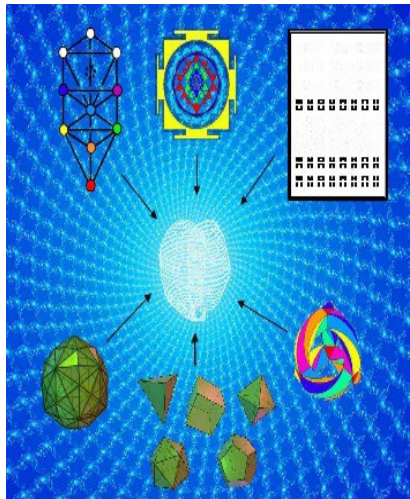


Mysticism: Where Science, Art, and Religion Meet



Subject Four
Mysticism East and West
Emily Dickinson
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12 January 2022



Emily Dickinson



- Emily Dickinson (December 10, 1830 – May 15, 1886) was a great poet whose life has remained a mystery.
- The myth of Emily Dickinson is as a quaint and helpless creature, disappointed in love, who gave up on life. In fact, she was unafraid of her own passions and talent; that her brother's sexual betrayal and subsequent family feud had a profound effect on the Dickinson legend that has come down to us; and perhaps most significantly,
- Emily had an illness – a secret that explains much.
- It was Emily herself who helped to devise the blueprint for her legend, starting at the age of 23 when she declined an invitation from a friend: "I'm so old-fashioned, Darling, that all your friends would stare." In place of the tart young woman she was, she adopted this retiring posture.
- Born in 1830 into the leading family of Amherst, a college town in Massachusetts, she never left what she always called "my father's house." Townsfolk spoke of her as "the Myth."

Emily Dickinson



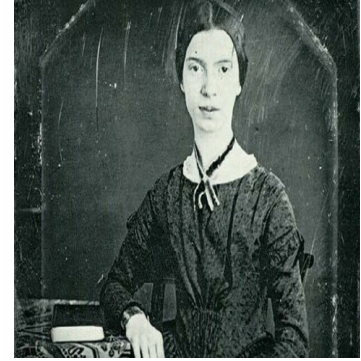
- Hope Is the Thing with Feathers
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TbqRaBY9K0>
- Because I Could Not Stop for Death
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLZKc0AnU7o>
- Before I Got My Eye Put Out-Crash Course on Emily Dickinson Poetry
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4WwhOdk_Eg
- The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBlfkefC630>
- Emily Dickinson Documentary
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpGVFTsyqxc>
- How Emily Dickinson Writes a Poem
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55kqNg88Jql>

Emily Dickinson



- On the face of it, the life of this New England poet seems uneventful and largely invisible, but there's a forceful, even overwhelming character belied by her still surface. She called it a "Still – Volcano – Life", and that volcano rumbles beneath the domestic surface of her poetry and a thousand letters. Stillness was not a retreat from life (as legend would have it) but her form of control. Far from the helplessness she played up at times, she was uncompromising; until the explosion in her family, she lived on her own terms
- Her widely spaced eyes were too keen for the passivity admired in women of her time. It's the sensitive face of a person who (as her brother put it) "saw things directly and just as they were." At 17, as a student at Mount Holyoke in 1848 (the same year that the women's movement took a stand at Seneca Falls), she refused to bend to the founder of her college, the formidable Mary Lyon. At this time Massachusetts was the scene of a religious revival opposed to the inroads of science. Emily, who had chosen mostly science courses, makes her -allegiance clear:

Emily Dickinson



***“Faith” is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see –
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.***

When Miss Lyon pressed her students to be “saved,” nearly all succumbed. Emily did not. On 16 May, she owned, “I have neglected the one thing needful when all were obtaining it.” It seemed that other girls desired only to be good. “How I wish I could say that with sincerity, but I fear I never can.” When Miss Lyon consigned her to the lowest of three categories – the saved, the hopeful and a remnant of about 30 no-hopers – she still held out

