"Pianos in the Woods":
Emily Dickinson's Imaginative Vision

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After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun.
If the rejected things, the things denied,
Slid over the western cataract, yet one,
One only, one thing that was firm, even
No greater than a cricket's horn, no more
Than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a speech
Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,
One thing remaining, infallible, would be
Enough. Ah! douce campagna of that thing!
Ah! douce campagna, honey in the heart,
Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,
Out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed:
The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,
The aureole above the humming house ...

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.

Wallace Stevens, "The Well Dressed Man
With a Beard"
Finding is the first Act
The second, loss,
Third, Expedition for
The "Golden Fleece"

Fourth, no Discovery--
Fifth, no Crew--
Finally, no Golden Fleece--
Jason--sham--too.

In this emphatically skeptical poem, Emily Dickinson squarely connects with one of the central issues of romantic and modern literature: the individual's alienation from the world in which he lives. This ontological separation had its origins in modern thought in the philosophy of Descartes and Hobbes, and was invested with scientific certainty by the revelation of Newtonian physics. Materialism gave way to mechanism, and the universe was reduced to substance and motion; it was emptied of purpose and value, and was thus seen as separate from the vital world of private experience. Inheritors of this world-view, the Romantics turned to the unifying force of the imagination. Through the power of imaginative vision, they sought to heal the breach between subject and object, and find a meaningful connection between man and the universe.

By engaging the external world imaginatively, the Romantics hoped to discover the "One Life" that they believed was in everything. The natural world was thought to be symbolic, the "signature" of a unified spiritual reality. In his essay, "Nature," Emerson observes: "Every natural fact
is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture." Similarly, in a note to the "Intimations Ode," Wordsworth writes, "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something apart from, but inherent, in my own immaterial nature." It was precisely this correspondence that Dickinson eschewed; she rejected any notions of a transcendental order, and embraced the world as she learned to see it—a world moving and changing in the flux of time and experience. The universe was chaotic, and any theories of unity were merely egoistic projections of the human disposition to order experience. The "loss" of the "second act" is the loss of certitude that arises from the rejection of a homocentric, unified vision of the universe; and the "Expedition for/The 'Golden Fleece'" is a quest for a poetry of perception that describes the mind engaging "things as they are." It is, in Robert Langbaum's words, "a poetry dealing with the object and the eye on the object." Viewed in this way, Emily Dickinson is a poet who shares some of the same concerns that form the discourse of much of Wallace Stevens' poetry. I will attempt to explore these ideas as they occur in Dickinson's poetry, using Stevens as an aide to understanding them.
One of the targets of Dickinson's skepticism is religious dogmatism—a "narcotic" that seeks to "still the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul"(501). Religion is an "eclipse" interposing between herself and reality. Describing her family to Thomas Higginson, she writes, "They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their 'Father'"(L.261).

This ironic jab at the anthropomorphistic projection of "Father" that allows us to conceptualize the unknown, is developed in her poetry:

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

(1551)

Using the common metaphor of "God's Right Hand," and extending it to its logical and absurd extreme, the poet rejects both the rigid beliefs of religion and the stale patterns of language that "eclipse" reality.

Dickinson recognizes that as our awareness of disorder increases and becomes more threatening, our "Blessed rage for order"(CP, 130) gets stronger. But she persistently rejects the "avarice of the mind"(1682) that seeks to tame the "Giants" of the unknown by "containing" in its logic:

Brief struggle for capacity
The power to contain

Is always as the contents
But give a Giant room
And you will lodge a Giant
And not a smaller man

(1286)

Dickinson was not unaware of the conflict that this posture raises for the poet who must conceptualize to express herself,
and who must "contain Giants" in a system of patterned language. This paradox is dramatized in one of her most awe-some poems:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading--treading--till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through--

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum--
Kept beating--beating--till I thought
My Mind was going numb--

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space--began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here--

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down--
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing--then--

Funerals are a source of comfort for mourners who must come to terms with death. Through this ritual we attempt to mitigate the force of one of the greatest unknowns we confront. But for the poet, the funeral is an imposition of reason, a false idea of order that does not comfort, but rather, is the source of unbearable pain. The central metaphor of the "Funeral" becomes analogous to "Reason" when we realize (in the last stanza) what "Sense" has finally broken through. The function of funerals is to impose order on a terrifying experience, just as "reason" must
construct a coherent picture of reality from a bombardment of random sensations.

