

LOVE, TERROR, AND TRANSCENDENCE
IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

THE devoted reader of Emily Dickinson who becomes familiar with her poetry in its entirety will become convinced, I believe, of a number of facts. One is that her genius for metaphorical invention is scarcely inferior to that of Shakespeare.¹ Another is that her poems articulating experiences of mental pain and torture — of dread, terror, fear of madness, depression, and alienation — so far outnumber her poems of delight, joy, and illumination that she has rightly been described as a poet “whose central mode is an intense suffering” (Bloom 350). And a third is that it is not quite sufficient to describe “religion” as just one of her perennial themes, along with nature, love, death, despair, and the workings of consciousness, because Dickinson’s poetry on these other subjects regularly explores their meanings in relation to her spiritual experiences, doubts, and hopes. Surveying all of her nearly 1800 poems and poetic fragments, one may reasonably agree with Charles R. Anderson’s judgment that “the reader today sees the ultimate purpose of *all* her explorations as religious in the profoundest sense of that term” (35, my emphasis). Since Anderson is here using the word *religious* in its metaphysical and not sociological sense, one might substitute the word *spiritual* without violating his meaning.

Of course, as is well-known, the spiritual explorations detailed in Dickinson’s poetry manifest an ongoing struggle with, and strong aversion to many core tenets of, the Christian religion to which her family and the great majority of her friends and acquaintances subscribed. In her poems and letters she clearly rejects, often in tones of mocking contempt, teachings central to the Calvinist-based theology of her Congregationalist community, including the doctrines of original sin, hell and damnation, election, and redemption. Her poems make clear that to her the Bible is not truth in any traditional Christian sense, but essentially a repository of evocative symbols. On the promise of a personal afterlife, she is inconsistent; while she often hopes it could be true, she remains convinced that human beings simply can’t know anything about it, and she returns in her poems obsessively to the possibility that death means annihilation. Most significantly, as she strives to understand the spiritual significance of her experiences of self and world, she finds it all but impossible to believe in the Creator-God of justice, mercy, and love as taught in Biblical and Christian tradition. All of this is fully apparent in her poems, and Helen Vendler is certainly correct to state that Dickinson’s “defiant critique of Christian-

ity and her uninhibited scrutiny of its concepts" is "unequaled among the poets of her day" (17).

Still, one must not be too quick to distance Dickinson's religious life and personality, as expressed in her poetry, from the comprehensive Christian vision of reality. It is obviously the Christian vision that provides the metaphysical framework for Dickinson's understanding of human beings, nature, and the cosmos. To be more specific: her spiritual questions, doubts, discernments, and affirmations all unfold against the fixed background notions of (1) an omnipotent, singular, personal, and transcendent God, who created both nature and her individual soul; (2) a unique and once-only personal life on earth, which may or may not be succeeded by a permanent afterlife; and (3) a Jesus whose exemplary love and suffering offers crucial orientation for interpreting and communicating a person's most extreme spiritual experiences. It is fair to say, then, that Dickinson battles Christianity from within. Even as she scoffs at many Christian doctrines and at most of the presumed certitudes of the so-called faithful, she nevertheless begins and ends her spiritual quest within the orbit of its metaphysical delineation of the universe and the human situation.

And this same point must be applied to an appreciation of her poetic use of Christian symbols and images. Her constant reliance on Biblical and Christian language — on terms such as *heaven, immortality, paradise, Jesus, Gethsemane, Eden, crucifixion, grace, glory, God, spirit, covenant* — to communicate her experiences and thoughts is not simply a matter of her lacking any other metaphysical vocabulary. While she regularly bends the meanings of such terms to suit her own expressive purposes, and sometimes employs them ironically or even subversively, they are nevertheless indispensable to her, and she often uses them sincerely and without ironic detachment, because they genuinely *resonate* with her spiritual experiences. She is not simply forced, in other words, by cultural circumstances to stay in the home of the Christian linguistic universe; she also chooses to live there, because many of the essential truths of her spiritual life find adequate expression through its language.

But given her rejection of many core doctrines of Christianity, what in fact *did* she hold to be the essential truths of an honest, appropriately critical, spiritual life? Above all, this: that there is a reality of divinely-grounded transcendence in which her consciousness, along with all of creation, participates. Though from one poem to the next she may vacillate on whether God is good, or whether death is the end of personality, or whether suffering is ultimately meaningful, she never disavows that conscious existence and natural creation are suffused and circumscribed by a dimension of divinely-grounded meaning that transcends the plane of the

physical and transitory. In poem after poem, we find the truth of transcendence affirmed; examples are easy to find:

This World is not conclusion.
 A Species stands beyond –
 Invisible, as Music –
 But positive, as Sound –
 (373)

And:

The only news I know
 Is Bulletins all Day
 From Immortality.
 (820)

And:

The Infinite a sudden Guest
 Has been assumed to be –
 But how can that stupendous come
 Which never went away? (1344)

Quotations from her poetry affirming or alluding to a divinely transcendent reality could extend into the hundreds.

