing in Eden!
Ah! the sea!
Might I but moor
To-night in thee!¹⁷

But the two lovers were kept apart by a powerful, if tenuous, barrier:

I had not minded walls
Were Universe one rock,
And far I heard his silver call
The other side the block.

I'd tunnel until my groove
Pushed sudden through to his,
Then my face take recompense—
The looking in his eyes.

But 'tis a single hair,
A filament, a law—
A cobweb wove in adamant,
A battlement of straw—

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 317, lxxv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141, xxv.

A limit like the veil
Unto the lady's face,
But every mesh a citadel
And dragons in the crease! ¹⁸

It was not the law alone, however, but the poet's refusal which was the final deciding factor in the renunciation of love:

I rose because he sank—
I thought it would be opposite,
But when his power bent,
My Soul stood straight.
I told him Best must pass
Through this low arch of flesh;
No casque so brave
It spurn the grave—
I told him worlds I knew
Where monarchs grew
Who recollected us
If we were true.
And so with thews of hymn
And sinew from within,
In ways I knew not that
I knew, till then—
I lifted him.¹⁹

After this renunciation, Emily Dickinson's love became sublimated from an earthly into a spiritual one. It became a cross, a crown, a heavenly bridal, a divine title without the sign, and a promise of immortality.

There came a day at summer's full
Entirely for me;
I thought that such were for the saints,
Where revelations be.

The sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no sail the solstice passed
That maketh all things new.

The time was scarce profaned by speech;
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at sacrament
The wardrobe of our Lord.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 361, cxlviii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 361, cxlix.

Each was to each the sealéd church,
Permitted to commune this time,
Lest we too awkward show
At supper of the Lamb.

The hours slid fast, as hours will,
Clutched tight by greedy hands;
As faces on two decks look back,
Bound to opposing lands.

And so, when all the time had failed,
Without external sound,
Each bound the other's crucifix,
We gave no other bond.

Sufficient troth that we shall rise—
Deposed, at length, the grave—
To that new marriage, justified
Through Calvaries of Love!²⁰

The predominant imagery of this poem is religious: *saints, revelations, sacrament, wardrobe of our Lord, sealéd church, supper of the Lamb, and Calvaries of Love*. This characterization of love as a religious experience and the identification of its renunciation with Calvary and the certainty of resurrection appear again and again in Emily Dickinson's poetry. At times it leads her, in an almost morbid intensity, to a seeming identification of her lover with Christ, as when she avers that even heaven would be

A residence too plain,
Unless in my Redeemer's face
I recognize your own.²¹

Her most passionate avowal of faith in "that new marriage" appears in the following poem:

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

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133, xiii.

²¹ *Bolts of Melody*, p. 154, No. 282.

Midnight, "Good night!"
I hear them call.
The Angels bustle in the hall,
Softly my Future climbs the stair,
I fumble at my childhood's prayer—
So soon to be a child no more!
Eternity, I'm coming, Sir,—
Master, I've seen that face before.²²

There is no doubt that the first face she recognizes in eternity is that of her lover.

Love alone, however, was not the sole basis for Emily Dickinson's belief in immortality. All life for her was a part of eternity, for she tells us:

The only news I know
Is bulletins all day
From Immortality.

The only shows I see
To-morrow and To-day,
Perchance Eternity.

The only One I meet
Is God,—the only street
Existence, this traversed

If other news there be,
Or admirabler show—
I'll tell it you.²³

What Paradise may be like we can only infer from our experience of the here and now, of the beauties of nature, the ecstasy of love, and the mystery of death; but these are enough, and from her experience of them, Emily has given us an intimation of what immortality may have to offer. The vision she evokes of what we cannot prove, yet believe may be possible, she makes credible through the use of persuasive imagery:

²² *Poems*, p. 373, clxxii.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 335, cii.

The love a life can show below,
Is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing
That faints upon the face of noon
And smites the tinder in the sun
And hinders Gabriel's wing.

'Tis this in music hints and sways,
And far abroad on Summer days
Distills uncertain pain.
'Tis this enamors in the East,
And tints the transit in the West
With harrowing iodine.

'Tis this invites, appals, endows,
Flits, glimmers, proves, dissolves,
Returns, suggests, convicts, enchants—
Then flings in Paradise! ²⁴

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351 ff., cxxxii.

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