Some critical notes on Emily Dickinson’s poems

“There’s a certain Slant of light”

Laurence Perrine

[In "There's a certain Slant of light,"] Emily Dickinson . . . treats an irrational psychological phenomenon akin to those recorded by Wordsworth in "Strange fits of passion have I known" ("Down behind the cottage roof, At once, the bright moon dropp'd. . . . '0 mercy!' to myself I cried, 'If Lucy should be dead!'") and by Tennyson in "Mariana" ("But most she loathed the hour When the thick-moted sunbeam lay Athwart the chambers, and the day Was sloping toward his western bower.") A certain external condition of nature induces in her a certain feeling or mood. But the feeling is more complex than Wordsworth's or Mariana's.

The chief characteristic of this feeling is its painful oppressiveness. "Oppresses," "weight," "hurt," "despair," and "affliction" convey this aspect. A large component in it is probably consciousness of the fact of death, though this is probably not the whole of its content nor is this consciousness necessarily fully formulated by the mind. Yet here we see the subtle connection between the hour and the mood. For the season is winter, when the year is approaching its end. And the time is late afternoon (winter afternoons are short at best, and the light slants), when the day is failing. The suggestion of death is caught up by the weighty cathedral tunes (funeral music possibly—but hymns are also much concerned with death—"Dies Irae," etc.) and by "the distance on the look of death." The stillness of the hour ("the landscape listens, Shadows hold their breath") is also suggestive of the stillness of death.

But besides the oppressiveness of the feeling, it has a certain impressiveness too. It is weighty, solemn, majestic, like organ music. This quality is conveyed by "weight of cathedral tunes," "heavenly ," "seal" (suggesting the seal on some important official document), and "imperial." This quality of the mood may be partly caused by the stillness of the moment, by the richness of the slanting sunlight (soon to be followed by sunset), and by the image of death which it calls up.

The mood gives "heavenly" hurt. "Heavenly" suggests the immateriality of the hurt, which leaves "no scar"; the source of the sunlight—the sky; the ultimate source of both sunlight and death—God. The hurt is given internally "where the meanings are"—that is, in the soul, the psyche, or the mind-that part of one which assigns "meanings"—consciously or intuitively—to life and to phenomena like this.

"None may teach it anything"—Both the sunlight and the mood it induces are beyond human correction or alleviation; they are final and irrevocable—"sealed." There is no lifting this seal— this despair.

"When it goes, 'tis like the distance On the look of death"—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.

from "Dickinson's 'There's a Certain Slant of Light,'" *The Explicator*, XI (May 1953), Item 50.

Sharon Cameron

How does "light" come into relation with "Despair—" and "Despair—" into relation with "Death—"? What are the generative fusions of the poem and why is the grammar of its concluding lines itself so confusing? We note that light is a "Seal" or sign of despair and we remember that Dickinson was much too conscientious a reader of the Bible and particularly of the Book of Revelation not to have intended "the Seal Despair—" to point to an experience that was, if a secular experience can be so, both visionary and apocalyptic. In the Bible, however, while the self is "not worthy to open the scroll and break the seals" that will reveal divine agency, in the speaker's world meaning must be deduced within the privacy of a solitary consciousness. Thus "None may teach it [to] any [one else]"; "None may teach it any [thing]" (it is not subject to alteration); "None may teach it—[not] any [one]." But the "Meanings" of the event are not self-generated; if this is a poem about the solipsistic labor of experience, it is not about autism. To be credited as vision, despair must also seek its connection to the generative source outside itself. For light may seal despair in, make it internal and irrevocable, but the irrevocability, by a line of association that runs just under the poem's surface, prompts the larger thought of death.

In fact, the poem is about correlatives, about how interior transformations that are both invisible and immune to alteration from the outside world are at the same time generated by that world. The relationship between the "Slant of light" in the landscape and the "Seal Despair—" within may be clarified by an analogy to Erich Auerbach's distinction between figure and its fulfillment, for the "Slant of light" and the "Seal Despair—" are not in this poem merely premonitions of death, but are, in fact, kinds or types of death. Indeed it could be asserted that in the entire Dickinson canon, despair is often a *figura* for death, not as Auerbach uses the word to specify related historical events, but rather as he indicates the word to denote an event that prefigures an ultimate occurrence and at the same time is already imbued with its essence. Figural interpretation presupposes much greater equality between its terms than either allegory or symbol for, in the former, the sign is a mere form and, in the latter, the symbol is always fused with what it represents and can actually replace it. While it is true that figural interpretation ordinarily applies to historical events rather than to natural events, and while the "Slant