Is this affirmation compatible, however, with Dickinson's many poems that describe her experiences of spiritual despair and terrifying existential isolation? Do these not evidence periods of disbelief in divinely-grounded transcendence? In fact, they never do. Of the *reality* of transcendent meaning, she is never in doubt. Indeed, the extraordinary poignancy of her psychological traumas entailing loss of hope, extremes of pain, depression, terror, and fear of madness derives precisely from her loss of felt *connection* to, and inability to understand the meaning of her existence or suffering given the fact of, a mystery of divine reality. To put it another way: Dickinson, even in her most extreme periods of anguish, and even in her most contemptuous flights of anger at the presumptions of Christian faith, is never tempted by philosophical materialism, or immanentism. In joy, anguish, anger, and reflective calm alike, she acknowledges and accepts a truth of transcendence.

In fact, I would argue that it is precisely Dickinson's profound appreciation of transcendence *as transcendence* — that is, as a reality that is a mystery to human intellect, as a "beyond" of meanings and truths that we cannot ever know — that above all structures and guides her lifelong spiritual quest. It is this that grounds her outlook on the distinctive peculiarities and challenges of the human condition; her understanding of the

self or soul; her relationship with the natural world; her grapplings with the idea of "God"; and her attitude toward Christian doctrines, preachings, and presumptions. The main purpose of the present essay will be to support and elucidate this view.

AN appropriate first step should be to explain how Dickinson's commitment to a truth of divine transcendence crucially shaped her relationship to two streams of "anti-Christian" critique that strongly influenced the intellectual culture of her time and place. The first of these was the local, and relatively short-lived, "movement" known as New England (or American) Transcendentalism; the second was the broad, accelerating impact of nineteenth-century scientific thought. A few comments on Dickinson's relationship to each of these phenomena will help to clarify the unique manner in which, on the one hand, she breaks in a liberalizing and modern way from core Christian teachings while, on the other hand, she continues to adhere to the essence — and to central symbols — of a Christian metaphysical vision.

Dickinson's youth coincided with the rise, centered precisely in her western Massachusetts locale, of New England Transcendentalism, a literary and philosophical phenomenon associated most famously, now, with the writings and views of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Transcendentalists emerged from within the Unitarian religious world as a more radical development of its rejection of Calvinist-based Christian orthodoxy and its theological metaphysics. They taught that the individual has no need whatever of organized religion or intercession, textual or ministerial, in order to develop a proper relationship with the divine, since every human being already participates in the divine oneness whose meaning and goodness permeate the universe, and which is experientially available to persons as an immediate (if evanescent) presence. Indeed, according to Transcendentalist teaching, each person can, through individual intuitive "Reason" and advancing self-interpretation alone, advance to sublime heights of human-divine insight and harmony. Emerson and others did emphasize the ultimate mysteriousness, to human consciousness, of the divine reality (which Emerson famously referred to as the "Over-soul"); but, together with the other Transcendentalists, he also stressed that we should recognize the whole universe, inclusive of human existence, as a sacred *harmony* grounded in divine intelligence and goodness, and the natural world in which we live as an Eden — if only we could recognize it.

Dickinson read Emerson's prose and poetry from an early age, and throughout her life expressed deep admiration for him; Thoreau's writings influenced her as well (McIntosh 14–20; Gelpi 42). She was clearly engaged by, and found solidarity with, elements of Transcendentalist teaching. She strongly sympathized with its rejection of both Christian doctrinalism and of the need for institutional mediation of a personal relationship with the divine; its condemnation of ideas of innate human sinfulness and depravity; its assertion that spiritual development is the result of personal experiences of divine presence and the unfolding of original, individual insights and self-interpretation; and its encouraging of mystical speculation.

This said, however, Dickinson's spiritual perspectives, and conclusions, remained in many respects at odds with those of Emerson and the other Transcendentalists. Transcendentalist optimism and Emersonian serenity conflicted with her recognition of the dreadful and terrifying aspects of spiritual life, and of the unjustified sufferings and inexplicable evils that permeate human existence and nature. Instead of her spiritual insights revealing ever more clearly a grand harmony between the soul's experiences, the natural world, and divinity, they revealed instead profound and unresolvable paradoxes and disjunctions manifested most vividly, for her, in personal experiences of divine presence that alternated between loving communion and intense alienation, inspiring elation and traumatic despair. And while at times she saw divinity in Nature, and could find in her experiences of the natural world occasions for ecstatic "transport," more typically she experienced Nature as an alien realm, as a threatening and indifferent universe. In sum: Dickinson's poetry often testifies to a painful awareness of a radical ontological divide between her self and the ultimate ground of divine being, and to a similar divide between nature and the divine ground — that is, it witnesses, often in modes of anxiety and despair, to the radical *otherness* of divine reality, to its genuinely *transcendent* quality, and it continually articulates the many problems this radical otherness poses for our spiritual comprehension of self and universe and for the achievement of any kind of existential serenity. Thus, in a manner very true to Christian metaphysics, she rejects the pull toward the pantheist and "Eden here" tendencies of the liberalizing spiritualism of the Transcendentalists.

