

ELATE PHILOSOPHER:

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE METAPHYSICAL TRADITION

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A dissertation submitted to
The Faculty of Arts,
Potchefstroom University for
Christian Higher Education,
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree
of MAGISTER ARTIUM

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April 1977

TO MY FATHER

I wish to thank:

Prof. Venter for his guidance and
meticulous care in examining the
manuscript.

The staff of the Inter-library loans
Department of the Ferdinand Postma Library
for their assistance.

My mother and husband for their encouragement and financial aid.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson's affinity with the seventeenth-century meta-physical poets is not apparent at first glance. Her biographical background tends to typify her as Victorian in the worst sense of the term, and many of her poems have a quality of saccharine coyness. The poem below is an adequate example of the kind "in which maidens blush and swains palpitate, in which there are the unfortunate analogies of moon beckoning to wave or river running to sea" (Griffith, 1965, p. 153):

Have you got a Brook in your little heart,
Where bashful flowers blow,
And blushing birds go down to drink,
And shadows tremble so -

And nobody knows, so still it flows,
That any brook is there,
And yet your little draught of life
Is daily drunken there -

Why, look out for the little brook in March,
When the rivers overflow,
And the snows come hurrying from the hills,
And the bridges often go -

And later, in August it may be -
When the meadows parching lie,
Beware, lest this little brook of life,
Some burning noon go dry!

(Dickinson, 1970a, poem 136) ¹⁾

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1. In order to facilitate reference, all poems have been taken from The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by T.H. Johnson, rather than the three-volume The Poems of Emily Dickinson by the same editor.

Yet in many of Emily Dickinson's poems one discerns a terseness and grit not generally associated with conventional Victorian poetry. A comparison between two poems on the same theme, one by Emily Dickinson, the other by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (a poet much admired by Emily Dickinson), will illustrate the essential disparity. The Dickinson poem startles the reader with its hyperbolic wit and effrontery, characteristics generally associated with the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. The Browning poem (possibly an unfair choice), appears banal beside the peremptory tone of Dickinson's staccato lines:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints - I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

(Untermeyer, 1970, p. 399)

So well that I can live without -
I love thee - then How well is that?
As well as Jesus?
Prove it me
That He - loved Men -
As I - love thee -

(Poem 456)

The critic approaching Emily Dickinson via the metaphysical poets might be tempted to look for correspondences between the philosophical outlook of the poets of the seventeenth century and the Victorian poetess. While Donne advised "doubt wisely", and complained that the "new philosophy calls all in doubt", his Holy Sonnets reveal an essentially orthodox religious outlook. Emily Dickinson's letters and many of the poems reveal a distrust of New England Puritanism, which made God seem like "Bears". Indeed, her view of the universe and man's appointed place in it sometimes demonstrates a naivety which might have prompted Dr Donne to exclaim: "Thou art too narrow, wretch, to comprehend/Even thyself":

Our little Kinsmen - after Rain
In plenty may be seen,
A Pink and Pulpy multitude
The tepid Ground upon.

A needless life, it seemed to me
Until a little Bird
As to a Hospitality
Advanced and breakfasted.

As I of He, so God of Me
I pondered, may have judged,
And left the little Angle Worm
With Modesties enlarged.

(Poem 885)

Consequently, a detailed comparison between the religious views of poets living in such diverse ages might be tedious and not very illuminating.

Much of Emily Dickinson's poetry is excruciatingly obscure,

and critics have referred despairingly to her as "crepuscular" and "sibylline". The reader of Emily Dickinson's poetry, on encountering poems such as the esoteric and abbreviated At Half past Three, a single Bird (no. 1084), will heartily concur.

However T.S. Eliot's observations, though writing of a later age, may have some bearing on the work of Emily Dickinson:

"We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult . . . Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (Eliot, 1961. p. 289).

Emily Dickinson had already experienced " . . . the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings", ¹⁾ and her obscurity possibly results from two sources: her acute sensibility and troubled, agoraphobic personality, and her attempts to reconcile the contradictory elements of the universe, God of the "Manacle" and God of the "Free". This gave rise to the ambiguity which characterizes much of her best work:

The truth I do not dare to know
I muffle with a jest.

(Poem 1715)

1. Eliot, T.S. East Coker II.

Duncan (1969, pp. 87 - 88) comments:

"There was a much deeper cleavage in her ways of looking at the world than in, for instance, Donne's. This is seen . . . in the incongruous juxtapositions of her condensed conceits and in the audacity of some of her religious metaphors and paradoxes. She touched most of her themes with her own metaphysical wit (often a little naive and mischievous), but she also often resorted to it to 'muffle with a jest' the mysteries of God and death and other subjects toward which her attitude was essentially ambiguous."

There is, even at a cursory glance, a distinct affinity of technique between Emily Dickinson and the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, although Dickinson's work is rather more laconic.

Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
"Dissolve" says Death - The Spirit "Sir
I have another Trust" -
Death doubts it - Argues from the Ground -
The Spirit turns away
Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay.

(Poem 976)

The above poem which bears some resemblance in form to Marvell's A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body, relies on terse legal argument for its effect. The discordia concors and metaphysical shudder appear as consummately and originally as

in much of the poetry of Donne:

Therefore I'll give no more; but I'll undo
The world by dying; because love dies too.
Then all your beauties will be no more worth
Than gold in mines, where none doth draw it forth;
Then all your graces no more use shall have
Than a sundial in a grave.

(The Will. Donne, 1966, p. 97)

In Emily Dickinson's poem 496 the contrast of sunset, butterflies and dancer with the "eyelids in the Sepulchre" has the same startling incongruity of Donne's sundial in a grave:

As far from pity, as complaint -
As cool to speech - as stone -
As numb to Revelation
As if my Trade were Bone -

As far from Time - as History -
As near yourself - Today -
As Children, to the Rainbow's scarf -
Or Sunset's Yellow play

To eyelids in the Sepulchre -
How dumb the Dancer lies -
While Color's Revelations break -
And blaze - the Butterflies!

Yet Dickinson is always superbly original, as in the following poem, where, behind the mask of child-like simplicity one discerns a wry and rather macabre irony:

If I shouldn't be alive
When the Robins come,
Give the one in Red Cravat,
A Memorial crumb.

If I couldn't thank you,
Being fast asleep,
You will know I'm trying
With my Granite lip!

(Poem 182)

The wit of the "Memorial crumb" blends superbly with the macabre shudder of "Granite lip". The stone effigy on the tomb is as dead as the figure it represents; its sleep is eternal.

"The conflicts in Donne's personality, reflected so perfectly in his art, his perplexities of faith and doubt, the tortured ambiguity one senses so strongly in his motives, his cynicism and his capacity for affection, the ironical quality of his self-knowledge and his psychological curiosity - all these have a familiar look in our day" (Donne, 1966, p. xxxix). Marius Bewley's remarks in his introduction to the *Selected Poetry of Donne* may be applied equally to Emily Dickinson. The following chapters are devoted to an examination of her poetry in terms of the techniques of the metaphysical poets. An analysis of her verse in terms of wit, irony and paradox will hopefully not only illuminate her poetry, but place her, albeit with her own distinctive and original stamp, in the metaphysical tradition.

CHAPTER TWO

THE METAPHYSICAL TRADITION

Joseph E. Duncan (1969, p. 6) rather wryly notes that the characteristics of metaphysical poetry are notoriously difficult to define. "Critics have been in much more general agreement about who the principal seventeenth-century metaphysical poets were than about what metaphysical poetry is. But fortunately this general agreement provides valuable clues to an understanding of both the seventeenth-century and modern conceptions of metaphysical poetry." Whether the "general agreement" is as universal as Duncan insists is debatable. Helen Gardner, in her edition of The Metaphysical Poets (1968), includes some 38 poets as part of the metaphysical tradition, ranging from Sir Walter Raleigh, William Shakespeare and John Milton, to John Norris of Benerton.¹⁾ Genevieve Taggard's Circumference, "treating 'varieties of metaphysical verse 1456 - 1928' included poems by Milton, Bunyan, Pope, Gray, Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, Swinburne, and Whitman" (Duncan, 1969, p. 166). It is, however, commonly acknowledged that "the school of Donne" produced the type of poetry known as "metaphysical", and Duncan says that the most representative metaphysical poets are "John Donne, Edward Herbert, George Herbert, Aurelian Townshend, Henry King, John Cleveland,

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1. "I am aware that I have included in this collection some poems whose presence under its title may be challenged . . . I am more concerned that readers should find them beautiful and interesting than that they should approve or disapprove of them as conforming or not conforming to the idea of a metaphysical poem" (Gardner, 1968, pp. 28 - 29).

Andrew Marvell, and Abraham Cowley." He concedes that Richard Crashaw may be included, but "he was a special case." Further, "in the work of Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne there are some important metaphysical elements, but other qualities are so pronounced that it is deceptive to consider these poets with Donne" (Duncan, 1969, p.6).

Dr Johnson is generally acknowledged as the earliest critic who wrote at some length about the metaphysical school of poets, but at least some of their eccentricities were noticed in the seventeenth century. William Drummond wrote: "Some men of late, transformers of everything . . . consulted upon her [poetry's] reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities, denuding her of her own habits and those ornaments with which she hath amused the world some thousand years" (Duncan, 1969, p. 8). Duncan (p. 8) also notes that in his conversation with Drummond, "Ben Jonson revealed that he considered Donne's poetry witty and excellent in some ways, metrically rough, difficult to follow, and occasionally sacrilegious." Thomas Carew's An Elegie upon the death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr John Donne, commends Donne for embracing a new poetic style. Carew admires Donne for having purged "The Muses garden with Pedantique weedes/O'rsprede", having thrown away "The lazie seeds/Of servile imitation", having redeemed "The subtle cheat/Of slye Exchanges, and the juggling feat/Of two-edg'd words . . ." Donne had further "open'd Us a Mine/Of rich and pregnant phansie, drawn a line/Of masculine expression . . ." and had bent the "stubborne" English language "to the awe of thy imperious wit . . ." (Gardner, 1968, p. 143 ff.).

Other seventeenth-century approaches may be seen in Duncan (1969, pp. 8 - 28) where ideas on wit, metaphor, ambiguity, the problem of personal expression and the relation of thought and feeling are discussed. Wordsworth is generally regarded as the first major critic to advocate a colloquial poetic style (the "language of men"), but it is interesting to note that the desire for a more personal and colloquial style appeared much earlier. "Renaissance writers . . . were fascinated with styles that exhibited not only character, but also the actual act of thinking and the natural idiom of conversation . . . Although their contemporaries at times regarded the metaphysical poets, particularly Donne, as obscure, these poets shared the interest in the plain language and conversational rhythms for which Jonson and others were striving" (Duncan, 1969, pp. 18 - 19).

John Dryden's rather censorious statements about the poetry of John Donne have frequently been taken as a flippant definition of metaphysical poetry:

"He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love." ¹⁾

1. Dryden, John. "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire", 2:19. The quotation is from the Oxford English Dictionary.

It fell, however, to that inimitable critic, Dr Samuel Johnson, to come closer to a true description of metaphysical poetry. The term "metaphysical" was applied by Johnson to a school of seventeenth-century poets comprising Donne, Jonson, Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley, Cleveland and Milton.

"About the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets . . . " writes Johnson (1900, p. 22), and with a touch of Augustan pedantry, censures the metaphysicals for the impropriety of their writing. In his criticism of Cowley he includes much of interest which may lead to the formulation of some sort of definition of metaphysical poetry.

In the first instance, Johnson censures the metaphysicals for their display of erudition and their lack of metrical virtuosity, the want of the latter resulting in a discordant type of verse:

"The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to shew their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to shew it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and very often verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables" (Johnson, 1900, pp. 22 - 23).

Johnson, in Aristotelian vein, also criticizes the metaphysical poets for their mimetic failings: "These writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets; for they

cannot be said to have imitated any thing; they neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect" (1900, p. 23).

Johnson is no less scathing in his treatment of the metaphysicians as wits (1900, pp. 23 - 24): Wit, "they certainly never attained, nor ever sought it; for they endeavoured to be singular in their thoughts, and were careless of their diction . . . Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found."

He is quick to concede that elegant verbal tricks are not the only constituent of wit; acumen or "strength of thought" is an equally important ingredient.

Johnson then discusses the concept of discordia concors, a term which has been used through the centuries in reference to an important element in metaphysical wit and metaphor:

"But Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader thinks his improvement dearly bought, and though he

sometimes admires, is seldom pleased" (Johnson, 1900, pp. 24 - 25).

Johnson concedes a grudging admiration for the ingenuity of mind which produces such images, but objects to much of the obscurity of the metaphysical style, possibly the lack of a proper objective correlative, a cleavage between image and emotion. The peculiarly analytical mind of these poets is also derided (pp. 25 - 26):

"Their attempts were always analytick; they broke every image into fragments: and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature, or the scenes of life, than he, who dissects a sun-beam with a prism, can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon."

Johnson, like Dryden, perceives that the analytic mind left little place for the affections of the heart, and comments on the want of "the softnesses of love":

"From this account of their compositions it will be readily inferred that they were not successful in representing or moving the affections. As they were wholly employed on something unexpected and surprising, they had no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and the pleasure of other minds: they never enquired what, on any occasion they should have said or done; but wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature; as Beings looking upon good and evil, impassive and at leisure; as Epicurean deities making remarks on the actions of men, and the

vicissitudes of life,'without interest and without emotion. Their courtship was void of fondness, and their lamentation of sorrow. Their wish was only to say what they hoped had never been said before" (1900, p. 25). ¹⁾

The significance of emotional distance or detachment appears to elude Johnson here. Much of the irony in metaphysical poetry serves as a buffer to emotion, and the metaphysical style eliminates what could easily become mawkish sentiment. The lack of fondness and sorrow serves to elevate the poetry above the personal level to a more universal plane.

Johnson, however, does discern elements of greatness among the metaphysicals, although his criticism is sometimes blunted by the Neo-Classical predilection for neatness and elegance:

"Yet great labour, directed by great abilities, is never wholly lost: if they frequently threw away their wit upon false conceits, they likewise sometimes struck out unexpected truth: if their conceits were far-fetched, they were often worth the carriage. To write on their plan, it was at least necessary to read and think. No man could be born a metaphysical poet, nor assume the dignity of a writer, by descriptions copied

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1. The wish to say what has never been said before is, of course, not as exceptional as Johnson seems to assume. Cf. T.S. Eliot, East Coker, V: "And what there is to/ conquer/By strength and submission, has already been discovered/Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot/hope/to emulate - "

from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery, and hereditary similies, by readiness of rhyme, and volubility of syllables.

"In perusing the works of this race of authors, the mind is exercised either by recollection or inquiry; either something already learned is to be retrieved, or something new is to be examined. If their greatness seldom elevates, their acuteness often surprises; if the imagination is not always gratified, at least the powers of reflection and comparison are employed; and in the mass of materials which ingenious absurdity has thrown together, genuine wit and useful knowledge may be sometimes found, buried perhaps in grossness of expression, but useful to those who know their value; and such as, when they are expanded to perspicuity, and polished to elegance, may give lustre to works which have more propriety though less copiousness of sentiment" (Johnson, 1900, p. 26).

Metaphysical poetry fell into disrepute during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although Coleridge and Browning expressed their appreciation of the poetry of Donne. The revival of interest in metaphysical poetry was heralded by Grierson's edition of Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, published in 1921, and was stimulated by various essays by T.S. Eliot in the 1920's. Donne and the metaphysicals were later cast aside by Eliot, and his interest was transferred to Dante. In 1931 he referred to the enjoyment of Donne as a "fashion" (Eliot, 1958, pp. 5 - 6)¹⁾ but

1. Cf. also Duncan, 1969, p. 148ff.

many of the critical principles of his "metaphysical period" may be related to his own poetry:

"The poet, when he talks or writes about poetry, has peculiar qualifications and peculiar limitations . . . I believe that the critical writings of poets . . . owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write. Especially when he is young, and actively engaged in battling for the kind of poetry which he practises, he sees the poetry of the past in relation to his own . . . What he writes about poetry, in short, must be assessed in relation to the poetry he writes" (Eliot, 1971, p. 26).

In the metaphysical poets Eliot finds a consummate fusion of thought and feeling (1961, pp. 287 - 288):

"The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were . . . In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others . . . But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude."

In the Romantic age, poets "revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits . . . " (Eliot, 1961, p. 288). In the nineteenth century, the tendency was towards "ruminating", rather than a fusion of thought and feeling.

The censure of the metaphysical poets by Samuel Johnson that the "most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together", is not shared by Eliot. In "The Metaphysical Poets" he says:

"A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (Eliot, 1961, p. 287).

Combined with the fusion of disparate experience is Eliot's idea of wit. In his essay on Andrew Marvell, he attempts to make an analysis of wit and of its value in poetry:

" . . . we can say that wit is not erudition; it is sometimes stifled by erudition, as in much of Milton. It is not cynicism, though it has a kind of toughness which may be confused with cynicism by the tender-minded. It is confused with erudition because it belongs to an educated mind, rich in

generations of experience; and it is confused with cynicism because it implies a constant inspection and criticism of experience. It involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible, which we find as clearly in the greatest as in poets like Marvell" (Eliot, 1961, p. 303).

The essence of this wit is therefore "an equipoise, a balance and proportion of tones . . ." (Eliot, 1961, p. 302); it is a supremely intellectual stance.

Besides the element of surprise intrinsic to wit, Eliot indicates the "alliance of levity and seriousness" as a characteristic of metaphysical wit (1961, p. 296), and cites Marvell for examples of this kind of wit. The levity, Eliot notes, intensifies the seriousness.

Louis L. Martz points out that "readers of the excellent anthologies of metaphysical poetry compiled by Grierson, Miss Gardner, or Frank Warnke will be convinced that some such term as 'metaphysical' . . . is needed to describe this pervasive poetical style that flourished in England and on the Continent during the seventeenth century" (1966, pp. 44 - 45). The Oxford English Dictionary states that metaphysics is concerned with "that branch of speculative inquiry which treats of the first principles of things, including such concepts as being, substance, essence, time, space, cause, identity, etc.; theoretical philosophy of Being and Knowing."

In dealing with metaphysical poetry one should therefore consider its subject matter, and H.J.C. Grierson says that metaphysical poetry is "a poetry . . . that . . . has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence" (1956, p. 1). Metaphysical poetry therefore is concerned with "the great drama of existence" - with birth, love and death. All poets write of love and death; the metaphysical poets reveal a fresh originality in their treatment of these subjects, and therefore the manner of treatment, rather than the subject assumes importance. "Metaphysical" is very much a style of writing as well as a reflection of a particular attitude or intellectual stance. What isolates the metaphysical poets from other poets, then, is not so much the subject or theme of their poetry, but their approach to and manipulation of this theme. In their love poetry, notes Willy (c. 1971, p. 9), there is "a broadening of range in the lover's moods and attitudes, a conception of passion more varied, complex and profound, and a depth of psychological insight into its contradictions and inconsistencies, unhinted at in those whom Grierson aptly describes as the 'pipers of Petrarch's woes'."

What then constitutes the "metaphysic style"? Grierson (1956, pp. xv - xvi), in writing of Donne and his followers isolates

" . . . the more intellectual, less verbal, character of their wit compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their conceits are often the expression; their learned imagery; the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics; above all the peculiar blend of passion and

thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement."

It is therefore not so much to the nature of the universe that the admirer of metaphysical poetry should turn, not to Renaissance philosophy and Medieval scholasticism, but to the manner in which the metaphysical poets link emotion and thought by means of unusual and exciting images and correlations. Joan Bennett (1964, p. 1) also stresses that the term "metaphysical" is not altogether a happy one, "since it gives the impression that metaphysical poetry discusses the nature of the universe." She elaborates:

"The word 'metaphysical' refers to style, rather than subject matter; but style reflects an attitude to experience. Experience to the metaphysical poets was, as it were, grist to an intellectual mill. They looked for a connection between their emotion and mental concepts. All poetical imagery arises from a perceived likeness between different things . . . The peculiarity of the metaphysical poets is not that they relate, but that the relations they perceive are more often logical than sensuous or emotional, and that they constantly connect the abstract with the concrete, the remote with the near, and the sublime with the commonplace" (Bennett, 1964, pp. 2 - 3).

Helen Gardner, in her introduction to The Metaphysical Poets (1968, p. 16), stresses the immense concentration of metaphysical poetry. "Poetry, like prose, should be close-packed and dense with meaning, something to be 'chewed and digested',

which will not give up its secrets on a first reading." ¹⁾
This, of course, is true of all good poetry, and a metaphysical poem tends to be especially brief and closely woven, a concentration of paradoxes and incongruous images which may elude all but the most meticulous reader.

"The first characteristic that I shall isolate in trying to discuss the admittedly vague and, it is often thought, unsatisfactory term 'metaphysical poetry' is its concentration. The reader is held to an idea or a line of argument. He is not invited to pause upon a passage, 'wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it' as a 'starting-post towards all the "two-and-thirty Palaces"'. Keats's advice can be followed profitably with much poetry, particularly with Elizabethan and Romantic poetry; but metaphysical poetry demands that we pay attention and read on" (Gardner, 1968, p. 17).

A metaphysical poem, then, is closely packed with meaning, and this desire for concision leads to a markedly epigrammatic style, with the attendant characteristic of wit. The point of an epigram obviously has to be expressed as tersely as possible to achieve any pith or piquancy, and consequently the metaphysical verse form is somewhat abbreviated:

1. The conception that difficulty in poetry is a merit appeared as early as 1595 in Chapman's preface to Ovid's Banquet of the Sense (Gardner, 1968, p. 16).

"The desire for concentration and concision marks also the verse forms characteristic of seventeenth-century lyric. It appears in the fondness for a line of eight syllables rather than a line of ten, and in the use of stanzas employing lines of varying length into which the sense seems packed, or of stanzas built of very short lines. A stanza of Donne or Herbert is not, like rhyme royal or a Spenserian stanza, an ideal mould, as it were, into which the words have flowed. It is more like a limiting frame in which words and thought are compressed, a 'box where sweets compacted lie'. The metaphysical poets favoured either very simple verse forms, octosyllabic couplets or quatrains, or else stanzas created for the particular poem, in which length of line and rhyme scheme artfully enforced the sense" (Gardner, 1968, pp. 18 - 19).

Length of line and rhyme scheme artfully enforce the sense in, for example, The Canonization by Donne, where the theme of the poem, viz. "love" is cleverly reiterated at the end of the first and last line of each stanza. The word "love" also stands remote from the insistent rhyme scheme of the other lines (e.g. gout, flout, place, grace, face), and thus assumes some importance by its very isolation. The terse concluding lines of each stanza form a logical and conclusive climax to the intricacies of the argument, which are presented in longer lines. This poem, then, in Grierson's words, is a prime example of lines of varying length which "bend and crack the metrical pattern to the rhetoric of direct and vehement utterance . . . striving to find a rhythm which will express the passionate fullness of . . . the flux and reflux of . . . moods" (Willy, c. 1971, p. 7).

Contemporaries of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals were not always so sympathetic, and contemptuously refer to "the tyranny of strong lines" (Gardner, 1968, pp. 15 - 16), ¹⁾ and to Donne's "strenuous" and "masculine" style. Although Ben Jonson fulminated that Donne deserved to be hanged "for not keeping of accent", the metrical gymnastics of the metaphysical poets are often functional in implementing both meaning and emotional intent. Other poetic devices are similarly employed, as, for example, sound in the opening lines of The Will, where long vowels and sibilants contribute to the opening line's asthmatic effect: ²⁾

Before I sigh my last gasp, let me breathe,
Great love, some legacies: here I bequeath . . .

(Donne, 1966, p. 96)

The concision of metaphysical poetry lends itself to ambiguities and paradoxes - the idea of personal salvation has probably never been so tersely expressed as in Donne's resounding "death, thou shalt die" (Holy Sonnet X: Death be not proud).

Concision is also achieved through puns and word-play, as in Donne's consummate exploitation of his name in A Hymn to God the Father. Willy discerns a double pun in per fretum febris

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1. Burton, in the preface to The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), and Quarles, in the preface to Argalus and Parthenia (1629).
 2. Although Donne manages about 54 lines of witty utterances without expiring.

(Hymn to God my God, in My Sickness); the literal translation would be "through the strait of fever", but "fretum" also means 'raging' (referring to his fever); and 'strait' has the meaning of both 'channel' and 'distress'" (Willy, c. 1971, p. 83).

One also discerns a blend of reason and imagination in the metaphysical poets. This gave rise to the type of image peculiar to the metaphysical poets, the conceit. As the conceit will be discussed more fully in a later chapter, it will suffice for the moment to say that the conceit is logical, employs ingenious and surprising comparisons, and is sometimes the centre about which the whole poem revolves. It is seldom used, as is the Elizabethan conceit, merely for ingenuity, or for flowery ornamentation. Consequently the metaphysical conceit contains the elements of surprise, wit, adroitness, and even erudition, all of which contribute to its difficulty. In combination with the elements of wit and surprise, however, one discerns a fine process of analogy.

"A conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or, at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. A brief comparison can be a conceit if two things patently unlike, or which we should never think of together, are shown to be alike in a single point in such a way, or in such a context, that we feel their incongruity. Here a conceit is like a spark made by striking two stones together. After the flash the stones

are just two stones . . . In an extended conceit, on the other hand, the poet forces fresh points of likeness upon us. Here the conceit is a kind of 'hammering out' by which a difficult join is made" (Gardner, 1968, pp. 19 - 20).

Donne's quality of "passionate ratiocination", the "felt" thought that is "as immediate as the odour of a rose" (Eliot, 1961, p. 287), is aptly described by Williamson who states:

"Nothing is more characteristic of Donne than the way in which thought gives a mathematical basis to the music of his emotions. The crystalline logic of his poetry is comparable to the score of music, and to certain minds it gives a pleasure similar to that of reading a musical score as opposed to hearing it" (Williamson, 1961, p. 40).

I suppose the marvellous compass image of Donne in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning is the most consummate example of both the extended conceit and the fusion of thought and feeling :

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two:
Thy soul the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like the other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begun.

(Donne, 1966, p. 91)

The conceit is logical and lucid; the mathematical analogy, as well as being original, is incongruous in the setting of a love poem. But, says Joan Bennett (1964, p. 135):

"Such words as 'rome', 'leanes', 'hearkens' gather up emotion into the intellectual image. It seems, as so often in Donne's poems, that one law is at work in all experience. The same flame that lights the intellect warms the heart; mathematics and love obey one principle. The binding of a circle and the union of lovers are equivalent symbols of eternity and perfection."

Basic to metaphysical poetry is what Dr Johnson so much abhorred - the discordia concors - or yoking together of apparently dissimilar elements, which is a constituent of wit. Johnson complained that "nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions" (1900, pp. 24 - 25), and the element of wit is frequently a vehicle for a display of erudition. The imagery of the seventeenth-century poets is often erudite, displaying not only an interest in the scientific inventions and geographical explorations of the time, but in many other facets of life which were previously outside the realm of poetic diction. Once again Johnson (1900, p.26), displays a certain perspicuity -

"To write on their plan it was at least necessary to read and think . . . "

Grierson (1956, pp. xx - xxi) also comments on the erudition of these poets in his discussion of Donne:

"Donne was no conscious reviver of the metaphysics of Dante, but to the game of elaborating fantastic conceits and hyperboles which was the fashion throughout Europe, he brought not only a full-blooded temperament and acute mind, but a vast and growing store of the same scholastic learning, the same Catholic theology, as controlled Dante's thought, jostling already with the new learning of Copernicus and Paracelsus. The result is startling and disconcerting, - the comparison of parted lovers to the legs of a pair of compasses, the deification of his mistress by the discovery that she is only to be defined by negatives or that she can read the thoughts of his heart, a thing 'beyond an angel's art'; and a thousand other subtleties of quintessences and nothingness, the mixture of souls and the significance of numbers, to say nothing of the aerial bodies of angels, the phoenix and the mandrake's root, Alchemy and Astrology, legal contracts and non obstantes, 'late school-boys and sour prentices', 'the king's real and his stamped face'."

Donne's variation is endless; in a love poem he can use medieval scholastic notions of compound substances (The Good-Morrow); at the same time he can employ the unaphrodisiac flea in a plea to his mistress to shed her inhibitions. At their best, notes Willy (c. 1971, p. 8), "there is in these startling analogies and juxtapositions, with their alliance of physical and spiritual, prosaic and poetic, the trivial and tremendous, an impact of aptness and complete rightness. The swift brilliance of their illumination, the freshness of the emotional and imaginative intuitions they yield, do in fact produce precisely those effects of 'sudden astonishment'

followed by 'rational' admiration' which Johnson denies them."

Analogous to the discordia concors is the alliance of levity and seriousness, and that peculiar metaphysical mood which Williamson (1961, pp. 90 - 98) calls the "metaphysical shudder". The sensibility of the seventeenth century was strangely susceptible to death, and the metaphysical shudder is frequently a macabre and jarring discordia concors, as in Donne's famous line:

A bracelet of bright hair about the bone

(The Relic. Donne, 1966, p. 101)

Marvell attains a witty grotesquerie in To his Coy Mistress:

The Grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 251)

Despite its erudition, much metaphysical poetry, especially that of Donne, has an intensely personal quality. One has only to recall some of the more passionate, abrupt openings of Donne's poems, with their dramatic, frequently rhetorical lines. Donne's verse can be violent and irascible, as in "Busy old fool, unruly Sun", "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love", "Love, any devil else but you/Would for a given soul give something too", and "He is stark mad, whoever says/That he hath been in love an hour . . ." Whether he is somewhat pedantically calling his mistress's attention to a flea; whether his tone is testily beguiling: ("Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy . . ."), or gently placating:

("Sweetest love, I do not go/For weariness of thee . . . "), his poetry is always intensely personally realized poetry and many of his poetic situations are extremely ordinary, almost homely situations. "Dryden praised Donne for expressing deep thoughts in common language. He is equally remarkable for having extraordinary thoughts in ordinary situations" (Gardner, 1968, p. 24). This, then, culminates in what Grierson calls a final "bizarre and blended" effect (1956, p. xxii). This is especially apparent in some of Donne's religious poems where God is frequently addressed with the passion of a lover, in intimate and blatantly sexual terms. The personal and dramatic quality of much metaphysical verse lends itself to an easy and colloquial style. Donne's verse surprises the reader with words like snorted, sucked, sweats, hydroptic and itchy (usually in the unexpected context of a love poem), and his frequent interjections also add a vivid immediacy to his work, as in lines like "'This Ecstasy doth unperplex'/(We said) 'and tell us what we love . . .'", and "I'll tell thee now (dear love) what thou shalt do . . ." Donne's frequent parentheses often indicate personal involvement, and sometimes serve to define more closely, or to argue a point. A strong argumentative tone is one of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry, and may be discerned in Herbert, especially. In poem after poem Herbert argues, pleads and cajoles in his colloquy with God:

Throw away thy rod,
Throw away thy wrath:
O my God,
Take the gentle path.

(Discipline. Gardner, 1968, p. 140)

D.J. Enright has commented on Herbert's resolution of style and theme:

"Yet Herbert will argue with God, and the peculiar effect of rebellion and reconciliation, of complaint and resolution, is often achieved by the alternation of long sweeping lines with short pointed ones" (Enright, 1968, p. 142). A clever example is Deniall:

When my devotions could not pierce
Thy silent eares;
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
My breast was full of fears
And disorder:

(Gardner, 1968, p. 126)

Tone is often subtle in metaphysical poetry, and the most despondent of poems is frequently lightened by a tone of wry irony which also lends a personal "felt" quality to the poetry, and which provides a sense of balance in its counteraction to the world's cruelties. "The search for the intellectual equivalents of emotion enforces connection and it also ensures detachment. To be handled by the intellect an experience must be held at arm's length" (Bennett, 1964, p. 10). Donne's tone can be self-disparaging, as in The Triple Fool:

I am two fools, I know,
For loving, and for saying so
In whining poetry . . .

(Donne, 1966, p. 60)

He is sometimes cynical, ever-aware of human frailty, as in

Woman's Constancy. One frequently feels the need to question Donne, even when he seems most sincere. Helen Gardner has questioned Walton's account of the poem A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning as being addressed to Donne's wife, saying that it is "not an argument to use to a wife, who has no need to hide her grief at her husband's absence" (Willy, c.1971, p. 18). A more cynical reader might discern in the placating lines a masculine abhorrence of tearful scenes:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

(Donne, 1966, p. 90)

More recent trends in critical analysis have evolved a new interpretation of metaphysical poetry and the metaphysical tradition. F.R. Leavis, for example, reiterating some of Eliot's ideas on wit (such as poise and mastery of tone), finds a line of wit in poetry running from Ben Jonson, Donne, Carew, Marvell and Pope to more modern poets such as Hopkins, Eliot and Empson, and suggests that wit, rather than romanticism, should be the touchstone of future poetry (Leavis, 1962, p. 31 ff.). A sense of poise, "the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses" are characteristics intrinsic to good poetry according to I.A. Richards (1948, p. 250), who consequently finds irony a characteristic of poetry of the highest order. William Empson, an acolyte of Richards, shares his mentor's passion for close reading and a vigilant mind in his study of ambiguity in poetry, and his painstaking analysis

of ambiguity, metaphor and pun is particularly relevant to the study of metaphysical poetry. Empson's apprehension of ambiguity is enormously broad and varied; his interpretation of ambiguity in Donne, for example, varies from the subtlety of mood in The Apparition, where he discerns both "an amused pert and fanciful contempt" and a "scream of agony and hatred" (Empson, 1963, p. 146), to the ambiguity inherent in the sound effects of Elegy IV (The Perfume), which contribute at once to silence, caution, and in contrast, triumph and expectation (Empson, 1963, pp. 199 - 200).

Cleanth Brooks has stipulated that the criteria for a successful poem should be functional imagery, irony, and complexity of attitude. Irony, wit and paradox are intrinsic to mature, poised poetry, and Brooks considers metaphysical poetry as the "best" kind of poetry. Brooks also demolishes the notion of metaphor and imagery as mere embellishment (1939, p. 15):

"Most clearly of all, the metaphysical poets reveal the essentially functional character of all metaphor. We cannot remove the comparisons from their poems, as we might remove ornaments or illustrations attached to a statement, without demolishing the poems. The comparison is the poem in a structural sense."

The above statement would suggest a structural description of metaphysical poetry, but Brooks includes complexity of attitude in his description of this type of poetry. In the manner of Eliot, he sees,

- i. wit, as an awareness of the multiplicity of possible attitudes to be taken toward a given situation;
- ii. paradox, as a device for contrasting the conventional views of a situation, or the limited and special view of it such as those taken in practical and scientific discourse, with a more inclusive view; and
- iii. irony, as a device for definition of attitudes by qualification (Brooks, 1949, p. 230).