***The mermaids in the basement
Came out to look at me.”.***

Emily Dickinson



During a creative burst in the early 1860s, she invited a Boston man of letters to be her mentor, but could not take his advice to regularise her verse. Helpful Mr Higginson, a supporter of women, who thought he was corresponding with an apologetic, self-effacing spinster, was puzzled to find himself “drained” of “nerve-power” after his first visit to her in 1870. He was unable to describe the creature he found beyond a few surface facts: she had smooth bands of red hair and no good features; she had been deferential and exquisitely clean in her white piqué dress and blue crocheted shawl; and after an initial hesitation, she had proved surprisingly articulate. She had said a lot of strange things, from which Higginson deduced an “abnormal” life.

Abnormal

***I started early, took my dog,
And visited the sea;
The mermaids in the basement
Came out to look at me.”.***

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Emily Dickinson



There was an increasing divide between people she wished to know and those she didn't. Her clarity could not endure social talk instead of truth; piety instead of "The Soul's Superior instants." Her directness would have been disconcerting if she did not "simulate" conventionality, and this was "stinging work." But a more threatening challenge, deeper below the surface, fired the volcanoes and earthquakes in her poems – an event, as she put it, that "Struck – my ticking – through –."

Something in her life has so far remained sealed. The poems tease the reader about "it" and her almost overwhelming temptation to "tell." I want to open up the possibility of an unsentimental answer. If true, it would explain the conditions of her life: her seclusion and refusal to marry. Once we know what "it" is, it will be obvious why "it" was buried and why its lava jolts out from time to time through the crater of her "buckled lips".

Emily Dickinson



During the poetic spurt of her early 30s, Dickinson transforms sickness into a story of promise:

***My loss, by sickness – Was it Loss?
Or that Etherial Gain –
One earns by measuring the Grave –
Then – measuring the Sun –***

Sickness is always there, shielded by cover stories: in youth, a cough is mentioned; in her mid-30s, trouble with her eyes. Neither came to much. In her poems, sickness can be violent: she speaks of “Convulsion” or “Throe”. There’s a mechanism breaking down, a body dropping. It “will not stir for Doctors”. “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”, she says, and “I dropped down, and down”. Allowing for the poet’s resolve to tell it “slant,” through metaphor, are we not looking at epilepsy?

Emily Dickinson



In its full-blown form, known as grand mal, a slight swerve in a pathway of the brain prompts a seizure. As Dickinson puts it, “The Brain within its Groove / Runs evenly”, but then a “Splinter swerve” makes it hard to put the current back. Such force has this altered current that it would be easier to divert the course of a flood, when “Floods have slit the Hills / And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves.”

Since the falling sickness, as epilepsy used to be known, had shaming associations with “hysteria,” masturbation, syphilis and impairment of the intellect leading to “epileptic insanity”, it was unnameable, particularly when it struck a woman. In the case of men secrecy was less strict, and fame in a few – Caesar, Muhammad, Dostoevsky – overrode the stigma, but a woman had to bury herself in a lifelong silence. It is remarkable that Dickinson developed a voice from within that silence, one with a volcanic power to bide its time.

Emily Dickinson



- Prescriptions (one from an eminent physician, others in the records of an Amherst drugstore) show that Dickinson's medications tally with contemporary treatments for epilepsy.
- The condition, which has a genetic component, appeared in two other members of the Dickinson family. One was Cousin Zebina, a lifelong invalid, immured at home across the road, whose bitten tongue in the course of a "fit" is noted by Emily in her first surviving letter at the age of 11. "I fit for them," she announced in a poem of c1866.
- Then her nephew, Ned Dickinson, turned out to be afflicted. He was the son of Emily's brother Austin and his wife Susan Dickinson, who lived next door. To the family's dismay Ned, aged 15, had an epileptic fit in 1877. Horrendous attacks continued, about eight a year, recorded in his father's diary.