of light" and the "Seal Despair—" are indeed natural and psychological events not separated by much time, they have a causal or prefigurative relationship to each other that is closer to the relationship implicit in the figural structure than to that in the symbolic one. Certainly it would be incorrect to say that they are symbols. "Light" and "Seal," however, are in relation to "Death—" as a premise is to a conclusion. Auerbach, speaking of the relationship between two historical events implicit in the figural structure, writes, "Both . . . have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event." We may regard the "Slant of light" and the "Seal Despair—" as having just such a signatory relationship as that described above. For the light is indirect; it thus seeks a counterpart to help it deepen into meaning. The "definitive event" in the poem to which "light" and "Seal" point is, of course, "Death—." While we would expect the departure of the light to yield distance from the "look of Death—," instead the preposition "on" not only designates the space between the speaker and the light but also identifies that light as one cast by death, and in turn casting death on, or in the direction of, the speaker. The "Slant of light," recognized only at a distance—its meaning comprehended at the moment of its disappearance—is revelatory of "Death—", is "Death['s]—" prefiguration. Figure fuses with fact, interprets it, and what we initially called the confusion of the two now makes sense in the context of divination.

If the light is indeed one of death, then we have the answer to why and how it "oppresses" in the first stanza and to the earlier oblique comparison of it to "Cathedral Tunes—." What Dickinson achieves in the poem is truly remarkable, for she takes a traditional symbol and scours it so thoroughly of its traditional associations with life that before we get to the poem's conclusion the image leans in the direction of mystery, dread, and darkness. By the time we arrive at the final simile and at the direct association of light and death we are not so much surprised as relieved at the explicitness of the revelation. It is the indirect association of "light" and "Death—" (the "Slant" that pulls them together at first seemingly without purpose) that prompts "Despair—." We feel it indirectly, internally, obliquely. Were we to know it, it would be death. For Dickinson, death is the apocalyptic vision, the straightening of premonition into fact, figure into fulfillment.

The fusions I have been discussing either between literal reality and its metaphoric representation (where literal reality permanently assumes those metaphoric characteristics that seemed initially intended only to illuminate it) or between the more formal *figura* and its fulfillment (where events contain in a predictive relationship the essence as well as the form of each other) raise the question of whether we can ever know anything in its own terms, and suggest perhaps that knowledge is not, as we might have thought, absolute, but is rather always relational. If these fusions link the historical or natural world with the divine one, the analogue with the real thing, they are predicated on a structure of simultaneous correspondence rather than of linear progression. The truth that is "Bald, and Cold—" is death, it does not lead to it. The "certain Slant of light," although it prefigures death, also already contains its essence. The thing in other words is saturated in the terms of its own figuration. Given the synchrony of this

relationship, we are not very far from those poems that strain to annihilate the boundaries of time itself and to treat death as if its very reality could be cast into the present tense, experienced, and somehow survived. The effort to know what cannot be known, to survive it, is thus carried one step further in those poems in which the speaker travels over the boundary from life to death to meet death on its own ground. Given the presumption of the quest, figural structure often gives way to allegory or at any rate to the acknowledgment of the inadequacy of simple analogue, for on the other side of death true knowledge can find no correspondences.

"After great pain, a formal feeling comes"

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren

["After great pain, a formal feeling comes"] is obviously an attempt to communicate to the reader the nature of the experience which comes "after great pain." The poet is using the imagery for this purpose, and the first line of the poem, which states the subject of the poem, is the only abstract statement in the poem. The pain is obviously not a physical pain; it is some great sorrow or mental pain which leaves the mind numbed. The nerves, she says, "sit ceremonious like tombs." The word sit is very important here. The nerves, it is implied, are like a group of people after a funeral sitting in the parlor in a formal hush. Then the poet changes the image slightly by adding "like tombs." The nerves are thus compared to two different things, but each of the comparisons contributes to the same effect, and indeed are closely related: people dressed in black sitting around a room after a funeral may be said to be like tombs. And why does the reference to "tombs " seem such a good symbol for a person who has just suffered great pain (whether it be a real person or the nerves of such a person personified)? Because a tomb has to a supreme degree the qualities of deadness (quietness, stillness) and of formality (ceremony, stiffness).