One might be tempted to enquire whether this statement does not contradict Brooks's maxim of form being meaning (Brooks, c.1962, p. 1). Leonard Unger (1950, pp. 18 - 19) suggests that this question might be settled by attention to the poetry:

"Mr Brooks' contribution in emphasizing the wittiness of metaphysical poetry is to suggest that this poetry is characterized not only by the manner of its statement but also by the import of its statement (i.e., the thought ultimately represented by the words of a passage or poem). He denominates the metaphysical poet as witty because of the poet's use of metaphor ¹⁾ and because 'he converges his lines from the farthest possible distances' - the discordia concors again; and the same wit he credits for the irony and complexity of attitudes to be observed in the statement of the poem. The connection between the structure and the kind of statement is left in question. Does the nature of the statement follow

1. Brooks's comment that wit is an acute perception of analogies.

causally from the structure, or are such statement and structure in combination merely coincidental in the poetry of the seventeenth century? This question may in some measure be settled by attending to the poetry; we may determine whether the wit of a passage is felt because of the technique used or because of the thought contained; and if the force of the passage is found to arise from the thought, then we should want to know what is contributed by the technique and what is the relationship between technique and thought in so far as the force or effect of wit is concerned."

John Crowe Ransom (1968, p. 135) characterizes metaphysical poetry as the "most original and exciting, and intellectually perhaps the most seasoned, that we know in our literature" and also refers to the figures of speech, the "so-called 'conceits' that constitute its staple" (1968, p. 136).

Ransom also touches on ambiguity (1968, p. 134). "Figures of speech twist accident away from the straight course, as if to intimate astonishing lapses of rationality beneath the smooth surface of discourse, inviting perceptual attention, and weakening the tyranny of science over the senses." This is augmented by Allen Tate who finds that both metaphor and paradox culminate in the supreme poetry of "tension":

" . . . in metaphysical poetry the logical order is explicit; it must be coherent; the imagery by which it is sensuously embodied must have at least the appearance of logical determinism: perhaps the appearance only, because the varieties of ambiguity and contradiction possible beneath the logical

surface are endless . . . Here it is enough to say that the development of imagery by extension, its logical determinants being an Ariadne's thread that the poet will not permit us to lose, is the leading feature of the poetry called metaphysical" (Tate, 1968, p. 68). Although Tate finds in metaphor the most telling instance of tension, the "controlled distortions of literal representation" also contribute to a poetry of tension (1968, p. 69).

David Miller (1971, p. 153) has similarly commented on the demands made on the reader by metaphysical metaphor:

"Metaphysical metaphor demands a great deal of the reader. Not only must he, as in all metaphor, be aware of the tension which exists in each image, but he must store contradictory readings so that when the poem is finished he can combine the two, juxtapose the reading based upon muted imagery with the reading produced by his awareness of negatives. The result is metaphor in a large sense."

Some critics have been at pains to view metaphysical poetry as the psychological manifestation of a disturbed personality and a troubled age. Allen Tate has commented on this in the poetry of Donne and Dickinson:

"In Miss Dickinson, as in Donne, we may detect a singularly morbid concern not for religious truth, but for personal revelation. The modern word is self-exploitation. It is egoism grown irresponsible in religion and decadent in morals. In religion it is blasphemy; in society it means usually that

culture is not self-contained and sufficient, that the spiritual community is breaking up. This is . . . the perfect literary situation" (Tate, c. 1963, p. 23).

Sona Raiziss (1952, p. 59) similarly considers "the predicaments of a troubled epoch, as well as subtle crises in the personality of an individual artist" as congenial to metaphysical expression. This possibly gives rise to the characteristic mood of metaphysical verse which "is recognized by its repeatedly sardonic quality, restless disillusionments, irritable surfaces and stinging effects - and its terrible intuitions" (Raiziss, 1952, p. 561). The world of Donne, with its "new philosophy [that] calls all in doubt" ¹⁾ certainly constituted a puzzling age. While Emily Dickinson found exciting metaphors in the scientific upheaval of the Victorian age, her bewilderment and doubt were not caused so much by an age of transition as by the upheaval in her own personality. Like Jane Austen she could ignore the outside world, save for extricating from it those elements which constitute much of the poetic apparatus of metaphysical poetry.

Whether any really new interpretation of metaphysical poetry has emerged since Dr Johnson's attempts at definition is debatable. Critics, however, have recognized a style of writing which constitutes metaphysical poetry, and have established many of the techniques of metaphysical poetry as

1. An Anatomy of the World; The First Anniversary (Donne, 1966, p. 211, l. 205).

a kind of blueprint for the "best" kind of poetry. Brooks, for example, regards metaphysical poetry as "the condition toward which any poem tends in so far as it is successful" (Unger, 1950, p. 17). Emily Dickinson's maxim of "success in circuit lies", her pruned, understated verbal style, her macabre wit and expertise at reconciling the universal with the immediate, surely place her, at least in some poems, in the metaphysical tradition of the "best" poets.

CHAPTER THREE

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE METAPHYSICAL TRADITION: A CRITICAL POLEMIC

Most critics have been wary with regard to the problem of "classifying" Emily Dickinson's particular poetic eccentricities. Her mentor Higginson possibly initiated the feeling that there might be a metaphysical method to her particular brand of madness, when he referred to the following poem as having "a curious seventeenth-century flavor":

A death-blow is a life-blow to some,
Who, till they died, did not alive become;
Who, had they lived, had died, but when
They died, vitality begun (Higginson, 1891, p. 455).

Emily Dickinson herself played into the hands of avid source-seekers with a somewhat hazy (and misquoted) reference to Vaughan:

"'Twas noting some such Scene made Vaughn [sic] humbly say
'My Days are at best but dim and hoary' - I think it was
Vaughn - " (Higginson, 1891, p. 456).

Another tenuous link between the poet and her seventeenth-century predecessors is her transcription of two stanzas of Herbert's Matin Hymn; these verses were actually mistaken by one of Emily Dickinson's early publishers for her own work, and published by Millicent Todd Bingham in the first edition of Bolts of Melody:

My God, what is a heart,
Silver, or gold, or precious stone,
Or star, or rainbow, or a part
Of all these things - or all of them in one?

My God, what is a heart,
That thou shouldst it so eye and woo,
Pouring upon it all thy art
As if that thou hadst nothing else to do?

Klaus Lubbers (c.1968, p. 52) mentions the article by Arthur Chamberlain in the Boston Commonwealth, December 26, 1891. Chamberlain guardedly asserts a resemblance to the metaphysical school:

"Indeed, many of the poems seem survivals from the 'Fantastic School' so-called, for strange comparisons and singular conceits abound; but they are not idle bits of laborious commonplace fretted into unwholesome prominence; they are rather descriptions of almost scientific exactness."

While not venturing to compare the Amherst Nun with the then-maligned "Fantastic School", several critics recognized in her poetry a new piquancy. Ella Gilbert Ives in the Boston Transcript attacked the critics of Emily Dickinson who deprecated her "eccentricities, her blemishes, her crudities", and hailed her as "another proof of nature's fecundity, versatility, and

daring" (Wells, 1929, p. 256). ¹⁾

In 1918, Marsden Hartley, a rather amateur critic, briefly touched upon the metaphysical aspects of Emily Dickinson's poetry: ²⁾

"It was a charm unique in itself, not like any other genius then or now, or in the time before her, having perhaps a little of relationship to the crystal clearness of Crashaw - like Vaughan and Donne maybe in respect to their lyrical fervor and moral earnestness, nevertheless appearing to us freshly with as separate a spirit in her poetry as she herself was separated from the world around her" (Lubbers, c. 1968, p. 108).

"Lyrical fervor" and "moral earnestness" are hopefully lesser characteristics of metaphysical poetry, but Hartley's perception that Emily Dickinson was "like", yet "different" from Donne et. al., shows a certain perspicacity on the part of a critic who wrote of the same poet that "she was an intoxicated being, drunken with the little tipsy joys of the simplest form" (Lubbers, c. 1968, p. 108).

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1. Anna Mary Wells' reference is "an undated clipping in the collection of the Jones library." She also refers to the newspaper as the Boston Transcript. Blake and Wells (c. 1964, p. 71) however include the Ives article in their work The Recognition of Emily Dickinson. The article is entitled "Emily Dickinson: Her Poetry, Prose and Personality" and it appeared in the Boston Evening Transcript, Oct. 5, 1907.
 2. Marsden Hartley's criticism appeared in The Dial, 65:95 - 97, Aug. 1918.

The first intensive practical criticism came in 1924 with Conrad Aiken's introduction to the Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson. Lubbers (c.1968, p. 121) refers to it as "the showpiece of Dickinson criticism in the 1920's." The only reference to the metaphysical style occurs in Aiken's admiration for two poems, viz. My life closed twice before its close - (poem 1732) and I died for Beauty - (poem 449). Here Aiken remarks on Emily Dickinson's capacity for "a granite simplicity, any parallel to which one must seek in the seventeenth century" (Dickinson, 1924, p. xiv). ¹⁾

Much speculation as to Emily Dickinson's literary indebtedness has arisen from perusal of the Dickinson family library. Critics have eagerly pounced upon creased pages of Chambers' Cyclopaedia of English Literature, as well as pencil markings of certain lines of Vaughan's Early Rising and Prayer. However the poet's self-acknowledged distaste of copying should deter the most rabid literary sleuth. In a letter to Higginson she writes: "I marked a line in one verse because I met it after I made it, and never consciously touch a paint mixed by another person" (Higginson, 1891, p. 449). In yet another letter, however, she writes: "You inquire my books. For poets I have Keats, and Mr and Mrs Browning. For prose Mr Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne and the Revelations" (Higginson, 1891, p. 445). Anna Mary Wells, in a list compiled from the letters, adds the names of George Eliot, Poe, Hawthorne, De Quincey, Tennyson, Plato, Dante, the Brontës, Dickens, Wordsworth and Shakespeare (Wells, 1929, pp. 245 - 246).

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1. In a reprint of his Introduction in The Dial, April 1924, p. 307, Aiken refers to Not any sunny tone (poem 1674), instead of I died for Beauty -.

Judith Banzer, in an erudite and convincing article, "'Compound Manner': Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets" (1961), enumerates some of the sources which might have been instrumental in bringing Emily Dickinson into contact with the seventeenth-century poets. The Dickinson family had, according to Miss Banzer, access to both the Springfield Republican and the Atlantic Monthly, periodicals which published poetry and criticism of the metaphysical school. The writer traces parallels in both insight and technique between Emily Dickinson and the metaphysical poets:

"Emily's kinship with the metaphysical poets is remarkable. One suspects that it developed not simply through a creativity led by instinct and by Puritan and Transcendental forces to elect a meditative mode, but from a familiarity with that mode in the work of Donne, Marvell, and the rest" (Banzer, 1961, p. 424).

Themes of God, love and death are common to the poetry of both Donne and Dickinson; like Donne's poetry, many of Emily Dickinson's lines "convey a brilliant colloquial voice inflecting many moods, asserting the self that is its subject" (Banzer, 1961, p. 419).

Miss Banzer uncovers a similar relationship between Herbert and Dickinson in their use of empiric conceits and homely images of safe enclosure. The transcendent is expressed by both "in material conceits of orderliness and neat symmetry" (1961, p. 421).

A catalogue of the anthologies and periodicals which were accessible to Emily Dickinson, and which she may or may not have read, concludes the article, and the writer asserts:

"Emily Dickinson's control of her inmost thoughts in lean, colloquial, incandescent verse; her conviction that 'Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day' with its rare vibrations; her simultaneous analysis of earth and eternity compose the 'Compound Manner' that commits her to the metaphysical tradition. From the poets of this tradition she doubtless sought imaginative stimulus and an occasional technical lesson. Her genius and her poetry are unique, but her inner vision and unifying style link her with Donne, Marvell, Vaughan, and Herbert, poets who argued the community of all 'that which God doth touch and own'" (Banzer, 1961. p. 433).

Jack Capps, in Emily Dickinson's Reading; 1836 - 1886 (1966) devotes several pages to a possible link between Emily Dickinson and the metaphysicals. Several lines of The Church-Porch by Herbert have been marked in an edition of The Temple which belonged to Emily's sister-in-law, Sue, and Capps, despite the ownership of the volume, finds the lines characteristic of Emily's attitude: "Dare to look in thy chest; for 'tis thine own; And tumble up and down what thou find'st there" (Capps, 1966, p. 69). He also finds that the marked lines from Vaughan's Early Rising and Prayer in Chambers 'Cyclopaedia coincide with Emily Dickinson's attitude towards God. "And, in her writing of Jacob's wrestling with the angel, her Jacob, like Vaughan's, infers that his antagonist was surely God" (Capps, 1966, p. 70). Capps's final judgment is that Emily

Dickinson "proved highly susceptible to the imagery of the metaphysical poets and to the vocabulary of Sir Thomas Browne" (1966, p. 66).

Kriesberg (1965) however, contradicts Miss Banzer's statement that metaphysical poetry was featured in either the Springfield Republican or Atlantic Monthly. Judith Banzer states that Marvell's Bermudas and Herbert's Money were reprinted "at least three or four times respectively between 1858 and 1863, while Dr. Donne's Holy Sonnets and the devotional poems of 'holy Herbert' were applauded for their intent and reproved for 'fantastic conceits' in 1863" (1961, p. 426). Kriesberg (1965, p. 61) notes: "A search through the files of the Springfield Republican for 1859 - 1862, the relevant period for questions of influence, directly contradict Judith Banzer's statement that metaphysical poetry was reprinted in that newspaper . . . Nor is there any evidence that such poetry was featured on the pages of the Atlantic." In similar vein Joseph E. Duncan (1969, p. 77) dismisses the influence of Herbert's Mattens (sic) which appeared in the Springfield Daily Republican on October 28, 1876 and which was probably the source of Emily's transcription, as well as the 1880 letter to Higginson which quoted Vaughan. "The evidence is too little and too late - the flood tide of creation was over by 1865 - to reveal an influence."

Emily Dickinson's interest in Sir Thomas Browne has been noted before. Herbert E. Childs (1951) has traced Emily Dickinson's indebtedness to Browne, but is careful to stress her fastidiousness with regard to borrowing: "Careful readers of Emily

Dickinson's poems will probably agree that she was even more chary of using other people's words than were other poets" (Childs, 1951, p. 456). Childs does note certain "verbal echoes" of Sir Thomas Browne in her poetry, however, the most important being Emily's favourite word circumference; other possible loan-words are hermetic, atom, periphrasis, and the place names of Peru and Potosi as symbols of wealth. Emily Dickinson's phrase "freckled human nature" is analogous to Browne's "this speckled face of honesty in the world", while her predilection for the indefinite article where it is not usually found ("a clover", "a hay", "an ecstasy") is also traceable in Browne.

Childs finds both parallels and disparities in their modes of thought: Dickinson's poetry is a poetry of doubt, especially the religious poetry, while Browne "unhampered by Puritan doubts", had a kind of "laissez faire assurance" (Childs, 1951, p. 463). Childs (p. 463) asserts that Emily Dickinson read Browne to "bolster her faith with his calm certainty." Both writers found death a subject of morbid speculation; Dickinson's plethora of poems on the moment of death and the grave matching Browne's all-absorbing interest in bodily decay. It must be added that Browne was a doctor, his interest therefore scientific and professional. Unlike Browne and an earlier

philosopher-poet, Lucretius,¹⁾ Emily Dickinson fortunately ignored the more vermicular aspects of death.

Wit, paradox and the use of great words for humorous effect are common to both. "In spite of their essentially serious ideas both were witty souls. Like so many great humorists, they took a sidelong view of life. Each one had a favorite word which may well be used to describe this approach. In Browne the word is 'asquint': . . . Emily Dickinson used the word 'oblique' . . . The words epitomize their common habit of looking at human affairs indirectly in order to see therein life's ironic pathos and humorous incongruity" (Childs, 1951, p. 464).

Childs, although his essay is convincing, and his quotations evidence of meticulous scholarship, is equally careful not to commit himself with regard to Emily Dickinson's resemblance to Browne (1951, p. 460):

-
1. Sin ita sinceris membris ablata profugit
Ut nullas partis in corpore liquerit ex se,
Unde cadavera racenti iam viscere vermes
Expirant, atque unde animantum copia tanta
Exos et exsanguis tumidos perfluctuat artus?

(Lucretius: De Rerum Natura, III, ll. 717 - 721)

But if it (the soul) has been removed and fled from the limbs while still entire, so that it has left no part of itself in the body, how is it that corpses, when the flesh is now putrid, teem with worms, and how does so great a store of living creatures, boneless and bloodless, swarm over the heaving frame?

"Unless it is unmistakable, evidence from parallel passages must never be taken too seriously. This is particularly true when the passages consist of single words. I merely offer the foregoing examples . . . as an indication that Miss Dickinson's reading of Browne was apparently close enough so that echoes of his prose melodies haunt her verse."

Mary Elizabeth Barbot (1941, pp. 689 - 696) finds parallels, not in Browne or Donne, but in the works of contemporaries whom Emily Dickinson admired: the Reverend Charles Wadsworth and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. The writer however admits:

"That she ever consciously plagiarized with serious intent is irreconcilable with her fine sense of integrity, evidenced by a scrupulous acknowledgment in a letter to Higginson . . . That she sometimes unconsciously used others' ideas or phrases which had been absorbed into the rich depth of her mind appears evident; but always these 'echoes' bear unmistakably the characteristic stamp of her original style. Moreover, as Emerson says: 'Thought is the property of him who can entertain it; and of him who can adequately place it. A certain awkwardness marks the use of borrowed thoughts; but, as soon as we have learned what to do with them, they become our own'" (Barbot, 1941, p. 695).

This, of course, coincides with T.S. Eliot's view of the writer's "historical sense", which "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country

has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Eliot, 1955, p. 23).

James Davidson (1954, p. 141) notes: "Ever since Emily Dickinson's first official critic, the well-intentioned but baffled T.W. Higginson detected a metaphysical flavor in a certain poem, many have compared her poetry to that of the seventeenth century." This critic prefers to acknowledge the poet's indebtedness to the hymnist Isaac Watts. Several critics have pointed out that many of Emily Dickinson's poems are written in the ballad stanza, the "common metre" of the hymn books. Her adaptation of the rather uninspired hymnal metre of Watts has also been discussed at some length. Davidson (1954, p. 147) concedes that "it is rather difficult to lay examples of the two poets side by side, for Emily Dickinson's fire of imagination far surpasses Watts's modest talents." The following is possibly one of his most convincing citations:

My gracious God, how plain
Are thy directions giv'n!
O may I never read in vain,
But find the path to heaven.

(Watts)

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.

(Dickinson)

Davidson finds further parallels in the writers' employment of half-rhyme, and in particular the rhyming combination of given and heaven. He acknowledges the marked difference in their attitudes to God, but it is rather difficult to discern the "distillation . . . economy and twist of expression" (pp. 147 - 148) which he finds in the following lines by Watts:

Laid in the grave, like silly sheep,
Death feeds upon them there;
'Till the last trumpet breaks their sleep,
In terror and despair.

He concludes that "Watts's literary relationship with New England is rather complex. He was a representative of the dying Calvinism, but a Calvinism that becomes much gentler than its parent stock in his Hymns and Spiritual Songs. He also has a subtle relationship with the metaphysicals. He did most of his writing in the eighteenth century, and did it in regular verse forms; but he injects a certain passion into his work, combined with a mild contempt for rime, that is more akin to the metaphysicals than to the smooth, objective verse of the neo-classicists. Could it not be that much of what is regarded as metaphysical in Emily Dickinson is derived more from Watts than from the seventeenth-century poets?" (pp. 148 - 149).

With the emergence of the New Critics came a revival of interest in the poets of the seventeenth century. In 1932 Allen Tate discerned in Emily Dickinson "the perfect literary situation - in which is possible the fusion of sensibility and thought" (c.1963, p. 23).

He notes (c.1963, p.'23):

"Neither the feeling nor the style of Miss Dickinson belongs to the seventeenth century; yet between her and Donne there are remarkable ties. Their religious ideas, their abstractions, are momentarily toppling from the rational plane to the level of perception. The ideas, in fact, are no longer the impersonal religious symbols created anew in the heat of emotion, that we find in poets like Herbert and Vaughan. They have become, for Donne, the terms of personality; they are mingled with the miscellany of sensation. In Miss Dickinson, as in Donne, we may detect a singularly morbid concern, not for religious truth, but for personal revelation . . . "

One might fruitfully dispute Tate's views on style; one has to concede both Donne and Dickinson's very essence lies in the fusion of Eliot's "cerebral cortex" and Yeats's "marrow bone".¹⁾

Using Cleanth Brooks's definition of metaphysical poetry as that "in which the opposition of the impulses which are united is extreme", or "in which the poet attempts the reconciliation of qualities which are opposite or discordant in the extreme" (Brooks, 1939, pp. 42 - 43), Eunice Glenn (1943, pp. 574 - 588) concentrates on the mechanics of poetry rather than

1. Eliot, 1961, p. 290, and Yeats, W.B. A Prayer for Old Age.

laboured source-tracing, and her introduction, in typically new critical vein, shows her to be an acolyte of Brooks. She attacks the plethora of biographical, romantic and fragmentary criticism (much of it mere speculation), and turns instead to the complexity of experience found in the poetry. Brooks had previously pointed out Emily Dickinson and Hopkins as poets who transcended Victorianism and characterized their poetry by "the use of vigorous metaphor, the incorporation of the difficult and unpoetic, and the use of dramatic shifts of tone" as well as obscurity (1939, p. 241). Miss Glenn (1943, p. 576) is rather more vehement:

"What is the use of merely saying that Miss Dickinson possesses a vigor of mind that resists romantic treatment; that superb control of tone is one of her methods; that she makes free use of bold metaphor and paradox; that her poetry is characterized by a use of disparate materials and an exciting use of language? Or what is to be gained by picking out of her poems some of the more audacious metaphorical phrases like 'quartz contentment' and 'hour of lead,' or some of her paradoxical phrases, such as 'pale sustenance' or 'reticent volcano'? They would be meaningless without the full context; the work of any artist who uses language strictly is not to be judged by its parts. For purposes of convenience in the analysis of a poem such features as metaphor, paradox, and disparate materials must be separated; but they cannot be separated from the poems."

Eunice Glenn then analyses five poems in order of complexity. No rack can torture me is interesting because of its use of sharp and forceful imagery and paradox; Title divine is mine for paradox and skilful control of tone; He put the belt around my life - for imagery, complexity of tone and paradox. In I cannot live with you, which is considered "one of Emily Dickinson's finest poems", the touchstone is "unconventionality of attitude", metaphor, paradox and complexity of tone, while Because I could not stop for Death is praised for the use of heterogeneous material and the reconciliation of seemingly contradictory elements. Miss Glenn, however, cannot resist comparisons, and finds parallels between the poems of Emily Dickinson and Donne, Marvell and Lovelace. In conclusion she writes (1943, p. 588):

"The interaction of elements within a poem to produce an effect of reconciliation in the poem as a whole, which we have observed in these analyses, is the outstanding characteristic of 'Metaphysical' poetry . . . I have no intention of forcing this classification upon the poetry of Emily Dickinson . . . Indeed, I have no intention of forcing any classification upon her; I have tried to focus more upon the mechanics of her poetry. It seems fairly clear however, from the examination of a few of her typical poems that we have made that she is free from the limitations of the romantic poet, which she is generally mistaken to be. She does not employ metaphor only for illustration or decoration of some 'truth,' as the romantic poet usually does. She does not merely introduce an element of paradox, as the romantic poet tends to do; rather she succeeds in bringing it to the surface and in reconciling seemingly contradictory concepts. She does not use disparate materials

sparingly and put them down in juxtaposition without blending them, as the romantic poet is often inclined to do. And her liberty in the use of words would hardly be sanctioned by the typically romantic poet, for fear of being 'unpoetic' and not 'great' and 'beautiful.'

"The kind of unity, or reconciliation that we have been observing at work in these poems is chiefly responsible for their success. Proof of this is found in the fact that the few poems of Emily Dickinson's that are not successful show no evidence of the quality; and some others that are only partially successful show less of it. In this sense we are justified in referring to Emily Dickinson as a metaphysical poet."

F.O. Matthiessen (1945, pp. 584 - 597) voices a guarded opinion as to the influence of metaphysical poetry on Emily Dickinson, and says: "Since her revival coincided with our renewed taste for the 17th century metaphysicals, some critics wrote as though she was a conscious follower of Donne. But she had none of his sustained control over rhetoric, though she shared with Emerson and Thoreau their great liking for Browne and Herbert" (p. 593). Matthiessen finds, in her transcription of the stanzas of Herbert's Matins, an indication of "her kinship with some of his spiritual values and with his way of conveying them through the homeliest words" (p. 593).

Later, in 1952, Richard Chase notes: "Like Donne and Marvell, Emily Dickinson is capable as F.O. Matthiessen remarked, of 'thinking poetry.' Like them she uses the conceit. But the fact remains that she has too little of the elaborative weight and ingenuity of intellect of the seventeenth-century

poets to allow us to 'apply the word 'metaphysical,' without radical qualification, both to them and to her. Her conceits issue from a Calvinist psychology and are the properties of a 'rococo' style. They do not very closely accord with a style of English poetry which is, generally speaking, Anglican and baroque" (pp. 240 - 241).

Still later, in 1956, Sergio Baldi (1960, p. 445)¹⁾ sees Emily Dickinson as "metaphysical", "crepuscular", "Rococo" and "Parnassian". Metaphysical source-hunting, argues Baldi, has proved fruitless, and he considers the link between Emily Dickinson and the seventeenth century "an affinity of technical problems" (p. 446). "Certainly Emily Dickinson knew something of them [the metaphysicals] (if only by reading them at school) but, so far as I know, nothing has been found in Donne, Crashaw, Vaughan or Herbert, which suggests any direct imitation, only a certain 'spiritual affinity,' and this has been over-stressed . . . The English 'metaphysicals' set out from a spiritual experience, and whether this was of love or religion, the problem was always that of rendering a metaphysical experience in concrete terms. For Emily Dickinson it was the other way round: she wanted to interiorize, to 'instress' reality of feeling and sensation. She wanted, as she herself might have said, to 'find a meaning'" (Baldi, 1960, pp. 446 - 447). This is all very well, but Baldi fails to consider poems such as My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - (754) and A Clock stopped - (287) where spiritual "problems" are concretized by the use of startling and carefully contrived conceits.

1. Although the article was written in 1956, it was only published in Sewanee Review in 1960.

Joseph E. Duncan (1969, pp. 77 - 88), in one of the most pithy and succinct of the essays in the Dickinson/metaphysical polemic, also refutes any direct metaphysical influence, but reaches the heart of the matter with his acknowledgement that her work "is strikingly illuminated when examined in terms of metaphysical techniques" (p. 77). He states: "There is no reason to doubt her when she asserts, 'I . . . never consciously touch a paint mixed by another person,' but to study and enjoy her own paints in the light of our knowledge of the metaphysicals provides some new insight into her original and distinctive achievements" (pp. 77 - 78).

Duncan notes similarities between Emily Dickinson and the metaphysicals: her habit of transposing an experience into new terms in a different realm of being, and her witty, mischievous, or naive tone in a serious context (p. 78). He also points out that she had no system of the universe, sharing the traditional view that part of man's duty "was to study God's plan of the world through analyzing the world's diversity" (p. 78). She explores poetic concepts in mathematical and spatial terms, often paradoxically. "Agony and bliss are measured in units of space and time, but the universe of space and time is experienced and understood through agony and bliss" (p. 78). He pinpoints the essential differences between a nineteenth and seventeenth century poet, writing in two completely diverse eras. "Although in reducing ideas and feelings to bare abstractions she approached the geometrical figures of Donne and Marvell, she went much further, and maintained a detached scientific view more consistently. Much of her poetry could have been written only by one who took the post-Newtonian universe for

granted" (p. 79). Analogous to this is her use of the conceit as a poetic metaphor, and Duncan (1969, p. 79) finds that her "poetic statements, often definitions, are exact, concise, logical, and often mathematical." In contrast to her scientific approach, "Miss Dickinson's second controlling interpretation of her material was rooted in traditional Christian symbols and correspondences. Her affinities with the metaphysicals would suggest this incarnational and sacramental approach, and it occurs boldly enough - but with her own distinctive flavor" (Duncan, 1969, p. 82).

Besides scientific conceits, much of her imagery is derived from ordinary experience - circuses, guns, clothing and house-keeping. The juxtaposition of the familiar with the mysterious, the use of paradox and wit are other elements which Dickinson has in common with the seventeenth century, although Duncan finds "only a trace of the witty grotesquerie of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals" in her work (p. 87). Careful search reveals a good deal more.

Irony is central to her work, and the complexity of her poetry "comes from her playing one sphere of knowledge and experience against a very different one and from her simultaneously holding quite different attitudes toward a subject" (Duncan, 1969, p. 87).

Duncan concludes his approbation of Emily Dickinson by viewing her not as an imitator of the seventeenth century, but an innovator. "Although Miss Dickinson was evidently not influenced directly by the seventeenth-century metaphysicals, there is a metaphysical approach at the heart of her work that

reveals much about her deepest inner life and thus, too, much about the original and distinctive poetry that sprang from this" (Duncan, 1969, p. 88).

Although the avid source-tracer might find parallels between the work of Emily Dickinson and that of the poets of the seventeenth century, these correspondences are possibly merely fortuitous. When reading Donne, or Herbert, or Vaughan, or Marvell, one realizes a similarity of perception and poetic craft, and an understanding of the mechanics and techniques of the recondite metaphysicals of the seventeenth century can only help to illuminate the work of this frequently abstruse poet. In 1960 an eminent critic ¹⁾ of Emily Dickinson's poetry wrote: "To study it intensively, to stare a hole in the page until these apparently cryptic notations yield their full meanings - this is the great challenge to modern readers." An attempt to explicate the poetry of Emily Dickinson in terms of the agile devices of the metaphysicals might be a more fruitful approach.

1. Anderson, 1963, p. xiv.

CHAPTER FOUR

WIT

Tell me, O tell, what kinde of thing is Wit,
Thou who Master art of it.
For the First Matter loves Variety less;
Less Women love't, either in Love or Dress.
A thousand different shapes it bears,
Comely in thousand shapes appears.
Yonder we saw it plain; and here 'tis now,
Like Spirits in a Place, we know not How.

(Cowley: Ode On Wit)

One of the reasons why the concept of wit is somewhat difficult to define, is that it has suffered certain modifications in meaning through the ages. Aristotle advocated the use of surprise, antithesis, deception and the pun as stylistic devices in his Rhetoric (Duncan, 1969, p. 14), while Cicero distinguished between humorous jests, and jests of elegance and scholarship in On Oratory and Orators, II (Duncan, 1969, p. 14). This wit depended on urbanity and learning, and was closely allied to logic. In the Middle Ages wit frequently referred to the senses, rather than the intellect, as in the five wits, but later came to denote a quickness of intellect: "The mind-faculty of thinking and reasoning in general, intellectual ability, sagacity" (O.E.D.). In the seventeenth century wit was associated with the unexpected combining of previously unconnected ideas or expressions. "Intellect, reason, powerful mental capacity, cleverness, ingenuity, intellectual quickness, invective and constructive ability, a talent for uttering brilliant things, the power of amusing surprise" were qualities of seventeenth-century wit (Martz, 1966, p. 46), and it was no longer seen as the

ornament of a work, but "as its soul and quintessence" (Duncan, 1969, p. 15). Samuel Johnson considered the discordia concors central to wit (1900, pp. 24 - 25):

"But Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they [the metaphysical poets] have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased."

A couple of centuries later T.S. Eliot saw the amalgamation of "disparate experience" as central to witty poetry (1961, p. 287):

"When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."

According to Eliot and Brooks, complexity of tone and subtlety of attitude are also intrinsic to metaphysical wit and to the "best" poetry. Brooks, for example, sees wit "as an

awareness of the multiplicity of possible attitudes toward a given situation" (1949, p. 230). This form of wit is more difficult to discern than the acute perception of analogies, as the sophistication of this device leaves a certain doubt as to the poet's true attitude towards his subject.

Emily Dickinson's flair for the comic is well illustrated in her correspondence. Her humour ranges from the homely, as in the "twenty-four Dickinson hens, who do nothing as vulgar as lay an egg", to slightly more vitriolic village gossip. In writing of a local lady of ample girth, for example: "There is that which is called an 'awakening' in the church, and I know of no choicer ecstasy than to see Mrs [Sweetser] roll out in crape every morning, I suppose to intimidate antichrist; at least it would have that effect on me" (Letter 389. To Louise and Frances Norcross, Late April, 1873. Dickinson, 1958, pp. 505 - 506). Her wit could on occasion verge on the macabre and blasphemous; in a letter of condolence to a friend whose father died on her wedding-day, she assures the young woman that few girls could receive the immortality of a father for a wedding gift (Letter 740. To Mrs J.G. Holland, December, 1881. Dickinson, 1958, p. 780).

George F. Whicher (c. 1963, p. 41) describes Emily Dickinson's wit as follows:

"The habit of combining small and great was ingrained in Emily Dickinson to such an extent that she instinctively employed it again and again in her most serious poems. When, reversing the humorous device of using the grand to express the trivial,

she projected a tremendous meaning into a homely image, she not infrequently laid herself open to the suspicion of making light of sacred things or of sporting with tender feelings. But in all probability she had no thought of being flippant. A way of speaking that might afford amusement if applied to light or indifferent subjects remained her constant manner even when she dealt with her most piercing memories and profound reflections. She was able to separate any circumstance or idea at will from the sentiment normally attached to it, and thus make available for artistic use what otherwise would shock or dazzle the mind into inarticulateness."

Much of Emily Dickinson's wit is startling in its apparent irreverence, as in the poem where she apologizes to God for His duplicity. The poem takes the form of a prayer, thereby intensifying the irony:

"Heavenly Father" - take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid Hand
In a moment contraband -
Though to trust us - seem to us
More respectful - "We are Dust" -
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity -

(Poem 1461)

In a peculiarly vehement love poem, the poet declares the impossibility of the two lovers meeting in heaven, for her lover's face would eclipse that of Christ:

Nor could I rise - with You -
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus' -

(Poem 640)

In another poem her love surpasses Christ's love:

So well that I can live without -
I love thee - then How well is that?
As well as Jesus?
Prove it me
That He - loved Men -
As I - love thee -

(Poem 456)

In There is a Languor of the Life (no. 396), God is portrayed as a surgeon in a manner reminiscent of Eliot in East Coker:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

(Eliot, 1944, p. 20)

The Dickinson poem is enveloped in irony, for the ministrations of the heavenly surgeon produce "no Vitality":

The Surgeon - does not blanch - at pain -
His Habit - is severe -
But tell him that it ceased to feel -
The Creature lying there -

And he will tell you - skill is late -
A Mightier than He -
Has ministered before Him -
There's no Vitality.

(Poem 396)

In Those - dying then . . . there is the shocking image of God's amputated hand. The surgical image incisively demonstrates the poet's alienation from God:

Those - dying then,
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -

(Poem 1551)

Whicher, with a whimsical turn of phrase, comes close to defining Emily Dickinson's wit (c. 1963, p. 43):

"It startles us in an unexpected phrase or epithet and is gone before we know it, as though a bird in flight had slightly lowered an eyelid at us." A tentative classification of the poet's kinds of wit, although not entirely satisfactory, proves useful, although the elusive quality of the wit persists. I have appropriated (with some additions) Williamson's classification of Donne's modes of wit (1961, p. 25 ff.).