Emily Dickinson



- It is not known whether Emily Dickinson suffered as her nephew did. There are many forms of epilepsy, and the mild petit mal does not involve convulsions. The mildest manifestations are absences.
- A schoolmate remembered that Emily dropped crockery. Plates and cups seemed to slide out of her hands and lay in pieces on the floor. The story was designed to bring out her eccentricity for, it was said, she hid the fragments in the fireplace behind a fireboard, forgetting they were bound to be discovered in winter.
- This memory is more important than the schoolmate realised, because it suggests absences, either accompanying the condition or the condition itself

Emily Dickinson



- Her output show that she coped inventively with gunshots from the brain into the body. She turned an explosive sickness into well-aimed art: scenes with “Revolver” and “Gun.” Contained in her own domestic order, protected by her father and sister, Dickinson saved herself from the anarchy of her condition and put it to use.
- The mystery the poet was not to “tell” continues to this day to be encased in claims put out by opposed camps who fought for possession of her greatness. These camps go back to the feud. It began with adultery between Emily’s brother Austin, in his 50s, and a newcomer to Amherst, a young faculty wife of 27, Mabel Loomis Todd.
- After the poet’s death, the feud came to focus on Emily as her fame grew: who was to own her unpublished papers? Who had the right to claim her?

Emily Dickinson



- Both camps proceeded to wrap the poet in legends that stress her pathos: where Dickinson legend built up a bereft Emily in a dimity apron turning away the one and only man she loved, Todd legend built up a pitiful Emily “hurt” by her “cruel” sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson. How can we crack through the sad-sweet picture to find what Dickinson called the red “Fire rocks” below?
- One way is to go back to acts of -adultery that changed utterly those who were to be the first keepers of her papers. The advantage of approaching the poet through the feud is the entrée it provides to emotional currents in the family. Assignations – sometimes “with a witness” – are on record, recounted precisely as to time and place in the lovers’ corroborating diaries. The impact of adultery on the family is plain – and not so plain, for the riddles in the poet’s notes to her brother’s mistress must be solved if we are to understand where she stood.

Emily Dickinson



- A recurring fact during the first years of the affair is crucial to the poet's position. Because it was difficult to keep adultery secret from the tattle of a small town, the safest place was the irreproachable home of the Dickinson sisters. There, the lovers would occupy the library or the dining-room (with its black horsehair sofa) for two to three hours. The door would be shut, blocking the poet's access to her second writing table in one room or to her -conservatory via the other.
- Austin Dickinson blew apart his family when he rejected his wife, Susan, who had long been the poet's keenest reader. Who had they been before this happened, and why, earlier, did Dickinson speak of a "Bomb" in her bosom? The Bomb may refer to periodic explosions in the brain, but emotionally both Austin and Emily had an eruptive vein, which Emily channelled into poetry. Her letters show that she cultivated adulterous emotions, if only in fantasy, for an unnamed "Master." How did this affect her response to her brother's sudden outbreak into active adultery?

Emily Dickinson



- In September 1881, David Todd and his wife, Mabel, had arrived in Amherst from Washington. She was a dressy urban beauty bent on maintaining standards in what appeared to her a negligible “village” full of retired clergymen and elderly academics.
- Mrs Todd, extending an immaculate white glove, her smile sliding up one cheek, was invited everywhere and was in a position to choose whom to favour. In Amherst, the Dickinsons were like royalty: Mrs Todd was taken with “regal,” “magnificent” Austin Dickinson and his wife’s dark poise, set off by a scarlet India shawl, when they called on her.
- Behind Austin’s back, Amherst children mocked his auburn hair, arrayed like a fan above his head, and his sniffy walk, tapping his cane as he went.

Emily Dickinson



- At first, all the Dickinsons (bar Emily, who kept to her room) warmed to Mrs Todd's accomplishments: her solos soared above the church choir, she painted flowers to professional standard and published stories in magazines.
- She soon won the friendship of the bookish Susan Dickinson, before it became apparent that she was flirting with Susan's son, 20-year-old Ned, who fell painfully in love.
- This happened just before his father became a rival. Austin's love for Mabel Todd was to last for the rest of his life.