Notice that the imagery (through the first line of the last stanza) is characterized by the possession of a common quality, the quality of stiff lifelessness. For instance, the heart is "stiff," the feet walk a "wooden" way, the contentment is a "quartz" contentment, the hour is that of "lead." The insistence on this type of imagery is very important in confirming the sense of numbed consciousness which is made more explicit by the statement that the feet move mechanically and are "regardless" of where they go. Notice too that the lines are bound together, not only by the constant reference of the imagery to the result of grief, but also by the fact that the poet is stating in series what happens to the parts of the body: nerves, heart, feet.

Two special passages in the first two stanzas deserve additional /469/ comment before we pass on to the third stanza. The capital letter in the word *He* tells us that Christ is meant. The heart, obsessed with pain and having lost the sense of time and place, asks whether it was Christ who bore the cross. The question is abrupt and elliptic as though uttered at a moment of pain. And the heart asks whether it is not experiencing His pain, and—having lost hold of the real world—whether the crucifixion took place yesterday or centuries before. And behind these questions lies the implication that pain is a constant part of the human lot. The implied figure of a funeral makes the heart's question about the crucifixion come as an appropriate one, and the quality of the suffering makes the connection implied between its own sufferings and that on the cross not violently farfetched.

The line, "A quartz contentment like a stone," is particularly interesting. The comparison involves two things. First, we see an extension of the common association of stoniness with the numbness of grief, as in such phrases as "stony-eyed" or "heart like a stone," etc. But why does the poet use "quartz"? There are several reasons. The name of the stone helps to particularize the figure and prevent the effect of a cliché. Moreover, quartz is a very hard stone. And, for one who knows that quartz is a crystal, a "quartz contentment" is a contentment crystallized, as it were, out of the pain. This brings us to the second general aspect involved by the comparison. This aspect is ironical. The contentment arising after the shock of great pain is a contentment because of the inability to respond any longer, rather than the ability to respond satisfactorily and agreeably.

To summarize for a moment, the poet has developed an effect of inanimate lifelessness, a stony, or wooden, or leaden stiffness; now, she proceeds to use a new figure, that of the freezing person, which epitomizes the effect of those which have preceded it, but which also gives a fresh and powerful statement.

The line, "Remembered if outlived," is particularly forceful. The implication is that few outlive the experience to be able to remember and recount it to others. This experience of grief is like a death by freezing: there is the chill, then the stupor as the body becomes numbed, and then the last state in which the body finally gives up the fight against the cold, and relaxes and /470/ dies. The correspondence of the stages of death by freezing to the effect of the shock of deep grief on the mind is close enough to make the passage very powerful. But there is another reason for the effect which this last figure has on us. The imagery of the first two stanzas corresponds to the "stupor." The last line carries a new twist of idea, one which supplies a context for the preceding imagery and which by explaining it, makes it more meaningful. The formality, the stiffness, the numbness of the first two stanzas is accounted for: it is an attempt to hold in, the fight of the mind against letting go; it is a defense of the mind. /471/

Thomas H. Johnson

. . . The authority of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" derives from the technical skill with which the language is controlled. As she always does in her best poems, Emily Dickinson makes her first line lock all succeeding lines into position. . . . /97/ The heaviness of the pain is echoed by *bore, wooden, quartz, stone, lead*. The formal feeling is coldly ceremonious, mechanical, and stiff, leading through chill and stupor to a "letting go." The stately pentameter measure of the first stanza is used, in the second, only in the first line and the last, between which are hastened rhythms. The final two lines of the poem, which bring it to a close, reestablish the formality of the opening lines. Exact rhymes conclude each of the stanzas.