Much of Emily Dickinson's wit depends on Johnson's heterogeneous ideas yoked together by violence, the combination of disparate elements which "pleases by its mental ingenuity, and

. . . by its imaginative shock" (Williamson, 1961, p. 27).
Emily Dickinson achieves this in various ways.

In the first instance Emily Dickinson employs the sudden and unexpected contrast of words for rhetorical shock. Duncan (1969, p. 86) finds a resemblance between Emily Dickinson and Crashaw in the use of oxymoron. "Almost her only resemblance to Crashaw was in her use of oxymoron. She referred to a 'Gay, Ghastly Holiday,' an 'Ethereal Blow,' a 'piercing Virtue' and a 'piercing Comfort,' and to a 'Bliss like Murder' and a 'Bliss to cauterize.'" The proximity of opposites found its expression in poems such as 'Tis so appalling - it exhilarates - and 'Tis Anguish grander than Delight. The surprise of a paradox in an opening line, such as Forever - is composed of Nows, had a pervasive appeal. In I cannot live with You - (no. 640), the poet has eyes only for her lover, and Paradise is dismissed as a "sordid excellence":

Because You saturated Sight -
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise . . .

One of Emily Dickinson's strongest metaphors appears in poem 286, and demonstrates her supremacy as mistress of the macabre:

The possibility - to pass
Without a Moment's Bell -
Into Conjecture's presence -
Is like a Face of Steel -
That suddenly looks into ours
With a metallic grin -
The Cordiality of Death -
Who drills his Welcome in -

As in How many times these low feet staggered - (no. 187), the workshop imagery reinforces the idea of the invincibility of death, although in more macabre terms. In the final two lines the wit is dependent on the violent contrast of words:

The Cordiality of Death -
Who drills his Welcome in -

As in Because I could not stop for Death - (no. 712), death has "Civility" - it is seen as cordial and urbane. The grating insistence of "drills" forms an ironic contrast to the urbane caller who is not invited, but who brooks no opposition; death here is the supreme gatecrasher.

In a poem which contrasts the vitality and brashness of everyday occurrences with the death of a loved one, the poet comments that

'Twas comfort in her Dying Room
To hear the living Clock -

(Poem 1703)

A sense of normality is combined with the irony of the mechanical timepiece surpassing the human one - the failing heart.

Allied to the wit of the juxtaposition of words is what Duncan calls the "most prominent feature of her style, a juxtaposition of the abstract, often Latinate words with concrete, usually Saxon ones; a fusion (that is to say) of the two main tones of her wit-writing, the academic and the colloquial" (1965, p. 63).

Presentiment - is that long Shadow - on the Lawn -
Indicative that Suns go down -

(Poem 764)

Here the "use of Latinate words has added a dimension of generality, so that the lines convey to us not only the shudder of an immediate experience but also the universal force of a definition" (Duncan, 1965, p. 63). Northrop Frye speaks of her use of "aureate diction", - "big soft bumbling abstract words that absorb images into categories and ideas" (1970, p. 21), while Archibald MacLeish (c. 1963, p. 153) says that abstractions like Grace and Bliss and Balm and Crown and Peninsula and Circumference - "the most abstract of abstractions and capitalized as well" are "turned into sensual counterweights that feel in the hand like images even if they can't be seen." This kind of wit renders images like the one below, where the soothing polysyllables of "deciduous" form a glaring contrast (in sound and meaning) to the line which follows and ends on the harsh, monosyllabic "die":

Forever is deciduous -
Except to those who die -

(Poem 1422)

A similar effect may be discerned in:

When Flesh and Spirit sunder
In Death's Immediately.

(Poem 1420)

Pervasive attempts at definition gave rise to strangely logical oddities like the following:

When Bells stop ringing - Church - begins -
The Positive - of Bells -
When Cogs - stop - that's Circumference
The Ultimate - of Wheels.

(Poem 633)

She also inquires:

Did life's penurious length
Italicize its sweetness . . .

(Poem 1717)

Her love for the unattainable is designated an "ablative estate" (nos. 1741 and 1744).

William Howard (1957, p. 240), wisely admonishes that not all of her words are to be taken too seriously. Examples of poems which contain a plethora of grandiose words are How happy is the little Stone (1510), His oriental heresies (1526), These are the Nights that Beetles love - (1128), A Spider sewed at Night (1138) and The pedigree of Honey (1627). These are mostly playful poems on natural objects. However Emily Dickinson's mingling of grandiose and resonant words such as esoteric, ornithology, perihelion and periphrasis with the solid earthiness of sod, duds, bog, and tippler, and the

colloquial heft, and checks,¹⁾ is consistent with metaphysical wit.²⁾

"Donne shocks the eye and ear with homely words and colloquial turns of phrase, and surprises with the contrast of learned words; but his staple vocabulary is characterized by the purity common to the seventeenth-century lyric. Such colloquial phrases as 'For Godsake hold your tongue,' 'And wee said nothing, all the day,' or 'What I will say, I will not tell thee now' are numerous and typical; such homely words as whining, rags, snorted, and itchy mark even his love songs and divine poems; and learned words like interinanimates, hydroptique, sublunary, trepidation come into the music of his finest verse.

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1. Cf. Frye, 1970, pp. 22 - 23: "The tang of her local speech comes out in such spellings as 'Febuary' and 'boquet,' in such locutions as 'it don't' and 'it is him,' and in such words as 'heft' for 'weight.' Speaking of heaven, she writes

Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the Checks were given -

meaning railway checks, the guarantee the conductor gives that one is proceeding to the right destination." Emily Dickinson could have used the more poetic chart, as preferred by her early editors, "but preferred to form her diction at a humorously twisted angle to the conventional expectations of the reader."

2. T.S. Eliot, whose verse reveals many metaphysical characteristics, displays a similar regard for polysyllabic words, as in Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service, where polyphiloprogenitive (how Emily Dickinson would have appreciated that one), superfetation and polymath appear cheek by jowl with "Sweeney shifts from ham to ham/Stirring the water in his bath."

Both his words and phrases vary from the simple and realistic to the fantastic and bizarre . . . " (Williamson, 1961, pp. 45 - 47).

Yet many of Emily Dickinson's poems verge on the ridiculous rather than the sublime, as the two poems below, with their plethora of grandiose words, will demonstrate:

Their dappled importunity
Disparage or dismiss -
The Obloquies of Etiquette
Are obsolete to Bliss -

(Pöem 1611)

The Lassitudes of Contemplation
Beget a force
They are the spirit's still vacation
That him refresh -
The Dreams consolidate in action -
What mettle fair

(Poem 1592)

The attentive reader will find a superfluity of examples, and one must agree with Northrop Frye (1970, p. 22):

"The result is not invariably success: sometimes we may agree with enthusiasm

How powerful the Stimulus
Of an Hermetic Mind -

at other times we can only say, with the captain in Pinafore confronted with a similar type of gnomic utterance: 'I don't see at what you're driving, mystic lady.'"

Emily Dickinson's wit may also be discerned in the sudden juxtaposition of ideas. Like Blake, she finds in God's "Perturbless Plan" a certain ambivalence - He is "God of the Manacle", as well as God of the "Free" (no. 728). The mystery of Blake's lamb and tiger is tinged with a sardonic wit and a touch of legality:

How ruthless are the gentle -
How cruel are the kind -
God broke his contract to his Lamb
To qualify the Wind -

(Poem 1439)

Her attitude to God is succinctly contained in the brief lines:

Burglar! Banker - Father!
I am poor once more!

(Poem 49)

God is seen as a burglar, depriving the poet of her loved ones, as a banker, who sometimes reimburses her, and finally, with a rather strained cry of belief, as "Father". The tone of the poem is rendered complex by the juxtaposition of contradictions.

In another poem she presents an ironic reversal of man's aspirations to heaven, for his attachment to life is stronger. The Maker's "Cordial visage" is shunned:

Drowning is not so pitiful
As the attempt to rise.
Three times, 'tis said, a sinking man
Comes up to face the skies,
And then declines forever
To that abhorred abode,
Where hope and he part company -
For he is grasped of God,
The Maker's cordial visage,
However good to see,
Is shunned, we must admit it,
Like an adversity.

(Poem 1718)

A Miltonic admiration for Satan occurs in the somewhat trite poem 1479. The contrasts stress the proximity of good and evil, and the poet playfully concludes that were the devil not perfidious, he would be "thoroughly divine":

The Devil - had he fidelity
Would be the best friend -
Because he has ability -
But Devils cannot mend -
Perfidy is the virtue
That would but he resign
The Devil - without question
Were thoroughly divine.

Frequently the juxtaposition of opposites culminates in a mere poetic exercise. Dickinson's poem no. 689 resembles Eliot's East Coker in imagery, although the Eliot poem is sacramental in connotation:

The chill ascends from feet to knees,
 The fever sings in mental wires.
 If to be warmed, then I must freeze
 And quake in frigid purgatorial fires
 Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars.

(Eliot, 1944, p. 21)

The Zeroes - taught us - Phosphorus -
 We learned to like the Fire
 By playing Glaciers - when a Boy -
 And Tinder - guessed - by power
 Of Opposite - to balance Odd -
 If White - a Red - must be!
 Paralysis - our Primer - dumb -
 Unto Vitality!

(Poem 689)

The "compulsion of a neutral term into a powerful metaphorical relation" (Williamson, 1961, p. 29) may be discerned in Emily Dickinson's manipulation of wit. Examples of this "neutral term" are the belt, in He put the Belt around my life - (273), the gun in My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - (754), and the tent in I've known a Heaven, like a Tent - (243). The wit is dependent on both the surprise of incongruity and detailed elaboration - Eliot's touchstone of "tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace" (1961, p. 293). In the work of Emily Dickinson the analytic mind is always keenly at work, and the following poem epitomizes Johnson's objection to the metaphysical poets:

"Their attempts were always analytick; they broke every image into fragments: and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature, or the scenes of life, than he, who dissects a sun-beam with a

prism, can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer day" (Johnson, 1900, pp. 25 - 26). Anderson discerns an allusion to Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici, where the anatomist carved up a cadaver to find the seat of the soul. His failure to discover the soul led to the conclusion that there exists "something in us that can be without us, and will be after us" (Anderson, 1963, p. 90). The Dickinson poem is, of course, ironical:

Split the Lark - and you'll find the Music -
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled -
Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning
Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.

Loose the Flood - you shall find it patent -
Gush after Gush, reserved for you -
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?

(Poem 861)

Allied to her use of the conceit is the wide range of material from which Emily Dickinson drew her perception of analogies, ranging from the rigour of mathematics to the homeliness of brooms and buckets. ¹⁾

The imaginative distance between the elements united in Emily Dickinson's yoking of heterogeneous ideas, contributes largely to her wit. Sometimes this is successful, as in the image of the funeral of God in poem 945:

1. The conceit and the diversity of Emily Dickinson's imagery are fully discussed in the chapter on imagery.

When it is lost, that Day shall be
The Funeral of God,
Upon his Breast, a closing Soul
The Flower of our Lord.

In poem 836 the shocking image of the death of God strengthens
the notion of the enduring nature of truth:

Truth - is as old as God -
His Twin identity
And will endure as long as He
A Co-Eternity -

And perish on the Day
Himself is borne away
From Mansion of the Universe
A lifeless Deity.

We find a similar image in Donne:

Who sees God's face, that is self life, must die;
What a death were it then to see God die?

(Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.
Donne, 1966, p. 279)

When Emily Dickinson compares clouds to listless elephants, one
is tempted to recall Eliot's comatose evening sky.¹⁾ The conno-
tation at which the poet aims is that of sombre, heavy clouds.
The image is adroit, but it is not altogether just; the semantic

1. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.

gap is too wide:

On this long storm the Rainbow rose -
On this late Morn - the Sun -
The clouds - like listless Elephants -
Horizons - straggled down -

(Poem 194)

"Substitution of simple concrete terms for the abstract ones actually intended was her strategy for achieving vivid immediacy, and the opposite for giving transcendent value to the homely" (Anderson, 1963, p. 32). This could be achieved with laconic succinctness:

If my Bark sink
'Tis to another sea -
Mortality's Ground Floor
Is Immortality -

(Poem 1234)

Her desire for concretization could touch the very quick, with an image like "An Omen in the Bone/Of Death's tremendous nearness - " (no. 532). The elusive quality of fame is

. . . the tint that Scholars leave
Upon their Setting Names -
The Iris not of Occident
That disappears as comes -

(Poem 866)

The office of the future is to execute "Fate's - Telegram" (672) while the reticence of grief is portrayed in the homely image

of a mouse, sheltering behind the wainscot of the breast (no. 793). ¹⁾ Fame, too, is "fickle food/Upon a shifting plate", which crows ignore but which men find tempting (no. 1659). Her commitment to a life of seclusion produced the following fine poem:

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see -
Tomorrow and Today -
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 -

(Poem 827)

Her personifications have a vivid piquancy much in the manner of Donne's addressing the sun as a "saucy pedantic wretch". ²⁾

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1. T.S. Eliot is fond of the image of the mouse behind the wainscot, cf. Little Gidding:

Dust inbreathed was a house -
The wall, the wainscot and the mouse . . .

and East Coker:

And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots

2. The Sun Rising.

In a poem commenting on her dependence on her lover, she says that the world without him would be:

The Heavens stripped -
Eternity's vast pocket, picked -
(Poem 587)

In I know some lonely Houses off the Road (289) she creates a sense of foreboding in a playful fashion:

A pair of Spectacles ajar just stir -
An Almanac's aware -
Was it the Mat - winked,
Or a Nervous Star?
The Moon - slides down the stair,
To see who's there.'

More jocularly:

The Clouds their Backs together laid
The North begun to push
The Forests galloped till they fell
The Lightning played like mice
The Thunder crumbled like a stuff
How good to be in Tombs
Where Nature's Temper cannot reach
Nor missile ever comes
(Poem 1172)

There is the startling immediacy of a bird throwing a tantrum!
(376):

Of Course - I prayed -
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird - had stamped her foot -
And cried "Give Me" -

Joseph E. Duncan (1969, p. 83) notes that "she compared the bee, the butterfly, and the breeze to the holy Trinity, robins to angels, and the mushroom to Judas Iscariot." The Jay, too, has the mien of a magistrate, and sits a "Bough like a Brigadier" (1177).

More irreverently, God permits "industrious Angels - Afternoons - to play -" (231), Seraphs "swing their snowy Hats" (214), while the "Grave Saints" show their dimples (476). Although one recalls some of Donne's more audacious epithets, her treatment of the heavenly host has a wit and temerity reminiscent of Byron's Vision of Judgment.

"It would be interesting to inquire concerning such a bold experimenter with words whether her distinction does not derive from the very élan with which she drove forward out of the verbal doldrums in which she found herself" (Anderson, 1963, p. 32). This élan may be encountered in her startling combination of the familiar with the mysterious. Frequently the image is sartorial, as in many of Herbert's poems. Emily Dickinson finds comfort

In passing Calvary -
To note the fashions - of the Cross -
And how they're mostly worn -

(Poem 561).

In Herbert's Dawning, Christ's passion and His mercy are translated into man's dependence on such a utilitarian article as a handkerchief:

Christ left his grave-clothes that we might, when
Draws tears, or blood, not want a handkerchief.^{grief}

(Enright, 1968, p. 145)

Comparing Crashaw's On our crucified Lord, Naked, and bloody with Emily Dickinson's poem no. 322, one feels that Dickinson's familiarity with the metaphysical poets has not been exaggerated:

Thee with thy selfe they have too richly clad,
Opening the purple wardrobe of thy side

(Willy, c. 1971, p. 83)

The time was scarce profaned, by speech -
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament,
The Wardrobe - of our Lord -

(Poem 322)

God, too, is seen as an old neighbour (623), while angels
"rent the House next ours,/Wherever we remove - " (1544).

A humorous poem on an eclipse of the sun (with possible overtones of death), shows God's watch to be wrong:

Sunset at Night - is natural -
But Sunset on the Dawn
Reverses Nature - Master -
So Midnight's - due - at Noon.

Eclipses be - predicted -
And Science bows them in -
But do one face us suddenly -
Jehovah's Watch - is wrong.

(Poem 415)

Death is seen as an urbane courtier, come to take the lady for a ride in his carriage. There is a gentle but horrifying irony in the opening lines - for all its gentility death is implacable:

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -

(Poem 712)

The alliance of levity and seriousness which Eliot considers a characteristic of metaphysical wit, may be discerned in Emily Dickinson's poetry. The levity is frequently characterized by a flippant attitude towards serious subjects and sacred things. Duncan (1969, p. 24) notes that the "metaphysical poets themselves were sometimes troubled in glimpsing a cleavage between the scintillating exhibition of wit and the expression of the deeply serious." Donne suggested that wit and elegance were not consistent with sacred matters (Duncan, 1969, p. 25) and wrote in A Litanie:

When we are mov'd to seeme religious
Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us.

Duncan (1969, p. 25) notes that George Herbert regarded wit and seriousness as congenial complements. "He wrote conceited Latin verse on his mother's death, addressed two witty sonnets to God, and treated religious subjects with the 'false wit' later ridiculed by Addison." The levity of wit, however, came to be recognized as a means of intensifying seriousness, and wit a "decorous means of expressing deep truths effectively" (Duncan, 1969, p. 26). Although Donne questioned wit, he was not above a

jibe at the souls at resurrection, seeking, of all things,
their lost teeth.' (Duncan, 1969, p. 23) :

But name not Winter-faces, whose skin's slack;
Lank, as an unthrift's purse; but a soul's sack;
Whose eyes seek light within, for all here's shade;
Whose mouths are holes, rather worn out, than made;
Whose every tooth to a several place is gone,
To vex their souls at Resurrection;
Name not these living Death's-heads unto me,
For these, not ancient, but antique be.

(The Autumnal. Donne, 1966, p. 125)

That this gruesome description is embodied in a poem addressed as a compliment to a lady, is a blatant example of the combination of levity and seriousness, the levity verging on the macabre.

Emily Dickinson has holy ghosts displayed in cages like freaks at a sideshow:

A transport one cannot contain
May yet a transport be -
Though God forbid it lift the lid -
Unto its Ecstasy.'

A Diagram - of Rapture!
A sixpence at a Show -
With Holy Ghosts in Cages!
The Universe would go.'

(Poem 184)

The mystery of the universe is dismissed in the following flippant tones, which, if anything, intensify the poet's real attitude to the negligibility of life:

It's easy to invent a Life -
God does it - every Day -
Creation - but the Gambol
Of His Authority -

It's easy to efface it -
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity -

The Perished Patterns murmur -
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed - inserting Here - a Sun -
There - leaving out a Man -

(Poem 724)

The "Perturbless Plan" appears a casual one, and the picture of God verges on blasphemy. At the same time there is an attitude of awe at the power that can so nonchalantly

Proceed - inserting Here - a Sun -
There - leaving out a Man -

The tone of the poem therefore reveals a certain complexity not apparent in a cursory reading.

In an unfinished poem Dickinson uses the image of the impoverished millionaire in the manner of Eliot in East Coker:¹⁾

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1. Cf. Blamires, c. 1969, p. 68. Blamires remarks on Eliot's attachment to the work of Sir John Davies. The "image of a patrimony squandered by the Fall of Man occurs in Sir John Davies's Nosce Teipsum." Could Eliot's "ruined millionaire" have its origin in Emily Dickinson? To the best of my knowledge no critic has commented on the resemblance between the Dickinson and Eliot poems.

The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

(Eliot, 1944, p. 21)

Paradise is that old mansion
Many owned before -
Occupied by each an instant
Then reversed the Door -
Bliss is frugal of her Leases
Adam taught her Thrift
Bankrupt once through his excesses -

(Poem 1119)

Here again one notes the combination of the familiar with the unfamiliar in "Paradise is that old mansion", while the legal terminology resembles the imagery of Donne and Herbert.

In poem 1195 the poet states that she will

. . . vote for Lands with Locks
Granted I can pick 'em -
Transport's doubtful Dividend
Patented by Adam.

Frequently the poet oversteps the bounds of propriety (as does Crashaw in the fifth stanza of The Weeper, for example), and the result is just a little too glib; a good example is where she is crowned in Heaven:

He'll take it - scan it - step aside -
Return - with such a crown
As Gabriel - never capered at -
And beg me put it on-

And then - he'll turn me round and round -
To an admiring sky -
As one that bore her Master's name -
Sufficient Royalty!

(Poem 336)

The hazards of the soul's final destination are wittily recorded in the language of democracy:

Soul, Wilt thou toss again?
By just such a hazard
Hundreds have lost indeed -
But tens have won an all -

Angel's breathless ballot
Lingers to record thee -
Imps in eager Caucus
Raffle for my Soul!

(Poem 139)

One of Emily Dickinson's most powerful poetic metaphors is found in poem 1612:

The Auctioneer of Parting
His "Going, going, gone"
Shouts even from the Crucifix,
And brings his Hammer down -
He only sells the Wilderness,
The prices of Despair
Range from a single human Heart
To Two - not any more -

The "going, going, gone" of the auctioneer is a bizarre equivalent of irredeemable finality, made more jarring by the hammer strokes. The auctioneer's hammer is merged with the hammer which drove the nails into Christ's body. The flippancy of the auctioneer image in no way affects its seriousness, and

the cry of the auctioneer is the despairing cry of doom. "This poem comprises the most remarkable pun in nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature . . . What is being sold, what is 'Going,' is gone-ness itself. What is being knocked down from the cross - and the verbal play makes that horrific extension inescapable - is death, the symbolic last parting of all . . . The purchaser cannot back out, he must take possession of what he has bought" (Anderson, 1963, p. 197).

The full implication of the poem is obscure, for the last lines indicate a love-separation, while the "Going, going, gone" becomes a parody of Christ's cry from the Cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?", indicating separation from God. The poet's equation of Christ's separation from the Father with her separation from her lover is violently shocking. Combined with the imaginative shock of the opening lines and the expanded conceit, one discerns an analytical tone in the final lines, much in the manner of Donne.¹⁾ "The powerful conceit reaches its climax in the second line, the devastation spends itself in the center, and the force of both is dissipated in the cool air

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1. Cf. Cox, 1968b, p. 102: "Even more remarkable are the transitions of tone in a few lines of the same poem: Lovers infinitenesse, for example, begins on a note of simple tenderness, passes through a bewildering series of doubts and suspicions, worked out in riddling casuistry, and returns at the end to more wholehearted expressions of love. Aire and Angels, in its second stanza, moves from conventional hyperbolic adoration of beauty to insolent disparagement of women's capacity for feeling. The effect is always that of hearing a particular tone of voice rather than of merely following words on a page."

of calculation at the end. The violent emotion comes to rest here in quiet analysis, it is true, but this is the mood that creates her best poems on the extremity of pain" (Anderson, 1963, pp. 197 - 198). The virtue of never "taking a subject too seriously or too lightly" (Eliot, 1961, p. 304) is clearly revealed in this poem, where levity and seriousness are consummately blended.

This leads one to the characteristic of Emily Dickinson's poetry which Eliot describes as the "constant inspection and criticism of experience . . . which . . . involves . . . a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible" (1961, p. 303).¹⁾ Archibald MacLeish (c. 1963, pp. 156 - 157) quotes the following as an example:

She bore it till the simple veins
Traced azure on her hand -
Till pleading, round her quiet eyes
The purple Crayons stand.

Till Daffodils had come and gone
I cannot tell the sum,
And then she ceased to bear it -
And with the Saints sat down.

(Poem 144)

"Here again, as so often in her poems of death - and death is, of course, her familiar theme - the margin between mawkishness

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1. I have preferred to discuss this characteristic under the chapter on wit. It could, of course, also fall under the heading of ambiguity in the chapter on irony.

and emotion is thin, so thin that another woman, living as she lived in constant contemplation of herself, might easily have stumbled through. What saves her, and saves the poem is the tone: 'She bore it till . . . ' 'And then she ceased to bear it - /And with the Saints sat down.' If you have shaped your mouth to say 'And with the Saints sat down' you cannot very well weep for yourself or for anyone else, veins azure on the hand or not" (MacLeish, c. 1963, pp. 156 - 157).

Here the transition from eloquence to bald statement is consummately made. MacLeish concludes: "A morbid art is an imperfect art" (c. 1963, p. 157). Emily Dickinson's saving grace is her mastery of tone in all situations. "I suppose there was never a more delicate dancing on the crumbling edge of the abyss of self-pity - that suicidal temptation of the lonely - than Emily's, but she rarely tumbles in. She sees herself in the awkward stumbling attitude and laughs" (MacLeish, c. 1963, p. 158). ¹⁾

Similarly, Whicher (c. 1963, p. 43) quotes the manipulation of tone and exploitation of poetic devices as a consummate "musical joke". In the poem Lightly stepped a yellow star (no. 1672) the poet "revels in a luxuriance of rippling l's accompanied

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1. Cf. also Brooks, 1939, p. 23: "The ability to be tender and, at the same time, alert and aware intellectually is a complex attitude, a mature attitude, but not necessarily a self-contradictory attitude."

by the moonlight suggestiveness of such words as silver and lustral. When the poem reaches its utmost effect of artful loveliness, she drops unexpectedly into a conversational tone that lets us down with a bump. The final l-sound of punctual, echoing in a totally different context all the preceding l's, knits the poem together in a 'musical joke.'"

Lightly stepped a yellow star
To its lofty place -
Loosed the Moon her silver hat
From her lustral Face -
All of Evening softly lit
As an Astral Hall -
Father, I observed to Heaven,
You are punctual.

Supreme use of understatement is an integral feature of Emily Dickinson's wit. In I fear a Man of frugal Speech - (no. 543) she comments on her love of reticence: ¹⁾

I fear a Man of frugal Speech -
I fear a Silent Man -
Haranguer - I can overtake -
Or Babblers - entertain -

But He who weigheth - While the Rest -
Expend their furthest pound -
Of this Man - I am wary -
I fear that He is Grand -

This inscrutable element may be discerned in her greatest poetry, where understatement serves to underscore the agony of her work. In a poem on her favourite theme of renunciation,

1. Cf. also poems 932, 1748, and 672.

the theme is stated in the following offhand manner:

To put this World down, like a Bundle -
And walk steady, away,
Requires Energy - possibly Agony -
'Tis the Scarlet way . . .

(Poem 527)

The impact of the hyperbolic simile is in no way diminished by the matter-of-fact tone.

In one whose "Mind were going blind", the momentousness of the subject is too terrible to handle except in the most casual terms:

Groped up, to see if God was there -
Groped backward at Himself
Caressed a Trigger absently
And wandered out of Life.

(Poem 1062)

Of Emily Dickinson's muted tone, James Reeves (c. 1963, p. 125) says: "Emily's own phrase 'a nearness to tremendousness' comes to mind; always when she is nearest to tremendousness she speaks most quietly." In poem 553 she employs the startling images of the crucifixion to transmit her own personal anguish. Despite the hyperbolic effrontery of comparing her sacrifice to the greatest the world has ever known, the tone is calm and dispassionate, imparting a sense of intimacy and even pathos:

One Crucifixion is recorded - only -
How many be
Is not affirmed of Mathematics -
Or History -

One Calvary - exhibited to Stranger -
As many be
As persons - or Peninsulas -
Gethsemane -

Is but a Province - in the Being's Centre -
Judea -
For Journey - or Crusade's Achieving -
Too near -

Our Lord - indeed - made Compound Witness -
And yet -
There's newer - nearer Crucifixion
Than That -

Although the poem is intensely personal, it surely is the
reticence of

There's newer - nearer Crucifixion
Than That -

which illustrates Eliot's maxim of the impersonality of great
art.

In The last Night that She lived (1100), one also discerns this
cool, off-hand quality. The poet blandly states: "It was a
Common Night". In The Woodspurge, by Rossetti, the poet
narrates his observation of small details while in an emotional
state:

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me, -
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

(Untermeyer, 1970, p. 454)

In the Dickinson poem, the watchers' perceptions are likewise heightened by grief. Emily Dickinson employs the marvellously dispassionate italicized to illustrate this:

We noticed smallest things -
Things overlooked before
By this great light upon our Minds
Italicized - as 'twere.

Death and its aftermath have seldom been described with such cool objectivity, yet the tone does not detract from the poet's intense participation in the events:

She mentioned, and forgot -
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce -
Consented, and was dead -

And We - We placed the Hair -
And drew the Head erect -
And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate -

Reeves (c. 1963, p. 125) states: "I doubt if a deathbed has ever been more indelibly realized in words."

Part of Emily Dickinson's faculty for understatement lies in her colloquial tone. Donne is famous for his casual, colloquial perfunctoriness with lines like "Busy old fool, unruly

Sun", "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love", and "I wonder by my troth, what thou and I/Did, till we lov'd?" In Herbert one finds the musing "My God, I heard this day . . . ", and Joan Bennett likens the plain matter-of-factness of Redemption, to "the tone of men exchanging news in the market place" (1964, p. 65).¹⁾ Vaughan, too, startles us with the casual "I saw Eternity the other night . . . " Emily Dickinson's God assumes the tone of a superior clerk behind the counter of the local village store:

The Mighty Merchant sneered -
Brazil? He twirled a Button -
Without a glance my way -
"But - Madam - is there nothing else -
That We can show - Today?"

(Poem 621)

The following poem bears comparison with Herbert's Love:

"Unto Me?" I do not know you -
Where may be your House?
"I am Jesus - Late of Judea -
Now - of Paradise" -
Wagons - have you - to convey me?
This is far from Thence -
"Arms of Mine - sufficient Phaeton -
Trust Omnipotence" -

1. Cox (1968a, p. 56) notes: "Herbert can suggest the speaking voice, not only with courtly politeness, but also with direct colloquial vigour."

I am spotted - "I am Pardon" -
I am small - "The Least
Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest -
Occupy my House" -

(Poem 964)

Herbert's poem takes the form of a conversation between guest and host, man, the sinner, and God, the merciful. Like Herbert's poem, the Dickinson poem is a colloquy between the poet and Christ. In the Dickinson poem, however, there seems to be a closer intimacy and sense of familiarity between the speaker and Christ, while the casual "I am Jesus - Late of Judea - /Now of Paradise" is reminiscent of the poet's "Old Neighbour - God -" (no. 623). The childish pose is once more assumed in this poem,¹⁾ and the last stanza may be compared to Herbert's

I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit downe, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 142)

-
1. Todd (1973, p. 29) states that Emily Dickinson assumes the pose of an utterly naive little girl.

Besides the easy intimacy of "My deare", the feeling of unworthiness and ultimate acceptance of the love and mercy of Christ, there is as well the faintest argumentative strain. Willy (c. 1971, p. 104) states that Love "is couched in the form of a parable: that of guest and host, the one travel-stained and diffident, the other graciously welcoming, taking a meal together." In the Dickinson poem the protagonists are traveller and escort, and the attitudes are similar, the poet shy and retiring, Christ omnipotent and welcoming.¹⁾

One also encounters a style reminiscent of Donne in much of Emily Dickinson's poetry. The following extract with its dashes, exclamation marks, italics and long and short lines recalls, in its quality of breathless excitement, the racier moments of Donne. In The Canonization he races through a catalogue of remonstrances:

-
1. I am spotted - "I am Pardon" -
 I am small -

Emily Dickinson is fond of referring to herself in a deprecating manner, cf. her letters to Higginson:

"I had not portrait, now, but am small, like the wren; and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur; and my eyes, like the sherry in the glass, that the guest leaves" (Higginson, 1891, p. 447).

"An ignorance, not of customs, but if caught with the dawn, or the sunset see me, myself the only kangaroo among the beauty, sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I thought that instruction would take it away" (Higginson, 1891, p. 448).

"I am spotted, - ": Cf. the phrase "Of freckled Human Nature - " in poem 401.

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs or ruin'd fortune flout . . .

(Donne, 1966, p. 58)

The disjointed utterances and ungrammatical "it is them!" become the colloquial style; the pun on knew and news effects concentration:

"And with what body do they come?" -
Then they do come - Rejoice!
What Door - What Hour - Run - run - My Soul!
Illuminate the House!

"Body!" Then real - a Face and Eyes -
To know that it is them! -
Paul knew the Man that knew the News -
He passed through Bethlehem -

(Poem 1492)

Reeves (c. 1963, p. 125) warns: "When she appears most cool, most off-hand, most nearly approaching flippancy, we should be especially on our guard against missing her profoundest significances." He quotes I started Early - Took my Dog - (520) as an "extraordinary and tantalizing" example. "What begins in a playful vein concludes as a pursuit to the death" (Reeves, c. 1963, p. 125). The reader would be misguided to take this seemingly innocuous poem too lightly. Interpretations vary from: "The sea is here the traditional symbol of death: that is, of all the forces and qualities in nature and in human nature which tend toward the dissolution of human character and consciousness" (Winters, c. 1963, p. 30), to "a study in fear, fear of love, of which the sea . . . is the symbol" (Flores, 1966, pp. 68 - 69). Reeves (c. 1963, p. 125)

chooses the safe middle-way and says: "It is evident that here the sea represents some overwhelming force, of great destructive power - death possibly, or love, or perhaps both." George Whicher (1957, p. 185) considers the poem written in "a spirit of pure fantasy", while John Cody (1971, p. 307) places the poet on the couch with the mind-boggling: "With the sea representing the vast unconscious (in terms of 'infinity,' 'immensity,' 'tremendousness,' and so on) and drowning in it representing the loss of one's psychic integrity in psychosis, the image of the boat becomes an appropriate means of delineating the ego which rides separate and distinct upon the surface of the id."

She shares with Donne a sense of the dramatic, a vivid sense of the moment. Gardner (1968, p. 22) says:

"Metaphysical poetry is famous for its abrupt, personal openings in which a man speaks to his mistress, or addresses his God, or sets a scene, or calls us to mark this or see that . . . Even poems of generalized reflection are given the flavour of spontaneous thought, as when Herbert opens his poem Man . . . with 'My God, I heard this day . . .', and thus gives the poem the air of having sprung from the casual overhearing of a chance remark."

Emily Dickinson similarly imparts a sense of vividness, and sometimes shock, in her opening lines. Lines like "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"; "I like a look of Agony"; "Just so - Jesus - raps - "; "I'll tell you how the Sun rose - "; "It is dead - Find it"; "She died - this was the way she died"; "I'm 'wife'

- I've finished that - "; "Is it true, dear Sue?"; "I've seen a Dying Eye" startle the reader by their sense of dramatic urgency. R.G. Cox (1968b, p. 98) speaks of the "surprising directness of the speaking voice" in the poetry of Donne. Archibald MacLeish (c. 1963, p. 154) comments that Emily Dickinson's poems have a voice - a particular voice - Emily's voice. At the same time she could view matters completely objectively, turning a blank stare on all she surveyed, what Douglas Duncan (1965, p. 61) calls the "dispassionate, camera-like observation which was a formidable part of her poetic equipment." There's been a Death, in the Opposite House (no. 389) illustrates this detachment, where the poet "watches from her window the comings and goings opposite, noting them in her log with a fearsome impersonality" (Duncan, 1965, p. 61). The house is opposite, "somebody" flings out a mattress, the corpse is unemotionally treated as "it". Although much of her verse has the quality of emotion recollected in tranquillity, a good deal of it surprises the reader with its assertive forthrightness and sense of situation.