Emily Dickinson



- The result was what came to be known as “the War between the Houses”. Austin turned against his children when they sided with their distraught mother.
- New evidence reveals that, far from withdrawing from the feud, Emily Dickinson took a stand. Unlike her sister Lavinia, who sided with the lovers, she refused to oblige her brother by signing over a plot of Dickinson land to his mistress. In August 1885 the poet wrote to her nephew Ned, confirming her resistance. “Dear Boy,” she starts her letter assuring him he would find “no treason”. “You never will, My Ned.” This letter ends: “And ever be sure of me, Lad – Fondly, Aunt Emily.
- When she died, Mabel got her land. Three weeks after the funeral the deed was signed and the Todds’ house rose on the Dickinson meadow – a venue for future assignments.

Emily Dickinson



- This might have been a routine story of a femme fatale were it not for the presence of mysterious genius. As the feud sharpened its focus on the poet, it would be seen how Mabel had quickened to the poems of Emily Dickinson and how willing Mabel would be to undertake years of toil with difficult manuscripts. She was to show herself ready in other ways, one of only three people during the poet's lifetime to recognise Dickinson's genius. The name of Mabel Loomis Todd will always be associated with the poet.

*Who robbed the woods,
The trusting woods?
The unsuspecting trees
Brought out their burrs and mosses
His fantasy to please.
He scanned their trinkets, curious,
He grasped, he bore away.
What will the solemn hemlock,
What will the fir-tree say?*

Emily Dickinson



- Mabel appears to act out a familiar plot – the seduction of a man in power – but what differs here is the presence of another and grander form of power, that of a poet who selects her own society, then shuts the door.
- To Mabel Todd, with her discerning taste, that shut door, and the elect intelligence behind it, offered an irresistible challenge. So, on 10 September 1882, accompanied by Austin, Mrs Todd knocked on the Homestead door, and had herself admitted to the parlour where she sang to Lavinia and Austin.
- As she did so, Mabel imagined the poet listening in her fastness upstairs, captivated, as the trained voice trilled through the house.

Emily Dickinson



- Over the years to come Mabel was to re-enact this scene, fantasizing a bond with the invisible poet. She would -insist on this bond yet although she was in and out of the Homestead, she never once laid eyes on Emily -Dickinson.
- On this initial occasion, the poet sent in a glass of homemade cordial together with a poem, which Mabel told herself had been composed spontaneously as a tribute to so pleasing a guest.
- Then, within 24 hours, on 11 September, there was a declaration of love for Austin – the “Rubicon” where he abandoned marital fidelity at the gate of his home before the pair entered to play a game of whist with the unsuspecting Sue

Emily Dickinson



- Mabel's entry into the Homestead looks politely innocuous beside this initiation of adultery, but it was to present a parallel and more lasting threat to family peace.
- In time, -Mabel would take possession of a large cache of Emily Dickinson's papers, and -market them in her own terms, so that the strange nature of the poet would be -obscured as a victim of Susan Dickinson.
- So it was that an eruptive poet sending out her "bolts", "Queen" of her own existence, would be subject to a false plot acted out in the unstoppable momentum of Todd's takeover.

Emily Dickinson



- A new and prolonged phase in the war between the houses began with the poet's death in 1886 and her sister's discovery of a lifetime's poems in her chest of drawers.
- Within a short time, Austin persuaded Lavinia to hand over the papers to his mistress. Yet Austin must have been aware that in his own home, his estranged wife treasured a separate collection – poems Emily had given her over the years. Fuelled by adultery, antagonism between Susan Dickinson and Mabel Todd mounted over possession of the poet, with the success of Todd's four editions of Dickinson (two co-edited with Higginson, two put out on her own) during the 1890s followed by the poet's growing stature in the course of the 20th century.
- Insistent legend continued to wrap her in the image of the modest, old-fashioned spinster. But the bold voice of the poems can't be categorised: "I'm Nobody," she says, "– who are you?" It's a voice we can't ignore, confrontational, even invasive, defying façades with a question about our nature.