Emily Dickinson's impulse to let the outer form develop from the inner mood now begins to extend to new freedoms. Among her poems composed basically as quatrains, she does not hesitate to include a three-line stanza, as in "I rose because he sank," or a five-line stanza, as in "Glee, the great storm is over." On some occasions, to break the regularity in yet another way or to gain a new kind of emphasis, she splits a line from its stanza, allowing it to stand apart, as in "Beauty—be not caused—lt Is," and "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House." Sometimes poems beginning with an iambic beat shift in succeeding stanzas to a trochaic, to hasten the tempo, as in "In falling timbers buried." It is the year too when she used her dashes lavishly. /98/

Francis Manley

Between 1860 and 1862 Emily Dickinson is commonly believed to have experienced a psychic catastrophe, which drove her into poetry instead of out of her mind. According to her explanation, she was haunted by some mysterious fright, and her fear, or whatever it was, opened the floodgates of her poetry. But despite their overwhelming number, the poems she produced under these conditions are not an amorphous overflow from a distraught mind; they are informed and well-wrought, the creations of controlled artistry—especially about twenty-five or thirty poems which, unlike the rest, treat specifically the intense subtleties of mental anguish, anatomizing them with awesome precision. And since all of the poems in this small cluster deal with varied aspects of that one subject, all of them follow a certain basic pattern dictated by the abstract nature of pain.

In each of these poems Dickinson was faced with this initial problem: somehow she had to describe a formless, internal entity which could never be revealed to others except in terms of its outward signs and manifestations. Moreover, these externalizations did not always /260/ correspond to the internal condition but at times, in fact, represented the exact opposite. Yet in poetry if such signs were completely misleading, they would obviously defeat their own purpose by communicating the wrong thing. Consequently, they must offer some oblique means for the reader to penetrate appearances to the reality beneath. In solving this problem Dickinson created some of her most interesting and complex poetry. Generally speaking, irony was her weapon as well as her strategy. First, she usually set up for her persona some sort of external ritual or drama, which contains

various levels of calm objectivity. Then, through a series of ironic involutions generated in the course of this symbolic action, she eventually led the reader from appearances to the reality of a silent anguish made more terrifying by its ironic presentation, as [in "After great pain, a formal feeling comes"]. . . .

In a literal sense, this poem has neither persona nor ritual, and since it describes a state of mind, neither would seem to be necessary. In such a case attention should be centered on the feeling itself and secondarily on its location. Consequently Dickinson personified various parts of the body so as to demonstrate the action of numbness on them—*the* nerves, *the* heart, *the* feet—generalized entities belonging to no one. Yet that is precisely the formal feeling benumbed contentment produces in a person, especially one who has lost the sense of time and his own identity (lines 3-4). All the parts of his body seem to be autonomous beings moving in mysterious ways. If that constitutes a persona, it is necessarily an unobtrusive one that must be reconstructed from *disjecta membra*. Similarly, the /261/ various actions performed in this poem are disjunctive, and though vaguely related to a chaotic travesty of a funeral, they are not patterned by any consistent, overall ceremony. Since they are all external manifestations or metaphors for numbness, however, they are all as they should be, lifeless forms enacted in a trance as though they were part of some meaningless rite.

The first stanza, for instance, is held rigid by the ceremonious formality of the chamber of death when, after the great pain of its passing, the corpse lies tranquil and composed, surrounded by mourners hushed in awe so silent that time seems to have gone off into eternity "Yesterday, or Centuries before." In one respect this metaphor is particularly suitable since the nerves are situated round about the body or the "stiff Heart" like mourners about the bed of death. But if the metaphor is extended further, it seems to become ludicrously unsuitable. These nerves, for example, are not neighbors lamenting with their silent presence the death of a friend. They are sensation itself, but here they are dead, as ceremonious and lifeless as tombs. Consequently, the formal feeling that comes after great pain is, ironically, no feeling at all, only benumbed rigidness. Conversely, if the "stiff Heart" is the corpse, he nevertheless has life or consciousness enough to question whether it was "He, that bore, / And Yesterday, or Centuries before." Obviously, this is moving toward artistic chaos since metaphors should be more and more applicable the further they are extended, but this one apparently becomes progressively worse. Curiously, however, by breaking all the rules Dickinson achieved the exact effect she needed. Her problem was to describe an essentially paradoxical state of mind in which one is alive but yet numb to life, both a living organism and a frozen form. Consequently she took both terms of this paradox and made each a reversed reflection of the other. Although the mourners, the nerves, appear to be the living, they are in actuality the dead, and conversely the stiff heart, the metaphoric corpse, has ironically at least a semblance of consciousness. In their totality, both these forms of living death define the "stop sensation" that comes after great pain.