Dickinson's commitment to a truth of divine transcendence also informed her assimilation of, and the nature of her response to, advances by the natural sciences in the nineteenth century. Dickinson paid close attention to scientific discoveries and developments — including Darwin's theories and their impact — and her poems display a remarkably sophisticated knowledge of geological, chemical, botanical, and astronomical processes and technical terminology (Sewall 342–45). Consistent with this

assimilation and her customary intellectual probity, her poetry reflects a clear grasp of how advances across the sciences constituted, in her day, a composite and cumulative challenge to Christian beliefs — to belief in the very existence of a Creator-God who both omnipotently governs all natural processes and is lovingly concerned with every human being's welfare, and also to teachings concerning the divinity of Christ, miracles attributed to him, the Resurrection, and the promise of eternal life. Dickinson was at one with the growing cultural skepticism, abetted by science, regarding claims about "supernatural" or "miraculous" events, which she rejected as consistently as she did Calvinist doctrines concerning original sin, salvation, election, and damnation; and, as we shall see, some of her poems express abandonment of belief in the Christian God, dispossession of hope in a personal afterlife, and despair over whether the human struggle on earth is finally meaningful.

At the same time, even when Dickinson seems most in tune with the nineteenth-century waning of Christian faith in the face of attacks on it both from adherents of a purely scientific or naturalistic worldview and from other sources (such as the pantheist expositions of Transcendentalism), she retains both an undiminished religious sensibility and, indeed, a supra-natural orientation — shown often enough in poems (and comments in letters) that scorn the notion that scientific discoveries could ever contradict or delegitimize the fact and truth of a sacred or divine realm of being. This was again due to her constant recognition of a *mystery of transcendence* — a true "beyond" of the material universe, experienced alternately as compellingly or frighteningly unfathomable.

Furthermore, this mystery of transcendence has, for her, an inescapably *divine* character, though to accept it as the Christian God challenges her credulity; that is, it has the character of personhood, however indirectly or analogically such a notion must be understood. Transcendent reality, for Dickinson, could not be conceived as having only a "naturalistic" or impersonal character — as it does in, say, Brahmanic Hinduism, or philosophical Taoism — because, as her poems make clear, it is incomprehensible to her that her own personhood, or self, could have as both its originating source and deepest ontological identity a creative principle lacking personhood. As her poetry attests, her most intense experiences of transcendence — as we shall have occasion to examine — are those involving loving desire and its (temporary) fulfillment, on the positive side, and those of anguished abandonment and emotional terror, on the negative side; and such experiences, for her, presuppose a divine "Other" who Loves, Abandons, and Tortures. Thus her most meaningful experiences, resulting from the passionate desire for communion with her transcendent source, could never be made sense of on the basis of a merely "naturalis-

tic" conception of transcendent reality; such a conception is simply foreign to Dickinson's experiential horizon, which continually reinforces the Christian metaphysical assumption of a *divine* transcendence — however difficult it is for her to entertain the belief that this is, indeed, the Christian God.²

SINCE there is no surer way, in my view, toward a sound appreciation of Dickinson's lifelong spiritual quest, and of the most abiding thematic concerns of her poetry, than through careful attention to what she tells us in her poems (and, occasionally, in her letters) about the human relation to divine transcendence, it will be helpful to proceed by first examining three distinctive features of her appreciation of transcendent mystery and meaning.

First, one of Dickinson's recurrent poetic themes is that it is misleading and foolish to imagine the realm of transcendence — what she calls *Eternity* or *Paradise* or *Heaven* — to be, as so many religious believers think, some kind place or thing, some kind of "somewhere" or "elsewhere." This is because the very nature of transcendent reality is — to use two terms from her poetry — "Illocality," or "Boundlessness" (824). And how is such a reality discovered? She tells us: only by way of its *presence* in consciousness. It is in the invisible, intangible interiority of consciousness — and only there — that the discernment of a timeless and imperishable realm of meaning occurs. And this discernment is not a matter simply of the mind's deducing that its conceptions of the divinely eternal and imperishable refer to something real; it is recognizing that, as the divine basis of its own existence, transcendent reality is a core constituent of the conscious self, an ontological *co-presence* that makes a human soul what it is. A number of Dickinson's poems strive to make clear that what she variously calls *Eternity*, or *God*, or *Immortality*, or *Infinity*, is only revealed to us as an inescapable truth of constitutive divine presence in consciousness. As she writes:

The Blunder is in estimate
Eternity is there
We say as of a Station
Meanwhile he is so near

He joins me in my Ramble
Divides abode with me
No Friend have I that so persists
As this Eternity (1690)

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Indeed, the ontological intimacy of personal consciousness and transcendent divine presence is so profound that Dickinson presents them in some poems as an identity.