But although funerals, and analogously, reason are a source of pain as they attempt to resist the pressures of reality, an escape from an ordering consciousness to a state of mere "Being" is just as frightening. Matter is no longer ordered in space. Substance is spatialized, and space is localized so "Space--began to toll,/As all the Heavens were a Bell." This conflation creates an alarming sense of vertigo. The absence of an ordering consciousness not only causes a loss of balance; it results in the end of "knowing" and of language. When all order breaks down, and "knowing" ends, the syntactical order of language disintegrates. The location of the last word, "then," is ambiguous; it can be placed either at the end of the preceding phrase or at the beginning of one that might follow, but without the familiar patterns of language we are unable to be sure.

The ambiguous placement of "then" suggests that to have "Finished knowing" is both a beginning and an end. The terror of mere "Being" forces us to recognize that we cannot know the world immediately; instead, we begin to realize that the world we see is mediated through an ordering mind. There is a dichotomy, not a unity, of mind and matter. To live without acknowledging the externality of the natural world--its randomness, and its indifferent, and often unknowable qualities--is to live with "Funerals in our Brains." But to escape from an ordering consciousness is to experience
an unbearable sense of vertigo. Dickinson accepts this dichotomy, and explores the complex interaction between the mind and the external world in a poetry of perception.

Any meaningful engagement of reality can only occur after we discard all false beliefs and the stale language that perpetuates them. Ironically, when we are able to penetrate the "eclipse" of dogma, we find there is no light; there is only an existential darkness. Dickinson's hero does not seek an "ignis fatuus"(1551) to provide light in a dark world; she accepts this darkness, and copes by adjusting her "Vision to the Dark":

\[
\text{We grow accustomed to the Dark--}
\text{When Light is put away--}
\text{As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp}
\text{To witness her Goodbye--}

\text{A Moment--We uncertain step}
\text{For newness of the night--}
\text{Then--fit our Vision to the Dark--}
\text{And meet the Road--erect--}
\]

(419)

Although we face initial uncertainties when we put away the "Light," we emerge with a fresh vision of the world, and are able to "meet the Road," to confront "things as they are," as Stevens puts it in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Stevens uses a similar metaphor to express the need to adopt a skeptical response to the false lights that interpose between ourselves and reality:

\[
\text{Throw away the light's, the definitions,}
\text{And say of what you see in the dark}

\text{That it is this or that,}
\text{But do not use the rotted names.}
\]

(CP, 183)
Like Stevens' "Man with the Blue Guitar," Dickinson's hero cannot know "things exactly as they are"; that is "a tune beyond us" (CP, 165). Even when we adjust our sight to "Midnight," we do not see perfectly--"Life steps almost straight."

The human condition of not knowing "things exactly as they are" does not detract from the wonder of "things as they are"--a universe that is beautiful without our projections of passion and purpose. This "Wonder" is a condition to be savored: "Wonder--is not precisely Knowing/
And not precisely Knowing not--/A beautiful but bleak condition/He has not lived who has not felt--"(1331). This "beautiful but bleak condition" describes the poet who gazes on the northern lights:

Of Bronze--and Blaze--
The North--Tonight--
So adequate--it forms--
So preconcerted with itself--
So distant--to alarms--
An unconcern so sovereign
To Universe, or me--
Infests my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty--
Till I take vaster attitudes--
And strut upon my stem--
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
For Arrogance of them--

(290)

The speaker confronts the natural world in one of its most awesome and sublime moments. Like Stevens' autumn aurora ("The Auroras of Autumn"), it is a perfect symbol for the ambiguity and evanescence of reality. It exists apart from us: it is "sovereign" and "unconcerned." But in contemplating it, we connect with it. The "Taints of Majesty" that "infect" the speaker are a result of her discovery of the profound
beauty in "things as they are." These lights are not a symbol; they just are. Stevens describes the phenomenon in similar terms:

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,  
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.  
An innocence of the earth and no false sign

Or symbol of malice.  