Although Joseph E. Duncan (1969, p. 87) finds that only "a trace of the witty grotesquerie of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals appears in Miss Dickinson's poetry", one is able to discover several examples of this macabre mood, all bearing her unmistakable whimsical stamp. Williamson calls this "charnel-house mood" peculiar to seventeenth-century thinking the "metaphysical shudder" (1961, p. 90ff.), and it is superbly represented in Donne, and in the modern age, in the poetry of

T.S. Eliot.¹⁾ Marvell, too, finds "The Grave's a fine and private place,/ But none I think do there embrace."²⁾ The seventeenth century was a "time when men loved to be subtle to plague themselves with the thought of death" (Williamson, 1961, p. 91), and Emily Dickinson, like Webster³⁾ was "much possessed by death", but unlike Donne and Marvell, her mingling of love and death lacks the sexual element.⁴⁾ Much of her poetry has a morbidity reminiscent of Herbert:

How soon doth man decay!
 When clothes are taken from a chest of sweets
 To swaddle infants, whose young breath
 Scarce knows the way;
 Those clouts are little winding sheets,
 Which do consigne and send them unto death.

(Mortification. Gardner,
 1968, p. 132)

Her version of the metaphysical shudder sometimes takes the form of a grotesque and macabre game, as in the opening stanza of the following poem:

1. Cf. Duncan, 1969, p. 163: "Dry bones sometimes rattle in Eliot's poetry, very much as in Donne's, to infuse a grotesque element that can add both to the wit and seriousness of a poem." Examples are: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/Has it begun to sprout?" (The Waste Land) and of course Whispers of Immortality.
2. To his Coy Mistress (Gardner, 1968, p. 251).
3. T.S. Eliot. Whispers of Immortality (Eliot, 1968, p. 55).
4. Cf. however poem 470. The analytical tone common to metaphysical poetry may be discerned here. The tentative and bizarre reconnaissance culminates in the ecstatic outcry of the last line. It is not clear whether the lover is heavenly or human.

We do not play on Graves -
Because there isn't Room -
Besides - it isn't even - it slants
And People come -

And put a Flower on it -
And hang their faces so -
We're fearing that their Hearts will drop -
And crush our pretty play -

And so we move as far
As Enemies - away -
Just looking round to see how far
It is - Occasionally -

(Poem 467)

The tone of the poem is ambiguous; the dead petulantly protest at their play being interrupted by the bereaved, but the last stanza has intimations of the homesick dead of poem 529 ("I'm sorry for the Dead - Today"). The mourners are treated disdainfully, but the final "Occasionally" has the slightest hint of mute appeal.

Donne, I suppose, was such another
Who found no substitute for sense,
To seize and clutch and penetrate;
Expert beyond experience . . .

(Whispers of Immortality.
Eliot, 1968, p. 55)

Emily Dickinson's fascination with death and the moment of death was probably an attempt to assuage her terror of the

grave.¹⁾ Williamson (1961, p. 50), commenting on the poetry of Donne, writes of his fear of death, "which is peculiarly physical in its dread of the 'wormy circumstance' of dissolution. Here in his thought we find a cold sensuality of the grave which shows us that even his religious aspirations could not shake off the dear enchantment of the flesh, except by inverting it in physical repulsion." Dickinson's poem 432 is reminiscent of the poetry of Donne:

Do People moulder equally,
They bury, in the Grave?
I do believe a Species
As positively live

As I, who testify it
Deny that I - am dead -
And fill my Lungs, for Witness -
From Tanks - above my Head -

-
1. Anderson (1963, p. 238) says: "What makes death fascinating to the poet is that, to borrow a term she used elsewhere, it is the 'Hyphen' between the mortal life and man's dream of immortality."

One of the poet's greatest companions was her young nephew who lived next door, and when he died at a young age, she cherished the memory of his last words: "'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me,' was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know - Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the little Grave at his Grandparents' feet - All this and more, though is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me its name" (Anderson, 1963, p. 225).

I say to you, said Jesus -
That there be standing here -
A Sort, that shall not taste of Death -
If Jesus was sincere -

I need no further Argue -
That statement of the Lord
Is not a controvertible -
He told me, Death was dead -

The theme of the poem is found in the paradoxical ending, reminiscent of Donne, Crashaw and Herbert.¹⁾ The poem commences with a line of startling directness with the disconcerting question:

Do People moulder equally,
They bury, in the Grave?

The hideous putrefaction and shock of the "wormy circumstance" lend a sort of desperation to her argument. The thought that "clings round dead limbs",²⁾ the shadow of the mouldering bodies, lend a wavering doubt to the final line, and it lacks the triumphant affirmation of Donne's "death, thou shalt die". Life is proved by breath (line 7), but her breath here comes in desperate gasps.³⁾

-
1. Donne's Holy Sonnet: Death be not proud . . . , Crashaw's Easter Day and Herbert's Mortification.
 2. T.S. Eliot: Whispers of Immortality.
 3. Cf. also poem 470.

In poem 607 she writes:

The Shapes we buried, dwell about,
Familiar, in the Rooms -
Untarnished by the Sepulchre,
The Mouldering Playmate comes -

In just the Jacket that he wore -
Long buttoned in the Mold
Since we - old mornings, Children - played -
Divided - by a world -

In this poem one is reminded of the letter she wrote to Mrs Holland:

"I am somewhat afraid at night, but the Ghosts have been very attentive, and I have no cause to complain. Of course one cant expect one's furniture to sit still all night, and if the Chairs do prance - and the Lounge polka a little, and the shovel give it's arm to the tongs, one dont mind such things" (Letter 204. To Mrs J.G. Holland, March 2, 1859. Dickinson, 1958, p. 351).

The grave is often familiarized in images of extreme homeliness as in the following poem, with its nightmarish quality:

Bereaved of all, I went abroad -
No less bereaved was I
Upon a New Peninsula -
The Grave preceded me -

Obtained my Lodgings, ere myself -
And when I sought my Bed -
The Grave it was reposed upon
The Pillow for my Head -

I waked to find it first awake -
I rose - It followed me -
I tried to drop it in the Crowd -
To lose it in the Sea -

In Cups of artificial Drowse
To steep its shape away -
The Grave - was finished - but the Spade
Remained in Memory -

(Poem 784)

The poet recounts her attempts to elude the grave, but the haunting spectre of the spade, a symbol of death, cannot be erased from her consciousness.

Even more macabre is The grave my little cottage is (1743), where the poet keeps house, makes the parlour orderly, and lays a "marble tea".

In poem 457, "she satirizes the professional smoothness of modern funeral parlors with their satin-lined metal caskets . . . , corpses turned into people of 'Pearl' by the embalmer's art, and 'Muffled Coaches' that cushion the anguish of the tomb. The undertaker has been transformed into the mortician, whose function is no longer to bury the dead but to obscure the fact of dying for a hedonistic society that has lost its belief in the soul; but by sealing out the reality of death it has cut itself off from immortality too" (Anderson, 1963, pp. 228 - 229).

Sweet - safe - Houses -
Glad - gay - Houses -
Sealed so stately tight -
Lids of Steel - on Lids of Marble -
Locking Bare feet out -

Brooks of Plush - in Banks of Satin
 Not so softly fall
 As the laughter - and the whisper -
 From their People Pearl -

 No Bald Death - affront their Parlors -
 No Bold Sickness come
 To deface their Stately Treasures -
 Anguish - and the Tomb -

 Hum by - in Muffled Coaches -
 Lest they - wonder Why -
 Any - for the Press of Smiling -
 Interrupt - to die -

There is a certain ambiguity in line five. Either the bare feet of the corpse are locked into the coffin and out of life, or otherwise the bare feet of the living are far removed from the dead in their "Sweet - safe - Houses". The bare feet have a certain vulgarity, and seem strangely out of place amid the "Brooks of Plush" and "Banks of Satin", and one is reminded of Ransom's The Emperor of Ice-Cream:¹⁾

Call the roller of big cigars,
 The muscular one, and bid him whip
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys
 Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
 Let be be finale of seem.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

-
1. Duncan (1969, p. 186) says that the Fugitives, viz. Ransom, Tate and Robert Penn Warren are "interesting for their subtle metamorphosis of the formal elements of metaphysical poetry."

Take from the dresser of deal,
 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
 On which she embroidered fantails once
 And spread it so as to cover her face,
 If her horny feet protrude, they come
 To show how cold she is, and dumb.
 Let the lamp affix its beam.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

The shock of incongruity one discerns in Donne's "bracelet of bright hair about the bone" (Donne: The Relic, 1966, p. 101), is also found in the Dickinson poem.¹⁾ A similar combination is found in the brief poem 1489:

A Dimple in the Tomb
 Makes that ferocious Room
 A Home -

Death is sometimes personified as a visitor, the poet attempting to allay her fears by thinking of it in friendly and even human terms. Her reticence is usually indicated by the vivid contrast of conflicting words, as in:

Back from the cordial Grave I drag thee
 He shall not take thy Hand
 Nor put his spacious arm around thee
 That none can understand

(Poem 1625)

-
1. Emily Dickinson is fond of contrasting images in the manner of Eliot's "Garlic and sapphires in the mud" (Burnt Norton). Cf. poem 356: "As Carbon in the Coal/And Carbon in the Gem"; poem 830: "A Compound Manner,/As a Sod/Espoused a Violet"; and poem 392: "Through the Dark Sod - as Education -/The Lily passes sure -".

Poem 286 is another fine example:

The Cordiality of Death -
Who drills his Welcome in -

In poem 608, however, the poet's vehemence might prompt one to question whether the lady doth not protest too much:

Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?
Not Death - for who is He?
The Porter of my Father's Lodge
As much abasheth me!

Poem 390 lacks the genteel demeanour of death in Because I could not stop for Death - , and is vaguely reminiscent of Ransom's Piazza Piece:

It's coming - the postponeless Creature -
It gains the Block - and now - it gains the Door -
Chooses its latch, from all the other fastenings -
Enters - with a "You know Me - Sir"?

Since antiquity the pun has been put to respectable literary use. While seldom succumbing to the intricacies of word-play which delighted the Elizabethans, Emily Dickinson does employ this form of wit in a subtle and adroit manner. John Donne sometimes stooped to punning, as on the occasion of his runaway marriage, with the wry "John Donne, Ann Donne - Undone" (Willy, c. 1971, p. 84). The more solemn A Hymn to God the Father consummately illustrates the metaphysical use of wit in a serious subject. Note the concentration of meaning in the following lines:

When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
For I have more.

(Donne, 1966, p. 284)

When God has finished forgiving his sins ("When Thou hast done"), He does not possess Donne ("Thou hast not done"), for he has more sins. Therefore God's tolerance and mercy must be infinite, since he has not completed His forgiveness ("Thou hast not done").

Critics have frequently unearthed the "Man/Of the Appalling Trade -" (poem 389) as an example of Emily Dickinson's punning. One might more fruitfully apply T.S. Eliot's appreciation of Lancelot Andrewes to Emily Dickinson:

"Andrewes takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess" (Eliot, 1961, pp. 347 - 348). Northrop Frye quotes this stanza from Dickinson:

Thrice to the floating casement
The Patriarch's bird returned,
Courage! My brave Columba!
There may yet be Land!

(Poem 48)

"The conventional Biblical image for the Holy Spirit is the dove, and the poet, picturing herself as Noah sailing the flood of experience, associates the dove who brought him news of land with the fact that the name of another well-known navigator, Christopher Columbus, also means dove" (Frye, 1970, p. 31).

Anderson (1963, pp. 31 - 32) says of Emily Dickinson that "her battling with language is quite similar to her skirmishes with the Bible . . . poking them both to make them come alive." He comments on her selection of prudent in the following extract:

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see -
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.

(Poem 185)

Prudent, notes Anderson (1963, pp. 34 - 35), also has the medieval religious meaning of prudens, the ability of perceiving divine truth. Ironically science then "furnishes the instrument for seeing God." Whether Emily Dickinson had the medieval meaning in mind when she wrote the poem is debatable. This interpretation, however, is analogous to William Empson's interpretation of Marvell's Horation Ode:

But with his keener Eye
The Axe's edge did try . . .

Empson points out in Seven Types of Ambiguity (1953, p. 166ff) that axe suggests the Latin acies, indicating both sharpness of eyesight and the sharp edge of the blade.

Finally, there are those poems in which Emily Dickinson employs form for humour or irony. As the lines of Herbert's Easter-wings are printed to suggest the shape of wings on a page, so Emily Dickinson, in one version of The Rat is the concisest Tenant, tapers the poem to end with the single Equilibrium, in

the shape of a rat's tail. ¹⁾ One poem is in the form of a letter, with a play on the word bee in the penultimate line:

Bee! I'm expecting you!
Was saying Yesterday
To Somebody you know
That you were due -

The Frogs got Home last Week -
Are settled, and at work -
Birds, mostly back -
The Clover warm and thick -

You'll get my Letter by
The seventeenth; Reply
Or better, be with me -
Yours, Fly.

(Poem 1035)

When Emily Dickinson employs form as in the following version of a bedtime prayer, she achieves something akin to metaphysical wit. Here she wittily transfers the prayer to one already dead:

Now I lay thee down to Sleep -
I pray the Lord thy Dust to keep -
And if thou live before thou wake -
I pray the Lord thy Soul to make -

(Poem 1539)

-
1. Several critics have discerned this "tail" ending. I feel that one might look more profitably to the mouse's tale (tail) in Alice in Wonderland than to the metaphysicals for this kind of wit.

From the foregoing examples and analyses of Emily Dickinson's wit, her affinity with the seventeenth-century metaphysicals may be discerned. Probably the greatest resemblance lies in her combination of levity and seriousness and her ingenious fusion of disparate images. For all this, Emily Dickinson's wit has a whimsy and piquancy that is essentially her own. What emerges clearly is that wit in Emily Dickinson's poetry is not mere ornamental embellishment, but plays an integral role in her manipulation of tone and meaning.

CHAPTER FIVE
DICTION AND IMAGERY

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

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

(Poem 581)

Emily Dickinson's familiarity with her lexicon accounts for many of her poetic eccentricities. As she states in one poem, she was forever probing "philology", which culminated in a diction which the Victorian age did not recognise as "poetic". Like her contemporary, Gerard Manley Hopkins, her experiments with words resulted in coinages, with words like birdling (39), swang (42), goer by (283), optizan (329), mis sum (877), antiquiest (1068) and consciouser (762). More exciting perhaps are her experiments with words such as "Death's Immediately" (1420), "The Positive of Bells" (633), and "Forever is deciduous" (1422).

Emily Dickinson's most pervasive link with the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century is her use of recondite imagery and diction. Thomas Carew, in his An Elegie upon the Death of the Dean of Paul's, Dr. John Donne, commented on the originality of Donne's poetry in that it had replaced "servile imitation" with "fresh invention"; the same may be said of much of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Donne's imagery is

extremely erudite, displaying not only a lively interest in the sciences of his time, but in many other realms of life which had previously fallen outside the sphere of poetic diction. A catalogue of Donne's sources might read as follows: medicine, alchemy, geometry, law, religion, myth, domestic life, travel and exploration, commerce and coinage.

William Howard has made an extensive count of Emily Dickinson's "unusual" words, and his findings might be quoted at some length:

"Another 442 words might be classed as unusual in that they may be referred to special sources. Twelve of these come from the vocabulary of the medical profession, e.g., cauterize, contusion, incision; 13 are medieval terms, e.g. charger, flambeaux (2), serf; 15 are grammatical terms, e.g. ablative (2), conjugate, syntax; 17 come from the terminology of mathematics, e.g. algebra, logarithm (2), ratio (3); 24 are military terms, e.g. brigadier (4), epaulettes (2), platoon, veillee; 25 are words belonging to the language of royalty or aristocracy, e.g. abdication (2), coronation (4), dynasty (3), royally; 60 are from the terminology of the law or politics, e.g. alibi (3), caucus, corporation, enact (11), rescind, surrogate; 62 are proper names falling into various categories, e.g. Currer Bell, Gessler, Pizarro (2), Atropos, Bridget, Herschel, Cinderella, Shylock; 65 come from the vocabulary of the housewife, e.g. apron (7), broom (8), cupboard, distaff, muslin, pantry, seam (12), wardrobe (2); 64 are Biblical names or theological terms, e.g. Abraham (3), apostasy (2), crucifixion, Ishmael, liturgy, ordination, recusance, surplice (2); and 85 are geographical

place-names or terms, e.g. Amherst (2), Bosphorus, Capricorn, Himalah or Himmaleh (4), oriental (3), Potosi (2), Teneriffe (3), Vevay (2).

"An additional 328 words are technical terms of one sort or another or words generally found only in scientific or academic discourse, e.g. adze (2), auctioneer (2), bargemen, capsule (3), cog (2), electrical, esoteric (3), extrinsic, fructify (2), hermetic (2), indurated, insulators, iodine (4), ornithology, pampas, perihelion, periphrasis, residue (2), skipper, specifial, stow, superficies, theses, wampum, weld" (Howard, 1957, pp. 230 - 231).

Howard sensibly points out that any attempts "to designate words in a writer's vocabulary as 'rare' or 'unusual' is influenced not only by the linguistic experience of the individual making the designation, and hence by his subjective reactions, but also by the criteria employed" (1957, p. 231). As an example he cites cochineal which occurs as the name of a food colouring in nineteenth century recipes, and which Emily Dickinson would therefore not have found odd. In contrast to most critics, Howard states that "there seems to be little necessity for assuming that the Amherst poet pored over her dictionary in search of the rare or unusual word" (1957, p. 232).

The essence of Emily Dickinson's imagery lies in her remarkable ability to depict the concrete as abstract, and the abstract as concrete. She has a marked propensity towards the definition of abstractions ("hope is", "renunciation is", "presenti-

ment is") which frequently, to the despair of the reader, results in the abstract being defined in terms of the still more abstract. Duncan (1969, p. 78) comments on "her habit of transposing an experience into new terms in a different realm of being", while Chase (1951, p. 199) rather more wittily remarks that when Emily Dickinson looks through her microscope, "she is sure to see a microbe putting on immortality." However much of Emily Dickinson's poetic diction has an extraordinary rightness, much of it reveals delight in words for grandiose effect only, and Chase (1951, p. 201) comments with some justification:

"The ever-present lexicon promised too much, and the poet who consulted it was often too eager to find within its covers some marvelous word, like attar, extrinsic, cochineal, plush or phosphor, which would body forth a complicated range of meaning . . . One might also say that her poetry was written in the hope of some day finding the magic phrase, some revelatory fusion of such words as noon, blaze, mazarin, circumference and recess. And however often she might remind herself that some waters cannot be verbally bridged, she never doubted that every 'broad word' allows us to make some sort of crossing. The truth is that many of her broad words are not bridges but merely vague and meaningless gestures of the aspiring soul."

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes -

(Poem 561)

Like Donne, Emily Dickinson found that the precision of mathematics could lend an austerity and rigid control to highly emotional states, and her use of mathematical terms as a disciplinary measure finds its counterpart in Dr Johnson: "It is the mind which knows the power of its own potentially disruptive propensities that needs and demands to be disciplined" (Duncan, 1965, pp. 72 - 73). ¹⁾ Like Marvell, however, she found in mathematics a meticulous aid to definition, the notion that "all human life could be measured on a slide rule" (Duncan, 1969, p. 81) producing some of her most logical, as well as profound verse. Her enumerative mind could therefore comment on the relativity of time as follows:

Two Lengths has every Day -
Its absolute extent
And Area superior
By Hope or Horror lent -

Eternity will be
Velocity or Pause
At Fundamental Signals
From Fundamental Laws.

To die is not to go -
On Doom's consummate Chart
No Territory new is staked -
Remain thou as thou art.

(Poem 1295)

1. Duncan is quoting Davie, D. 1958. The Late Augustans.
p. xxiii.

As emotional anxiety extends time, so analysis subdues terror. The scientific "Velocity" with its meaning of mechanical yet controlled movement is further modified by the assurance of the "consummate Chart" of the final stanza, although, as in so many of Dickinson's poems, an ambiguous note is introduced by her use of the word doom with its negative connotation.

In My first well Day - since many ill - (no. 574) the poet expresses her heightened appreciation of nature and life in terms of ratio:

My loss, by sickness - Was it Loss?
Or that Ethereal Gain
One earns by measuring the Grave -
Then - measuring the Sun -

"Whilst Mathematics were of late in vogue," wrote Thomas Blount in 1654, "all similitudes came from Lines, Circles and Angles" (Willy, c. 1971, p. 71). In The Definition of Love, Marvell uses geometrical figures to describe his love "of a birth . . . begotten by despair/Upon Impossibility":

As Lines so Loves oblique may well
Themselves in every Angle greet:
But ours so truly Paralel,
Though infinite can never meet.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 253)

Oblique lines, like imperfect loves, always meet, while perfect loves such as that of Marvell and his mistress, though infinite, run parallel and can therefore never join.

Emily Dickinson, writing on the death pangs of a friend,
identifies the meeting point of heavenly and profane love: ¹⁾

Was He afraid - or tranquil -
Might He know
How Consciousness Consciousness - could grow -
Till Love that was - and Love too best to be -
Meet - and the Junction be Eternity.

(Poem 622)

In less optimistic mood, however, "The best Vitality/Cannot
excel Decay", but:

I reason, that in Heaven -
Somehow, it will be even -
Some new Equation, given -
But, what of that?

(Poem 301)

The poem concludes with the shoulder-shrugging "But, what of
that?", introducing a hint of doubt.

Attachment to the dead and dying is similarly given a mathe-
matical basis, which braces a poem which could be maudlin:

As by the dead we love to sit,
Become so wondrous dear -
As for the lost we grapple
Tho' all the rest are here -

1. Cf. Duncan, 1969, pp. 81 - 82.

In broken mathematics
We estimate our prize
Vast - in its fading ratio
To our penurious eyes!

(Poem 88)

"Broken mathematics" gives an indication of the bereaved's emotional state as well as depicting the incongruity of loving the dead more than the living.

Emily Dickinson frequently employs the word degree and its synonyms. Generally she uses the word in its geometrical sense; it also occurs as a signal of rank as in:

Acute Degree - conferred on me -

(Poem 1072)

Mostly degree gives the indication of an infinitesimal distance or digression - a natural supplement to the poet's "oblique vision":

Lest this be Heaven indeed
An Obstacle is given
That always gauges a Degree
Between Ourselves and Heaven.

(Poem 1043)

Experience, too, is "the Angled Road/Preferred against the Mind/By - Paradox" (910), which ironically allows man to choose his "Preappointed Pain".

The same propensity to the geometrically oblique may be seen in much of the nature poetry. A slanting bough of apples against

the sky becomes "The Angle of a Landscape" (375), while more philosophically, the poet mingles natural and metaphysical concepts, and winter sunlight becomes an image of despair, rather than natural description:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons -
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes -

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

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

When it comes, the Landscape listens -
Shadows - hold their breath -
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death -

(Poem 258)

Like Mariana,¹⁾ Emily Dickinson finds in the amorphous quality of the light, an objective correlative for her oppressed mind. "Slant of light" conveys the picture of a diffused, wintry sunbeam, and the implications of death are evident in "Winter Afternoons". The poet appears to be oppressed by the idea of death. The light assumes an aural quality and the sense of

1. Cf. Perrine, 1966, p. 80:

. . . but most she loathed the hour
When the thick-moted sunbeam lay
Athwart the chambers, and the day
Was sloping towards his western bower.
Then said she, "I am very dreary . . ."

heaviness is augmented by the sombre cathedral tunes, with their associations of funeral music. "Heft" suggests a great weight - the weight of funeral bells, the resonance of organ music, the weighty effect these bells have on the spirit. The sense of oppression is magnified by "Hurt" and "Despair".

The hurt induced by this natural phenomenon is "Heavenly Hurt" which leaves no scar - it does not cause physical pain, but "internal difference,/Where the Meanings, are - ". The soul, not the body is affected. This affliction is a heavenly affliction and is beyond human correction, for "None may teach it - Any - ". A certain richness of association develops with the words "Seal" and "Imperial".

The pathetic fallacy of the similarly oppressed landscape makes way for a superb image:

When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death -

Laurence Perrine (1966, p. 80) comments on the effectiveness of this image:

" . . . the lines call up the image of the stare in the eyes of a dead man, not focused, but fixed on the distance. Also, 'distance' suggests the awful distance between the living and the dead - part of the implicit content of the mood. Notice that the slanted ray and the mood are still with us here, but are also going. The final remarkable image reiterates the components of the hour and the mood - oppressiveness, solemnity, stillness, death. But it hints also at relief - hopes

that there will soon be a 'distance' between the poet and her experience."

Emily Dickinson was similarly enamoured of the word circumference, which she used at every available opportunity, whether the choice was justified or not. Ward (1961, p. 60) sees her use of circumference as "a vision of the great wholeness of the universe, expressed in the word 'circumference'." Johnson (1967, p. 140) similarly defines it as "a projection of her imagination into all relationships of man, nature and spirit", while Emily Dickinson herself comes close to defining her poetics in a letter to Higginson: "Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that. My business is Circumference" (Higginson, 1891, p. 448). Duncan (1969, p. 81) finds a metaphysical affinity in her use of circumference and notes: "Like seventeenth-century writers she found it natural to think of God as a great circle."¹⁾ The "circumference" poems display Emily Dickinson at her most sibylline as in the following epigrammatic riddle:

-
1. One calls to mind several seventeenth-century metaphysical poems in which the image of the "ring", or circle appears, e.g. Vaughan: The World -

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light . . .

(Gardner, 1968, p. 271)

and Traherne: On News -

The Diadem,
The Ring Enclosing all
That Stood upon this Earthy Ball . . .

(Gardner, 1968, p. 291)

Circumference thou Bride of Awe
Possessing thou shalt be
Possessed by every hallowed Knight
That dares to covet thee

(Poem 1620) ¹⁾

Almost as abstruse is the following poem, where the poet attempts a definition of the familiar in terms of the abstract:

At Half past Three, a single Bird
Unto a silent Sky
Propounded but a single term
Of cautious melody.

At Half past Four, Experiment
Had subjugated test
And lo, Her silver Principle
Supplanted all the rest.

At Half past Seven, Element
Nor Implement, be seen -
And Place was where the Presence was
Circumference between.

(Poem 1084)

-
1. Cf. Vaughan: The World -

This Ring the Bride-Groome did for none provide
But for his bride;

and:

The Queer -

Which wears heaven, like a bridal ring,
And tramples on doubts and despair?

(Willy, c. 1971, pp. 108 - 109)

These lines bear some resemblance to the Dickinson poem, and bearing in mind her transcription of They are all gone into the world of light, a direct metaphysical influence might not be far-fetched.

The poem opens with the colloquial and rather prosaic statement: "At Half past Three, a single Bird", which well illustrates the metaphysical attribute which Helen Gardner calls "the sense of the moment", and which she discerns in Donne (1968, p. 24). ¹⁾

The bird appears to be attempting to sing, and the verb pro-pounded lends an elevated note to the picture of natural description. The sky is "silent", and therefore impersonal. The bird loses some of its caution in the second stanza, with experiment subjugating "test". The romantic exclamation "And lo" is one of wonder as the bird's "silver Principle" - the song, dominates the scene, thus supplanting "all the rest". The hypothesis of the first stanza has become both experiment and principle. Perhaps "silver" has associations of quicksilver, the bright fluidity in keeping with the fluidity of the bird's song.

Of the final stanza Robert W. Russell (1966, p. 55) says:

"These are the hours in which the hypothesis or theory has become a principle, principle a faith, and by half past seven perhaps a truth."

-
1. Her comments on Donne might well fit much of Emily Dickinson's poetry. "The sense of the moment gives Donne's wit its brilliance and verve, the aptness and incongruity of the comparisons being created by their contexts . . . A reader may at times exclaim 'Who would ever think such a thought in such a situation?' He will not exclaim 'Who can imagine himself in such a situation?' Dryden praised Donne for expressing deep thoughts in common language. He is equally remarkable for having extraordinary thoughts in ordinary situations" (Gardner, 1968, p. 24).

Now there is no "Element" or "Implement" - no bird and no melody. The bird and its song have both disappeared: "And Place was where the Presence was". The bird's song, the bird and the sky have become one. This seems to echo the thought in Yeats's Among School Children:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(Yeats, 1967, p. 245)

Circumference as "a vision of the great wholeness of the universe" (Ward, 1961, p. 60) would therefore serve as theme for this metaphysical poem.

Concerning the translucence of Emily Dickinson's poetry, Richard Wilbur (c. 1963, p. 134) has the following to say: ". . . what mortal objects she does acknowledge are riddled by desire to the point of transparency." Blake used words in a simple but telling way, and is sometimes accused of not controlling the reader's reactions sufficiently:

"Few poets, Blake among them, have used words as sounds in as primitive a way while using the same words as meanings in a way so far from primitive. And not even Blake pushed his organization of words as meanings as far toward the unsayable as Emily sometimes did in these simple-sounding little tunes" (MacLeish, c. 1963, p. 151).

The balanced structure of the above poem tends to diminish some of its transparency: time - half-past three, half-past four, half-past seven; elements - bird, song, sky; and finally the

transition from tentative experiment to consummate experience. The failure of the poem lies in the fact that the poet tends to deal with abstractions in terms of greater abstractions with resonant words like principle, element, implement and circumference.

Although poems like the one below tend to make the reader's head spin, Emily Dickinson could with some justification be said to "Deal with the soul/As with Algebra" (269):

Time feels so vast that were it not
For an Eternity -
I fear me this Circumference
Engross my Finitude -
To His exclusion, who prepare
By Processes of Size
For the Stupendous Vision
Of His diameters -

(Poem 802)

At times she approached the intellectual conceits of Donne in her portrayal of the union of lovers:

I could suffice for Him, I knew -
He - could suffice for Me -
Yet Hesitating Fractions - Both
Surveyed Infinity -

(Poem 643)

Her best images arise, however, from physical or mental anguish, where she is "bisected" by grief (1738), where pain is so utter that it has "an element of Blank" (650), or when, on encountering a snake, the arch-embodiment of evil, she feels the ulti-

mate chill of "Zero at the Bone" (1986). A critic's evaluation of Donne's use of the conceit is equally relevant with regard to Emily Dickinson's manipulation of imagery. "The laboratory of this synthesis is the 'naked thinking heart' of Donne, where the conceit becomes a microscope held over pulsing emotions. Here, looking more sharply, we may discover how Donne, like Paul Valery, 'chained an analysis to an ecstasy,' and gave us the impassioned geometry of his verse" (Williamson, 1961, p. 32).

Physics, Chemistry, Mechanics and Optics supplied Emily Dickinson with vivid poetic metaphors. Donne seldom forgoes the opportunity of displaying his erudition:

At the round earth's imagined corners, ¹⁾ blow
Your trumpets, Angels, and arise, arise
From death . . .

(Holy Sonnet VII. Donne, 1966, p. 268)

He is also not averse to a bit of scientific scepticism. In the following extract he employs the myth that the Cross was erected on the original site of the Garden of Eden, and a parallel between the two hills, Eden and Calvary, and the two trees, the tree of knowledge and the Cross, is developed. Paradise and Adam's tree, which brought death into the world,

1. My underlining. Revelation VII, i: "I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth . . ."

are related analogically to Calvary and the Cross which brought resurrection and eternal life. Amidst this tortuous reasoning we find the doubtful "We think", indicating a preference for scientific proof rather than myth:

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's Cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place . . .
(Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness. Donne,
1966, p. 283)

Emily Dickinson could protest vehemently, if playfully, that science was the destroyer of illusion:

"Arcturus" is his other name -
I'd rather call him "Star."
It's very mean of Science
To go and interfere!

(Poem 70)

She could also turn her talents to:

Delight's Despair at setting
Is that Delight is less
Than the sufficing Longing
That so impoverish.

Enchantment's Perihelion
Mistaken oft has been
For the Authentic orbit
Of its Anterior Sun.

(Poem 1299)

Dr Johnson might with justification say of the school of Donne that " . . . to shew their learning was their whole endeavour . . . instead of writing poetry" (Johnson, 1900, pp. 22 - 23).

Like Vaughan, who could compare the morning's awakening to the circulation of the blood, Emily Dickinson could put her own animation to scientific test:

And if I hold a Glass
Across my Mouth - it blurs it -
Physician's - proof of Breath -

(Poem 470)

Frequently scientific metaphors appear in the most unusual contexts. In a satirical poem on a clergyman she writes:

He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow -
The Broad are too broad to define
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar -
The Truth never flaunted a Sign -
Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
As Gold the Pyrites would shun -
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
To meet so enabled a Man!

(Poem 1207)

The metallurgical analogy becomes an apt metaphor for pretence.

More cynically she comments on God as a refuge:

Could dimly recollect a Grace -
I think, they call it "God" -
Renowned to ease Extremity -
When Formula, had failed -

(Poem 293)

In the following poem the poet strives for the "formal feeling" which appeases pain or loss. Her emotional emptiness is felt as a vacuum. The poet's frenetic activity becomes mechanical, the wheels of brain and bone attempting to clog the vitality of the nerves which tingle like live electrical wires. The only panacea is, ironically, death.

Severer Service of myself
I - hastened to demand
To fill the awful Vacuum
Your life had left behind -

I worried Nature with my Wheels
When Hers had ceased to run -
When she had put away Her Work
My own had just begun.

I strove to weary Brain and Bone -
To harass to fatigue
The glittering Retinue of nerves -
Vitality to clog

To some dull comfort Those obtain
Who put a Head away
They knew the Hair to -
And forget the color of the Day -

Affliction would not be appeased -
The Darkness braced as firm
As all my stratagem had been
The Midnight to confirm -

No Drug for Consciousness - can be -
Alternative to die
Is Nature's only Pharmacy
For Being's Malady -

(Poem 786)

Norman Gregor (1955, pp. 40 - 41) finds a parallel between this poem and Donne's A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day. Both poems employ the control of wit to manage

their grief at the loss of a loved one, and the struggle between being and non-being occurs with both poems anticipating death. "But Donne's appeal is more intellectual and Emily Dickinson's is more lyrical. And for Donne, grief is not a form of vitality which the griever wants to deaden but the essence of non-being. He tries to recover (not by death) but by an obvious (not a fearful) anticipation of life. The struggle between death and life is central in the Dickinson drama but the Donne protagonist, also struggling, finds no relief in nullity. He is the victim of a grieving numbness; she is a victim but cannot achieve the numbness . . . Renunciation is not Donne's goal but the preservation of vitality . . . " (Gregor, 1955, pp. 40 - 41). Gregor also finds in the Dickinson poem a "suggestion of spiritual rebirth" which is debatable, and Donne's use of alchemic terms is comparable to "Dickinson's narcotics, drugs and pharmacy."

The law of the conservation of matter becomes a spiritual crutch, furnishing her with hopes of immortality:

The Chemical conviction
 That Nought be lost
 Enable in Disaster
 My fractured Trust -

 The Faces of the Atoms
 If I shall see
 How more the Finished Creatures
 Departed me.

(Poem 954)

The phenomenon of fire frequently lends itself to a display of erudition:

Ashes denote that Fire was -
Revere the Grayest Pile
For the Departed Creature's sake
That hovered there awhile -

Fire exists the first in light
And then consolidates
Only the Chemist can disclose
Into what Carbonates

(Poem 1063)

Abandoning this mawkish reverie she finds in carbon the perfect analogy for "The Day that I was crowned":

The Day that I was crowned
Was like the other Days -
Until the Coronation came -
And then - 'twas Otherwise -

As Carbon in the Coal
And Carbon in the Gem
Are One - and yet the former
Were dull for Diadem -

(Poem 356)

R.P. Blackmur has commented at length on the imagery in More Life - went out - when He went (422). The words anthracite and phosphor pose problems in the explication of the poem.