Emily Dickinson



*The morning lit, the birds arose;
The monster's faded eyes
Turned slowly to his native coast,
And peace was Paradise!*

- The feud fed into a succession of increasingly public conflicts, starting with a court case in 1898 when Lavinia Dickinson changed sides and took a stand of her own against the Todds' further claim to Dickinson land.
- At the heart of the trial is Mabel Todd's assertion that this strip of land was due to her as compensation for her years of toil in bringing a great poet before the public. *Poems* (1890) had sold 11,000 copies in its first year. Her defence turned on her undoubted feat in transcribing, dating and editing piles upon piles of unpublished manuscripts.

Emily Dickinson



- Hatred did not die with the deaths of the first generation. The daughters of the feud, Susan's daughter Martha Dickinson and Mabel's daughter Millicent Todd, did battle through adversarial books during the first half of the 20th century. At its height in the 1950s, the feud turned into a conflict over the sale of the Dickinson papers.
- The Dickinson camp appeared to win that round. But before Millicent Todd died in 1968, she set up a posthumous campaign that could not fail. Her plan was to co-opt a writer of impeccable credentials for a book she had in mind. To this end she appointed Yale professor Richard B Sewall as her literary executor, granting him exclusive rights to the Todd papers.
- Her partisan agenda was clear: this executor was to “set the whole network of Dickinson tensions in proper perspective.” So it came about that Sewall perpetuated the Todd positions in a two-volume biography of Emily Dickinson that has remained standard for the last 36 years.

Emily Dickinson



- Mabel Todd's persuasive grace in presenting her point of view was reinforced by the educated rigour of her daughter's voice on tape as she took Sewall through the legal history of the feud, bristling with facts and dates. These she laid out in the orderly manner of a scholar. To the unwary her testimony would appear objective and informed, and yet in every instance the Todds turn out to be the victims of Susan Dickinson and her fearsome daughter. To hear the tapes is to understand their impact on a biographer. Sewall felt "haunted" by Austin's statement that he went to his wedding as to his execution. Only no one can know what Austin said: the image of execution was transmitted by a mistress determined to oust his wife, and not only in the usual manner, but in various ways to obliterate Sue's centrality in the poet's life.
- A biographer tempted by exclusive access to an archive of such eloquence is bound to be influenced, and though Sewall relayed what he found in a cautious manner, he passed on the trove of Todd untruths: that Emily Dickinson had favoured Mabel; that the poet's withdrawal into seclusion had been the result of a family split preceding Mabel's appearance; and that Austin (contrary to evidence in the trial) had "deeded" to the Todds a second strip of land. The biographer even outdoes the Todds when he suggests that Dickinson's "failure" to publish was a result of a family quarrel.

Emily Dickinson



- Legends of this kind spread to theatre and fiction. In 1976 an award--winning play *The Belle of Amherst* reinvigorated the sad-sweet image: a “shy,” “chaste,” “frightened” poet hardly knows what she says, so keeps busy with baking. The playwright called it an “enterprise of simple beauty,” backed by “audiences who have taken our ‘Belle’ to their hearts.”
- In a novel of 2006 a spiteful Sue ends up “hating” Emily. In a novel of 2007 Sue becomes a death-dealing Lucrezia Borgia. She awaits her victims in the hall of her house, a vamp in décolleté black velvet waving her fan. Can evil go further? It can. Sue “could make mincemeat pie of the Dickinson sisters and eat it for Christmas dinner.”