(CP, 418)

In a moment of transport, Dickinson's observer feels a sense of harmony with the blazing sky, and is able to transcend the mundane world of "Men and Oxygen." But this transcendence is transitory, a moment in the mind; she cannot "strut upon her stem" too long:

My Splendors, are Menagerie--
But their Competeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I, am long ago,
An Island in dishonored Grass--
Whom none but Beetles--know.

(290)

The poet is conscious that her mortality separates her from the universe, but that through her art, she will achieve a form of immortality. The splendors of her art, though not negligible, are small compared to the splendors of the sky. "Menagerie" is the perfect word to describe this: it represents the exotic creatures of the world, caged in the formal structure of poetry. She receives her inspiration from the evanescent colors of the sky, holds them together in her mind, and gives them form in her verse. Her poetry—like the scholar's single candle in "Auroras of Autumn"—pales in the "Artic effulgence," but its "Competeless Show"
is not extinguished:

The scholar of one candle sees
An Artic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is.

(CP, 417)

Although Dickinson's skeptical posture drove her to examine "things as they are," contemporary philosophy caused her to question her ability to apprehend reality in its naked state. Summarizing the Critique of Pure Reason, Bertrand Russell writes:

According to Kant, the outer world causes only the matter of sensation, but our own mental apparatus orders this matter in space and time, and supplies the concepts by means of which we understand experience. Things in themselves, which are the causes of our sensations, are unknowable; they are not in space and time, they are not substances, nor can they be described by any of those other general concepts which Kant calls "categories." Space and time are subjective, they are part of our apparatus of perception.

In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson writes, "While my thought is undressed--I can make the distinctions, but when I put them in the Gown--they look alike, and numb" (L.261). This statement reveals a major poetic dilemma, and it implies something about the nature of perception that informs much of Dickinson's poetry. Taken on a literal level, she is expressing the frustrations of the poet who recognizes the problems of faithfully rendering the beauty of the phenomenal world, whose salient qualities are flux and evanescence, in a system of patterned language: "You cannot fold a Flood--/And put it in a drawer" (530). But implicit in this statement is a paradox that directs our attention to the problems of perception and poetic expression.
that Dickinson explores in her poetry: since we can neither see nor express a naked thought, we dress it in metaphor, and in doing so, impose our subjective process of cognition on the objective world, refracting its contours through our own minds.

In one poem, Dickinson squarely confronts the process of perception and its epistemological implications:

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object's loss--
Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to its Price--
The Object Absolute--is nought--
Perception sets it fair
And then Upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far--

(1071)

The poet concedes that we see the world through a subjective lens; thus, "the Object Absolute--is nought." The speaker is aware that the nature of perception is such that it prevents us from accurately mapping the contours of an objective landscape; but rather than lamenting her inability to apprehend the "Object Absolute," she celebrates "gain": her ability to be, in Stevens' words, the "single artificer of the world/In which she sings" (CP, 129).

The poet does not choose sides in the epistemological debate of whether mind or matter is prior and creative; instead she recognizes that it is the complexity of their interaction that forms the content of experience, and is the source of art. The phenomenal world alone is devoid of beauty without a human perceiver--it is "nought." But neither is the poem an egoistic rampage: it is through the
act of perception that we realize how unknowable the external world is, "situated so far" from our own minds.