Since the metaphoric nightmare of the first stanza could hardly be extended any further, Dickinson is obviously not concerned with elaborating a conceit. In the second stanza, then, the cataleptically formal rites of the dead are replaced by a different sort pf action

ceremoniously performed in a trance, an extension not of the previous metaphor, but of the paradox which informed it. For although move- /262/ ment usually indicates vitality, there is no life in the aimless circles of the walking dead. Whether numb feet go on the hardness of ground or on the softness of air, their way is wooden because paralysis is within them. Since they cannot feel nor know nor even care where they are going ("Regardless grown"), they wander in circles ("go round") on an insane treadmill as though lost, suspended between life and death and sharing the attributes of both.

The third stanza is, in one respect, an imagistic repetition of the second. Benumbed, aimless movements through a world of waste, the motions of the living dead are similar to the trance-like, enchanted steps of persons freezing in a blank and silent world of muffling snow. But at the same time that this metaphor refers particularly to the preceding stanza, it also summarizes the entire poem since the ambiguous antecedent of *This* in line 10 is, in one respect, everything that went before. Consequently, this final image should somehow fuse all the essential elements of the poem. Not only that, it should present them in sharp focus.

Certainly the chill and subsequent stupor of freezing, a gradual numbing of the senses, incorporates many of the attributes of death itself: a loss of vital warmth, of locomotion, of a sense of identity in time and space conjoined with an increasing coolness, rigidness, and apathy. Since freezing, however, is neither life nor death but both simultaneously, it is an excellent, expansive metaphor for the living death which comes after great pain. But in addition to extending the basic paradox which informs the poem, this final figure serves a more important function by drawing to the surface and presenting in full ambivalence a certain ironic ambiguity which in the first two stanzas remains somewhat below the threshold of conscious awareness.

In its furthest extent great pain produces internal paralysis, but, ironically, this numbness is not itself a pain. It is no feeling, "an element of blank," which gradually emerges from the poem until at the end it almost engulfs it in white helplessness. In the first stanza it lurks just below the surface, unstated, but ironically present in the situation itself. For although the nerves represent metaphorically the formal feeling which comes after great pain by being silent, ceremonious mourners, they are simultaneously dead sensation, no feeling, formal or otherwise, not pain, but nothing. In the second stanza this implication is no longer subliminal, but even though it is at the surface, it is not developed, merely stated: "A Quartz /263/ contentment, like a stone." According to Webster's *American Dictionary* (1851), the lexicon Dickinson used, contentment was a "Rest or quietness of mind in the present condition; satisfaction which holds the mind in peace, restraining complaint, opposition, or further desire, and often implying a moderate degree of happiness." Apparently, then, by the second stanza anguish has resolved itself into its impossible opposite, a hard, cold, quartz-like peaceful satisfaction of the mind. In the third stanza, this inert irony fully emerges to modify response and ultimately to qualify it to such an extent that the poem ends in tense, unresolved ambivalence. According to the superficial movement of the poem, the time after great pain will later be remembered as a period of living death similar to the sensation of freezing. Yet the qualifications attached to that statement drain it of its assertiveness and curiously force it to imply its

own negative. For there is not only a doubt that this hour of crisis may not be outlived (line 11), but even the positive statement (that it will be remembered) is made fully ambivalent by being modified by its own negative (that it will be remembered just as freezing persons recollect the snow). Ironically, freezing persons can never remember the snow since they die in it, destroyed by a warm, contented numbness in which they sleep and perish in entranced delusion. Because there is no solution to this ambivalence, the poem ends unresolved, suspended between life and death in a quartz contentment, the most deadly anguish of all, the very essence of pain, which is not pain, but a blank peace, just as the essence of sound is silence. /264/

"I heard a Fly buzz"

Paula Bennett

Like many people in her period, Dickinson was fascinated by death-bed scenes. How, she asked various correspondents, did this or that person die? In particular, she wanted to know if their deaths revealed any information about the nature of the afterlife. In this poem, however, she imagines her own death-bed scene, and the answer she provides is grim, as grim (and, at the same time, as ironically mocking), as anything she ever wrote.

In the narrowing focus of death, the fly's insignificant buzz, magnified tenfold by the stillness in the room, is all that the speaker hears. This kind of distortion in scale is common. It is one of the 'illusions' of perception. But here it is horrifying because it defeats every expectation we have. Death is supposed to be an experience of awe. It is the moment when the soul, departing the body, is taken up by God. Hence the watchers at the bedside wait for the moment when the 'King' (whether God or death) 'be witnessed' in the room. And hence the speaker assigns away everything but that which she expects God (her soul) or death (her body) to take.