***The wind tapped like a tired man,
And like a host, “Come in,”
I boldly answered; entered then
My residence within.***

Emily Dickinson



- So the pathos has persisted even though Dickinson's words reveal a woman who was fun: a lover who joked; a mystic who mocked heaven. This woman was not like us: to know her is to encounter aspects of a nature more developed than our own. Her -poems turn on the communicative power of the unstated between two people attuned to it. So, the question of contacts is crucial: for whom is she writing? Who is being trained in her unique mode of communication? Who provokes her to further communication? "Be Sue – while I am Emily – ", she commanded the friend of her youth who became her sister-in-law, "Be next – what you have ever been – Infinity".
- An initiation in infinitude was the gift Dickinson offered to the few she admitted to intimacy. Sewall's assumption that men changed her has dated. It was she who operated on others for the brief periods they could bear it. She created certain people in the same way as she created her poems, many enclosed in letters as extensions of them. She half-found, half-invented a receptive reader in Sue to whom she sent 276 poems – more than twice the number sent to anyone else. In a similar way she created a deathless love for the person whom she called "Master."

Emily Dickinson



- Biographers have sought meaning behind the bearded and married “Master”, who appears in three mysterious letters from spring 1858 to the summer of 1861. Evidence remains thin, and biographers have taken their pick from an array of unlikely candidates.
- These letters race from one literary drama to another, including Jane Eyre’s encounter with her married “Master” and deathless love in Emily Brontë – in 1858 Dickinson had acquired a copy of an 1857 edition of Wuthering Heights – and it seems likely that the “Master” letters were as much exercises in composition as letters addressing a particular person.
- The most popular candidate originated in hearsay that the love of Dickinson’s life had been the married Rev Charles Wadsworth, whom she met during a visit to Philadelphia in 1855 and then, supposedly, renounced. (Lugubrious, beardless, with stringy locks, Wadsworth sent Miss “Dickenson” a dull pastoral letter about her sufferings – without a clue what those sufferings were.)

Emily Dickinson



*Where ships of purple gently toss
On seas of daffodil,
Fantastic sailors mingle,
And then — the wharf is still.*

In her late 40s and 50s, a new drama began when she turned to fierce Judge Lord of the Massachusetts supreme court. But though she thought of his touch at night, interrupted her writing to anticipate his weekly letter and played up to the comic character he assigned as “Emily Jumbo,” she would not marry him. Epileptics in her time were not supposed to marry, and some American states passed laws against it. Drafts of her love letters have survived: they are witty, confident, open (not coded like letters to “Master”), and within the limits of her unrelenting control over her existence, abandoned – hardly the way 19th-century ladies were supposed to behave.

Dickinson found love, spiritual quickening and immortality, all on her own terms. One model remained: Wuthering Heights. Yet unlike the -anarchic lovers of the Heights, Dickinson was a moral being, a product of upright New England: she grasped the potential destructiveness – to her sanity, for a start – of the “Bomb” in her bosom; and she witnessed the eruption of the feud – during her lifetime, another secret within the family. She refers repeatedly to a secret “Existence” – primarily her poetry – that must be seen in terms of New England individualism, the Emersonian ethos of self-reliance that in its fullest bloom eludes label. It’s more awkward and less lovable than English eccentricity – dangerous, in fact, as Dickinson owned when she said, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –.”

Emily Dickinson

You'll know it as you know tis noon-by Glory

As you do by the sun-by Glory



- It was with these words that the 19th century New England poet Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886) described a transformative experience of Self Realisation. Her change of consciousness could be likened to a conversion, but not the kind of conversion her Calvinist community were hoping for.
- Despite relentless pressure from her family and fellow townspeople, she stubbornly resisted organised Christianity while having a continuous mystical communion with what she liked to call 'Eternity', a concept beyond the associations of the word 'God'. Hers was a conversion to the world of the spirit by Nature Herself, action through the faculty of intuition. This is a notion she held in common with the Transcendentalists, in these of her poems:

By intuition, Mighty Things

Assert themselves – and not by terms –

"I"m Midnight" – need the Midnight say –

"I"m Sunrise" – Need the Majesty?

Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –

His lisp – is lightning – and the sun –

His Conversation– with Sea –

"How shall you know"?