Perception and language are the forces that enable the poet to invigorate our sense of reality, cutting through the "eclipse" of the absolute labels we assign to the "objects" of our experience. These rigid qualities that resist change are represented in the poem as "absolute" and "perfectness." With linguistic precision, Dickinson defrocks two mighty superlatives. The "Object Absolute" is complete, whole, and not dependent on anything else (including the mind). "Absolute" bestows upon the "Object" a title with implicit, unlimited powers—an absolute ruler. But "nought" is another absolute—absolutely nothing. The juxtaposition creates a linguistic type of destructive interference. The "Object" remains "Absolute," but it is emptied of any meaning, and its royal posture appears silly and pompous.

In the second instance, it is essential to notice Dickinson's idiosyncratic noun-form of the adjective "perfect." "Perfection" is the standard usage for something that contains the quality of "perfect." But "perfection" would be too solid to be upbraided, even by perception. "Upbraid Perfection" rings futile—the pest of perception nudging up against a mountain. But "a Perfectness" is a bit more pliant: the introduction of the indefinite article and the forced suffix, "ness," which sounds like a loose appendage because it cannot merge phonetically with its root, detracts from its solidity. This quality of being more "perfectish" than
"perfect" makes it a more plausible object to be upbraided; it also carries a snide undertone so that, even before it is chided, it shares a pejorative affinity with the "Object Absolute"—a cold and sterile quality of the just-too-perfect. Like the "Wonder" that "is not precisely Knowing/And not precisely knowing not," our inability to apprehend reality directly is not a cause for despair; it is a charm:

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld--
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled--

But peers beyond her mask--
And wishes--and denies--
Lest Interview--annul a want
That Image--satisfies--

(421)

That all knowledge is inferential is a justification rather than an impediment for poetry. With all transcendental notions called into question, and our ability to know absolutely made suspect, the moment of specific experience becomes the only verity; in a moment of "vivid transparence" (as Stevens describes it, CP, 380), the imagination engages the "Object Absolute" and "sets it fair." This places primary importance on the imagination for providing this ideal union of the imagination and reality, but we recognize (with the speaker in 1071) that this harmony is transitory, an "idea of order," rather than an existential one.

The primacy of the imagination is dramatized in the poem:

Who goes to dine must take his Feast
Or find the Banquet mean--
The Table is not laid without
Till it is laid within.
For Pattern is the Mind bestowed
That imitating her
Our most ignoble Services
Exhibit worthier.

(1223)

The human mind is obsessed with pattern. The natural world holds a random assortment of food for our feast; the imagination engages this disorder, perceives the possibilities of pattern, and gives them aesthetic form. This tremendous discovery of "the possible" gives art a noble purpose: "The gleam of an heroic Act/Such strange illumination/The Possible's slow fuse is lit/By the Imagination" (1687). The imagination is a source of pleasure—"arranging, deepening, and enchanting" (CP, 130) a disordered universe—as well as the seat of our power over nature. It is our "Vision" in the "dark"; or, to use Stevens' phrase, it "helps us face the dumbfounding abyss/Between us and the object" (CP, 437).

Dickinson explores the relationship between "us and the object" in another poem:

The Outer—from the Inner
Derives its Magnitude—
'Tis Duke, or Dwarf, according
As is Central Mood—

The fine—unvarying Axis
That regulates the Wheel—
Though Spokes—spin—more conspicuous
And fling a dust—the while.

(451)

The speaker calls our attention to the distance between subject and object: the wheel of experience is in perpetual motion, spinning, and indifferently flinging dust
on the observing intelligence. But the central metaphor also illustrates the complexity of experience, in which the human agent is both a part of, and separate from his scene. Although the "Inner" may enhance the "Outer," it does not function without reference to it: it depends on reality.