Heaven is so far of the Mind
That were the Mind dissolved –
The Site – of it – by Architect
Could not again be proved –
(413)

And more famously:

...
The Brain is just the weight of God –
For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
And they will differ – if they do –
As Syllable from Sound – (598)³

This ontological identification, however, doesn't make Dickinson a peculiar type of gnostic who equates human knowledge with divine knowledge, nor a Feuerbachian type of reductionist who equates the divine with human imaginative projections. For while divine transcendence is revealed — as it must be, being spaceless and timeless — only within and as ontologically interpenetrative with consciousness, it also remains *transcendence*. That is, while divine reality is distinctively constitutive of human consciousness, it is not *contained* by consciousness. So it is that in many of her poems Dickinson is at pains to convey how imperishable divine reality immeasurably transcends, with overwhelming mysteriousness, the finitude and limitations of human consciousness and comprehension. Indeed, Dickinson's acute sensitivity and reactions to the unknowability of the "beyond" of meaning that co-constitutes consciousness is, in the end, the single most important factor in the spiritual journey depicted in her poetry.

This becomes obvious when we consider her interpretation of the nature of the self, or soul. Her intense, lifelong scrutiny of her own consciousness informs much of her poetry, and one of the most prominent features of her view is that, because the conscious self is, experientially, a finite and severely limited participation in a boundlessness of transcendent meaning mysteriously cognate with the self, it can know itself, and have control over itself, only very incompletely. This is most directly stated in an undated poem in which Dickinson affirms both the divine creation of and presence in her mind, and her awareness that this divine depth of real-

ity in which her mind is an involvement extends beyond any awareness or knowledge of it her mind might attain:

His mind of man, a secret makes
I meet him with a start
He carries a circumference
In which I have no part

Or even if I deem I do
He otherwise may know
Impregnable to inquest
However neighborly – (1730)

These lines bring to mind the famous fragment of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus: “You could not find the limits of the soul, even if you travelled every path; so deep is its logos.”⁴ The difference with Dickinson, of course, is the Biblical divine personalization of the transcendent depth onto which each soul opens, a personalization emphasized in another poem whose first quatrain again emphasizes that divine presence is both co-constitutive of human consciousness and radically transcends all that humans can know and experience. Here she employs one of her favorite synonyms for God, the word “awe,” which connotes both the divine reality itself and her feelings of fear and fascination in the face of divine power:

No man saw awe, nor to his house
Admitted he a man
Though by his awful residence
Has human nature been.
(1342)

Dickinson, then, knows where to search for the divine: in apperceptions and encounters within the interior of her own consciousness. But she also knows this search leads directly into the insoluble mysteries of transcendent meaning. This is the human situation she describes with her usual metaphorical nimbleness and wit in a prose fragment of 1872:

Paradise is no Journey because it (he) is within – but for that very cause though – it is the most Arduous of Journeys – because as the Servant Conscientiously says at the Door We are (always – invariably –) out –. (*Letters* Vol. 3 926)⁵

Paradise, Eternity, God is not an elsewhere; it is a placelessness revealed in the “within” of the soul’s longing and reflection. And yet the seeking

soul can scarcely know it beyond the mere fact of its reality, because transcendence must remain, in its substantial meaning, a "beyond" and an absence.

Second, the unknowability of transcendence dominates Dickinson's experiences and interpretations not only of the interior but also of the external world. It has often been noted that, for all her sympathetic delight in nature — in its bees and birds, flowers and trees, sun and moon, sunset and dawn — Dickinson's relationship with the natural world, as revealed across the spectrum of her poems, shows itself as deeply ambivalent. Her poems frequently express a profound alienation from nature, an experience of being "Homeless at home" in the world (1603), as she once put it, and a sharp awareness of nature's indifference to human striving and suffering. But both her joyful responses to natural beauty and her alienated reactions to it derive, in fact, from the same root cause: her recognition that every natural object is an ephemeral creation of and participation in a fuller and imperishable dimension of meaning, a divinely transcendent reality revealed to the self through the within of consciousness, whose purposes with and for nature seem sometimes glorious and sometimes dreadful but are always, in the end, unknowable.