What arrives instead, however, is neither God nor death but a fly, '[w]ith Blue—uncertain--stumbling Buzz,' a fly, that is, no more secure, no more sure, than we are. Dickinson had associated flies with death once before in the exquisite lament, 'How many times these low feet/staggered.' In this poem, they buzz 'on the/ chamber window,' and speckle it with dirt (# 187, F, 152), reminding us that the housewife, who once protected us from such intrusions, will protect us no longer. Their presence is threatening but only in a minor way, 'dull' like themselves. They are a background noise we do not have to deal with yet.

In 'I heard a Fly buzz,' on the other hand, there is only one fly and its buzz is not only foregrounded. Before the poem is over, the buzz takes up the entire field of perception, coming between the speaker and the 'light' (of day, of life, of knowledge). It is then that the 'Windows' (the eyes that are the windows of the soul as well as, metonymically, the

light that passes through the panes of glass) 'fail' and the speaker is left in darkness--in death, in ignorance. She cannot 'see' to 'see' (understand).

Given that the only sure thing we know about 'life after death' is that flies--in their adult form and more particularly, as maggots--devour us, the poem is at the very least a grim joke. In projecting her death-bed scene, Dickinson confronts her ignorance and gives back the only answer human knowledge can with any certainty give. While we may hope for an afterlife, no one, not even the dying, can prove it exists.

Like 'Four Trees--upon a solitary/Acre, ' 'I heard a Fly buzz' represents an extreme position. I believe that to Dickinson it was a position that reduced human life to too elementary and meaningless a level. Abdicating belief, cutting off God's hand, as in 'I heard a Fly buzz' (a poem that tests precisely this situation), leaves us with nothing. Not just God, but we ourselves are reduced--a fact that has become painfully evident in twentieth-century literature. . . .

Sharon Cameron

We must imagine the speaker looking back on an experience in which her expectations of death were foiled by its reality. The poem begins with the speaker's perception of the fly, not yet a central awareness both because of the way in which the fly manifests itself (as sound) and because of the degree to which it manifests itself (as a triviality). As a consequence of the speaker's belief in the magnitude of the event and the propriety with which it should be enacted, the fly seems merely indecorous, as yet a marginal disturbance, attracting her attention the way in which something we have not yet invested with meaning does. In a poem very much concerned with the question of vision, it is perhaps strange that the dominant concern in stanza one should be auditory. But upon reflection it makes sense, for the speaker is hearing a droning in the background before the source of the noise comes into view. The poem describes the way in which things come into view, slowly.

What is striking in the second stanza is the speaker's lack of involvement in the little drama that is being played out. She is acutely conscious that there will be a struggle with death, but she imagines it is the people around her who will undergo it. Her detachment and tranquility seem appropriate if we imagine them to come in the aftermath of pain, a subject that is absent in the poem and whose absence helps to place the experience at the moment before death. At such a moment, the speaker's concern is focused on others, for being the center of attention with all eyes upon her, she is at leisure to return the stare.

Her concern with her audience continues in the third stanza and prompts the tone of officiousness there. Wanting to set things straight, the speaker wishes to add the finishing touches to her life, to conclude it the way one would a business deal. The desire to structure and control experience is not, however, carried out in total blindness, for she is clearly cognizant of those "Keep-sakes—" not hers to give. Even at this point her conception of dying may be a preconception but it is not one founded on total ignorance.

The speaker has been imagining herself as a queen about to leave her people, conscious of the majesty of the occasion, presiding over it. She expects to witness death as majestic, too, or so one infers from the way in which she speaks of him in stanza two. The staginess of the conception, however, has little to do with what Charles Anderson calls "an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of [Dickinson's] time and place toward the significance of the moment of death." If it did, the poem would arbitrate between the social meanings and personal ones. But the conflict between preconception and perception takes place inside. Or rather preconception gives way only to darkness. For at the conclusion of the third stanza the fly "interpose[s]," coming between the speaker and the onlookers, between her predictive fantasy of the event and its reality, between life and death. The fact that the fly obscures the former allows the speaker to see the latter. Perspective suddenly shifts to the right thing: from the ritual of dying to the fact of death. It is, of course, the fly who obliterates the speaker's false notions of death, for it is with his coming that she realizes that she is the witness and he the king, that the ceremony is a "stumbling" one. It is from a perspective schooled by the fly that she writes.