The imagination does not master reality by projecting itself into it, but by abstracting from the "Outer" its fictional possibilities--the "Duke" and "Dwarf." These fictions are transitory, varying "As is the Central Mood." Like the poet's "Menagerie" in 290, these images illustrate the possibilities as well as the limitations of the imagination; they are exotic, but they are also real. Stevens articulates this balance between the imagination and reality in his essay, "Three Academic Pieces":

The imagination is able to manipulate nature as by creating three legs and five arms but it is not able to create a totally new nature as, for instance, a new element with creatures indigenous thereto, their costumes and cuisines. Any discussion of level is a discussion of balance as well. Thus, a false exaggeration is a disturbing of the balance between reality and the imagination.

"Manipulation" is roughly equivalent to aesthetic perception. In the same essay, Stevens writes that in poetry, "we are not dealing with identity. Both in nature and in metaphor identity is the vanishing-point of resemblance." In her poetry of perception, Dickinson does not attempt to create a picture of the world, but rather, how we patch it together in our minds. This process is explored in "Delight is as
the Flight"

Delight is as the flight--
Or in the Ratio of it,
As the Schools would say--
The Rainbow's way--
A Skein
Flung colored, after Rain,
Would suit as bright,
Except that flight
Were Aliment--

"If it would last"
I asked the East,
When that Bent Stripe
Struck up my childish
Firmament--
And I, for glee,
Took Rainbows, as the common way,
And empty skies
The Eccentricity--

And so with Lives--
And so with Butterflies--
Seen magic--through the fright
That they will cheat the sight--
And Dower latitudes far on--
Some sudden morn--
Our portion--in the fashion--
Done--

(258)

The separation of the "Inner" from the "Outer" world begins in the first stanza which opens with the simile: "Delight is as the flight." Readers who are familiar with Dickinson's "naming" poems will recognize an almost familiar syntactical form. "'Heaven'--is what I cannot reach!"(239) and "'Hope' is the thing with feathers--"(254) are typical opening lines of poems in which the speaker gives a personalized definition for an abstract term. She uses a simple and powerful construction in which an abstract noun that is already, by definition, colored by subjective values, is reduced to the poet's own terms. This reduction, however,
is not to be found in the definition itself, which often contains an undefined object that suggests ambiguity ("the thing with feathers"), but in the copula, "is." This syntax implies a direct and logical connection between subject and predicate, while the content reminds us of the subjective nature of knowledge. The intrusion of the comparative adverb, "as," in "Delight is as the flight" is felt as a deliberate hesitation of language and must have a measure of significance.

Rewritten in Dickinson's "naming form," "Delight is the flight" would seem to make sense in the context of the first stanza. Delight is not in the colors of the rainbow ("the Skein/Flung colored, after Rain"), but rather, in its evanescence ("the flight"). Indeed, if this were the sentiment to be expressed, the hypothetical revision would seem to make poetic sense; its form would make a closer, mimetic gesture toward "flight" than does the actual first line. What she does say, however, and what she means are organically linked through form. It might be paraphrased as, "Delight is neither in the colors of the rainbow, nor in its flight; but rather, in the ratio of its appearance to its disappearance."

The form of her statement is actually that which we commonly use to express proportion in algebra: \( w \) is to \( x \) as \( y \) is to \( z \). Considered this way, delight is something that is exclusively human: it is not merely the delight in nature's colors or its evanescence; delight is in the patterns that we perceive that may have their seeds in the external world, but have in
themselves, an existence apart from it.

There is a direct analogy made between the rainbow and butterflies, and human beings; they are linked by their shared quality of impermanence that is the source of an elusive magic:

And so with Lives--
And so with Butterflies--
Seen--magic--through the fright
That they will cheat the sight--
And Dower latitudes far on--
Some sudden morn--
Our portion--in the fashion--
Done--