Anthracite, says Blackmur (1954, p. 42), "is coal, is hard, is black, gives heat, and has a rushing crisp sound; it has a connection with carbuncle and with a fly-borne disease of which one symptom resembles a carbuncle; it is stratified in the earth, is formed of organic matter as a consequence of enormous

pressure through geologic time; etc. etc." We are spared further erudition. Blackmur says that one of these senses should contribute to the meaning of the poem, but it is not clear which. Dickinson wanted something hard and cold and black, and "took anthracite off the edge of her vocabulary largely because she liked the sound" (Blackmur, 1954, p. 42).

Blackmur (1954, p. 42) cites phosphor as being "a habitual symbol word rather than a sudden flight." This word is used "at least twelve times to represent, from the like characteristic of the metal, the self-illuminating and perhaps self-consuming quality of the soul." He concludes that the only "right" word in the poem is phosphor, and his somewhat harsh judgement that Emily Dickinson leaned on the formulas of words in the hope that the "formulas would fully express what she felt privately", is frequently justified.¹⁾

The seventeenth-century metaphysicals were similarly fond of metallurgical images. Both Vaughan and Traherne, for example, use the image of the loadstone:

He knocks at all doors, strays and roams,
Nay hath not so much wit as some stones have
Which in the darkest nights point to their homes,
By some hid sense their Maker gave . . .

(Vaughan: Man, Gardner,
1968, p. 273)

-
1. Here Blackmur seems to have hit upon the truth. Many of Emily Dickinson's more obscure words seem to have no real meaning within their contexts - they simply sound impressive or fit the rhyme or metrical pattern of the poem.

The telegraph provides a witty poem on the difference between harnessed and unharnessed electricity:

The Lightning playeth - all the while -
But when He singeth - then -
Ourselves are conscious He exist -
And we approach Him - stern -

With Insulators - and a Glove -
Whose short - sepulchral Bass
Alarms us - tho' His Yellow feet
May pass - and counterpass -

Upon the Ropes - above our Head -
Continual - with the News -
Nor We so much as check our speech -
Nor stop to cross Ourselves -

(Poem 630)

Anderson (1963, p. 188) finds in poem 1581 " . . . one of her most extraordinary epithets for the heavenly lover." The "waylaying Light" is analogous to the light which blinded Paul on the road to Damascus. The poem therefore celebrates Emily Dickinson's initiation into spiritual life:

"The parallel makes a religious interpretation of Dickinson's poem inescapable. First there was the unexpectedness of the experience: 'suddenly there shone,' he records; and she: 'The Scene was quiet,' then the 'Crash.' Again, the revelation was to one only: others 'saw indeed the light . . . but they heard not the voice,' according to the Biblical account; in the poem: 'A Crash without a sound . . . Struck no one but myself.' Finally, there is the complete and permanent change wrought in the lives of both, the abiding subject of his epistles and of her poems. For her as for St. Paul it meant love and joy and

ultimate truth: 'It founds the Homes,' 'And decks the Days,' and reveals the meaning of 'Life's reverberation' - not its sights and sounds but its re-echoings and reflections" (Anderson, 1963, p. 189).

The analysis is extremely interesting, but one wonders if the poet is not merely describing an electrical phenomenon. Certain lines seem to indicate this:

But not the obligation
To Electricity -
It founds the Homes and decks the Days . . .

Gardner (1968, p. 21) says that the metaphysical conceit should aim at "making us concede justness while admiring ingenuity." Emily Dickinson's conceit fulfils this criterion, but as the image lacks logical rigour, the analogy is not entirely successful. When using this sort of discordia concors in an extended metaphor, she frequently loses the thread of her argument. In the following extract, however, she achieves the necessary synthesis:

We barred the Windows and the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost -
The Doom's Electric Moccasin
That very instant passed -

(Poem 1593)

Vibrance and energy ("Electric") are combined with the stealth of an Indian ("Moccasin") producing a kinetic effect which aptly conveys the elements of the storm.

"She made uninhibited use of imagery from the workshop, usually to convey a sense of ruthlessness and inevitability, and often with regard to death . . . Drills, rivets, hasps, screws, staples, valves, plugs, bungs, and so on, Emily Dickinson handled as confidently as any twentieth-century poet, but with no intent to shock or appear 'contemporary.' She employed a matter-of-fact idiom as naturally, when it suited her, as the vaguer idiom of the 'broad words'" (Duncan, 1965, pp. 75 - 76).

In The Soul selects her own Society - (no. 303) - a poem on Emily Dickinson's perennial theme of renunciation, the poet introduces the rather prosaic word Valves:

Then - close the Valves of her attention -
Like Stone -

Donne in his most elevated poetry resorts to earthy words like sucked, snorted, spongy and itchy; Valves in the Dickinson poem stands in marked contrast to words like Soul, Chariots and Emperor. It lends a down-to-earth note to the poem, and makes the renunciation more vital, for the anatomical reference suggests a closing off of life, and the juxtaposition of Valves to Stone lends an implacable quality to the line.

Imagery related to optics is frequently found in Donne's poetry. In The Ecstasy the intimacy of the lovers is reflected in their exchanging fond glances, and their only "propagation" is their reflection in each others' eyes:

Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes, upon one double string;
So to intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.

(Donne, 1966, p. 91)

Similar images are found in The Good-Morrow and The Canonization.

The Poets light but Lamps -
Themselves - go out -
The Wicks they stimulate -
If vital Light
Inhere as do the Suns -
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference -

(Poem 883)

Each age is a lens which not only reflects the fame of poets, but also magnifies it; the basic theme of the poem is that of the illumination of great poetry. "Disseminating" carries the notion of the scattering of seeds. The idea of birth augments the enduring nature of poetry. "If poets can light such lamps they are content to 'go out' themselves, for death then becomes a means of going outward to illuminate the darkness surrounding the generations of man. The mortal life has been transfigured into the enduring life of their poems" (Anderson, 1963, p. 59).

She comments on the relativity of time; death is likened to a concave and convex glass, the "Compound Vision" of which allows one to see both the finite and infinite, time and God:

'Tis Compound Vision -
Light - enabling Light -
The Finite - furnished
With the Infinite -
Convex - and Concave Witness -
Back - toward Time -
And forward -
Toward the God of Him -

(Poem 906)

Vaughan, in They are all gone into the world of light, implores
God to

Either disperse these mists, which blot and fill
My perspective (still) as they pass,
Or else remove me hence unto that hill,
Where I shall need no glass.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 277)

Dickinson, with more temerity, pictures God as a perennial telescope:

If God could make a visit -
Or ever took a Nap -
So not to see us - but they say
Himself - a Telescope

Perennial beholds us -
Myself would run away
From Him - and Holy Ghost - and All -
But there's the "Judgment Day"!

(Poem 413)

The new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent,
When in the planets, and the firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation . . .

. . .

Man hath weav'd a net, and this net thrown
Upon the heavens, and now they are his own.

(Donne, 1966, pp. 211, 213)

The age of Donne was an age of scientific upheaval. Much of Emily Dickinson's poetry, says Duncan (1969, p. 79), "could have been written only by one who took the post-Newtonian universe for granted."

I know I am not
A practical person; legal matters and so forth
Are Greek to me, except, of course,
That I understand Greek.

(Christopher Fry: The Lady's Not for
Burning)

In Donne's poetry lawyers "find out litigious men", Donne himself is his "own executor and legacy", he resigns himself to God "due by many titles", and his poetry proffers words like jointure, non obstante, and purlewe. Herbert petitions God for a "new, small-rented lease". Sir Walter Raleigh uses the legal metaphor of court and trial at some length in his depiction of the incorruptibility and mercy of heaven:

From thence to heavens Bribeles hall
Where no corrupted voyces brall,
No Conscience molten into gold,
Nor forg'd accusers bought and sold,
No cause deferd, nor vaine spent Journey,
For there Christ is the Kings Atturney:
Who pleades for all without degrees,
And he hath Angells, but no fees.

When the grand twelve million Jury
Of our sinnes with sinfull fury,
Gainst our soules blacke verdicts give,
Christ pleades his death, and then we live,
Be thou my speaker taintles pleader,
Unblotted Lawyer, true proceeder,
Thou movest salvation even for almes:
Not with a bribed Lawyers palmes.

(The Passionate Mans Pilgrimage . . .
Gardner, 1968, p. 34)

Emily Dickinson's grandfather was a lawyer. Her father was a lawyer and the Treasurer of Amherst College, and her brother Austin followed their father into the legal profession. Judges

frequently visited the Dickinson home, and Conrad Aiken relates the rather ghastly incident of Emily Dickinson's disposal of dead kittens (Dickinson, 1924, pp. ix - x): " . . . she put them on a shovel, carried them into the cellar, and dropped them into the nearest jar - which, subsequently, on the occasion of the visit of a distinguished judge, turned out to have been the pickle-jar." That her mind could turn portentous legalities into poetry is yet another example of her wit. The following poem infuses legal jargon with a mischievous delight:

Alone and in a Circumstance
Reluctant to be told
A spider on my reticence
Assiduously crawled

And so much more at Home than I
Immediately grew
I felt myself a visitor
And hurriedly withdrew

Revisiting my late abode
With articles of claim
I found it quietly assumed
As a Gymnasium
Where Tax asleep and Title off
The inmates of the Air
Perpetual presumption took
As each were special Heir -
If any strike me on the street
I can return the Blow -
If any take my property
According to the Law
The Statute is my Learned friend
But what redress can be
For an offense nor here nor there
So not in Equity -
That Larceny of time and mind
The marrow of the Day
By spider, or forbid it Lord
That I should specify.

(Poem 1167)

Lest the reader be overwhelmed by this Alice in Wonderland type of gibberish, Howard (1957, p. 240, footnote 35) delicately outlines the "circumstance reluctant to be told", and adds that there might well be a more serious interpretation:

"When the domestic sanitary arrangements of Emily Dickinson's day are recalled, the first stanza of the poem - 'Alone and in a Circumstance/Reluctant to be told/A spider on my reticence/Assiduously crawled' - certainly suggests a situation which would classify the poem as light verse. But because of the embellishments with which the 'half-sheet of notepaper on which the poem is written' is decorated, Johnson comes, quite logically, to a more serious interpretation of the poem (II, 816), and the phrase towards the end of the poem 'That Larceny of time and mind' certainly supports his assumption that the poem was a protest against the time the poet felt she had wasted reading George Sand's Mauprat. But his statement that 'in a circumstance reluctant to be told' ED had been guided to Mauprat and had found the book a 'larceny of time and mind' fails to account for alone, certainly a key word in the first line. Both interpretations may be valid, however, and the implied physical setting for the poem may represent Dickinson's appraisal of Mauprat as literature."

Legal language served Emily Dickinson well in her arguments with God where she frequently displayed rather more effrontery than her seventeenth-century predecessors:

To hang our head - ostensibly -
And subsequent, to find
That such was not the posture
Of our immortal mind -

(Poem 105)

The case of Dickinson v. God could be argued to the point of blasphemy as in the following two versions of poem 1357:

"Faithful to the end" Amended
From the Heavenly Clause -
Constancy with a Proviso
Constancy abhors -

"Crowns of Life" are servile Prizes
To the stately Heart,
Given for the Giving, solely,
No Emolument.

c. 1876.

"Faithful to the end" Amended
From the Heavenly clause -
Lucrative indeed the offer
But the Heart withdraws -

"I will give" the base Proviso -
Spare Your "Crown of Life" -
Those it fits, too fair to wear it -
Try it on Yourself -

c. 1876.

God's command of "Faithful to the end" is "Constancy with a Proviso" and should be deleted from the "Heavenly Clause". The picture of God is one of a condescending benefactor who gives "for the Giving, solely", and the multi-syllabled "Emolument" is suited to the rest of the legal terminology. The stipulation of constancy makes the poet spurn the crown of life, and it is

ironically offered to the giver.

On the destruction of her garden, she penned the following witty lines:

I had some things that I called mine -
And God, that he called his,
Till, recently a rival Claim
Disturbed these amities.

The property, my garden,
Which having sown with care,
He claims the pretty acre,
And sends a Bailiff there.

The station of the parties
Forbids publicity,
But Justice is sublimer
Than arms, or pedigree.

I'll institute an "Action" -
I'll vindicate the law -
Jove! Choose your counsel -
I retain "Shaw".

(Poem 116)

Her "action" proves nothing stronger than engaging Henry Shaw, a day labourer, to dig for her. Emily Dickinson does not hang her head (poem 105); she is God's equal:

The station of the parties
Forbids publicity . . .

Note the effrontery of the implication in "pedigree", as well as the arrogance of the opening lines.

"Too much of Proof affronts Belief", she writes in poem 1228. There must be a heaven "If only to enclose the Saints/To

Affidavit given." The picture of the saints cosily wrapped in their sworn statements is amusing.

Her unerring selection of the right word is displayed in the following poem:

Which is best? Heaven -
Or only Heaven to come
With that old Codicil of Doubt?
I cannot help esteem
The "Bird within the Hand"
Superior to the one
The "Bush" may yield me
Or may not
Too late to choose again.

(Poem 1012)

Her vacillation between the heaven below and the bliss of eternity is wonderfully contained in the phrase "Codicil of Doubt". A codicil is an addition to a legal document, usually modifying or revoking a will. Her trepidation and doubts of celestial bliss are thus well illustrated in the will image with its attendant emotions of expectation and doubt.

The revoking of earthly paradise is termed "Adam and Repeal"; nevertheless:

Paradise is of the option.
Whosoever will
Own in Eden . . .

(Poem 1069)

The following poem is dependent on meticulous analogy rather than wit:

I am afraid to own a Body -
I am afraid to own a Soul -
Profound - precarious Property -
Possession, not optional -

Double Estate - entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir -
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.

(Poem 1090)

The "Double Estate" is the body and soul, foisted upon man, the "unsuspecting Heir". The conceit is maintained to the end with images of title and land - items of bequest. Man in his prime ("in a moment of Deathlessness") is also the heir to "God, for a Frontier" - immortality. The insistent alliteration of "Profound - precarious Property -/Possession" serves to draw together body and soul which are one "Property" - the soul "Profound" and the body, because of its susceptibility to death, "Precarious". Man's predestined path is, ironically, not optional, but once again foisted onto him. The imagery is somewhat reminiscent of Donne's Holy Sonnet XVI: Father, part of His double interest . . . , but the Dickinson poem does not resemble Donne's in tone.

More succinctly, the cessation of the heart, its absence from its "established place", is due to "technicality of Death - / Omitted in the Lease -" (poem 973).

Legal imagery is especially effective in the following poem, which celebrates a state of heavenly grace:

Mine - by the Right of the White Election!
Mine - by the Royal Seal!
Mine - by the Sign in the Scarlet prison -
Bars - cannot conceal!

Mine - here - in Vision - and in Veto!
Mine - by the Grave's Repeal -
Titled - Confirmed -
Delirious Charter!
Mine - long as Ages steal!

(Poem 528)

The "White Election" refers to a heavenly marriage, while the "Royal Seal" is the stamp of authority by which God confers this right on the poet. "Scarlet prison" is rather more difficult; Todd (1973, p. 51) says that she "must remain behind the bars of the 'Scarlet prison' of this life." The "Sign" within the "Scarlet prison", would therefore be the soul. That this heavenly marriage can only be consummated after death is apparent by "in Vision - and in Veto." The "Grave's Repeal" is an image of particular force, stressing the idea of eternal life. "Confirmed" has associations of church ritual, while the "Delirious Charter" is the document bearing the king's seal. The oxymoron in this image is particularly effective in combining a tone of beatific fervour with the stern finality of statutory imagery.

Analogous to the legal imagery is the imagery of commerce. Richard Crashaw (Upon the Death of a Gentleman) uses metaphors of accountancy to explore the theme of mortality:

Faithlesse and fond Mortality,
Who will ever credit thee?
Fond and faithless thing! that thus,
In our best hopes beguilest us.
What a reckoning hast thou made,
Of the hopes in him we laid?

(Willy, c. 1971, p. 59)

Herbert also uses the language of accountancy in Dialogue:

Who for man was sold, can see;
That transferr'd th' accounts to me.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 134)

Emily Dickinson employs the same sprightly gait as in Alone and in a Circumstance (1167) in the following poem with its wryly sardonic tone:

If I should die,
And you should live -
And time should gurgle on -
And morn should beam -
And noon should burn -
As it has usual done -

If Birds should build as early
And Bees as bustling go -
One might depart at option
From enterprise below!
'Tis sweet to know that stocks will stand
When we with Daisies lie -
That Commerce will continue -
And Trades as briskly fly -
It makes the parting tranquil
And keeps the soul serene -
That gentlemen so sprightly
Conduct the pleasing scene.

(Poem 54)

In more serious vein "Our Lord - thought no/Extravagance/To pay
- a Cross -" (571).

In a love poem, the marriage bond is explored in terms of a
business contract:

I gave myself to Him -
And took Himself, for Pay,
The solemn contract of a Life
Was ratified, this way -
The Wealth might disappoint -
Myself a poorer prove
Than this great Purchaser suspect,
The Daily Own - of Love
Depreciate the Vision -
But till the Merchant buy -
Still Fable - in the Isles of Spice -
The subtle Cargoes - lie -
At least - 'tis Mutual - Risk -
Some - found it - Mutual Gain -
Sweet Debt of Life - Each Night to owe -
Insolvent - every Noon -

(Poem 580)

The "Mutual - Risk" lends itself to various images such as that
of routine familiarity:

The Daily Own - of Love
Depreciate the Vision -

The following poem exhibits a perfect balance:

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!

(Poem 1725)

The poem is conceived in homely marketing terms. "Dust by Dust" is reminiscent of the funeral service's "dust to dust", while there is a hint of irony in her "Being's worth" being a mere "single Dram of Heaven". The poem is loaded with words and images suggesting exactitude: paid, precisely, price, weighed, balanced, worth.

Metaphors of exploration and travel are common in seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. In Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness, for example, Donne employs many geographical conceits and imagery derived from contemporary journeys of exploration and discovery:

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
That this is my Southwest discovery
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die,
I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
For, though their currents yield return to none,
What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection.

Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?
Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar,
All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them,
Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Sem.

(Donne, 1966, p. 283)

The "Southwest discovery" refers to the Straits of Magellan - as Magellan passed through the straits to the West, to die in the Philippines, so Donne is about to pass through the straits of suffering to his own death. The metaphor of exploration is continued in stanza four, where the poet presents a catalogue of the riches of the entire earth. "Pacifique" suggests not only the geographic entity, but also suggests the peace of heaven. "Jerusalem" evokes the picture in the Book of Revelation - the golden, heavenly city. The Anyan Straits lead to the far East, Magellan's Straits to the Pacific, and Gibraltar to Jerusalem. Through the straits of sickness and hardship, the poet can reach his ultimate destination of heaven. In the final line of the stanza, the poet refers to a doctrine from medieval geography; medieval maps show the world divided between the sons of Noah: Europe belonged to Japhet, Africa to Ham and Asia to Shem.

Emily Dickinson had a curious predilection for place-names. A perusal of the subject index to the Collected Poems, edited by Johnson (Dickinson, 1970a), reveals names like Tuscarora, Vera Cruz, Thermopylae, Kidderminster, Dnieper, Popocatepetl, Teneriffe, Van Dieman's Land and Golconda. Usually these far-away places are symbols of remoteness, chosen at random for their resonant names. The reader, to quote Johnson again, frequently thinks "his improvement dearly bought", as in the

following poem. In a letter to T.W. Higginson Emily Dickinson enclosed a copy of the poem, entitled The Humming-Bird (Higginson, 1891, p. 450).¹⁾ The poem is deservedly famous for its kinaesthetic imagery in which sound, motion and colour are subtly linked. The final two lines, however, seem an unnecessary intrusion:

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel -
A Resonance of Emerald -
A Rush of Cochineal -
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head -
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride -

(Poem 1463)

Tunis in North Africa might have an exotic ring, in keeping with the rather flamboyant bird, but the picture of bird and postman is incongruous and deflating. Frank Davidson, however, disagrees, and finds an analogy in Shakespeare:

"Then comes the terse concluding thought . . . with its fanciful conjecture of the bird's mission. Implied in the name Tunis, with its suggestion of distance, is the idea of rapidity of motion on which the poem began. These lines derive doubtless from The Tempest. There Antonio speaks to Sebastian of

1. Cf. Dickinson, 1968, pp. 1011 - 1013. Emily Dickinson sent numerous copies of this poem to correspondents. Johnson asserts that this indicates "the assurance ED felt about its quality."

Claribel,

She that is Queen of Tunis, she that dwells
Ten leagues beyond man's life, she that from Naples
Can have no note, unless the sun were post -

"Both the dramatist and the poet employ the name Tunis, and both associate with it great distance and the transmission of mail. Emily Dickinson's adaptation is aptly, cleverly, and beautifully made" (Davidson, 1945, pp. 407 - 408).

Donne, in his more erotic moments, could address his mistress as "O my America! my new-found-land" (Going to Bed), her lips as "Islands Fortunate" and her navel as "fair Atlantic" (Love's Progress). The poem below, which Higginson trembled to publish, "lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there" (Dickinson, 1968, p. 180)¹ is similar to Donne's poetry in tone, but is less learned in imagery:

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!

-
1. "One poem only I dread a little to print - that wonderful 'Wild Nights,' - lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there. Has Miss Lavinia any shrinking about it? You will understand & pardon my solicitude. Yet what a loss to omit it! Indeed it is not to be omitted" (Dickinson, 1968, p. 180).

Rowing in Eden -
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor - Tonight -
In Thee!

(Poem 249)

The tone is ecstatic, abandoned, but not frenzied; the imagery is frankly sexual, although it is not clear whether the poet is addressing a human or heavenly lover.¹⁾ One might add that Donne would probably not have abandoned the compass and chart by casting them to the winds as Dickinson does!

1. Cf. the last two lines of the Dickinson poem with Donne's Holy Sonnet: Batter my heart . . . :

Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

(Donne, 1966, p. 271)

Thomas Carew, on the other hand, makes use of religious imagery in a love poem, viz. To my inconstant Mistris.

Perhaps Emily Dickinson's most successful imagery came from the very ordinary world of housewifely pursuits. From her letters we learn that her father would only eat bread of her baking, and that she was accustomed to send puddings to the ill and infirm. Louis Martz (1966, pp. 103 - 104) sketches a picture of Emily penning poetry while at her household tasks. Her poems were "written on the backs of brown-paper bags or of discarded bills, programs, and invitations; on tiny scraps of stationery pinned together; on leaves torn from old notebooks . . . on soiled and mildewed subscription blanks, or on department- or drug-store bargain flyers from Amherst and surrounding towns. There are pink scraps, blue and yellow scraps, one of them a wrapper of Chocolat Meunier; poems on the reverse of recipes in her own writing, on household shopping lists, on the cut-off margins of newspapers." ¹⁾

"Household words and her nineteenth century mundus muliebris condition Emily Dickinson's poetic language . . . From girlhood the 'house' had been her constant refuge, and it is therefore easy to find images which spring naturally from the household and the woman's world, completely feminine, foreign to our poetic vocabulary, which is still mainly naturalistic and masculine" (Baldi, 1960, p. 442).

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1. Martz is quoting from Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham. 1945. New York, Harper, pp. xii - xv.

These "completely feminine" images are also used by Herbert, who sees the beauties of heaven and earth as "furniture" and "household-stuffe":

I looked on thy furniture so fine,
And made it fine to me:
Thy glorious household-stuffe did me entwine,
And 'tice me unto thee.

(Affliction I. Gardner, 1968, p. 122)

Willy (c. 1971, p. 90) says: "Herbert may be using this characteristically homely imagery of God's 'furniture' and 'houshold-stuffe' [sic] in a double sense: for the natural beauty of creation surrounding him, and for the ceremonial equipment of the Church . . . Thus he enjoys in youth the benefits of 'both heav'n and earth'."

In Man, Herbert compares man to a "stately habitation", and earth is "either our cupboard of food,/Or cabinet of pleasure" (Gardner, 1968, pp. 129 - 130). Christ is sought "in heaven at his manour" (Redemption). For Emily Dickinson houses and rooms are frequently the setting for mental anguish:

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
One need not be a House -
The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
Material Place -

(Poem 670)

Remembrance, too, has

. . . a Rear and Front -
'Tis something like a House -
It has a Garret also
For Refuse and the Mouse.

(Poem 1182)

The following lines of Dickinson bear a startling resemblance to Herbert's poetry:

I cannot see my soul but know 'tis there
Nor ever saw his house nor furniture,
Who has invited me with him to dwell . . .

(Poem 1262)

Many critics have commented on Emily Dickinson's household imagery. Conrad Aiken (Dickinson, 1924, pp. xiii - xiv) speaks of the "downright homeliness which is a perpetual surprise and delight." George F. Whicher (c. 1963, p. 42) states: "The momentousness of death to her imagination did not prevent her from stating the anguish of bereavement in terms of broom and dustpan", while Richard Wilbur (c. 1963, p. 127) states that "she liked accuracy; she liked solid and homely detail; and even in her most exalted poems we are surprised and reassured by buckets, shawls, or buzzing flies."

The strangeness of death is translated into the familiar and homely in this way, as in the succinct The Bustle in a House in which the poet comments on the emotional adjustment after the death of a loved one:

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.

(Poem 1078)

Anderson (1963, p. 226) discerns a literary allusion in the phrase "The Bustle in a House" which he traces to Dickens's Dombey and Son. The austerity of the poem together with the unexpected domesticity of "Sweeping up the Heart", and "putting Love away", culminates in a poetic creation of tidy detachment, intimacy and pathos. The menial tasks are reminiscent of Herbert:

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

(The Elixir. Untermeyer, 1970, p. 190)

Ordinary tasks such as hanging up clothes, putting them in drawers, and mending them assume momentous roles in the healing of grief:

It ceased to hurt me, though so slow
I could not feel the Anguish go -
But only knew by looking back -
That something - had benumbed the Track -

Nor when it altered, I could say,
For I had worn it, every day,
As constant as the Childish frock -
I hung upon the Peg, at night.

But not the Grief - that nestled close
As needles - ladies softly press
To Cushions Cheeks -
To keep their place -

(Poem 584)

To mend each tattered Faith
There is a needle fair
Though no appearance indicate -
'Tis threaded in the Air -

And though it do not wear
As if it never Tore
'Tis very comfortable indeed
And spacious as before -

(Poem 1442)

Similarly, outgrown or unrequited love becomes an outgrown garment, stored in a drawer, and later revealed as odd and old-fashioned (887). Donne, too, employs sartorial imagery in The Second Anniversary:

Forget this world, and scarce think of it so,
As of old clothes, cast off a year ago.

(Donne, 1966, p. 225)

The poet, spared to live a little longer:

A Summer further I must wear,
Content if Nature's Drawer
Present me from sepulchral Crease
As blemishless, as Her.

(Poem 1038)

Her anxiety to see her lover is portrayed in the following housewifely image:

If I could see you in a year,
I'd wind the months in balls -
And put them each in separate Drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse -

The same poem contains this image of amused indolence:

If you were coming in the Fall,
I'd brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As Housewives do, a Fly.

(Poem 511)

The "household-stuffe" is also an intrinsic part of death:

It came at last but prompter Death
Had occupied the House -
His pallid Furniture arranged
And his metallic Peace -

(Poem 1230)

An evocative picture of death is achieved by "pallid Furniture" and "metallic Peace", creating an image of icy rigor mortis. The plosive consonants of "pallid" and "metallic" similarly add to the incisiveness and finality of death.¹⁾

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1. Whicher (c. 1963, p. 42) quotes from her correspondence what he terms "a sample of mortuary merriment":

"No one has called so far, but one old lady to look at a house. I directed her to the cemetery to spare expense of moving."

In There's been a Death (389), the "Man/Of the Appalling Trade" - Dickinson's macabre euphemism for the undertaker, takes "the measure of the House -".

The mundane imagery of the following poem is in violent contrast with its theme:

Ample make this Bed -
Make this Bed with Awe -
In it wait till Judgment break
Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight -
Be its Pillow round -
Let no Sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground -

(Poem 829)

The whole wonderful brashness of living is marvellously condensed in the "Sunrise' yellow noise"; life, heat and vibrance are illustrated, contrasting with the "Ample . . . Bed" of the grave. The levity of mattresses and pillows in no way diminishes the seriousness of the poem; its success lies in its austere simplicity.

Similar imagery is found in Herbert's Death:

Therefore we can go die as sleep; and trust
Half that we have
Unto an honest faithfull grave;
Making our pillows either down, or dust.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 142)

In another poem about death, the poet again displays a vulture-like obsession with the moment of death:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true -
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe -
The Eyes glaze once - and that is Death -
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

(Poem 241)

There is a macabre grotesquerie in the comparison of beaded sweat on the forehead of the dying with a strung necklace. The choice of "glaze" for the film covering the eyes of the dead is clever, uniting the visible outward manifestations of death with a piece of worldly frippery.

Similar grotesquerie is found in poem 665, combined with a macabre delight in sartorial accoutrement:

Dropped into the Ether Acre -
Wearing the Sod Gown -
Bonnet of Everlasting Laces -
Brooch - frozen on -
Horses of Blonde - and Coach of Silver -
Baggage a strapped Pearl -
Journey of Down - and Whip of Diamond -
Riding to meet the Earl -

(Poem 665)

Like Because I could not stop for Death (712), this poem takes the form of a journey to immortality. "Ether Acre" is particularly rich in associations - the clear skies of heaven and the volatile soul paradoxically linked with a sense of numbing anaesthesia and the sod of the grave. The "Sod Gown" is reminiscent of Sir Walter Raleigh's The Passionate Mans Pilgrimage . . . : 1)

And by the happie blissfull way
More peacefull Pilgrims I shall see,
That have shooke off their gownes of clay,
And goe appareld fresh like mee.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 33)

One also recalls Dryden's description of "the false Achitophel":

Of these the false Achitophel was first,
A name to all succeeding ages curst.
For close designs and crooked counsels fit,
Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit,
Restless, unfixt in principles and place,
In pow'r unpleased, impatient of disgrace;
A fiery soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the pigmy body to decay:
And o'er informed the tenement of clay.

(Absalom and Achitophel. Read and Dobrée, 1963,
p. 798)

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1. Sir Walter Raleigh's poem, The Passionate Mans Pilgrimage, supposed to be written by one at the point of death contains images very similar to Dickinson's:

Then the holy paths wee'le travell
Strowde with Rubies thicke as gravell,
Ceelings of Diamonds, Saphire floores,
High walles of Corall and Pearl Bowres.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 34)

Emily Dickinson's monosyllabic "Sod" is earthier, if less telling than Raleigh's "gownes of clay". The poet's vestments, in contrast to the immortal journey of "Down" into the "Ether" acre, are all of a peculiar hardness and brightness: "Brooch - frozen on - ", "Coach of Silver", "Baggage a strapped Pearl", and "Whip of Diamond".

Porcelain is a favourite correlative for the coldness of the grave or the dead. In a poem similar to the one above, one discerns several aspects which might be termed "metaphysical":

Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last -
It is a stealthy Wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach
But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected Coach
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown
And Kindred as responsive
As Porcelain.

(Poem 1445)

The conceit of the journey, the macabre touch of death as the "supple Suitor", insinuating himself with the lady, and the implicit image of the Bride of Christ ("It bears away in triumph/To Troth unknown") all lend a metaphysical air to the poem. The logical clash between the Bride of Christ who rides away in triumph, and "Troth unknown", lends a note of ambiguity to the poem. There is also the mathematically precise "bisected". "As a hearse it separates her body in the glass enclosure from the driver on his seat above, as a wedding coach it

divides the wife-to-be from the virginal life left behind, as a heavenly chariot the mortal from the immortal" (Anderson, 1963, p. 248). The remoteness of the "Kindred" is aptly conveyed by the fragile whiteness of porcelain.

In another poem with strong metaphysical aspects (no. 640):

. . . Life is over there -
Behind the Shelf
The Sexton keeps the Key to -
Putting up
Our Life - His Porcelain -
Like a Cup -
Discarded of the Housewife -
Quaint - or Broke -
A new Sevres pleases -
Old Ones crack -

In the poems where Emily Dickinson describes psychological states of distress or mental dissolution, housewifely imagery is employed with a consummate touch. The off-hand statement that "I've dropped my Brain - My Soul is numb -" (no. 1046) has more force than any exclamatory outcry.

In the third stanza a life-in-death state is wonderfully captured:

Not dumb - I had a sort that moved -
A Sense that smote and stirred -
Instincts for Dance - a caper part -
An Aptitude for Bird -

Who wrought Carrara in me
And chiselled all my tune
Were it a Witchcraft - were it Death -
I've still a chance to strain
To Being, somewhere -

The straining for physical sensation is counteracted by
"Carrara" (an effective use of the place-name) and "chiselled".

A similarly powerful poem is no. 937:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -
As if my Brain had split -
I tried to match it - Seam by Seam -
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before -
But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
Like Balls - upon a Floor.

There is a similarity between this poem and I felt a Funeral,
in my Brain (no. 280). The cosily domestic assumes the
qualities of a surrealistic nightmare. Todd (1973, p. 84)
states:

"The persona's attempts to repair the splitting of her brain is
described in the imagery of a seamstress trying to match pieces
of material but unable to make them fit. The metaphysical poets
(as well as early Puritan poets like Edward Taylor in a poem
like 'Huswifery') had employed homely imagery, as well as the
controlling metaphor, but Emily Dickinson puts these devices to
work in expressing the persona's serious psychological disorder,
projected beyond the confines of the poem itself in the impli-

cation that the limit of the persona's ability to communicate has been reached. She has attempted to join her thoughts together in a coherent pattern, but, as she states, 'Sequence unravelled out of Sound'."

Vaughan sees man on earth tied to trivial pursuits and worldly cares:

Man hath stil either toyes, or Care,
He hath no root, nor to one place is ty'd,
But ever restless and Irregular
About this Earth doth run and ride . . .

(Man. Gardner, 1968, p. 273)

Dickinson is more scathing about man's mean existence:

Earth at the best
Is but a scanty Toy -
Bought, carried Home
To Immortality.

It looks so small
We chiefly wonder then
At our Conceit
In purchasing.

(Poem 1024)

The profound irony lies in the fact that earth is man's predestined fate; the dignity of "purchasing" is denied him.

Phenomena of nature could also be depicted as ordinary domestic incidents. A seemingly simple nature poem comments cunningly on God's ambivalence, much in the manner of Blake:

The Lightning is a yellow Fork
From Tables in the sky
By inadvertent fingers dropt
The awful Cutlery
Of mansions never quite disclosed
And never quite concealed
The Apparatus of the Dark
To ignorance revealed.

(Poem 1173)

Forked lightning becomes a piece of cutlery which is dropped from above by some Being's clumsy fingers. Lightning becomes the manifestation of another world, mysterious and somewhat inimical, since the inmate of the mansion appears rather negligent. The "inadvertent fingers" cause the deity to appear clumsy and uncaring rather than deliberately vindictive, Vulcan rather than Jupiter.