At times, Dickinson emphasizes the pleasures and comforts in apprehending nature as numinous, as in this poem about a tree near her house, which begins,

By my Window have I for Scenery
 Just a Sea — with a Stem —
 If the Bird and the Farmer — deem it a "Pine" —
 The Opinion will do — for them —

and ends with her assimilation of the pine into all of nature as the manifestation of a divine reality worthy of her worship:

Was the Pine at my Window a "Fellow
 Of the Royal" Infinity?
 Apprehensions — are God's introductions —
 To be hallowed — accordingly — (849)

More often, however, it is the uncanniness, even ominousness, of the sacred "otherness" suffusing the world of nature that Dickinson stresses. The penultimate quatrain from a much-anthologized poem expresses this well:

...
 But nature is a stranger yet;
 The ones that cite her most

Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

(1433)⁶

“Simplified” here refers to clarifying, making intelligible. Dickinson is saying that, for those with eyes to see, nature is haunted with a numinous presence that is unnerving and alienating because it is radically unknowable — and she concludes the poem with the terse assertion “That those who know her, know her less / The nearer her they get.” For Dickinson, one sign of an undiscerning, or self-deluding, mind — whether of poetic, practical, or scientific bent — is that it presumes to be able to define and understand fully what the creatures and objects of the natural world *are* and *mean*. Dickinson’s view is the opposite. In the words of James McIntosh, for her, if the soul is to be both honest and open to continual growth, “[t]he intellect needs *not* to know definitively and permanently the things it observes because they exist in time and space *and* disappear into an unknowable realm” (123, my emphasis). Existential openness to supervening mysteriousness, in nature as in the depths of the self, is a basic criterion of both intellectual and spiritual honesty for Dickinson.

Third, and most important, it is Dickinson’s unwavering commitment and sense of responsibility to the truth of the *unknowability* of transcendent meaning that guides her critical, sometimes angry, and often scornfully dismissive responses to Christian teaching. In her poems she challenges, one after another, religious doctrines and presumptions that she regards as claims to know the humanly unknowable. While she is not unsympathetic to the *urge* to believe in the availability of religious answers that, if known, would give us great comfort, her honesty and self-respect require her to witness to her ignorance about transcendent meanings.

For example, she bases her rejection of the doctrines of original sin and redemption on a straightforward declaration of unavoidable human ignorance:

Of God we ask one favor, that we may be forgiven –
For what, he is presumed to know –
The Crime, from us, is hidden –

(1675)

...

Is Heaven an Exchequer?
They speak of what we owe –
But that negotiation
I’m not a Party to – (1260)⁷

Of the idea that divine reality is a God who listens to and answers human prayer, and who answers by way of comfort or insight when the human seeker knocks, she is consistently contemptuous — based, she makes clear, on her own long experience of spiritual longing and seeking:

There comes an hour when begging stops,
 When the long interceding lips
 Perceive their prayer is vain.
 "Thou shalt not" is a kinder sword
 Than from a disappointing God
 "Disciple, call again." (1768)⁸

The presumptions of prayer are, of course, part of a larger Christian presumption that divine ultimacy is a God who is not merely all-knowing but also unfailingly merciful and just. This evokes incredulity on Dickinson's part, not only because of the unwarranted human pretension to comprehend what is transcendent but because it is belied by overwhelming evidence of unjust suffering, inexplicable calamity, and the indifference and cruelty built into the natural order of things. In a poem from her late twenties, she refers to children who have died young as "Sparrows, unnoticed by the Father —" (91), a simple but stern rebuke to Jesus's affirmation of God's omniscient care as related in the Gospel of Matthew; and in a poem written four years before she died, she delineates a divinity utterly unmoved both by the destruction that attends the processes of the natural world and by our dismay at the seeming arbitrariness and amorality of divine action:

Apparently with no surprise
 To any happy Flower
 The Frost beheads it at its play —
 In accidental power —
 The blonde Assassin passes on —
 The Sun proceeds unmoved
 To measure off another Day
 For an Approving God — (1668)

But if God cannot be known to be just or merciful or attentive to human desire and distress, can God be known to be "God"? — that is, can the "Thou" of divine transcendence be more than a blank to a human ignorance honest with itself? In one of her most provocative poems on the theme of religious seeking, one that echoes the rapid waning of Christian belief in the nineteenth century, Dickinson compares the faith of earlier times with her own incapacity to apprehend the divine nature:

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

(1581)

The undiscoverability of divine character is repeated in a famous sentence from her second letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Unitarian minister, abolitionist, and writer to whom she wrote seeking advice on the publishability of her poetry and who became to her a kind of mentor or “preceptor,” where she states of her family: “They are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their ‘Father’” (*Selected Letters* 173). Now, this comment and the just-quoted poetic stanza can easily be misread as declarations that there is no God, as confessions of atheism. But an “Eclipse” is not a metaphysical nothingness; rather, it is the complete hiddenness of something real. Likewise, just because the Christian God cannot be “found” by the human intellect doesn't mean the divine personhood within the hiddenness of transcendence is an illusion. Dickinson's spiritual position, rather, is characterized by the often agonizing tension between, on the one hand, her tenacious adherence to the truth that human existence participates in a mystery of transcendence whose ultimate ground is a divine Creator and, on the other, her conviction that finite human understanding can know nothing, finally, of what this participation means or portends.