The analogy is strengthened by attributing human qualities to unthinking things which, lacking thought, malice, or benevolence, can neither "cheat" nor "dower." There is, however, a subtle irony working to undercut the analogy between subject and object. This is achieved through the rhythmic modulation that moves the stanza to the final word,"done." The first four lines communicate a spacious, almost "magical" feeling: the repetition of the first two lines, the word "magic" that is followed by a phrase that achieves its fullest expansion on the word "Dower" before taking off into "latitudes far on." In both its form and content, the passage expounds on the word "magic." But when we share in nature's evanescence, the result is less fanciful; magic is a whimsical euphemism for death. The syntax breaks down, and the stanza drops off "suddenly," and then expires in three short, last breaths, on the final note of "done."
One critic writes of Stevens' poetry, that "One necessity of individual being, then, is mortality, and another is subjectivity, for the mind is a specific of time as well as a specific of existence or point of identity from which all the world radiates." "Delight is as the flight" addresses these two aspects of being. The speaker recognizes that "the magic" of life is predicated on our ability to conceive of our own mortality. (Dickinson writes elsewhere, "That it will never come again/Is what makes life so sweet" (1741).) It is this conceiving self that is also the "point of identity" from which "all the world radiates"; her subjectivity is essential to the "magic": "Seen magic--through the fright/That they will cheat the sight." The magic is dependent on the quality of the perceiving mind that filters visual sensations through a complex of emotions and then recognizes them as "magic"--a "magic" that exists within the boundaries of the mind.

Again, Doggett's remarks are particularly apt for this poem which dramatizes that "the moment of consciousness, the unfolding event we call experience, including what we think and what we feel as well as what we see, is an infinitely complex realization of self and world." With all the poem's emphasis on the self, it is crucial to note that this is a moment of specific experience. The first and last stanzas lack a situational matrix,
and, as I have shown, describe not the world, but the way the mind perceives it. But the second stanza achieves the balance between self and world by giving the poem an experiential referent. The second stanza shifts suddenly into the past tense, and a youthful version of the speaker addresses not rainbows, but a specific "Bent Stripe."

This locates the observations made in the first and last stanzas more specifically in time. The present tense becomes more than the language of an abstract discourse; it represents a specific time in the life of the speaker whose remarks are more clearly understood when we recognize that she is older and that her experience has changed the way she perceives the natural world. We can recognize the contrast between the spontaneous "glee" that the rainbows evoked for the child and the somber, reflective mood of the last stanza. The reader is able to observe this specific experience as it unfolds in the speaker's consciousness. We trace a progression from a seemingly abstract statement in the first stanza, to a specific observation in the second, and finally, to a moment of heightened consciousness when the speaker becomes more fully aware of the complex relationship between herself and the world.

Dickinson achieved her mastery over the natural world through her mastery of language. Perhaps the greatest distinction we can make between her and her
contemporaries lies in her attitude toward language. Unlike Emerson, for whom words were "signs of facts,"\(^{10}\) Dickinson found in language the facts themselves. Words were the source of the poet's power, allowing her to create new meaning. For her, like Stevens, "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words."\(^{11}\)

Johnson's subject index in the *Complete Poems* lists sixteen poems in which Dickinson writes specifically about words. She states her claim for the hidden powers of language over our lives:

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Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped freight
Of a delivered syllable
'Twould crumble with the weight.
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(1409)

She expresses a similar sentiment in a letter to Joseph Lyman:

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We used to think, Joseph, when I was
an unsifted girl and you so scholarly
that words were cheap and weak.
Now I don't know of anything so mighty.
There are [those] to which I lift my
hat when I see them sitting prince-like
among their peers on the page.
Sometimes I write one, and look at
his outlings till he glows as no
sapphire."\(^{12}\)
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As R. Sewall nicely observes, Dickinson achieves in her poetry "the intensification, or concentration, of meaning in words until they glowed 'as no sapphire.'"\(^{13}\) This "concentration of meaning" in words until they seem to create their own meaning characterizes most of Dickinson's
"naming poems." I will examine one:

"Heaven"--is what I cannot reach!  
The Apple on the Tree--  
Provided it do hopeless--hang--  
That--"heaven" is--to Me!

The Color, on the Cruising Cloud--  
The interdicted Land--  
Behind the Hill--the House behind--  
There--Paradise--is found!