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 -

(Poem 219)

In the above poem the beauty of sunset is depicted in terms of a negligent housewife. The variegated colours of sunset become "Brooms", "Shreds", and "Aprons". These contrast strongly with

the jewel images of amber and emerald. "Duds of Emerald" is used in the sense of remnants or cast-offs, and the spring-cleaning conceit is thus sustained in a somewhat romantic poem, redeemed only by the unusual imagery.

The changing seasons of the year become:

Ribbons of the Year -
Multitude Brocade -
Worn to Nature's Party once
Then, as flung aside
As a faded Bead
Or a Wrinkled Pearl
Who shall charge the Vanity
Of the Maker's Girl?

(Poem 873)

Judith Banzer has commented at length on Emily Dickinson's domestic imagery, particularly her affinity with Herbert in the use of enclosure images "to capture an exquisitely-felt tension between body and spirit" (1961, p. 421). Emily Dickinson, however, far surpasses the seventeenth-century metaphysicals in her combination of the unfamiliar with the familiar, the infinite with the transitory, and above all, the sublime with the ordinary stuff of life. Banzer calls this "the custom of seeing 'Comparatively,' of fitting all experience, sublime or ordinary, into one place and finding it the haunted 'Ground Floor' of a familiar Infinite" (1961, p. 423).

Emily Dickinson frequently uses the image of a circus or travelling show to give substance to her thoughts on ephemerality, transience and doubt. The thrill which a circus held for

her, is evident from the following quotations:

"Always, when a circus was to pass her window in the first grey dawn on its hooded way from town to town, she sat up all night to watch for it, thrilled by its wild vagrancy, its pathos, its utter sophistication: hungry for sensation, starving for a world she later shunned, with a vague dread of its haunting power over her" (Bianchi, c. 1924, p. 45).

"At rare intervals a travelling circus passed the Dickinson house, and Emily, who cared nothing for the performance, would sit at her window all night if necessary to see the 'Algerian procession' go by. It seemed to her that she 'tasted life' at such moments, though all she could report next day was that 'they said, "Hoy, hoy" to the horses'" (Whicher, 1957, p. 18).

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -
To wrap its shining Yards -
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear -
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter -
But just the miles of Stare -
That signalize a Show's Retreat -
In North America -

No Trace - no Figment of the Thing
That dazzled, Yesterday,
No Ring - no Marvel -
Men, and Feats -
Dissolved as utterly -
As Bird's far Navigation
Discloses just a Hue -
A plash of Oars, a Gaiety -
Then swallowed up, of View.

(Poem 243)

In I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -, she creates a jolting metaphor in the comparison of the elusive quality of heaven to a travelling circus which departs without the "sound of Boards/ Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter - ". The odd metaphor "miles of Stare" effectively condenses the fascination which a circus on the road has for onlookers. In the second stanza the enthralling qualities of the circus (and heaven) are stressed by "dazzled", "Ring", "Marvel", "Feats", but the poet then abandons the conceit and lapses into the vagueness which is characteristic of many of her closing lines. The image of transience develops into one of distance with the bird image (one presumes the odd punctuation is merely erratic), and the somewhat vague "plash of Oars", which possibly denotes the fading ripples on water caused by oars or the transitory quality of the drops of water occasioned by such "plashing". The heaven/circus conceit, after the initial shock of incongruity, is not sustained.

The splendour of summer is described as a "mighty show", to which admission is free (no. 1644), while her "business of circumference" finds an apt metaphor in the laconic:

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see -
Tomorrow and Today -
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 -

(Poem 827)

The loneliness of the grave

. . . is strict -
Tickets admit
Just two - the Bearer -
And the Borne -
And seat - just One -

(Poem 408)

The momentousness of death is scaled down to a somewhat dubious afternoon treat!

Emily Dickinson sometimes embraces God with a fervent intensity reminiscent of the most passionate poetry of Donne. In several of these poems she identifies herself with a bride, wedded to Christ, which calls to mind numerous passages from Revelations:

"And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Revelations XXI, 9).

"Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.

"And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

"And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelations XIX, 7 - 9).

The bridegroom, Christ, and His mystical marriage with the soul, His bride, is an image which appears in Vaughan's The World:

This Ring the Bride-groome did for none provide
But for his bride.

(Gardner, 1968, p. 272)

The vestments of the wife of the lamb remind one of Emily Dickinson's habit, in later life, of wearing only white, and during her early church-going days, the White Nun of Amherst, in a letter to her brother Austin, December, 1851, gives some indication of her strange propensity towards the Apocalypse:

"Oh Austin, you don't know how we all wished for you yesterday. We had such a splendid sermon from that Professor Park - I never heard anything like it, and don't expect to again, till we stand at the great white throne, and 'he reads from the Book, . the Lamb's Book.' The students and chapel people all came to our church and it was very full, and still, so still the buzzing of a fly would have boomed like a cannon. And when it was all over, and that wonderful man sat down, people stared at each other, and looked as wan and wild as if they had seen a spirit, and wondered they had not died" (Whicher, 1957, p. 8).

In a letter to Higginson, April 26, 1862, she writes:

"You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats, and Mr and Mrs Browning. For prose, Mr Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations" (Higginson, 1891, p. 445).

The poem Given in Marriage unto Thee, epitomizes the idea of the Bride of Christ in cool, almost detached tones:

Given in Marriage unto Thee
Oh thou Celestial Host -
Bride of the Father and the Son
Bride of the Holy Ghost.

Other Betrothal shall dissolve -
Wedlock of Will, decay -
Only the Keeper of this Ring
Conquer Mortality -

(Poem 817)

In the poet's fusion with the will of God, symbolized by the idea of marriage, the will of the poet will be submerged in the will of God. (Note the succinct image of annihilation in "Wedlock of Will, decay - "). Immortality, then, is ensured by a spiritual relationship with God, portrayed in the earthly relationship of marriage.

The bride image also occurs in the well-known Because I could not stop for Death - (no. 712), where the idea of a celestial marriage is implicit in the following lines, with their associations of a bridal veil, suggested by the filmy tulle:

For only Gossamer, my Gown -
My Tippet - only Tulle -

The genteel, courteous Death is not the suitor, but only an envoy.

In God is a distant - stately Lover - (no. 357) the picture of the envoy is also employed with a new slant - to witness God's jealousy. The parallel with Longfellow's Courtship of Miles Standish is given an almost blasphemous slant:

God is a distant - stately Lover -
Woos, as He states us - by His Son -
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship -
"Miles", and "Priscilla", were such an One -
But, lest the Soul - like fair "Priscilla"
Choose the Envoy - and spurn the Groom -
Vouches, with hyperbolic archness -
"Miles", and "John Alden" were Synonym -

Lest "the Soul - like fair 'Priscilla' / Choose the Envoy - and spurn the Groom - ", the paradox of the Trinity intervenes. God and His Son are "Synonym". This, notes Anderson (1963, p. 180), "is hardly the expectant rapture of the novitiate, nor even sound trinitarian doctrine." Emily Dickinson's religious fervour is always modified by a wry sensibility.

In Emily Dickinson's Bride of Christ imagery one recalls Donne's Holy Sonnet XVIII, where the Church as the Bride of Christ is compared to a prostitute:

Show me, dear Christ, Thy spouse so bright and clear.
What! is it She, which on the other shore
Goes richly painted? or which robb'd and tore
Laments and mourns in Germany and here?
Sleeps she a thousand, then peeps up one year?
Is she self truth and errs? now new, now outwore?
Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore
On one, on seven, or on no hill appear?
Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights
First travel we to seek and then make love?
Betray kind husband Thy spouse to our sights,
And let mine amorous soul court Thy mild dove,
Who is most true, and pleasing to Thee, then
When she is embrac'd and open to most men.

(Donne, 1966, p. 273)

Although Dickinson's imagery is not as flagrantly shocking as that of Donne, there is a superficial resemblance of technique, if not of attitude. Bewley (Donne, 1966, p. xxix) speaks of the devout reverence with which Donne brings off this startling image; in Emily Dickinson's religious poetry one discerns a note of ironic question rather too often.

Duncan (1969, p. 82) comments: "In contrast to her scientific approach, Miss Dickinson's second controlling interpretation of her material was rooted in traditional Christian symbols and correspondences. Her affinities with the metaphysicals would suggest this incarnational and sacramental approach, and it occurs boldly enough - but with her own distinctive flavor." The "own distinctive flavor" may be seen in her nature poetry especially, where the sacrament as controlling metaphor produced some of her finest and most sensitive poetry.

These are the days when Birds come back -
A very few - a Bird or two -
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
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 thro' 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 take
And thine immortal wine!

(Poem 130)

The poet is describing an Indian summer - the fraudulent season. The hesitancy of the first three stanzas, with their numerous dashes, induces a sense of reticence and nostalgia. The idea of the season being a cheat is indicated by the "very few" birds which return, and the blue and sunny skies which are a "mistake". "Sophistries", "mistake", "fraud", "cheat" and "plausibility" heighten the sense of fraudulence and deception. "Sophistries of June" is paradoxical, for the poet appears to imply that summer itself is an illusion. Marshall van Deusen (1966b, p. 82) comments on the first three stanzas as an example of the pathetic fallacy. "The whole idea of the season's falseness is, in fact, a playful and delicious fancy on the part of the poet, who - to judge from what follows - is really thinking about the illusory qualities of the pleasures of life."

The imagery in the final three stanzas is sacramental, recalling the sacrament of Holy Communion. The "ranks of seeds" bear witness of the promise of spring, while the "timid leaf" paradoxically hints at winter and death. The poet's plaintive desire to be allowed to partake of this "Last Communion" (death is once more implied) is somewhat negated by "Haze" with its connotations of obscurity. The bread and wine are the natural products of the harvest, and the child persona here assumes a credible humility. The poem is clothed in contradictions, for if the season is illusory, one might question its "sacred emblems". "The poem itself is a kind of 'last Communion' between her critical mind and her yearning heart" (Anderson, 1963, p. 149).

At this stage it might be expedient to examine the metaphysical conceit at some length, and to study Emily Dickinson's use of the conceit in her poetry.

The Italian concentto, according to Ruthven (1969), does not illuminate the meaning of "conceit" in English, for the former could signify "concept, idea, image, an intuition of analogy, a pungent statement, a witty metaphor, or any witty figure of thought or sound" (Ruthven, 1969, p. 4). ¹⁾

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1. Ruthven is quoting Mirollo, James V. 1963. The Poet of the Marvellous: Giambattista Marino. New York. p. 116.

It is essential to differentiate between the Elizabethan conceit and the metaphysical conceit. The Elizabethan conceit is solely an exaggerated and elaborate comparison used as rhetorical ornamentation, while the metaphysical conceit is frequently logical, and uses paradoxical relationships or ingenious and unexpected extensions of significance. Ruthven (1969, pp. 7 - 16) distinguishes three characteristics of the conceit: the discordia concors, the "poetic of correspondence" and the "far-fetched". The first of these, the discordia concors of Johnson, refers to a combination of dissimilar images, a fusion of disparate elements, an apparent hiatus between the elements compared which demands some mental agility from the reader if he is to perceive the relationship between the unexpected referents. Bateson (1950, p. 50) calls this the "Principle of the Semantic Gap" in poetry and quotes John Hoskins, a sixteenth-century poet and critic as follows: " . . . you shall most of all profit by inventing matter of agreement in things most unlike, as London and a tennis court: for in both all the gain goes to the hazard" (Bateson, 1950, p. 50). The wider the gap between the elements, the more incongruous the comparison, the more successful the image will be. Johnson criticized the school of Donne for their unbridgable gaps, while poetry "that one tends to dismiss as merely graceful, pretty or pleasant - that of the minor Victorians, for example . . . will generally be found to suffer from a narrowness of the semantic gap" (Bateson, 1950, p. 51).

The "poetic of correspondence" recalls the medieval and Elizabethan scholastic notion of the universe as a chain of correspondences. More important is what Ruthven terms the "far-fetched", which does not seem to differ in essence from the discordia concors. Basing his argument on Aristotle's Rhetoric,

far-fetched, according to Ruthven (1969, pp. 12 - 13), indicates anything out of the ordinary or novel, "anything that differentiates literary language from the language spoken every day." It also includes the augmentation of the language with loan-words, coinages and images drawn from new sources.

Eliot, in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets", says much the same: there is the "elaboration . . . of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it" (1961, p. 282). An example is the comparison of two lovers to a pair of compasses in Donne's A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning. Besides the "mere explication of the content of a comparison", there is also "a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader" (Eliot, 1961, p. 282), as in A Valediction: Of Weeping, where images flit in rapid succession from the geographer's globe to the tear, and from the tear to a deluge. Finally, "successful . . . effects are secured by brief words and sudden contrasts" (Eliot, 1961, p. 283), as in Donne's "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone".

George Williamson typifies the conceit as showing more brain work, making use of material of little innate poetic value, and achieving greater imaginative distance - which is to explain why "it is commonly regarded as difficult, perverse, and far-fetched" (Williamson, 1961, p. 90).

In my discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of the conceit, Williamson's distinction of two sorts of conceit is relevant. In commenting on the apparent incongruity between the two terms of the metaphor, Williamson (1961, p. 87) identifies the

condensed conceit, which achieves a startling effect by a rapid telescoping of apparently incongruous associations, as well as the expanded conceit, in which the image is elaborated and relationships are meticulously explored.

Emily Dickinson employs the adroitness and element of surprise of the metaphysical conceit in much of her verse, and her conceits are generally used to give vivid substance to an abstraction or to concretize an experience. Her images have a freshness and vigour which is not generally associated with the age in which she lived, and central to her employment of the conceit is the discordia concors, the witty perception of similarities in apparently unrelated objects or ideas. Her exploitation of the "far-fetched" in her use of imagery drawn from new sources has already been discussed at length; the following explications will hopefully demonstrate her accomplishment as a conceitist in the metaphysical tradition.

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 -
Then quivered out of Decimals -
Into Degreeless Noon -

It will not stir for Doctors -
This Pendulum of snow -
This 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 -

(Poem 287)

This poem depicts the moments of cessation of life. The moment of death is indicated by the stopping of the heartbeat which is equated with the homely image of the cessation of time-keeping by the mantelpiece clock. "In fable, a clock stops when its owner dies; at any event, it measures the clock-time by which men live" (Warren, 1957, p. 584). Emily Dickinson frequently uses the image of a ticking clock to depict normality and ordered routine:

'Twas comfort in her Dying Room
To hear the living Clock -

(Poem 1703)

How orderly the Kitchen'd look, by night,
With just a Clock -
But they could gag the Tick -

(Poem 289)

Man is a trinket, a manikin which cannot be restored by the artifice of its manufacturer, and the poet associates the dying person with the life-like puppet on top of the clock. The skill of "Geneva", or the Swiss clock-maker, is not able to "put the puppet bowing", just as man's Creator cannot or will not res-

tore life. The death-throes of the dying person are reflected by the reverberations of the clock as it strikes noon, and death occurs. The hands of the clock move out of "Decimals" (one presumes the metrification is employed for alliterative effect as minutes and hours are not decimal figures) into "Degreeless Noon", where the hands of the clock are superimposed, instead of at an angle.

The entreaties of the Doctors and the Shopman, the latter "the person who owns the clock, i.e. the one who loves the dying person" (Miner, 1966, p. 58), are in vain. The "Pendulum", the living symbol of the clock/man is described in terms of snow, which has implications of coldness and chill, and consequently death, eternity and the like. The "Seconds slim - " indicate the infinitesimal measurement of the clock's second-hand - the seconds between the moment of death and the entreaties of the bereaved are suddenly lengthened to "Decades" which correlate with the "Decimals" of the second stanza. The mystery of infinity is cold and arrogant, and the gulf between the "Dial life" - the mortal body bound by time, and Him (God) is immense.

Careful examination of the poem reveals that the conceit is sustained with a clinical precision. The clock finds its parallel in man's life cycle, measured as time. The ticking of the clock also parallels the heart-beats of the patient - a palpable sign of life. The bungling of the Geneva watchmaker may be taken as the poet's ironical interpretation of God, while the trinket on top of the clock personifies the dying person, whose life is manipulated by a heavenly Puppet Master. The dial of the clock mirrors man's outward appearance, while the pen-

dulum is the outward manifestation of the working of the clock - the patient's beating heart. Finally, the shopman is synonymous with the bereaved. In an apparently simple poem, the poet has managed to achieve a concentration of life and death, motion and stillness, time and eternity. The conceit admirably fulfills the criterion that "the metaphysical conceit aims at making us concede justness while admiring ingenuity" (Gardner, 1968, p. 21).

"Perhaps the most brilliant of the death-in-death poems is 'A clock stopped - Not the Mantel's,' a masterpiece in the employment of a conceit coterminous with the poem - a definition once proposed for Donne's poems but more accurately applied to such of Emily's as this. Most of what is said fits approximately both sides of the equation; and that intellectual work which is the conceit serves, as we know, to distance the poem" (Warren, 1957, p. 584).

In addition to the conceit and the irreverent attitude, we also encounter a tone of ironical detachment which places the poem in the metaphysical tradition.

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him -
The Mountains straight reply -

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow -
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through -
And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -
To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
None stir the second time -
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
Or an emphatic Thumb -
Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -

(Poem 754)

In this poem Emily Dickinson employs an expanded conceit, and the poem opens with a line of dramatic potential. The two terms of the metaphor are disparate, and even paradoxical. Life is vital, while a gun is an inanimate piece of metal. It possesses the potential of destroying life, however. "Loaded" implies that the life has possibilities, although these can only be activated by the owner of the gun.

The conceit is embroidered with images of hunting, and gradually the subject of the poem emerges as that of the poet and her lover. The poet's identity is still embodied in the gun - her words are gunfire, hyperbolically echoed by the mountains, and her smile is the flash of the gun when fired. The gunfire becomes a laughing volcano, a rather exaggerated extension of the image of the firing gun.

In the fourth stanza the gun guards the master while he is asleep, and the poet's protective love is elevated above physical love:

'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -

Indeed, the overriding qualities in the poem are masculine, with the stress on the great outdoors in the aggressive hunting image. Pampered luxury is rejected (the "Eider-Duck's/Deep Pillow").

The human qualities of the "gun" are emphasised in the gun's reaction to any foe. The "Yellow Eye" (flash of fire) and "emphatic Thumb" (bullet) bring quick death.

The poem ends in a paradox in which the poet implores her owner to live longer than she. The idea of the opening stanza is reiterated, i.e. that the poet has no control over her own life, but must be activated by another:

Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -

Anderson (1963, p. 174) argues that the poem is a pastiche of techniques. The poem commences with a metaphysical conceit. It then develops via the ballad narrative, the poem being "a domestication on American soil of the tradition of courtly love."

"If she had chosen to use the strict method of metaphysical poetry, the succeeding stanzas would have been devoted to complicating and reconciling these disparities [life and gun] until they coalesce violently in the end" (Anderson, 1963, p. 174). Instead the poem concludes with an aphorism that "seems to have little structural relation to the rest of the poem" (Anderson, 1963, p. 175). Anderson tries to defend the "tagged on" ending by venturing that "perhaps this is a poem about the limitations of mortal love and a yearning for the superior glories of the immortal kind" (p. 175), but this ignores the body of the poem, which is clearly about a love relationship. Surely the final stanza reinforces the idea of the poet's dependence on the lover, and therefore the conceit of the opening stanza seems to be resolved satisfactorily. The final stanza is therefore not aphoristic, but a resolution of the initial theme.

In several poems Emily Dickinson uses the conceit of a journey; in Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord (279), the poet depicts her heavenly commitment in terms of a journey. One discerns an ambivalent attitude as the poet clings to the world, as in "Just a look at the Horses - ", "And it's partly, down Hill - ", and "And kiss the Hills, for me, just once - ". More sophisticated is the conceit in poem 712, Because I could not stop for Death -. As this poem is probably one of Emily Dickinson's most anthologized poems, it suffers from a plethora of critical explication. I have therefore omitted a complete analysis.

The preparation of the soul for immortality is portrayed in terms of seasonal ripening in poem 483. The ripening soul is

suspended between the orchard, where the dead body drops, and the Maker's ladders, leading not down but heavenwards. The sun is the grace of God, working for the attainment of the soul's perfection. The image of suspension is a perfect conceit for man's precarious suspension between death and immortality, and the image of ripening is maintained to the end:

But solemnest - to know
Your chance in Harvest moves
A little nearer - Every Sun
The Single - to some lives.

The following poem with its imagery taken from geography and military terminology, resembles seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry in both theme and imagery:

They put Us far apart -
As separate as Sea
And Her unsown Peninsula -
We signified "These see" -

They took away our Eyes -
They thwarted Us with Guns -
"I see Thee" each responded straight
Through Telegraphic Signs -

With Dungeons - They devised -
But through their thickest skill -
And their opaquest Adamant -
Our Souls saw - just as well -

They summoned Us to die -
With sweet alacrity
We stood upon our stapled feet -
Condemned - but just - to see -

Permission to recant -
Permission to forget -
We turned our backs upon the Sun
For perjury of that -

Not Either - noticed Death -
Of Paradise - aware -
Each other's Face - was all the Disc
Each other's setting - saw -

(Poem 474)

The theme of the poem is one common in Donne - the separation of lovers, but here the separation is one of death. The attachment of the lovers is stronger than any physical restraint. Despite distance and deprivation of sight, the lovers are still able to communicate through "Telegraphic Signs". Imprisonment (note the favourite image of "adamant" for thickness or weight), also proves no deterrent. The contradictory nature of the lovers towards their unspecified tormentors is shown when, despite the Torquemada-like methods of the torturers, they stand upon their "stapled feet". The image combines both rivetting pain and a sense of restriction. There is a constant reiteration of "see", and the poem reaches a climax with the dying lovers "concentrating on each other's disc-like 'Face', a symbol of the wholeness of the union which remains intact through death and, presumably, into the realm of 'Paradise'" (Todd, 1973, p. 38).

Poem 616, with its bold, opening paradox, is also in the meta-physical tradition:

I rose - because He sank -
I thought it would be opposite -
But when his power dropped -
My Soul grew straight.

I cheered my fainting Prince -
I sang firm - even - Chants -
I helped his Film - with Hymn -

And when the Dews drew off
That held his Forehead stiff -
I met him -
Balm to Balm -

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 Emperors grew -
Who recollected us
If we were true -

And so with Thews of Hymn -
And Sinew from within -
And ways I knew not that I knew - till then -
I lifted Him -

The poet describes the illness of a lover, her strength correspondingly increasing to his weakness. Her mental fortitude is described in linear terms - "My soul grew straight". Her support of the "fainting Prince" is devotional; that he is close to death is seen by his dimming eyes:

I helped his Film - with Hymn -

Besides her priest-like ministrations, the poet is also nurse, meeting him "Balm to Balm". Heraldic imagery is sustained by "fainting Prince" and "Casque". "Thews of Hymn" is a striking image, combining both physical and moral tenacity.

The soul's superiority to the body is described in the following poem:

No Rack can torture me -
My Soul - at Liberty -
Behind this mortal Bone -
There knits a bolder One -

You cannot prick with saw -
Nor pierce with Scimitar -
Two Bodies - therefore be -
Bind One - The Other fly -

The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest -
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou -

Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy -
Captivity is Consciousness -
So's Liberty.

(Poem 384)

Once again images of violence and torture predominate, though one might pedantically question the pricking and piercing abilities of instruments such as saws and scimitars, alliteration notwithstanding. The soul is immune to all violence. The paradox of "Two Bodies - therefore be - / Bind One - The Other fly - " links up with the first stanza where the soul is described as a body within a body:

Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One -

The neat epigrammatic paradox of the final stanza in which the soul proves to be its own enemy, has the element of wit discernible in the best metaphysical poetry.

He put the Belt around my life -
I heard the Buckle snap -
And turned away, imperial,
My Lifetime folding up -
Deliberate, as a Duke would do
A Kingdom's Title Deed -
Henceforth, a Dedicated sort -
A Member of the Cloud.

Yet not too far to come at call -
And do the little Toils
That make the Circuit of the Rest -
And deal occasional smiles
To lives that stoop to notice mine -
And kindly ask it in -
Whose invitation, know you not
For Whom I must decline?

(Poem 273)

Eunice Glen (1943, p. 581) finds that the image of the belt here "is as precise a figure as Donne's 'compass,' although it is more sensuous and is not pursued so far; the ordinary associations with such everyday objects enhance their effectiveness when used in a fresh way." Whether the image is as precise as Glenn states is debatable, for Donne's image has both precision and ingenuity lacking in the Dickinson image. The image however conveys a sense of finality, and Glenn is justified in commenting that the attitude established is not simple, for "added to the normally unpleasant feeling of being completely subjected to the will of another is an ecstatic delight in the experience" (1943, p. 581). The complete subjugation of the poet is revealed through the autocratic actions of the Duke, and the image of owner and owned is sustained in the Duke's folding the "Kingdom's Title Deed". The final lines of stanza one reveal that God is the captor, for the poet becomes a "Dedicated sort" and a "Member of the Cloud". The

tone of subservience is maintained in the second stanza, the bold imagery is not.

Publication - is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man -
Poverty - be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly - but We - would rather
From Our Garret go
White - Unto the White Creator -
Than invest - Our Snow -

Thought belong to Him who gave it -
Then - to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration - Sell
The Royal Air -

In the Parcel - Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace -
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price -

(Poem 709)

An interesting and sustained metaphor may be discerned in the above poem, where the poet comments on the sanctity of the human mind. The poem may also be a symbol of her own reticence with regard to publication. Publication is selling in the most public way; the poet's soul is laid bare in this "Auction/Of the Mind of Man", it is sullied by investment. In a shocking metaphor in stanza three she states that thought belongs to the Creator, and then to the poet who bears it in corporeal form. Even religion may be sold, but the spirit of man is above price.

Her delight in concretizing abstractions is seen in "Hope" is the thing with feathers - (254), where hope is a caged singing bird which "perches in the soul". In a rather more subtle poem (1547), hope becomes a glutton. The dum spiro, spero notion is paradoxically presented, for although it "feeds upon the Fair", its abiding qualities give the impression of abstinence. However, Emily Dickinson's most effective conceits are those which open her brief, eight-line poems. Here the conceits are condensed, rather than expanded, and their impact derives from their unexpectedness, the sense of imaginative shock derived from an incongruity of associations. The healing touch of time is "Time's consummate plush" (1738), which renders the woe "sleek"; the unattainability of Heaven is an apple on a tree, just beyond reach (239); presentiment is "that long Shadow - on the Lawn - /Indicative that Suns go down - " (764); shame "the shawl of Pink/In which we wrap the Soul" (1412), while inner turmoil becomes "The mob within the heart/Police cannot suppress" (1745).

Much of Emily Dickinson's poetry hearkens to the twentieth century rather than to the seventeenth century, especially in her almost surrealistic depiction of psychological states of terror and distress. Donne, notes Williamson (1961, p. 34), "is shocking in his curious exploration of the soul." Dickinson however frequently surpasses Donne in her uncanny selection of the right "objective correlative".

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the

formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot, 1961, p. 145).

The objective correlative is a set of words, usually an image, so constituted that it produces in the reader a mental state which is as close as possible to that of the poet's experience. The hallmark of the objective correlative should be economy and precision, and Emily Dickinson manages to combine this precision with a remarkable dramatic intensity in the following poem:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My Mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

(Poem 280)

Here Emily Dickinson has succeeded in articulating a mental breakdown in terms of physical death. The conceit may seem hackneyed, but the poet succeeds in finding an original metaphorical approach through auditory imagery which verges on the surrealistic. "The stage lies within the cortex of the brain, and the drama is rendered exclusively in terms of unarticulated sounds, transformed into motions which enact the pantomime through its inexorable progress to extinction" (Anderson, 1963, pp. 208 - 209).

The village funeral ceremony, an integral part of what Emily Dickinson could see "New Englandly", becomes a symbol of insanity. The ritual of the funeral is amplified rather than magnified; the plosives of treading, drum, beating, boots of lead and the reiterated bi-labial plosives of box and boots sustain the cacophonous mood.

The funeral imagery is extended in the penultimate stanza where the poet's entire being becomes an ear, wrecked in a cacophonous, tolling universe. Finally there is a switch from the funeral bell to the grave in the last stanza, where the scaffolding which supports the poet's consciousness breaks. The inconclusive "then - " effectively demonstrates Emily Dickinson's articulatory breakdown, and the lines are reminiscent of Hopkins's:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.

(No worst, there is none. Read and Dobrée, 1963,
p. 659)

This poem, with its taut restraint and vivid concretization, together with the "sense of the moment" which Gardner (1968, p. 24) discerns in Donne, captures the poet's spiritual death without the self-abandonment one might expect from a Victorian "poetess". Dickinson's poem invites comparison with the first stanza of Marvell's A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body:

Soul

O who shall, from this Dungeon, raise
A Soul enslav'd so many wayes?
With bolts of Bones, that fetter'd stands
In Feet; and manacled in Hands,
Here blinded with an Eye; and there
Deaf with the drumming of an Ear.
A Soul hung up, as 'twere, in Chains
Of Nerves, and Arteries, and Veins.
Tortur'd, besides each other part,
In a vain Head, and double Heart.

(Willy, c. 1971, p. 144)

Marvell presents the soul imprisoned in the flesh in vivid and sensate terms; the Dickinson poem, with its "soundless sounds of agony" (Winters, c. 1963, p. 31) is born out of actual experience, rather than academic speculation.

Poem 1159 creates an atmosphere similar to Eliot's state of induced languor in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table . . .

(Eliot, 1968, p. 13)

Great Streets of silence led away
To Neighborhoods of Pause -
Here was no Notice - no Dissent
No Universe - no Laws -

By Clocks, 'twas Morning, and for Night
The Bells at Distance called -
But Epoch had no basis here
For Period exhaled.

(Poem 1159)

The poet appears to be in some kind of mental stupor in which time has no basis. The atmosphere is dream-like, given substance only by shadowy streets, clocks and bells. Yvor Winters (c. 1963, p. 31) sees the poem as an expression of "the experience of posthumous beatitude" and has some scathing comments to make: ". . . no concrete image emerges, and the idea of the poem - the idea of the absolute dissidence of the eternal from the temporal - is stated indirectly, and in spite of the brevity of the poem and the gnomic manner, with extraordinary redundancy." While one might profitably question Winters' contention about "posthumous beatitude", one has to concede that the surrealistic imagery lacks definition, and thus remains vague and unsatisfactory.

Allen Tate (c. 1963, p. 21) seizes upon the problem of communication:

"She lacks almost radically the power to seize upon and understand abstractions for their own sake; she does not separate them from the sensuous illuminations that she is so marvellously adept at; like Donne, she perceives abstraction and thinks sensation . . . She cannot reason at all. She can only see."

Emily Dickinson demonstrates her poetic skill in depicting a feeling of numbness and despair in palpable terms in poem 341:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round -
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -

The analogy seems to be that of "After the Funeral", where the poet describes the mental paralysis which is a panacea for "great pain". The numbness and process of readjustment is a "formal feeling", and the nerves sit "ceremonious, like Tombs". The feeling of stolidity is increased with "stiff Heart", while the events occasioning the pain seem remote and unreal:

The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

Mechanical reactions are aptly described in "Wooden way", which together with the "Hour of Lead" of stanza three, conveys the paralysis of despair. The uncaring state, "Regardless grown", gradually resolves into "A Quartz contentment, like a stone - ". The numbing grief gradually crystallizes into an analgesic stupor. The gradual release from pain is likened to death by freezing. The chill of pain is resolved into a stupor, which

ends in the "letting go - ". In the case of freezing, the letting go means the release of death. Here the "Hour of Lead" is partially obliterated by time's "consummate plush" (no. 1738).

Like Donne, Dickinson is "re-begot/Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not." ¹⁾ John Cody, a practising psychiatrist, says in his work After Great Pain; The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (1971, pp. 328 - 329) that the poem is both a "summary of the major symptomatology and a general outline of the course of the acute phase of the poet's illness", and that the second stanza is "an epitome of the clinical appearance of catatonia." Emily Dickinson has, through meticulous manipulation of imagery and control of tone, arrested the formal feeling which "is, ironically, no feeling at all, only numb rigidity existing outside time and space" (Anderson, 1963, p. 211).

In poem 510 Emily Dickinson produces an image of dissection comparable to Prufrock's vivisection by his social environment:

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall . . .
(The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Eliot,
1968, p. 15)

Unlike Prufrock, Dickinson is totally removed from any human environment; she is locked in a surrealistic nightmare:

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame . . .

1. A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day . . . (Donne, 1966, p. 85)

One recalls the undertaker of There's been a Death, in the Opposite House taking "the measure of the House - ". The poet reaches the ultimate in exposure.

Helen Gardner (1968, p. 23), commenting on Donne, states that "his strong dramatic imagination of particular situations transforms the lyric and makes a metaphysical poem more than an epigram expanded by conceits." When the "strong dramatic imagination of particular situations" is absent in Dickinson's poetry, one finds the kind of vapid and forced analogies of By my Window have I for Scenery/Just a Sea - with a Stem - (797), where the poet labours to be witty and the resultant poem fails. From the poems analysed above, however, one can adduce Emily Dickinson's relationship to the metaphysical tradition in terms of imagery. Her imagery, unlike that of the metaphysical poets, is the imagery of wit, rather than of logical explication and resolution; her longer conceits lack the intellectual genius of Donne. Although the introspection of some of her poems is reminiscent of Eliot's depth psychology rather than the seventeenth century, her kinship with the seventeenth century cannot be ignored.

This was a Poet - It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings -
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door -
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it - before -

(Poem 448)

Emily Dickinson could with justification see herself as the distiller of "amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings"; the cynic might add of amazing meanings from ordinary sense. Though much of her work is abstract and clandestine to an extreme, her poetic genius is distinctive of the metaphysical tradition rather than of any other.

CHAPTER SIX

"SUCCESS IN CIRCUIT": EMILY DICKINSON'S IRONIC VISION

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies

(Poem 1129)

L'ironie est le fond du caractère de la Providence.

(Honoré de Balzac: Eugénie Grandet)

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet . . .

(T.S. Eliot: The Love Song of
J. Alfred Prufrock)

"Should anyone ever discover in himself the need to reduce another to mental and syntactic confusion," says Muecke in his treatise on irony (1970), "few things will be found so efficacious as asking him to write down on the spot a definition of irony."

The New Critics regard irony as being basic to all good poetry; irony, with its attendant forces of wit and paradox may be deemed the touchstone of good poetry. Cleanth Brooks especially is intensely concerned with wit, irony and paradox and their operation in poetry.

Irony is akin to wit in its ability to achieve equilibrium, and the major critics agree on this point:

"Irony . . . consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry which is" (Richards, 1950, pp. 250 - 251).

"It [wit] involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible, which we find as clearly in the greatest as in poets like Marvell" (Eliot, 1961, p. 303).

Irony, then, is a qualification of experience, and provides a kind of internal equilibrium for poetry. It supposes a complexity of response, the awareness of the existence of a second perspective, to achieve what Richards calls a "balanced poise". Irony represents the middle way, and certain critics see this as a defect.