Nowhere is this tension more apparent in her work than in poems in which she questions what happens to human beings in death. Again and again she brings into conjunction the possibility that death means personal annihilation with her awareness that the participation of human consciousness in divine transcendence suggests the possibility of some kind of personal afterlife. This tension is especially vivid in a poem from 1862:

I know that He exists.
 Somewhere – in silence –
 He has hid his rare life
 From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play –
 'Tis a fond Ambush –
 Just to make Bliss
 Earn her own surprise!

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! (365)

This is not a poem, as some would maintain, in which Dickinson changes her position, as she reflects and writes from an assertion of religious faith — “I know that He exists” (a first line ending with a rare and emphatic full stop) — to a loss of that faith, in which the poem's mordant ending contradicts its confident beginning. The thinking in the poem, although anguished, is self-consistent. Dickinson begins with an affirmation of the fact of transcendent divinity; but in the context of that affirmation, she ponders the possibility that personal existence ends only in “death's stiff stare,” which if true would reveal the drama of the self to be a grim “jest” perpetrated, presumably, by a cruel or indifferent God. This idea is posed as a question — one that Dickinson, as an honest spiritual questioner, cannot evade. But it remains a question; and what the poem in fact shows is her awareness that not knowing what present participation in divine transcendence *means* can be the basis not only for hope in a personal afterlife, but also for a Macbeth-like despair in the face of the possibility that, in the end, the drama of human existence on earth “signifies nothing.”

Dickinson's principal spiritual fidelity, then, is always to the *mystery* of divine transcendence — to the unknowability of what it finally is, and of what our participation in it signifies. And her critique of Christian doctrines, and of the pieties and presumptions of Christian believers, can be seen to follow in every point the evasion, or the obscuring, or the denial, of that mysteriousness. Because she experiences her own consciousness — and from that experience, recognizes all of creation — as the “intersection of the timeless with time,” to use T. S. Eliot's phrase from *Four Quartets*, she has no doubt that creation is shot through with the divinely-grounded transcendent reality that she variously calls *Heaven*, *Eternity*, *Paradise*. Every implication or consequence of what this means, however, in her view must remain uncertain. So she writes:

Of Paradise' existence
All we know
Is the uncertain certainty –
But it's vicinity, infer,
By it's Bisecting Messenger – (1421)

Thus authentic spirituality, for Dickinson, means abjuring the so-called “faith” that oversteps the tight circumference of essential human ignorance. Genuine faith is, rather, the embrace of divine transcendence together with every uncertainty and doubt that recognition of the impenetrable mysteriousness of transcendence brings. As she wrote in a letter-poem, late in her life, to her closest friend and confidante, her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson: “Faith is *Doubt*” (qtd. in McIntosh 73).

GIVEN the foregoing, we should not be surprised to find that the poems in which Dickinson describes the most gratifying and the most dreadful extremes of her experience — poems of desire most richly fulfilled, and of pain most terribly suffered — to be lyrics in which her recognition of divine transcendence plays a central part. That this is the case can readily be shown by considering, first, poems whose topic is love — for, as her writings make clear, love is for Dickinson the ultimate existential and metaphysical value — and, second, a few of the many poems describing Dickinson’s experiences of terror, psychological trauma, emotional numbness, and despair, poems in which the acknowledgement of divine transcendence typically plays a sinister or distressing, but nevertheless crucial, role.

When Dickinson desires to describe what she has found to be of supreme worth in the drama of living, and of supreme importance in how we should approach a proper understanding of the relation between the created world and divine transcendence, she employs the term *love*. It is in “the revelation of love,” as Helen Vendler calls it (9), that Dickinson finds a truth and a metaphysical reality to which she is willing to grant the status of an absolute value:

Love – is anterior to Life –
 Posterior – to Death –
 Initial of Creation, and
 The Exponent of Earth – (980)

For her it is the experiences of love that reveal to us most assuredly, and at their most sublime give us a fleeting sense of communion with, what we cannot help but imagine as a divine and transcendent love that entices us with the allure of promise even as we remain haunted with uncertainty about our ultimate destiny in relation to it. All of these elements are present in what may be Dickinson’s most eloquent poem on the subject:

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The Love a Life can show Below
Is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing
That faints upon the face of Noon –
And smites the Tinder in the Sun –
And hinders Gabriel's Wing –

'Tis this – in Music – hints and sways –
And far abroad on Summer days –
Distills uncertain pain –
'Tis this enamors in the East –
And tints the Transit in the West
With harrowing Iodine –

'Tis this – invites – appalls – endows –
Flits – glimmers – proves – dissolves –
Returns – suggests – convicts – enchants
Then – flings in Paradise – (285)

Love's overwhelming significance for the self is carefully conveyed here, especially in the last stanza's cascading verbs, which confirm moments of paradisaical joy while indicating how unstable the living soul's love-based relation with transcendence — and how uncertain its ultimate destiny in relation to it — always remains.