Her teasing Purples--Afternoons--  
The credulous--decoy--  
Enamored of the Conjuror--  
That spurned us--Yesterday!

(239)

As in the other poems I've discussed, Dickinson makes the "gap" between subject and object distinct: the objects of the natural world are always one step beyond our "reach." The distance between the poet and the "conjuror" provides the tension in the poem; there is a "war," to use Stevens' apt phrase, "between the mind and sky" (CP, 407), and the struggle for victory is the dynamic of the poem. This "war" begins in the first line. The syntax of the sentence implies the poet's mastery; "heaven" is defined in her own terms. But the content of the line informs us that "heaven" lies beyond the poet's words. The poem unfolds, an extended analogy, ironically linking a variety of natural objects (that are characterized by their elusiveness vis-à-vis the poet) to the speaker's term, "heaven." The abundance of these objects reveals another tension: the poet uses the singular form of the verb "to be," contrasting the human ability and disposition to perceive the resemblances in an assortment of objects, and order
them in symbolic language, with nature's randomness. The process of naming is that of perceiving resemblance, and it is through this process that the poet creates new meaning, ultimately mastering the natural world. Although the mind perceives harmony, the tension that the poet maintains between the tenor and vehicle of her extended metaphor,\textsuperscript{14} reminds us of the extent of artifice, and consequently, of the fictional nature of the harmony between subject and object. Without denying the externality of the natural world--its randomness and elusiveness--she celebrates the imagination's capacity to create order from chaos.

In his article, "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," W.K. Wimsatt describes a characteristic type of romantic metaphor which is very different from the type I have just described. He writes that romantic metaphor "makes less use of the central overt statements of similitude" in which "both tenor and vehicle are wrought in a parallel process."\textsuperscript{15} This is indicative of the difference between Dickinson's imaginative vision and that of the Romantics. While the Romantics sought an ideal union between man and the universe, Dickinson insisted on the distinction, and in doing so, she placed the locus of artistic creation in the mind of the artist: a mind that was dependent on nature, but that in the end, transcended it by creating its fictions out of the uniquely
human gift of language.

"The Golden Fleece," the imaginative transformation of experience into artifice, was Dickinson's vision. To achieve this, she found it necessary to somehow live closer to experience. This forced her to call into question the dogmatic beliefs that interposed between her and reality. The belief in either a theistic or transcendental order was to her a projection of the human need to order onto a universe that was forever fleeing, enamoring her with its evanescent beauty. Her skepticism resulted in a loss of certitude; it meant groping for a while in the "dark," searching for a new way to see. This is the position of "loss" from which her "expedition" begins.

A corollary to this "religious" skepticism was the doubt raised by philosophers of our ability to apprehend the "object absolute." Our inability to participate in a state of mere being where "knowing" ends and "bells begin to toll" forced her to turn to the one thing she could believe in: the moment of perception, when the imagination engages the world outside of it, "setting its objects fair," liberating them from a state of disorder by perceiving patterns and creating language. This is what the poet does; and much of Dickinson's poetry is about writing poetry.

Dickinson loved a riddle, especially a tough one:
The Riddle we can guess
We speedily despise--
Not anything is stale so long
As yesterday's surprise--

(1222)

For her readers, Dickinson bequeathed the ultimate riddle: 1775 poems—moments of experience that often seem linked only by their ambiguities and contradictions. In reading her poetry we participate in our own "Expedition," trying to patch together a coherent pattern for her "competeless show."
Notes

1 The Poems of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960). References to this edition appear in the text with the poem's number placed in parentheses.


5 Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from Earliest Times to the Present Day (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p.707. There is no evidence (to my knowledge) to suggest that Dickinson had read the Critique of Pure Reason, but the poem that I examine next (1071) clearly demonstrates some familiarity with the epistemological questions it raises. I quote Russell's concise summary merely to illustrate the connection.


7 Ibid., p.72.

8 Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore:

9 Ibid., p.6.

10 See Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *Nature*, chapter IV.


Bibliography