For John Crowe Ransom, irony signifies a failure to unify. "In a pointed form of irony the oppositions produce an indecisive effect" (The New Criticism, p. 96. In Wimsatt and Brooks, 1965, p. 622). Ironic poetry therefore expresses irresolution.

Yvor Winters, though primarily a moralist critic, deflates what he terms "romantic irony"¹⁾ as the irony of a poet who is not

1. Winters calls the deflation of a positive mood by irony "romantic irony". "In this kind of progression, the poet alternates moods: he 'builds up a somewhat grandiloquent effect only to demolish it by ridicule or by ridiculous anticlimax.'" (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1965, pp. 672 - 673).

morally secure, and "his irony is thus a reflection of his confusion or of his moral flabbiness or of his lack of concern to focus his poem" (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1965, p. 673). It amounts to "an admission of careless feeling, which is to say careless writing" and Winters recommends to the romantic ironist "the waste-paper basket and a new beginning" (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1965, p. 673).

Much of Emily Dickinson's irony falls under what Muecke (1970, p. 69) terms: "World Irony, Philosophical Irony or Cosmic Irony". This is "the presentation of the helplessness of men in the face of an indifferent universe, a presentation coloured with feelings of resignation and melancholy or even despair, bitterness, and indignation." For the ironist, a sense of irony will "not make him any the less a victim of these predicaments but will enable him in some degree to transcend them" (Muecke, 1970, p. 77). Emily Dickinson tends to fall into this category of ironist, and Griffith says: "Irony, as an attitude to life, represents to Miss Dickinson the sort of steadfast composure which declines involvements, presupposes ambiguity, spurns all firm expectations - and, therefore, cushions the ironist from the tricks and wry jokes that life delights in playing" (1965, pp. 44 - 45). Irony need not be an admission of "moral flabbiness", but rather a mark of a keen sensibility which perceives the intrinsic contrariness of life and experience. The ironist seeks the safe middle way, and Griffith argues that it accentuates the poet's involvement (1965, pp. 70 - 71):

"In much of the poetry, she faced outward with perfectly blank features, hoping thereby to gain detachment from the fearful risks of living in a fearful world. But the very urgency with which she sought for this escape is, of course, a clear indication of Miss Dickinson's actual involvements. Beneath her surface equanimity - her cautiously cultivated self-effacements - she obviously existed as an acutely self-conscious personality and as a mass of seething anxieties."

While the ironic mask serves as a non-committal rein on much of her poetry, it also slips, ironically exposing her to her overwrought emotions. It is in this poetry that hysteria can be discerned; irony, while tempering emotion, reveals the true horror of the situation.

In one of Emily Dickinson's letters to Higginson she writes: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean me, but a supposed person" (Higginson, 1891, p. 448). This desire for self-effacement seems akin to Eliot's plea for the extinction of the personality in poetry. The following poem, no. 426, exemplifies her desire for a muted control in the face of strong emotion. Her erratic use of the dash, however, annihilates the desired poise:

It don't sound so terrible - quite - as it did -
I run it over - "Dead", Brain, "Dead."
Put it in Latin - left of my school -
Seems it don't shriek so - under rule.

Turn it, a little - full in the face
A Trouble looks bitterest -
Shift it - just -
Say "When Tommorow comes this way -
I shall have waded down one Day."

I suppose it will interrupt me some
Till I get accustomed - but then the Tomb
Like other new Things - shows largest - then -
And smaller, by Habit -

It's shrewder then
Put the Thought in advance - a Year -
How like "a fit" - then -
Murder - wear!

The following is rather more contained:

Consulting summer's clock,
But half the hours remain.
I ascertain it with a shock -
I shall not look again.
The second half of joy
Is shorter than the first.
The truth I do not dare to know
I muffle with a jest.

(Poem 1715)

Donne's poetry concerning death is frequently tinged with a quizzical or self-mocking tone -

When I am dead, and doctors know not why,
And my friends' curiosity
Will have me cut up to survey each part,
When they shall find your picture in my heart,
You think a sudden damp of love
Will through all their senses move,
And work on them as me, and so prefer
Your murder, to the name of massacre.

(The Damp. Donne, 1966, p. 102)

Unlike him, Emily Dickinson prefers the stance of the objective onlooker. This does not signify lack of involvement, for this objective irony becomes a way of assuaging her terrors of death:

"I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does of the burying-ground, because I am afraid" (Higginson, 1891, p. 445).

Emily Dickinson had a morbid predilection for the theme of death in her poetry. The following letters remind one forcibly of Donne who had his portrait painted in his shroud.¹⁾

Dickinson's memento mori is rather more Victorian, as may be discerned from her correspondence. In an adolescent letter to a friend she imagines how she would look when dead, wearing a white gown and with a snowdrop at her breast:

-
1. "Donne died in 1631 in the odor of sanctity and theater, which is as it should have been. Walton gives us this vividly memorable picture of Donne's last performance:

'A Monument being resolved upon, Dr. Donne sent for a Carver to make for him in wood the figure of an Urn, giving him directions for the compass and height of it; and to bring with it a board of the just height of his body. These being got: then without delay a choice Painter was got to be in a readiness to draw his Picture, which was taken as followeth: - Several Charcole-fires being first made in his large Study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand, and, having put off all his cloathes, had this sheet put on him, and so tyed with knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed, as dead bodies are usually fitted to be shrowded and put into their Coffin, or grave. Upon this Urn he thus stood with his eyes shut, and with so much of the sheet turned aside as might shew his lean, pale, death-like face, which was purposely turned towards the East, from whence he expected the second coming of his and our Saviour Jesus. In this posture he was drawn at his just height; and when the Picture was fully finished, he caused it to be set by his bedside, where it continued, and became his hourly object till his death'" (Donne, 1966, p. xxxviii).

"I'm a naughty, bad girl to say sad things, and make you cry, but I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love" (Letter 86. To Jane Humphrey, April, 1852. Dickinson, 1958, pp. 197 - 198).

In another of her early letters she writes:

"I cannot realize that the grave will be my last home - that friends will weep over my coffin and that my name will be mentioned, as one who has ceased to be among the haunts of the living" (Letter 10. To Abiah Root, 31 January, 1846. Dickinson, 1958, p. 28).

This adolescent melancholy is not at work in the following poem, where the poet recreates a Victorian death-bed scene, and where the irony is chiefly one of unfulfilled expectation.

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
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 -

(Poem 465)

Here the "terror" centres on the perennial metaphysical theme of death. Like Donne, Emily Dickinson knew the value of a vigorous opening line, and the incongruity and temerity of "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - " startles the reader into awareness. The poet skilfully weaves the more grandiose elements of expectation into the poem; the buzzing fly (note the onomatopoeic harshness of "buzz") is more forceful when contrasted with "Stillness in the Air" and "Heaves of Storm". Here one then finds Eliot's "powerful effect . . . produced by the sudden contrast of associations" (1961, p. 283). Even more shocking is the irony of coupling the fly with the revelation of the expected "King". As the dying person departs this world, the only mystical revelation is a fly "With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz - " - perhaps an ironic comment on the disappointment of man's heavenly expectations. Note also the dry tone in the poet's bequests: "I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away/What portion of me be/Assignable - ". The keepsakes sound negligible, but are in fact more enduring than the body; what is not assignable is doomed to putrefaction. There is also a hint of irony in the description of the attendants around the deathbed, the sensation-seekers with "Breaths . . . gathering firm". The situation is not unlike that of Donne in Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness, where he describes his inert body surrounded by doctors:

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
That this is my Southwest discovery
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die . . .

(Donne, 1966, p. 283)

Here the irony is a somewhat wry one at the expense of Donne; Emily Dickinson's irony is at the expense of the onlookers, foiled in their expectations of a grand exit.¹⁾

In the final line the unexpected reiteration of "see" causes the poem to culminate in irresolution. With death, vision ceases, and the poet therefore cannot see the fly, an image of everyday discomfort and annoyance, perhaps a symbol of the vulgarity of death. The poet implies that death is the ultimate destination, and the final line is an ironic reversal of the expectations of the watchers. Death does not bring any profound revelations; possibly the irksome fly is an affirmation of life which is infinitely preferable to the void after death. Apart from the grotesquerie of the fly image that is reminiscent of Donne, the poem also has a wryness of tone identifiable with the latter. The scene also has a theatrical quality comparable to much of the dramatic poetry of Donne; the Dickinson poem is rather more detached and sparse.

A similar ironic touch is discerned in the well-known poem:

I died for Beauty - but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room -

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
"For Beauty", I replied -
"And I - for Truth - Themselves are One -
We Brethren, are", He said -

1. Cf. also Donne: The Second Anniversary, ll. 90 - 112.

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night -
We talked between the Rooms -
Until the Moss had reached our lips -
And covered up - our names -

(Poem 449)

Here the poet is no longer in the process of dying, but is ensconced in the grave. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between the metaphysical notions of Beauty and Truth. The bold assertion of the opening line is negated by the irony of man's becoming a clod - his whole identity is obliterated in a less cosmic manner than Wordsworth's Lucy:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

(A slumber did my spirit seal. Untermeyer, 1970,
p. 313)

Not only man, but also his memory is effaced:

Until the Moss had reached our lips -
And covered up - our names -

In the poem below, the poet again displays her morbid scrutiny of cadavers:

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 care - 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!

(Poem 187)

The rigidity of the corpse is described in startling images borrowed from the coffin; "soldered mouth", "awful rivet", "hasps of steel" intensify the sense of rigid immobility. The housewife is described as languid and uninterested, with "listless hair"; in the final stanza she is portrayed as "indolent", which carries both the medical denotation of "without pain", as well as "slothful". The wit and effrontery in the image of the lazy corpse would surely have been appreciated by Donne! The buzzing flies, the sun and the cobwebs are affirmations of life which gloat over death - ironically the tribulations of the housewife while alive. There is also the ironic contrast between the "adamantine fingers" of the corpse and the nimble fingers which once wore a thimble. "Adamantine" in its earlier sense of "loadstone" or "diamond" intensifies the predominant feeling of rigor mortis. The poem, which opens with images of tremendous hardness stressing the coldness and finality of death, culminates in a gentle admonition of the lazy housewife reclining among the daisies. This is an excellent example of the "alliance of levity and seriousness" (Eliot, 1961, p. 296) which is a characteristic of metaphysical wit. The levity intensifies the seriousness and the incongruity of the image renders the irony more horrifying.

In One dignity delays for all - (98) Emily Dickinson achieves a fine integration of irony with precision of imagery.

One dignity delays for all -
One mitred Afternoon -
None can avoid this purple -
None evade this Crown!

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!

"The emphasis here is on death as a democratic leveler. The persona is not singled out for any distinctive honor but indicates that 'none can avoid this purple - /None evade this Crown'. She herself is 'simple', and her escutcheon or coat of arms is 'meek', yet she, too, can 'claim the rank to die.' There is no specific mention of eternity in this poem, but the use of the phrase 'one mitred Afternoon', with the image of the liturgical headdress, suggests that the 'rank to die' does not necessarily mean final extinction. It may well indicate a spiritual rank to be attained through the process of death. Furthermore, in this poem the funeral procession blends imperceptibly into a coronation procession which . . . often indicates the achievement of immortality" (Todd, 1973, p. 58). To the wary reader a hint of irony is attached in the final stanza,

for all these trappings of coaches, mitres, and footmen are unappreciated by the participants. Todd seems to be unaware of the wryness of tone behind the poem.

Griffith (1965, pp. 47 - 56) has commented that Emily Dickinson's ironic vision is especially vivid in the poems involving the conferment of a precious gift. The word "gift" is misleading, for the poet's gifts are abstract emotional states of happiness, love, etc. The ironic mask is especially functional in this poetry, for "in the midst of the new satiety a curious reserve always exists. There is a reluctance to seem too pleased or too grateful" (Griffith, 1965, p. 47). The following poem is a rather blatant example of this stance where "the unexpected gift is suspect because the mere act of receiving it necessarily entails the prospect of a future loss" (Griffith, 1965, p. 48):

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

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittance of years -
Bitter contested farthings -
And Coffers heaped with Tears!

(Poem 125)

The poem opens with the kind of mathematical reasoning of which Emily Dickinson was fond. The grammatical oddity of "an anguish" matches the commercial profit and loss theme of the poem. The poet achieves remarkable poise in her use of the mathematical "ratio" in conjunction with emotionally charged words such as "ecstasy" and "anguish", and the vibrant

adjectives "keen" and "quivering". The financial imagery is maintained in the second stanza; tears are the remuneration for joy, and the reimbursement is not consistent with the loss, for instants of ecstasy and hours of love demand the "pittances of years". Emily Dickinson did not face the tribulations which Herbert faced; neither does she display any of his patience and fortitude:

Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
In weakness must be stout.
Well, I will change the service, and go seek
Some other master out.
Ah my deare God, though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

(Affliction. Gardner, 1968, p. 123)

The "romantic irony" so deprecated by Yvor Winters is a favourite strategy of Emily Dickinson. In the poem below, the poet employs the imagery of the courtroom:

I read my sentence - steadily -
Reviewed it with my eyes,
To see that I made no mistake
In its extremest clause -
The Date, and manner, of the shame -
And then the Pious Form
That "God have mercy" on the Soul
The Jury voted Him -
I made my soul familiar - with her extremity -
That at the last, it should not be a novel Agony -
But she, and Death, acquainted -
Meet tranquilly, as friends -
Salute, and pass, without a Hint -
And there, the Matter ends -

(Poem 412)

The "I" appears to be the mortal body, while the "she" is the soul. The scene takes place in a courtroom, but it is an interior courtroom of the mind.

"The dramatic appeal of a criminal trial comes from the contrast of the lawless emotions involved in the original actions and the ordered procedure by which the court enacts them, with the possibility that at any moment the violently human may erupt through the formalism of its jargon. From this situational irony she creates her strategy, giving it a unique twist by having one actor, the masking 'I,' slip successively into all the leading roles - prisoner-in-the-dock, defense counsel, judge, jury, and courtroom spectators" (Anderson, 1963, p. 205).

The tone of the opening lines is cool and appraising as the trial proceeds. The final judgement is death, and the crux of the matter, the "soul" is glossed over as a "Pious Form", a piece of legal jargon designed to defer to public moral sensibility. The capital letters seem functional in implementing the irony here.

The poet then awaits execution, and prepares the soul for extinction, thinking it to be mortal. Death and the soul are old friends, and instead of a violent confrontation, their meeting is casual. The "Matter" which ends is the mortal protagonist:

"In the triple pun, 'And there, the Matter ends,' the fictive 'I' experiences a new death by losing his soul as well as his identity in the depths of despair, the curtain is rung down on the bad dream along with all the legal theatricalities that bodied it forth, and the poem destroys itself in a tour de force. The reader, if any one, suffers shock" (Anderson, 1963, p. 207).

The same sense of ironical anti-climax is found in the following poem with its Herbert-like imagery. The climax shatters expectation, for the poet finds that gratification of hunger is less important when the wherewithal is at hand. The imagery of the poem has a sacramental quality reminiscent of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals:

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, Home
I looked in Windows, for the Wealth
I could not hope - for Mine -

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 -

(Poem 579)

The poem bears comparison with Herbert's Love; the Dickinson poem is tinged with ironical disillusionment. The simplicity of Herbert's acceptance - "So I did sit and eat" - is absent, although both the Dickinson and Herbert poems are characterized by a restrained, rather than impassioned rhetoric.

Emily Dickinson's forte is possibly her depiction of "the terror of irresolution" (Griffith, 1965, p. 53). Kenneth Clark in Civilization (1974, p. 4) describes a poem by a modern Greek poet, Cavafy, "in which he imagines the people of an antique town like Alexandria waiting every day for the barbarians to come and sack the city. Finally the barbarians move off somewhere else and the city is saved; but the people are disappointed - it would have been better than nothing." Emily Dickinson revels in similar situations, which would place her in the present age, rather than the seventeenth century. Many poets have commented on the dread of unfulfilled expectation:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds
that knife us . . .
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
Low, dropping flares confuse our memory of the
salient . . .
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.

(Wilfred Owen: Exposure.
Allott, 1968, p. 119)

Emily Dickinson takes a sadistic delight in building up feelings of nameless dread and terror, only to shatter the mood into one culminating in irresolution. A good example is the following:

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing its boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyed coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem -
And you dropt, lost,
When something broke -
And let you from a Dream -

As if a Goblin with a Gauge -
Kept measuring the Hours -
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws -

And not a Sinew - stirred - could help,
And sense was setting numb -
When God - remembered - and the Fiend
Let go, then, Overcome -

As if your Sentence stood - pronounced -
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt
To Gibbets, and the Dead -

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped "Reprieve"! -
Which Anguish was the utterest - then -
To perish, or to live?

(Poem 414)

The poem is a study in the recollection of some past psychological agony, exemplified by images of excruciating power. The image of the whirling maelstrom is particularly suggestive with its connotations of an ever-narrowing, dark, annihilating force. "For Emily Dickinson, as for Melville and Poe, the maelstrom - the bottomless, eternally spinning whirlpool - symbolizes both moral and physical dissolution. It is a cruelly destructive force - dark, primordial, populated by those shapes and spectres which are most appalling to the human sensibility" (Griffith, 1965, p. 52). "Notch" is puzzling - it introduces an idea of

substance into the liquid turmoil of the maelstrom. Martha Fodaski (1966, pp. 85 - 86) interprets it as "the narrow pass which promises release . . . the narrow passage from the whirlpool-wheel and unreality." The suffocation of the maelstrom suddenly makes way for the suave seducer toying with the "final inch" of the poet's hem. The imagery is sexual, the hem signifying the edge of restraint in Victorian terms. It seems to parallel the "notch" of the first stanza. The diction also has erotic connotations, e.g. "dropt", "lost", while the adjective "delirious" intensifies the idea of psychological turmoil coupled with ecstasy. As in the first stanza, there is a hint of reprieve from the torturer:

When something broke -
And let you from a Dream -

The goblin, a favourite Dickinson symbol, is a macabre, yet calculating tormentor. The final hours of life are meticulously measured, until the fiend is sadistically balancing the final second of her life "in his Paws". The grotesquerie of the description is achieved by the discordia concors; the incongruity of images of scientific measurement coupled with brutish paws. Extinction is at hand and the poet becomes increasingly helpless, when "God - remembered - and the Fiend/ Let go . . . ". The image of the Redeemer is ironic and off-hand.

The climax is short-lived and the scene moves to the poet being led to the scaffold. The "Dungeon's luxury of Doubt", the dum spiro spero notion, fades away. The images indicate mental paralysis - the poet is lulled into acquiescence. The film

which stitches the eyes indicates the poet's proximity to death - the senses have started to blur. Then comes the reprieve. The paradox of the poem is that of dying into dying; the poet hovers in the terrible no-man's land of irresolution which is infinitely worse than life or death. Griffith (1965, pp. 53 - 54) points out that the poem is not romantic in conclusion:

"It is in the light of their remission that the last two lines acquire a special sort of terror: call it, possibly, the terror of irresolution. Given the turn of events that has been dramatized, we might well have looked for hyperbole at the end of 'The Final Inch.' Grateful for relief, the speaker could have concluded with loud affirmations, meant to glorify life and to praise its essential fitness. Or, exhausted by pain, she could, understandably, have lost the will to live, and so concluded (no less hyperbolically) by invoking death. But steadily declining either commitment, Emily Dickinson strikes a note which is infinitely less hopeful than the first and, in its own way, immeasurably more dreadful than the last. She poises us finally upon the sharp edge of an ironical attitude. There are no statements in the end; there is only a question."

The poem does not invite a pat response. Emily Dickinson succeeds in capturing a mood of hysteria and subjecting it to a strict economy of form and imagery. In the following poem, she attempts the same theme, but with less success. A few interesting images disintegrate into a sort of groping haziness:

Did you ever stand in a Cavern's Mouth -
Widths out of the Sun -
And look - and shudder, and block your breath -
And deem to be alone

In such a place, what horror,
How Goblin it would be -
And fly, as 'twere pursuing you?
Then Loneliness - looks so -

Did you ever look in a Cannon's face -
Between whose Yellow eye -
And yours - the Judgment intervened -
The Question of "To die" -

Extemporizing in your ear
As cool as Satyr's Drums -
If you remember, and were saved -
It's liker so - it seems -

(Poem 590)

The "curtain . . . rung down on the bad dream" (Anderson, 1963, p. 207) frequently functions as a braking device which extricates the poet from an emotionally charged situation.

The seventeenth-century metaphysical poets were not inspired by nature. Emily Dickinson wrote sufficient poetry on nature for her early publishers to include some of her poems under this heading. Much of the nature poetry, too, is characterized by her singularly oblique method and knack of deflation. In the following poem she builds up a tremendous sense of eerie expectation:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on -
He stuns you by degrees -
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow

By fainter Hammers - further heard -
Then nearer - Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten -
Your Brain - to bubble Cool -
Deals - One - imperial - Thunderbolt -
That scalps your naked Soul -

When Winds take Forests in their Paws -
The Universe - is still -

(Poem 315)

Note the careful heightening of tension by carefully controlled imagery. Emily Dickinson displays her ability of fusing the volatile and ethereal with more concrete imagery to produce certain sensations. Stealth makes way for impact, with words like "drop", "stuns", and "Blow", but the nature of this mysterious attacker is hinted at by the contrasting "Ethereal". A sense of ghastly expectation is contrived by unusual imagery:

Your Breath has time to straighten -
Your Brain - to bubble Cool -

Breath is described in terms which convey visible relaxation, while mental composure is a liquid cooling process.

The concluding couplet reveals the trick which has been perpetrated on the reader, for the poet has been describing a purely natural phenomenon. At the same time the conclusion effects an adjustment of tone; the intensity of the preceding lines is modified by this apparent anti-climax. A touch of ambiguity is hinted at, for the wind's brute strength persists:

When Winds take Forests in their Paws -
The Universe - is still -

The following nature poem also depends on hyperbole for its effect. Unlike in the previous poem, the situation is immediately made clear to the reader. Once again there is a slow crescendo of tension, beginning with the housewifely conceit of slow, controlled movement:

The Wind begun to knead the Grass -
As Women do a Dough -
He flung a Hand full at the Plain -
A Hand full at the Sky -
The Leaves unhooked themselves from Trees -
And started all abroad -
The Dust did scoop itself like Hands -
And throw away the Road -
The Wagons quickened on the Street -
The Thunders gossiped low -
The Lightning showed a Yellow Head -
And then a livid Toe -
The Birds put up the Bars to Nests -
The Cattle flung to Barns -
Then came one drop of Giant Rain -
And then, as if the Hands
That held the Dams - had parted hold -
The Waters Wrecked the Sky -
But overlooked my Father's House -
Just Quartering a Tree -

(Poem 824; first version,
c. 1864)

The domesticity of the opening lines is shattered by the wind's random and violent action. The images become almost surrealistic - nature engages in weird and macabre actions.

Once again there is a sense of anti-climax in the concluding lines, for amid this fury, the poet's abode has escaped relatively unscathed:

But overlooked my Father's House -
Just Quartering a Tree -

"In the face of such impending doom the Christian refuge would normally be faith in an overwatching Providence. But there is irony rather than coy piety in the concluding picture of the little girl safe in her 'Father's House.' Behind the overt thanksgiving that 'His eye' was on Squire Dickinson is the implied near-miss that makes the reader catch his breath" (Anderson, 1963, p. 139).

Here again there is a reining in of description and emotion, and perhaps a wry raising of eyebrows at the mere "Quartering" of a tree by so tremendous a power. There also seems to be a hint of wry acknowledgement of the poet's own relative unimportance in the universe.

Emily Dickinson delighted in paradoxes, but a penchant for riddling does not necessarily link her with the seventeenth-century metaphysicals. The following little verse can hardly be taken too seriously:

Who is the East?
The Yellow Man
Who may be Purple if He can
That carries in the Sun.

Who is the West?
The Purple Man
Who may be Yellow if He can
That lets Him out again.

(Poem 1032)

Many of the paradoxical poems are mere poetic exercises and metrical vehicles for aphorisms; they have a certain slickness which does not go beyond wit:

By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.

(Poem 1714)

Like Donne, Emily Dickinson knew the value of a bold opening chord. The puzzle of a paradox in an initial line has a pervasive appeal:

We lose - because we win -
Gamblers - recollecting which
Toss their dice again!

(Poem 21)

The poems which are clearly paradoxical are mostly concerned with the opposites of pleasure and pain and their enhancing effect upon the other. In To learn the Transport by the Pain - (167), the typically Dickinsonian dilemma of opposites is explored.

To learn the Transport by the Pain -
As Blind Men learn the sun!
To die of thirst - suspecting
That Brooks in Meadows run!

To stay the homesick - homesick feet
Upon a foreign shore -
Haunted by native lands, the while -
And blue - beloved air!

This is the Sovereign Anguish!
This - the signal woe!
These are the patient "Laureates"
Whose voices - trained - below -

Ascend in ceaseless Carol -
Inaudible, indeed,
To us - the duller scholars
Of the Mysterious Bard!

God may only be approached through suffering, as pleasure is known by pain. The poem ends with an ironic dig at the patient "Laureates", the pious hymn-singers, and the poet suggests that the "duller scholars" of God, those with the perception to recognize His ambivalence, are superior.

The poem below, with its paradoxical opening, initially appears irreverent. Instead it is an affirmation of belief in God, albeit in pantheistic terms. It is spoilt by a coy tone, although there is the audacious wit of calling God a "noted Clergyman".

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 getting to Heaven, at last -
I'm going, all along.

(Poem 324)

Just lost, when I was saved!
Just felt the world go by!
Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,
When breath blew back,
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel
Odd secrets of the line to tell!
Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores -
Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!
Next time, the things to see
By Ear unheard,
Unscrutinized by Eye -

Next time, to tarry,
While the Ages steal -
Slow tramp the Centuries,
And the Cycles wheel!

(Poem 160)

In this poem there is an ironic paradox in terms of traditional Christian salvation. The poet describes a return from the threshold of death. The opening lines indicate dismay that she is called back to earth. Her position is Lazarus-like, but as she has not fully experienced immortality, her report is vague.

William Empson, in Seven Types of Ambiguity (1953, p. 1), defines ambiguity as follows:

"An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."

For Empson, ambiguity is characterized by tremendous complexities of response, and the importance of ambiguity lies in the "puzzle". Any blatant pun or irony is not ambiguous, for it involves no puzzle. Empson's treatise depends on finding nuances of meaning in order to appreciate a poem's full effect.

The following poem is a good example of what Griffith calls Emily Dickinson's achievement of "ironic effects through a calculatedly ambiguous image which . . . guards against the 'heresy of inattention,' which, in her own way, Emily Dickinson would have found fully as objectionable as did that other supreme ironist, Henry James" (1965, pp. 57 - 58):

Here, where the Daisies fit my Head
'Tis easiest to lie
And every Grass that plays outside
Is sorry, some, for me.

Where I am not afraid to go
I may confide my Flower -
Who was not Enemy of Me
Will gentle be, to Her.

Nor separate, Herself and Me
By Distances become -
A single Bloom we constitute
Departed, or at Home -

(Poem 1037)

In the first stanza the poet sentimentally describes herself lying in her grave surrounded by daisies. The intrusion of "some" in the fourth line imparts a somewhat disconcerting note, not only semantically, but by its placement and isolation by punctuation. The sentence is grammatically uneasy. Does she imply that each blade of grass has somewhat pity for her, or that a few blades of grass feel sorry? "Every" points to the

first interpretation, but the English reader ¹⁾ might find the sentence ambiguous. The intrusion of the word does tend to dispel a little of the mawkishness of the lines.

Shame is the shawl of Pink
In which we wrap the Soul
To keep it from infesting Eyes -
The elemental Veil
Which helpless Nature drops
When pushed upon a scene
Repugnant to her probity -
Shame is the tint divine.

(Poem 1412)

Does the poet imply that the soul is wrapped in a shawl of pink so that it may not "infest" the eyes of observers, or so that it may not be infested by the eyes of the observers? The "tint divine" implies the second interpretation, but the succinct ambiguity enriches the poem considerably.

In A Bird came down the Walk - (328), Lair (1966, pp. 163 - 164) notes that "cautious" is applicable to both bird and poet:

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around -
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought -
He stirred his Velvet Head

-
1. Webster's Third New International Dictionary (c. 1966) uses "some" as a synonym for "somewhat".

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rolled him softer home -

Lair concludes: "Both readings are appropriate."

In the poetry of Emily Dickinson one is frequently reminded of Donne, who was able to manipulate tone by the insertion of a few choice words:

Then, he that digs us up will bring
Us to the Bishop, and the King,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men . . .
(The Relic. Donne, 1966, pp. 101 - 102) ¹⁾

Meticulous diction intensifies the ironic intent in the following:

Prayer is the little implement
Through which Men reach
Where Presence - is denied them.
They fling their Speech
By means of it - in God's Ear -
If then He hear -
This sums the Apparatus
Comprised in Prayer -

(Poem 437)

1. My underlining.

"Implement" implies a mere mechanical tool, the futility of which is further emphasized by the diminutive "little". "Fling" implies a desperate and random action, while "Apparatus" and "implement" also intensify the idea of a slightly deaf, senile and unconcerned Deity, qualified by the despairing "If then He hear - ". "Comprised", too, indicates that prayer is mechanical, made up of set components. The whole poem is a brief and bitter negation of traditional religious beliefs, and one recalls Emily Dickinson's letter to Higginson: "They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their 'Father'" (Higginson, 1891, p. 446).¹⁾

Even more succinct is the brief I went to Heaven - (374), in which Emily Dickinson gives an idealistic picture of heaven, but with one carefully selected word, succeeds in introducing a disconcerting note:

Almost - contented -
I - could be -

One is tempted to call to mind Jack Donne, "not dissolute but very neat, a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays, a great writer of conceited verse" (Grierson, 1956, p. xviii), on recalling Emily Dickinson's confession to a friend that "it is hard for me to give up the world." She could thus impudently write:

1. Cf. also Griffith, 1965, pp. 60 - 61.

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

(Poem 1601)

In her poetry, Emily Dickinson displays an ambivalent attitude towards God, frequently expressed with a temerity both stimulating and appalling. In 1852 she wrote of her family: "They will all go but me, to the usual meeting house, to hear the usual sermon; the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me" (Welland, c. 1961, p. 74). About her agoraphobic tendencies she remarks with acute sensibility: "They talk of hallowed things, aloud, and embarrass my dog" (Higginson, 1891, p. 449). This irreverence should not be confused with blasphemy or mere flippancy, but should be seen as part of the mechanism of a fine, if eccentric perception. "Man should not be too serious, either about extinction or redemption" (Gregor, 1955, p. 27). Whicher (1957, pp. 162 - 163) comments on Emily Dickinson's religious philosophy:

"Emily could trust in her own soul, but in what else could she trust? Intense religious feelings and flashes of illumination were not equivalent to settled religious convictions. She was not a systematic thinker. The spiderwebs of Calvinist theology did not concern her. The doctrinal sermons that she heard in girlhood did little more than give her a theological vocabulary, so that when she used such technical terms as predestination, justification, election, and grace in her poems, she used them

understandingly, albeit with a mischievous twist. For the rest she made eclectic choice of such doctrines as pleased her and jettisoned those that did not. In her attitude towards sin, for example, she was thoroughly unorthodox. Apparently she hardly ever used the word; it was repugnant to her to think of human nature as 'sown in corruption.' Minatory sermons troubled her, but the God of wrath was not her God. She hated to have divine Love made 'to seem like bears.' The God who sometimes visited her came as an 'old neighbor.' His residence was not far from hers. Unfortunately he was often out."

Religious doubts and tribulations make up much of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, as we see in Herbert:

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
I will abroad.
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free; free as the roe,
Loose as the winde, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?

(The Collar. Gardner, 1968, p. 135)

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancell th'old.

(Redemption. Willy, c. 1971, p. 103)

Donne, too, pleads:

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to You, imprison me, for I
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

(Holy Sonnet: Batter my heart . . . Donne, 1966,
p. 271)

Emily Dickinson's religious poetry, however, is characterized by a sardonic tone; her own struggle with "the world, the flesh, the devil" made bearable only by the acerbity of irony. Her God is a vacillating one, and frequently appears as a tyrannical, authoritarian father figure:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod,
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels - twice descending
Reimbursed my store -
Burglar! Banker - Father!
I am poor once more!

(Poem 49)

One is also tempted to seek a note of questioning behind the jocularity of poem 61:

Papa above!
Regard a Mouse
O'erpowered by the Cat!
Reserve within thy kingdom
A "Mansion" for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic Cupboards
To nibble all the day,
While unsuspecting Cycles
Wheel solemnly away!

Emily Dickinson adopted the "little girl" or "Christopher Robin" guise (Chase, 1952, p. 111) for a variety of purposes. The psychological implications of sheltering behind the safe mask of childhood are manifold; this childish mask was also sometimes a facade for a wry, self-deprecating irony as in the following poem, where the poet, in paradoxical and witty manner, is actually affirming herself!

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!

How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!

(Poem 288)

The "little girl" poems are usually spoilt by a naive and precious tone; their wit and perfunctory colloquial style being the only redeeming features which might characterize them as metaphysical. In the religious poetry, however, the child persona makes for an easy intimacy with God which would be effrontery in other circumstances. Christ is depicted as a "docile Gentleman" (1487), God is a bully (597), or even a "noted Clergyman" (324). "It is the kind of understatement that a 'little girl' can use with great effectiveness. There is no real irreverence toward God expressed because of the

persona that has been adopted" (Todd, 1973, p. 16).

In A Clock stopped - (287), man is a puppet and a trinket which cannot be restored by the Swiss clockmaker, the doctor or the shopman. "All three may be taken as masks for the Great Artificer, with an irony bordering on blasphemy: the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but He cannot repeat the performance with the same trinket" (Anderson, 1963, p. 237).

Several of the religious poems begin on a note of supplication, depicting God as a benevolent provider, and heaven as a safe refuge. There is often, however, a switch in tone, where the poet retreats in disillusionment, God having been revealed as a swindler. An example is I meant to have but modest needs - (476) , where in answer to the poet's prayer -

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face -
The Cherubim - withdrew -
Grave Saints stole out to look at me -
And showed their dimples - too -

God and the heavenly host are benevolent, yet patronising, amused at the gullibility of the poet:

I left the Place, with all my might -
I threw my Prayer away -
The Quiet Ages picked it up -
And Judgment - twinkled - too -
That one so honest - be extant -
It take the Tale for true -
That "Whatsoever Ye shall ask -
Itself be given You" -

The poet, disillusioned, abandons her former naivety:

But I, grown shrewder - scan the Skies
With a suspicious Air -
As Children - swindled for the first
All Swindlers - be - infer -

Todd notes that the mask of the persona assumed is functional in that it admits a second interpretation:

"In the final stanza the persona is described as having grown 'shrewder'. But Emily Dickinson seems to leave some doubt as to the degree of shrewdness the persona has acquired. Isn't this persona still acting like a child in the inference she draws? Perhaps there is even a kind of humor stemming from the notion that there has been no cosmic swindle at all but rather that man, as exemplified by the 'little girl' here, thinks he has been swindled because of an imperfect understanding of God. Thus I feel it is possible to suggest that Emily Dickinson is not actually being irreverent in the poem but merely playful, if we keep in mind the dramatic poses she assumes" (1973, p. 22).