Still, in poem after poem she identifies love as the highest realization of our positive relation to transcendence. "Love is like Life – merely longer" (287), she writes, and "Love – is that later Thing than Death –" (840). Given her Biblically-informed imagination, such a view inspires Dickinson on numerous poetic occasions to use the figure of Jesus to symbolize love in its utmost human capacity, and also to symbolize how a personal afterlife, should it be possible, can only rightly be conceived as love's fulfillment. While Dickinson always rejects authoritarian images of Jesus, and the doctrine of his substantial identity with "God the Father," she is nevertheless powerfully drawn to the image of a human Jesus whose courage, compassion, and love show human participation in divine transcendence at its most authentic and completely realized.

In one particularly telling poem, envisioning a Jesus whose loving openness to reality extends even to the embrace of death by stating that "Christ – stooped until He touched the Grave –," Dickinson allows herself to imagine this as an act of ". . . love annealed of love / Until it bend as low as Death / Redignified, above[.]" (273). That is, she shows how the idea of a love unremittingly tempered and strengthened by further love makes sense of the imagined possibility of Christ's transfiguration, and thus of

love as the means of a mysterious spiritual transformation — a transformation very much longed for by Dickinson — into a life beyond this life of suffering. Another poem revisits the theme:

To know just how He suffered – would be dear –

 Was he afraid – or tranquil –
 Might He know
 How Conscious Consciousness – could grow –
 Till Love that was – and Love too best to be –
 Meet – and the Junction be Eternity (688)

Dickinson, of course, knows that she cannot know how Jesus suffered, or whether he experienced such a communion. But his example attracts her like no other for illustrating that it is love that enables us best to remain in attunement with the divine transcendence that is always both present in consciousness and suggested by nature. As she writes in a letter of 1878, “Love makes us ‘heavenly’ without our trying in the least. . . . [and] its low ‘Come unto me’ begins in every place” (*Selected Letters* 242).

Given Dickinson’s profound association of love with transcendent reality, one might expect that her many poems describing experiences of psychological pain, deprivation, and emotional numbness, where the quickenings and comforts of love are agonizingly absent and in which a principal theme is the terror of life’s meaninglessness, would register also a falling-away of confidence in the truth of transcendence. But such is not the case. Dickinson always remains acutely aware that her consciousness is a participation in a mystery of spaceless and timeless meaning; but this mystery’s unfathomable depths become, in periods of intense suffering, a terrifying abyss rather than an alluring unknown, a source not of spiritual hope and comfort but of spiritually-originated affliction. In her famous and much-anthologized poem beginning “There’s a certain Slant of light,” she emphasizes that the “Despair” she feels to have been placed like a “Seal” on her soul “Is an imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air –” (320) — that is, it has a divine or transcendent source, sent for reasons of course unknown. Likewise in two of her most powerful and unsettling poems of psychological anguish, “’Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch” (425) and “The Soul has Bandaged moments –” (360), she employs a language suggestive of spiritual agency, referring to “Goblin” and “Fiend,” to convey her sense that the ultimate origins of her pain are uncanny and spiritual, and that whatever purposes her suffering might have, their basis lies in her soul’s participation in the mystery of transcendence. In sum, extreme pain — like extreme joy — always directs Dickinson’s imagination toward the

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unknowable depths of spiritual reality in which her consciousness is aware of being involved.

She states this carefully, in a diction of typically Dickinsonian metaphorical and syntactical concision, in a two-stanza poem from 1864:

A nearness to Tremendousness –
An Agony procures –
Affliction ranges Boundlessness –
Vicinity to Laws

Contentment's quiet Suburb –
Affliction cannot stay
In Acres – It's Location
Is Illocality – (824)

The “Illocality” and “Boundlessness” toward which intense pain directs our consciousness transcends the “Laws” that govern “Contentment,” in two senses. The social laws, or mores, to which everyday living is properly subordinated lose their relevance to a soul in “Agony.” More profoundly, to the complacent and untroubled soul, the laws of space and time that structure the natural world can appear to circumscribe the whole of reality; but these laws are revealed to govern only a “Suburb” of the whole once extreme “Affliction” forces us to address the mystery of transcendence.