As several previous discussions of the poem have acknowledged, the final stanza begins with a complicated synesthesia: "With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—." The adjective "stumbling" (used customarily to describe only an action) here also describes a sound, and the adverb "uncertain" the quality of that sound. The fusion would not be so interesting if its effect were not to evoke that moment in perception when it is about to fail. As in a high fever, noises are amplified, the light in the room takes on strange hues, one effect seems indistinguishable from another. Although there is a more naturalistic explanation for the word "stumbling" (to describe the way in which flies go in and out of our hearing), the poem is so predicated on the phenomenon of displacement and projection (of the speaker's feelings onto the onlookers, of the final blindness onto the "Windows," of the fact of perception onto the experience of death) that the image here suggests another dramatic displacement—the fusion of the fly's death with her own. Thus flies when they are about to die move as if poisoned, sometimes hurl themselves against a ceiling, pause, then rise to circle again, then drop. At this moment the changes the speaker is undergoing are fused with their agent: her experience becomes one with the fly's. It is her observance of that fly, being mesmerized by it (in a quite literal sense now, since death is quite literal), that causes her mind to fumble at the world and lose grip of it. The final two lines "And then the Windows failed—and then / I could not see to see—" are brilliant in their underlining of the poem's central premise; namely that death is survived by perception, for in these lines we are told that there are two senses of vision, one of which remains to see and document the speaker's own blindness ("and

then / I could not see to see—"). The poem thus penetrates to the invisible imagination which strengthens in response to the loss of visible sight.

I mentioned earlier that the poem presumes a shift of perspective, an enlightened change from the preconception of death to its perception. In order to assume that the speaker is educated by her experience, we must assume the fact of it: we must credit the death as a real one. But the fiction required by the poem renders it logically baffling. For although the poem seems to proceed in a linear fashion toward an end, its entire premise is based on the lack of finality of that end, the speaker who survives death to tell her story of it. We are hence left wondering: How does the poem imagine an ending? If it does not, what replaces a sense of an ending? How does it conceive of the relationship between past, present, and future? To address these questions adequately, we need to look at some theories of time against which the poem's own singular conception may more sharply be visible.

On Emily Dickinson's use of DASHES

Kamilla Denman

Unlike the exclamation mark, the dash that dominates the prolific period is a horizontal stroke, on the level of this world. It both reaches out and holds at bay. Its origins in ellipsis connect it semantically to planets and cycles (rather than linear time and sequential grammatical progression), as well as to silence and the unexpressed. But to dash is also "to strike with violence so as to break into fragments; to drive impetuously forth or out, cause to rush together; to affect or qualify with an element of a different strain thrown into it; to destroy, ruin, confound, bring to nothing, frustrate, spoil; to put down on paper, throw off, or sketch, with hasty and unpremeditated vigour; to draw a pen vigorously through writing so as to erase it; [is] used as a euphemism for 'damn,' or as a kind of verbal imprecation; [or is] one of the two signals (the other being the dot) which in various combinations make up the letters of the Morse alphabet." Dickinson uses the dash to fragment language and to cause unrelated words to rush together; she qualifies conventional language with her own different strains; and she confounds editorial attempts to reduce her "dashed off " jottings to a "final" version. Not only does she draw lines through her own drafts but also through the linguistic conventions of her society, and her challenges to God are euphemistic imprecations against conventional religion. Even the allusion to the Morse alphabet is not entirely irrelevant: through her unconventional use of punctuation, particularly the dash, Dickinson creates a poetry whose interpretation becomes a process of decoding the way each fragment signals meaning.

Dickinson's transition from a dominant use of the exclamation mark to a preference for the dash accompanied her shift from ejaculatory poems, which seem outcries aimed with considerable dramatic effect at God or others, to poems where the energies exist more in the relationships between words and between the poet and her words. In this intensely prolific period, Dickinson's excessive use of dashes has been interpreted variously as the result of great stress and intense emotion, as the indication of a mental breakdown, and as a mere idiosyncratic, female habit. Though these speculations are all subject to debate, it is clear that in the early 1860s Dickinson conducted her most intense exploration of language and used punctuation to disrupt conventional linguistic relations, whether in an attempt to express inexpressible psychological states or purely to vivify language.

From "Emily Dickinson’s Volcanic Punctuation." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* (1993).