Consult your eye!

Emily Dickinson



- “Transcendentalism was a philosophic and literary movement that flourished in New England as a reaction against 18th century rationalism, the sceptical philosophy of Locke, and the confining religious orthodoxy of New England Calvinism. Its beliefs were idealistic, mystical, eclectic and individualistic, shaped by the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, as well as the teaching of Confucious, the Sufis, the writers of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhists and Swedenburg. Transcendentalism had at its fundamental base a monism holding to the unity of the world and God and the immanence of God in the world.
- Because of this indwelling of divinity, everything in the world is a microcosm containing within itself all the laws and the meaning of existence. Likewise the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and latently contains all that the world contains. Man may fulfil his divine potentialities either through rapt mystical state, in which the divine is infused into the human, or through coming into contact with the truth, beauty, and goodness embodied in nature and originating in the Over-Soul

Emily Dickinson



- Thus occurs the correspondence between the tangible world and the human mind, and the identity of moral and physical laws. Through belief in the divine authority of the soul's intuitions and impulses, based on the identification of the individual soul with God, there developed the doctrine of self reliance and individualism, the disregard of external authority, tradition, and logical demonstration, and the absolute optimism of the movement".
- The most important literary expression of transcendentalism is considered to lie in Thoreau's "Walden" and in the works of Emerson. Others in the movement were A.M. Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott. German transcendentalism (Goethe, Richter, Novalis) influenced Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth. The greatness of these figures and the universal respect for their ideas has led to the use of the word 'transcendental' by business organisations masquerading as spiritual paths.

Emily Dickinson



- Much present in the poetry of Dickinson is the idea of the proximity of the Eternal in the here and now. Like other visionaries she was not content to await Judgement Day for a glimpse of Paradise but, like William Blake, knew that it was visible if the doors of perception could be cleansed.

Not “Revelation”— ‘tis— that waits, But our unfurnished eyes—

- ‘Eternity’ recalls Blake’s “eternity” glimpsed ‘in a grain of sand’ and has the oceanic quality described by mystics of all ages.

*Exultation is the going
of an inland soul to the sea
Past houses – past headlands—
Into deep Eternity.*

Emily Dickinson



- The ‘lover’ in many of her poems is Eternity itself. There is even a sense of the individual ‘I’ consciousness dissolving into Divinity, the oceanic consciousness:

*‘Tis little I – could care for pearls
Who own the ample sea –
Of Periods of seas –
Unvisited of Shores Themselves the Verge of Seas to be
Eternity – is Those–*

- In keeping with the tradition of the mystics is the idea of transcending mental processes:

*Let not Revelation
By theses be detained*

Emily Dickinson



- Akin to the writings of the mystics and great religious teachers is the call to self knowledge:

*Explore thyself
Therein thyself
shall find*

The “Undiscovered Continent” No Settler had the Mind

- Once realised this Self is known to be limitless:

*The Brain – is wider than the sky–
For put them side by side –
The once the other will contain With ease –
and You – beside –*

- Compare this to Muso Soseki’s Zen Buddhist perspective:

*For a person of Zen
No limits
The blue sky must
feel ashamed to be so small.*

Emily Dickinson



- The sense of paradox so fundamental to Zen is also ever present in Dickinson. The similarities to Dickinson's insights despite the fact that she had direct access to Eastern wisdom is testimony to the universality of the experience of self realisation.
- To the Indian Yogi self realisation is the gift of an inner energy known as Kundalini which manifests itself as a cool wind. During yogic states the heat of sympathetic nervous activity subsides and the parasympathetic nervous system comes into play relaxing and refreshing the body, with a breeze or fountain like energy, so that the attention can transcend physical needs and merge with the Atman or Self.
- According to Dickinson the moments of At-One-ment with Nature/Self happen "when the wind is within" (Thoreau wrote of " ecstasies begotten of the breezes") For the yogi or realised soul the sensation of this cool energy becomes his means of being sensitive to manifestations of Truth–Beauty–Love (Keats' tripartite Unity). Dickinson stated that she had no other means to discriminate these qualities in art