Inevitably, the spiritual questioning provoked in Dickinson by intense suffering guides her poetic imagination to Jesus's passion and crucifixion. Her frequent references to Calvary, in which she associates her own suffering with that of Jesus's crucifixion — for example, she describes herself in two poems as, respectively, “Queen of Calvary” (347) and “Empress of Calvary” (194) — are meant to suggest not only the intensity of her anguish, but also her identification with the unrestricted openness of Jesus's human consciousness to transcendence, both in his extremity of doubt and in his hope for consolation. Calvary and Gethsemane are symbols that stand for how acutest anguish opens up, inwardly and invisibly, the abyss of transcendent mystery in the core of every spiritually self-aware soul. As she writes:

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 – (670)⁹

Still, such experiences do not lead Dickinson to embrace the idea at the heart of Christology, and so central to Christian self-understanding, that undeserved suffering is redemptive — that, as made manifest through and enacted by Jesus, it serves to reconcile sinful human nature with the just, merciful God of all Creation. That doctrine makes no more sense to her than it does to Ivan Karamazov. The only spiritual comfort her honest assessment of her experiences of anguish will allow her is recognition of the fact that, because the purpose of conscious participation in divine transcendence is impenetrable to human understanding, our experiences of both suffering and love in this life *may* hold an ultimate meaning in the economy of human-divine participation that, for now, we cannot surmise. Her credo of ignorance, and the utmost she can manage of cautious hope, is nowhere better distilled than in lines written in a letter to her cousins about the death of her mother, only four years before Dickinson's own death:

She slipped from our fingers like a flake gathered by the wind, and is now part of the drift called "the infinite."

We don't know where she is, though so many tell us.

I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker — that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence . . . (*Letters* Vol. 3 750)

As these lines make clear, Dickinson's principal spiritual allegiance — and this holds true from her teenage years to the end of her life — was neither to any identifiable set of spiritual claims nor to a self-assured discrediting of the Christian vision in its entirety, but to the mysteriousness, the unknowability, of what the reality of divine transcendence and human participation in it finally means. Nowhere does she make this point more succinctly than in a letter written, again to her cousins, just about a year before her death: "That we are permanent temporarily, it is warm to know, though we know no more" (*Selected Letters* 315). To claim to know more, in this as in other matters pertaining to transcendent meaning, would be to retreat from the truth of mystery, to lose "the resilience not to be overcome by" the haunting uncertainties of mystery, which is the one thing her sense of spiritual authenticity will not allow her to do (Eberwein 42; McIntosh 48).

And it is for this very reason, finally, that she is no more approving of materialists or atheists than she is of her Christian neighbors who are con-

vinced that they know ultimate truths. Of those who recognize and devote themselves exclusively to what is earthly and its rewards, and who ignore or deny what is — to her — the obvious fact of our participation in a divine infinite, she writes mockingly:

How much the present moment means
 To those who've nothing more —
 The Fop — the Carp — the Atheist —
 Stake an entire store
 Upon a moment's shallow Rim
 While their commuted Feet
 The Torrents of Eternity
 Do all but inundate — (1420)

Dickinson's spiritual position, then — while it can be confusing to readers of her poems who find her now worshipful of her Creator, and now describing a negligent, indifferent, or cruel God; now hopeful of and curious about a personal afterlife, and now resigned to despair or even dread of it; now confident that her experiences of love and joyful transport are revelatory of essential divine nature, and now horrified by the thought that her experiences of anguish have their origin in divine malignancy — does have a coherent center, and is not self-contradictory. That center is her simultaneous affirmation of (1) the fact of divinely transcendent reality and (2) the mystery of what human participation in it means. Authentic spiritual faith is, for Dickinson, a steadfast acknowledgment of both these facts — and such a faith is a first requirement, in her view, for any person's responsible embracing of the spiritual situation of human beings within reality:

Faith — is the Pierless Bridge
 Supporting what We see
 Unto the Scene that We do not —
 Too slender for the eye

It bears the Soul as bold
 As it were rocked in Steel
 With Arms of steel at either side —
 It joins — behind the Vail

To what, could We presume
 The Bridge would cease to be

To Our far, vascillating Feet
 A first Necessity. (978)

NOTES

1) For perceptive comments regarding Shakespeare's influence on Dickinson and comparing their achievements in "linguistic virtuosity," see Sewall 700-05, 708, 719.

2) For a strong account of the impact of nineteenth century science on Dickinson, with whose conclusions concerning Dickinson's relation to the Christian idea of God, however, I am in some disagreement, see Wolff 342-48, 451-73.

3) 598: "The brain is wider than the sky."

4) Translation by Voegelin 227. For a slightly different translation and further commentary on this fragment, see Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 126-30.

5) In what is obviously a typographical error, this text prints "in" for "is" as the second word in the fragment.

6) 1433: "What mystery pervades a well!"

7) 1260: "Is heaven a physician?"

8) On prayer, see also the crucial poems "My period had come for prayer" (525), "Prayer is the little implement" (623), and "I meant to have but modest needs" (711).

9) 670: "One crucifixion is recorded only."

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