The poet's portrayal of the mystery of God as a game of hide-and-seek is somewhat more sophisticated (no. 338). The "fond Ambush", however, is likely to end in "Death's - still - stare - ", and the conclusion to which the poet is driven is that this celestial game is a sadistic one, at the expense of man:

But - should the play
Prove piercing earnest -
Should the glee - glaze -
In Death's - stiff - stare -

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest -
Have crawled too far!

From the above examples one deduces that Emily Dickinson saw God as a tyrant or a suave deceiver. Northrop Frye (1970, p. 27) states:

"The whole 'punishing' aspect of religious doctrine struck her as 'a doubtful solace finding tart response in the lower Mind,' and she asks: 'Why should we censure Othello, when the Criterion Lover says, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me"? That is, why blame Othello for being jealous when God tells us that he is himself? She concluded that 'I do not respect "doctrines,"' and added, with a touch of snobbery: 'I wish the "faith of the fathers" didn't wear brogans, and carry blue umbrellas.' In short, she took no care to distinguish the Father of Christianity from the cloud-whiskered scarecrow that Blake called Nobodaddy and Bernard Shaw an old man in the sky looking like the headmaster of an inferior public school."

A strongly argumentative tone is commonly acknowledged as intrinsic to much metaphysical poetry. This tone may be discerned in Donne's altercations with his mistress, and occasionally with his God. The Holy Sonnet, If poisonous minerals . . . illustrates this tone, where the questioning note is resolved in "But who am I, that dare dispute with Thee/O God?" (Donne,

1966, p. 269). Marvel's Coy Mistress depends on playful, hyperbolic flattery and grotesque urgency in its argument. Yet the argumentative tone is seen most clearly in Herbert's questioning of his suffering. His Affliction (I) and The Collar rebuke God for His desertion, but in poem after poem Herbert is reconciled with God:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child!
And I reply'd, My Lord.

(The Collar. Gardner, 1968, p. 135)

Emily Dickinson argues with God, and is not above quoting chapter and verse to prove her point:

"Sown in dishonor"!
Ah! Indeed!
May this "dishonor" be?
If I were half so fine myself
I'd notice nobody!

"Sown in corruption"!
Not so fast!
Apostle is askew!
Corinthians 1. 15. narrates
A Circumstance or two!

(Poem 62) ¹⁾

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1. Johnson (Dickinson, 1968, pp. 47 - 48) notes: "The reference is to I Corinthians 15. 42 - 43: 'So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in corruption: It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.'" Johnson says: "The chapter commonly is interpreted as a demonstration that by Christ's resurrection he proved the necessity of man's resurrection."

Unlike Herbert, Emily Dickinson is not often able to achieve reconciliation with God, although Martz (1966, p. 98) says that "her Deity, like George Herbert's, is one who never minds an honest disagreement or a 'freckled' opinion."

Emily Dickinson used the hymnal form of Isaac Watts for much of her poetry. The hymnal line is basically a form for expressing faith and humility, but Emily Dickinson frequently puts it to work in an ironical manner, for the incongruity of her words and images set in a solemn rhythm is functional - the divergence between form and content operating as parody. Griffith (1965, p. 66) refers to this as the "cruellest kind of irony."

Glee - The great storm is over -
Four - have recovered the Land -
Forty - gone down together -
Into the boiling Sand -

Ring - for the Scant Salvation -
Toll - for the bonnie Souls -
Neighbor - and friend - and Bridegroom -
Spinning upon the Shoals -

(Poem 619)

Here "the irreverent content . . . is rendered more intense by the hymn-like structure of the poem and by the fact that heresies must be read with all the thumping vehemence of a camp-meeting paean" (Griffith, 1965, pp. 66.- 67).

Griffith also points out that At least - to pray - is left - is left - (502) is ironical, not only because of Christ's ambivalent nature, but also because "the same rhetorical sweeps - the same hymn-like bumptiousness - which normally praise Christ for His power and love have now been brought to a

context where they suggest Christ's ambiguousness" (p. 67).

Several examples of this "metrical irony" may be found. The sweeping grandeur of organ music becomes a pompous vehicle for a bantering poem in which the Bible is dismissed in scathing terms:

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

(Poem 1545)

Like Milton, Dickinson cannot suppress a grudging admiration for "Sin - a distinguished Precipice/Others must resist -".

Irony, in the hands of Emily Dickinson, was a powerful vehicle which gave a novel twist to themes which could have been banal. In her religious poetry she vacillates between orthodoxy, petulance, passion and profound irony, and her most ironical and questioning poetry stems from an acute sensibility. "Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you," she asks of a friend. "I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me

that I almost wish there was no Eternity" (Letter 10. To Abiah Root, 31 January, 1846. Dickinson, 1958, p. 28). For Emily Dickinson, as for the earlier metaphysical poets like Donne, religion served as an intellectual stimulus for a frequently profound poetry of doubt. "We thank thee Oh Father for these strange Minds, that enamor us against thee" (Frye, 1970, p. 28). Doubt could not often be assuaged with the intrinsically strong convictions of the seventeenth century:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

(Holy Sonnet: Death be not proud . . .
Donne, 1966, p. 270)

I say to you, said Jesus -
That there be standing here -
A Sort, that shall not taste of Death -
If Jesus was sincere -

I need no further Argue -
That statement of the Lord
Is not a controvertible -
He told me, Death was dead -

(Poem 432)

Much of the poetry, however paradoxical or ambiguous, cannot be termed "metaphysical". It lacks the strength of intellect and grit which characterize seventeenth-century poetry. One suspects that much of this is due to Emily Dickinson's prolific output, and Blackmur's judgement that "she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably as some women cook or knit" (1954, pp. 49 - 50) has some justification. The ironic mask, however, when carefully donned, strengthened her commitment to an emotion and to God. Her irony, coupled with audacious displays

of wit and a colloquial, perfunctory tone, constitutes that "constant inspection and criticism of experience" (Eliot, 1961, p. 303) which is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry. Emily Dickinson's raid on the inarticulate rouses the reader into a new awareness, and Bewley's appraisal of Donne might well fit her poetry:

"The poetry neither presents original ideas (as paraphrasable entities) nor develops old ones. Nevertheless, it is among the most intelligent, nervously alert poetry in English. What it does do supremely well is to develop a completely poised attitude towards experience" (Donne, 1966, p. xxii).

Amidst the "pain" of much of the poetry, there is also the "transport", embodied in poetry of staunch belief and reconciliation, the knowledge that "now we see through a glass, darkly; but then, face to face."

Of all the Souls that stand create -
I have elected - One -
When Sense from Spirit - flies away -
And Subterfuge - is done -
And that which is - and that which was -
Apart - intrinsic - stand -
And this brief Drama in the flesh -
Is shifted - like a Sand -
When Figures show their royal Front -
And Mists - are carved away,
Behold the Atom - I preferred -
To all the lists of Clay!

(Poem 664)

CHAPTER SEVEN

FORM AS MEANING: EMILY DICKINSON'S POETIC STYLE

"A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar."

(Jane Austen: Northanger Abbey)

The metaphysical poets are not generally regarded as masters of the mellifluous; one has only to recall the astringent criticism of Ben Jonson, Dryden, and of course, Dr Johnson. The latter censured them as men of learning, who "unluckily resolving to shew it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables" (Johnson, 1900, pp. 22 - 23). Ben Jonson did not escape the acerbic pen of Dr Johnson either, and was censured for resembling Donne "in the ruggedness of his lines" (Johnson, 1858, p. 14). T.S. Eliot, however, came to the rescue of both critic and victim, by declaring Donne "a very accomplished craftsman indeed, . . . a versifier of signal virtuosity; and what Johnson denotes as 'ruggedness' strikes our ear as a very subtle music" (Eliot, 1971, p. 167). Johnson's aural obtuseness is defended on the grounds that the sensibility of his age was attuned to the beauties of sense,¹⁾ rather than sound.

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1. Johnson was no less harsh on Milton's Lycidas "of which the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers displeasing" (Johnson, 1858, p. 99).

The music of poetry, however, is generally acknowledged to have escaped many of the metaphysical poets,¹⁾ or to have manifested itself in a novel and functional manner:

"Normally Donne is not one of the great musicians of English poetry. His verse is usually thin in sensuous texture, and his musical effects at their best are not those of lyrical lilt nor of rich, Miltonic orchestration, but rather those which one finds in The Good Morrow and The Canonization - effects produced by subtle rhythmic inflections in a taut, spare melodic line" (Hunt, 1962, p. 112).

Much of Emily Dickinson's difficulty lies in her eccentric poetic style, what Edith Perry Stamm (1963, p. 26) calls the "Dickinson trademarks" of "colloquial idiom, her severe paring of her line (even at the expense of 'correct' syntax), her preference for the subjunctive, her intentional misspellings (for the right sound: 'Febuary' for 'February'), even her inconsistent capitalization and line arrangement (as indicating her 'mood of the moment') . . . and . . . a wilful, sometimes almost perverse scattering of dashes throughout the lines of her verse."

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1. With the exception of Andrew Marvell, who in evocative sensuousness resembles Keats, rather than Donne. Cf. F.W. Bradbrook (1968, p. 200).

Critics have been at some pains to discover a "method" in Emily Dickinson's idiosyncratic style, and have been at great variance. Her chronic use of the subjunctive instead of indicative mood, for example, has been described by Whicher as expressing "a state of chronic trepidation" (In Duncan, 1965, p. 48) and by Reeves as expressing "uncertainty" (Dickinson, 1970b, p. xivi). Richard Chase says that she "learned from her Amherst Academy that the subjunctive is volitive, optative and potential" (In Duncan, 1965, p. 48).

Her erratic punctuation has also not been explained entirely satisfactorily. Stamm (1963, p. 27) finds the origins of the diverse dashes (- / ') in Noah Porter's Rhetorical Reader (1837) which was used as a text at Amherst Academy, and concludes that Dickinson's eccentric punctuation "is simply meant to direct the reading of her verse." Emily Dickinson, therefore, was concerned with the importance of poetry's oral quality, a somewhat dubious assertion, as she was an extremely private poet who shunned even publication. The prolific dash, then, according to Porter, "belongs to grave delivery, especially in elevated description, or where emotions of sublimity or reverence are expressed" (Stamm, 1963, p. 27). To establish whether Emily Dickinson adhered rigidly to this system would involve a detailed study of the punctuation of the poems. In certain poems her use of the dash appears functional, as in the first line of the following extract:

To hang our head - ostensibly -
And subsequent, to find
That such was not the posture
Of our immortal mind -

(Poem 105)

Here the one word indicating pretence, viz. "ostensibly" is isolated by punctuation.

I am ashamed - I hide -
What right have I - to be a Bride -
So late a Dowerless Girl -
Nowhere to hide my dazzled Face -
No one to teach me that new Grace -
Nor introduce - my Soul -

(Poem 472)

Here the plethora of dashes conveys a certain halting reticence and baffled disbelief; in other poems her use of the dash as a syntactic factotum is less inspired.

Charles R. Anderson (1963, p. 307) concludes: "Many readers will be tempted to make their own interpretations of these signs, but in the present state of knowledge there is no real clue to her system and it seems presumptuous to be dogmatic."

Many of Emily Dickinson's poems are excruciatingly obscure; this obscurity is heightened by what Higginson called her "unregenerate condition" (1891, p. 448). His attempts to guide her to poetic propriety were countered with:

"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" (Higginson, 1891, p. 448). Her "unregenerate condition" resulted largely in a pruned style marked by ellipses, inversions, off-rhyme and halting movement - a style which might indicate to the careless reader merely a lack of poetic craftsmanship. Her early critics, certainly, were

scathing of her craftsmanship, or lack of it, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, an early critic, wrote in somewhat Johnsonian vein that her work exemplified poetic chaos. Klaus Lubbers comments:

"'In Re Emily Dickinson' begins by declaring her work a poetic chaos. Through strict discipline she would have become 'an admirable lyric poet of the second magnitude.' In order to show how her poetry would have looked in that case, he makes use of the first stanza of 'I taste a liquor never brewed,' a poem which had already displeased others before him, tosses it until a rhyme falls out, and places it before his readers with the request not to accuse him of overrating Emily Dickinson . . . Aldrich was later repeatedly reproached for this well-known desecration, which exemplifies what he understood by form: rhyme, transparent imagery, logical succession of thought" (Lubbers, c. 1968, pp. 57 - 58).

Although not all critics went as far as actually rewriting Emily Dickinson, the criticism went on in much the same vein, and a reviewer in America, added that Miss Dickinson "might have made a name for herself in poetry if she had been willing to occupy herself with the technical rules of her art. These, after all, are of primary importance: they crystallize into beauty the trailing ghosts of the mind" (Lubbers, c. 1968, p. 105).

A later critic maintains that Emily Dickinson shied away from rhetorical devices "because most forms of the rhetorical were totally at odds with her ironic pattern of thought . . . Miss Dickinson's drab and narrow language was not, as has been asserted, the product of an insensitive ear or of a constitutional

awkwardness with words.' Her language sprang, instead, from her conviction that in a world characterized by manifold uncertainties, the only viable speech would be a terse and astringent speech - the speech of careful, quiet inconclusiveness" (Griffith, 1965, pp. 62 - 63).

One of Emily Dickinson's most famous poems is Further in Summer than the Birds; it is also one of the most obscure. Critics have found the poem rewarding, but owing to its apparent lack of stylistic features, have tended to settle for interpretations of meaning, rather than of meaning enhanced by form. The merit of the poem rests mainly on a kind of subjective haziness:

"The poem, though not quite one of her most nearly perfect, is probably one of her five or six greatest, and is one of the most deeply moving and most unforgettable poems in my own experience; I have the feeling of having lived in its immediate presence for many years" (Winters, c. 1963, p. 36).

The poem seems to be an excellent example of the poet's functional succinctness; the ellipses, inversions and disjointed syntax reflecting her uncertainty and enhancing the ambiguity inherent in all experience. Although Emily Dickinson could resort to the traditionally "poetic", as in the opening line of poem 1528 ("The Moon upon her fluent Route"), where, as in Coleridge's "The Moving Moon went up the sky", an effect of harmonious movement is achieved by the numerous long vowels, her poetic craftsmanship is less apparent, but rather more subtle in Further in Summer than the Birds. In this poem the subtlety of her stylistic practice enhances both mood and

meaning, and an analysis of this "hidden" craftsmanship will hopefully reveal the same kind of "subtle music" that Eliot discerns in the poetry of Donne.

Emily Dickinson herself gave a clue to the subject of the poem. In a letter to Thomas Niles she enclosed a copy of this poem and It sifts from Leaden Sieves -, and wrote: "I bring you a chill Gift - My Cricket - and the Snow - " (Dickinson, 1968, p. 754). Apparently she thought well enough of the poem to send a copy to T.W. Higginson.

Further in Summer than the Birds -
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen
So gradual the Grace
A pensive Custom it becomes
Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquiest felt at Noon
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace
No Furrow on the Glow
Yet a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now

(Poem 1068)

Fowler has defended the "heresy of paraphrase", stating that "we cannot feel sure of our response until we know what the poem is about" (1971, p. 222). Emily Dickinson's numerous ellipses and ambiguities render a paraphrase difficult, but the poem's meaning appears to be roughly the following.

The crickets are celebrating a mass; the time is late summer. The opening lines of the poem are ambiguous; either the minor nation is heard after the birds have ceased their song, or else the lives of the crickets are shorter than the lives of the birds. "The character of the mass is suggested by the complementary ambiguities of the first line: the insects are both farther in summer and farther into the summer of their lives than are the birds in theirs. The insects complete a cycle before the birds do; their career is a concentration of that of other living things" (Elias, 1966, p. 60). Anderson states that the crickets are "Further in Summer" than the birds, "not only symbolic of a later phase in the calendar year and so able to prophesy like Druids the coming seasonal change, but deeper into the secret meaning of nature and so not deceived by the surface illusion of summer" (1963, p. 154). The most obvious meaning seems to be that the crickets are heard in late summer, after bird song has ceased - "Further" would thus be synonymous with "later". The Mass is unobtrusive, because the small insects, the "minor Nation", are hidden in the grass. "Pathetic" is more difficult to explain, not only by the uncertainty of its qualification. The mass of the insects may be pathetic, because it is their last, a kind of extreme unction or a litany for the dying year; it may be that the insects are small and unimportant ("a minor Nation"), hence pathetic. The sound of the crickets' chirping may sound melancholy and it might also indicate the poet's own mental state. This time of year had a strange fascination for her, as may be seen in poems like These are the days when Birds come back - and As imperceptibly as Grief. The notion of the pathetic plight of the poet is stressed by Yvor Winters (c. 1963, p. 35):

"We are shown the essential cleavage between man, as represented by the author-reader, and nature, as represented by the insects in the late summer grass; the subject is the plight of man, the willing and freely moving entity, in a universe in which he is by virtue of his essential qualities a foreigner. The intense nostalgia of the poem is the nostalgia of man for the mode of being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share."

The reticence of the second stanza is heightened by the elliptical "be seen". The absence of punctuation also renders the lines ambiguous; in fact the whole poem is marked by an almost complete lack of punctuation. The effect may be likened to the monotone of the mass, and also to the monotonous chirping of the crickets. The grace is so gradual that no ordinance may be observed; it becomes a custom, pensive, because it causes reflection in the poet, enlarging loneliness, because man is excluded. René Rapin isolates the first line from the rest of the stanza, bringing out the "necessary connection between the 'gradual' character of the 'grace' and its now becoming a 'custom'" (1966, p. 62). Anderson adds that since "the antecedent of 'it' in line 7 remains ambiguous, one may hazard the guess that both the ancient ritual itself and the poet's fascination by it have become 'a pensive Custom,' brooding on a meaning lost to the insects through habitual repetition and not yet found by the poet through intuition" (1963, p. 154). Anderson finds the central meaning of the poem implicit in these lines: ". . . that nature's meaning in her secret processes has come to be hidden from man as he developed consciousness, and the most he can know is this sense of loss" (1963,

Stanza three is extremely elliptical, and "Antiquiest" presents a slight ambiguity; is the "Custom" felt to be antique, or the "Loneliness"? The poet appears to feel this loneliness "antiquiest", or most primeval, at noon, and one recalls the image of "degreeless noon" in A Clock stopped -. Noon signifies the end of the first half of the day, just as summer marks the end of the warmer months of the year. It also signals "that moment between the completion of one clock-cycle and the beginning of another when time escapes out of numerals into timelessness - the beginning of eternity or merely the death of human time" (Anderson, 1963, p. 155). Noon is also the hottest part of the day, and fits the sultriness and languor of the season exemplified in "August burning low". The latter image recalls the subdued light of a candle, and the associations of candles indirectly sustain the liturgical imagery. Duncan states that the subjunctive mood is sometimes used in Emily Dickinson's poetry to express "a habit or general truth" (1965, p. 49); the poet's use of "Arise" would therefore be consistent with this. Alternately it suits the rhythm of the poem and renders the line more laconic. The canticle, or song of the crickets is spectral, ghostlike because the singers are unseen. The grammar of the final line also renders the lines ambiguous, and Anderson (1963, p. 155) notes: "To secure the emphatic meaning of typifying, rather than in order to typify, she resorted to the apparently awkward inversion 'Repose to typify.'" This view is shared by Elias. "Repose" is also emphasized by its initial position, thereby intensifying the languor of the season, the sense of timelessness and continuity.

Rapin (1966, p. 62) notes: "Emily Dickinson had an instinctive preference for clipped, condensed forms of verbs and . . . she even 'sometimes contrived to shorten them' when they 'did not come short by nature.'" Whicher (1957, p. 235) notes her preference for "glid" instead of "glided", "create" instead of "created" and "exert" instead of "exerted". Rapin (1966, p. 62) concludes that "remit" can therefore be taken as short for "remitted", and the line would thus mean: "There is as yet no diminuation of beauty." He concludes that this interpretation of the line consorts with the tone of the whole poem, and "has the further advantages of making it apparent that the next line ('No furrow on the glow') is the first one's necessary and indeed, most natural complement." One might add that taking "remit" as a condensed form of "remitted" also fits the sense with regard to the cautioning "yet" of the penultimate line. The glow of autumn has not been disturbed by any "Furrow", nothing mars its languorous beauty, and the image of another season, that of ploughed fields, enhances the theme of seasonal transition. A hint of discord is introduced by "yet"; the rite of the insects is seasonal and pagan, rather than liturgical. "Druidic Difference" with its capitals and voiced plosives registers a certain sense of shock, but the harshness is somewhat mitigated by the less forceful consonants of "Enhances Nature now".

The dramatic switch of imagery from orthodox rites to pagan ritual appears to reinforce Yvor Winters' interpretation of the theme as " . . . the essential cleavage between man . . . and nature" (c. 1963, p. 35).

Because of the poem's 'elliptical oddity, an examination on the grounds of syntactic and morphological deviation would appear fruitful. With regard to morphological deviation, one may note that "Antiquiest" is a lexical innovation, and in a draft of the poem (this is one of the few poems in which Emily Dickinson adopted Yeats's practice of "stitching and unstitching") she first wrote "Antiquer", but in pencil overlaid the final "r" with "st", and then wrote "Antiquiest" in pencil above the original word (Dickinson, 1968, p. 753). There is some doubt as to the actual meaning of the word; Frederic I. Carpenter (1966, pp. 59 - 60) sees it as the antithesis of "quest": ". . . the wilful, active quest of man is balanced by his 'antiquiest' for this peace and repose of nature." Another feasible interpretation is that it is the superlative form of "antique", therefore "most antique".

Syntactic deviation appears to play a greater role than morphological deviation, and a closer examination of each stanza will reveal this.

A minor "Nation", which is further in summer than the birds, pathetically celebrates an unobtrusive mass from the grass. Although "Pathetic" by its proximity to "Birds" would appear to qualify this noun, it appears to be an elliptical form of the adverb. The birds, therefore are not pathetic; rather the celebration of the minor nation has an element of pathos. The proximity of "Birds" to "Pathetic" makes the reader involuntarily link them; perhaps the birds are pathetic in a sense, as they do not participate in the ritual of the "minor Nation", and are therefore to be pitied. Ellipsis and ambiguity are

thus occasioned by "Pathetic".

In the second stanza the poet uses the subjunctive "be" ("No Ordinance be seen"), rather than the indicative. In the third stanza there is a total collapse of syntax. "Antiquiest" could qualify either "Custom" or "Loneliness"; the stop at the end of the second stanza estranges it from both. "Arise" may be imperative, or an abbreviated form of "arises"; once again the subjunctive mood should not be discounted. Line 12 is ambiguous. R.H. and H.L. Elias note that the poet, "by her inversion in the twelfth line is preventing ambiguity: she means 'typifying,' not 'in order to typify'" (1966, p. 61).

"Remit" in the final stanza also poses problems; it may be imperative, or it may be an elliptical form of "remitted". Rapin argues that the imperative is incompatible with the tone of the poem: "There is indeed nothing hortatory, nothing in the least way oratorical or dramatic about it. It is, on the contrary, entirely elegiac, meditative, 'pensive.' A sudden, unprepared for, unsupported imperative would be a fausse note in such a poem" (Rapin, 1966, p. 62).

In terms of lexical and semantic cohesion the following may be grouped together:

Summer; Birds; Grass; Nature	(Natural elements)
Summer; Noon; August	(Time)
burning; Glow	(Heat)
Mass; Ordinance; Grace; Canticle; Druidic	(Religion)

Marshall Van Deusen (1966a, p.64) finds other words with religious connotations: "It may be noted that the word 'nation' in the opening stanza is rich with Biblical associations and that 'gradual,' although used here as an adjective, has also a substantive significance ('an antiphon sung or recited with the Alleluia or the Tract between the Epistle and Gospel') which prepares the way for 'canticle.' Likewise, 'remit' is a word associated with the mass." One might also note a semantic clash between the words connected with church ritual and "Druidic" with its pagan associations.

A number of the words are negative in connotation, e.g. "Further", "Pathetic", "minor", "unobtrusive", "No", "Loneliness", "Remit". There are also words with a more positive connotation: "celebrates", "Grace", "Enlarging", "Arise", "Glow", "Enhances".

There is an almost complete absence of punctuation in the poem, which enhances the air of introspective, pensive speculation. The poem appears phonologically austere, with an absence of true rhyme, except in the first stanza where Grass/Mass would be compatible according to American pronunciation. In stanza two there is the imperfect rhyme of Grace/Loneliness, and in the third stanza there is no discernible rhyme. In the final stanza there is the imperfect Glow/now. A subtle pattern of assonance may be discerned: Further/Birds; Nation/celebrates; be/seen; Custom/becomes; No/Furrow/Glow. There is an alliterative pattern of gradual/Grace; Grace/Glow; Druidic/Difference; Nature/now.

One might also point out a certain symmetry in the poet's use of capitals. Other than initial words, the words capitalized are all nouns, with the exception of "Druidic". This is a key-word in the poem, and assumes a certain importance by its deviation.

Anderson (1963, p. 154) finds the central meaning of the poem in line seven - "A pensive Custom it becomes". This line, besides being one of the longest in the poem ("Arise this spectral Canticle" being somewhat longer), exhibits a certain phonological symmetry and order. There is an almost equal distribution of high, mid, and low vowels: (/ə/ twice, /e/ once, /ʌ/ twice, and /i/ three times). The consonant sounds are nasals (/m/ twice, /n/ once), alveolar fricatives (/s/ twice, /z/ once), the labio-dental fricative /v/ and the plosives (/p/ once, /b/ once, /t/ twice and /k/ twice).

Further in Summer than the Birds, then, appears to be an excellent example of the poet's functional succinctness; the ellipses, inversions and disjointed syntax reflecting her uncertainty and enhancing the ambiguity inherent in all experience. The uneven rhymes suggest man's precarious state in nature, his uncertainty (cf. Carpenter, 1966, p. 60). Yet a subtle craftsmanship may be discerned in the sound patterning; the subtlety of the poet's stylistic practice enhances both mood and meaning. If Emily Dickinson's stylistic eccentricities involve "a sort of studied ugliness: an attempt to record the treacheries of experience by the blunt antithesis, the guttural expression, the abrupt break in meaning, the barbarous lapse from rhyme . . . the logical contradiction and the apparently

inept word", these lapses from conventional Victorian usage "reflected Miss Dickinson's sense of a tangled and indecipherable reality" (Griffith, 1965, p. 64). Publication, she wrote to Higginson, was "as foreign to my thought as firmament to fin" (Higginson, 1891, p. 447), and her innate reticence developed a style suited to her personality - a personality no less turbulent than that of Donne or Hopkins. Emily Dickinson's exploration of the "soul at . . . white heat", her most personal revelations, could only be expressed in a cryptic, sibylline and abbreviated style - a style in which the "music" is subtle and low-keyed indeed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

And I may dine at journey's end
With Landor and with Donne.

(W.B. Yeats: To a Young Beauty)

In this study of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, an attempt was made to place her in the metaphysical tradition. This was done with a twofold purpose; in the first place, to bring to light the striking resemblances between Emily Dickinson and the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, and secondly, in the hope that a metaphysical approach via wit, paradox, irony and the like would aid in the elucidation of this arcane poet.

Critics have been fairly unanimous as to who the metaphysical poets were; exactly what constitutes this kind of poetry has proved more elusive. As such eminent critics as Dr Johnson and Helen Gardner have fought shy of "defining" metaphysical poetry, I have contented myself with isolating its characteristics, and with attempting to account for its pervasive appeal.

The subject matter of metaphysical poetry is not as important as the treatment of the subject, and metaphysical poetry approaches the traditional themes of love and death in a refreshing way. A metaphysical poem tends to be concentrated; its paradoxical, epigrammatic style demanding a certain mental agility from the reader.

Peculiar to metaphysical imagery is the conceit, which frequently relies on the discordia concors for its effect. The conceit is chiefly cerebral, even when depicting emotion, and critics have frequently admired the imagery which resulted from Donne's "naked, thinking, heart". Erudition, and the derivation of imagery from diverse sources are other characteristics of metaphysical poetry, while the alliance of levity and seriousness, and the weird phenomenon, the "metaphysical shudder" frequently give metaphysical poetry a macabre tone.

Despite its erudition, metaphysical poetry has an intensely personal quality, a colloquial and argumentative tone, and what T.S. Eliot (1961, p. 303) has called "a constant inspection and criticism of experience". Tone therefore assumes some importance in metaphysical poetry, and a tone of irony is often encountered.

Some critics in this century have tended to think of the staples of metaphysical poetry such as wit, ambiguity, irony and paradox as essential ingredients of all good poetry; others, adopting a moral or psychological stance, have viewed metaphysical poetry as the manifestation of a disturbed personality or a troubled age. Probably no new view of metaphysical poetry has emerged recently, although critics have looked at the apparatus of metaphysical poetry with vigour and fresh insight.

I have given some account of the determined efforts of critics to link Emily Dickinson with her seventeenth-century predecessors. Critics have searched long and energetically for

proof of the poet's familiarity with these poets. Scholarly sleuthing has unearthed pencil markings and dog-eared pages in certain volumes in the Dickinson family library; a hazy reference to Vaughan and the transcription of two stanzas from Herbert lend slender support to this evidence. As Emily Dickinson was an educated woman, exposed to the academic life of nineteenth-century Amherst, she was no doubt familiar with the work of the metaphysical poets. A close examination of her poetry reveals many striking resemblances between her work and that of the seventeenth century, but we learn from her letters that she had an innate distaste of copying. While she might have felt some kinship with these poets, no doubt marvelling at minds so closely approximating her own, her originality marks her as an innovator, rather than an imitator.

An examination of Emily Dickinson's poetry in the light of the various metaphysical "techniques" was then attempted under the rather broad headings of wit, diction and imagery, and ironic vision. Much of her wit hinges on what Johnson called the yoking together of heterogeneous ideas by violence. Oxymoron, the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, and a fusion of abstract and colloquial diction are all qualities of her wit, which frequently succeeds owing to the gap between the elements brought together, giving the resultant images a seventeenth-century flavour:

When it is lost, that Day shall be
The Funeral of God . . .

(Poem 945)

Her personifications have a certain piquancy, and frequently help to familiarize the mysterious. The alliance of levity and seriousness, which Eliot mentions as a characteristic of metaphysical wit is found in her poetry, and linked to this is what Eliot has called a "constant inspection and criticism of experience". This renders the tone of many of her poems complex and ambiguous. Understatement also acts as an emotional rein, and many of her profoundest poems have a perfunctory tone.

Many of her lines have a direct quality, reminiscent of Donne. Her opening lines have what Cox (1968b, p. 98) calls the "surprising directness of the speaking voice", with lines like "I've seen a Dying Eye", or "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" Her preoccupation with death sometimes culminates in her own version of the metaphysical shudder, usually characterized by a macabre gentility and cosiness:

The grave my little cottage is,
Where "Keeping house" for thee
I make my parlor orderly
And lay the marble tea.

(Poem 1743)

Emily Dickinson, like Donne, sometimes resorts to punning in the poetry, and in some poems she employs form for humour or irony. Although this is not particularly witty or "metaphysical", one recalls poems like Herbert's Easter-wings, where the printed lines resemble wings. Bennett (1964, p. 64) says that such devices "convey a child-like quality of mind", and Emily Dickinson resembles Herbert, rather than Donne, in her more playful moods.

Emily Dickinson's diction is characterized by coinages and a somewhat self-conscious display of erudition; like Donne, she employs a large number of words from diverse sources. Her imagery is noted for its wide range; she draws her perception of analogies from mathematics, science, law, commerce, travel and religion. Her use of household images links her with Herbert, but her attraction to the spectacle of a circus possibly provided some of her most startling and effective metaphors:

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -
To wrap its shining Yards -
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear -
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter -

(Poem 243)

The Grave is strict -
Tickets admit
Just two - the Bearer -
And the Borne -
And seat - just One -

(Poem 408)

Like her seventeenth-century predecessors she uses both the expanded and condensed conceit; her expanded conceits are generally sustained, but lack the meticulous execution of Donne. Rather more successful are her condensed conceits which derive their impact from a sudden sense of incongruity.

In her selection of the right "objective correlative" for the communication of psychological states of distress, she frequently achieves a surrealism akin to certain twentieth-century writers. While mental derangement is consummately expressed in

the cacophonous I felt a Funeral in my Brain, this type of image sometimes disintegrates into hazy rambling.

As Emily Dickinson did not share the intrinsically devout background of the seventeenth century, her religious poetry is marked by a more sardonic tone. The ironic mask serves the poet as a shield, and is particularly evident in the poetry on the subject of death. Her use of an ironic anticlimax often leaves the reader in doubt as to her true intentions; the poems culminating in irresolution once again place her in the modern age, rather than the seventeenth century. Much of her religious poetry is marked by a questioning tone and her use of the "little girl" persona is functional in mitigating any irreverence in her arguments with God. Unlike Herbert, Emily Dickinson does not always achieve a reconciliation with God. The basic hymnal metre of Watts is frequently used, not for the expression of faith and devotion, but to suggest the ambivalence of God.

In the penultimate chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that in at least some of the poems, Emily Dickinson's stylistic idiosyncrasies are not entirely haphazard, and that some of her most elliptical poems reveal a subtle craftsmanship. The "subtle music" which Eliot discerns in the poetry of Donne, is not entirely absent in much of Dickinson's work.

One should perhaps not confine oneself to the seventeenth century in an examination of metaphysical poetry, and Cleanth Brooks's view of metaphysical poetry as "the condition toward which any poem tends in so far as it is successful" (Unger,

1950, p. 17) demolishes any rigid classification of poets according to the age in which they wrote.

In evaluating the work of Emily Dickinson it is important to remember that she did not intend her work for publication, and that her poems were scrawled with little or no revision. Like Donne, she was a poet "on the by", and the following description of Donne might well fit the Amherst Nun:

"Donne was, in Ben Jonson's phrase, a poet 'on the by'. He was not a poet by vocation . . . nor was he a professional man of letters . . . He feels no sense of responsibility towards a public who are to be taught 'the best and sagest things', nor has he any sense of responsibility towards his own calling or reputation as a poet. He writes as the mood takes him and as a theme seizes his imagination. The poem is its own justification, and if it totally contradicts what he has said in another poem this is of no consequence" (Gardner, 1963, p. 118).

One recalls Blackmur's condemnation of D.H. Lawrence's verse as being "predominantly of the hysterical order" (1954, p. 296). The discerning critic would be forced to agree that this criticism could apply equally to much of Emily Dickinson's work. However in a sufficient number of poems she uses the apparatus of seventeenth-century poetry with sufficient originality and skill to take her place in the metaphysical tradition. Although much of her work may be dismissed as facile, her poetic genius possibly lies in that element of surprise so aptly described by Whicher (c. 1963, p. 43):

"It startles us in an unexpected phrase or epithet and is gone before we know it, as though a bird in flight had slightly lowered an eyelid at us." Helen Gardner, in her introduction to The Metaphysical Poets, isolates the characteristic of "pungency" as intrinsic to the metaphysical style (1968, p. 28), and Emily Dickinson herself was vitally aware of what constituted poetic originality:

This was a Poet - It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings -
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door -
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it - before -

(Poem 448)

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