Emily Dickinson



“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know of.”

and in one of her poems:

*“Your breath has time to straighten,
Your brain to bubble cool
Deals one
imperial thunder bolt
that scalps your
naked soul”*

Interestingly the yogi also experiences concentration of the Kundalini, or cool breeze at the top of the head, during union with the Self (the unity behind Truth—Beauty—Love). The yogic experience of self realisation is a simultaneous reception of grace, poured down from celestial realms, and an upsurging, or erupting, of energy from the unconscious depths within. Dickinson referred to herself as a “volcano at home”. “On my volcano grows the grass”; there is a sense of a vast underlying power of unconscious creativity waiting to be brought forth

Emily Dickinson



- A final point of comparison with the yogis of the East is Dickinson's spiritual detachment from a world that was unready to share her vision. She spent the second half of her life as a virtual hermit, just as Indian yogis and the Desert Fathers of early Christianity (some of whom went to the extreme of meditating for years on the tops of columns) isolated themselves from the materialism they saw in human society, in order to achieve yoga.
- “I dwell in possibility”, she wrote. She had little time for the gossips and church people of 19th century Amherst with its restrictive Calvinist beliefs. “The soul selects her own society and then shuts the door”, perhaps things would have been different if she had been born 100 years later. Not everyone was turned away, however, the local children were especially welcome since they were relatively uncalcified by dogma and selfishness. She wrote of her “Columnar Self”, referring to her strength in standing alone, connected perhaps to other columns by celestial vaults in the great palace of the Self.

Emily Dickinson



Technique

Her genius lay in expressing the Infinite in terms of close-by things, “her basket”, she said, “held firmaments”. “Extreme psychological states could be expressed if the right words were hunted down, yet a poem is not method. For those on friendly terms with cherubim, riffling through dictionaries is not always necessary.” Unusual word pairings which jolt the mind, are her trade mark “confiscated gods”. She made use of legal terms (she was born into a legal family) and scientific or theological vocabulary, “Enchantment’s Perihelion”.

Legacy

To the self addressed question: Wherefore sing...since nobody hears?”, Dickinson affirms; “My business is to sing”.

After her death Dickinson’s sister Lavinia discovered hundreds of poems in a single locked box. In all she left us over 1, 700 poems. In them she envisaged worlds far beyond the apparent simplicity of her daily life.

Emily Dickinson



Virtually unknown in her lifetime(only ten of her poems were published) Dickinson now ranks with Walt Whitman as one of the two great visionary names in 19th century American poetry, and has had an enormous impact on modern poetry generally. She was ahead of her time both in terms of form and idea Jane Langdon Writes in her selection of Dickinson's poems:"

In the end it is perhaps the sense of vastness that carries her poems so powerfully forward into this or any other century, the immensities that spread outward from her short quatrains, the firmaments that fill her basket, her acquaintance with eternity."

Emily Dickinson



Emily Dickinson did not leave any poetics or treatise to explain her life's work, so we can come to her poetry with minds and hearts open, and unearth whatever we need to find. Her oeuvre is a large one and most of her work was done in secret – she didn't share most of what she wrote. Ten or so poems were published in her lifetime, mostly without her consent. She often included poems with letters but, after her death, the poet's sister Vinnie was surprised to find almost eighteen hundred individual poems in Dickinson's bedroom, some of them bound into booklets by the poet. Here are some of the best

1. "I taste a liquor never brewed"
feathers"
2. "Success is counted sweetest"
3. "Wild nights - Wild nights!"
Death"
4. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"
Gun"
5. "If I can't Nobody! Who are you?"
6. "'Hope' is the thing with
feathers"
7. "A Bird, came down the Walk"
8. "Because I could not stop for
Death"
9. "My Life had stood - a Loaded
Gun"
10. "Tell all the truth but tell it
slant"

