Thirst and Starvation in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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"EMILY DICKINSON I did like very much and do still," wrote her friend Joseph Lyman to his fiancée in 1858. "But she is rather morbid and unnatural."[1] Lyman, who lived with the Dickinsons during the winter of 1846, had formed a close platonic attachment with Emily at that time and continued to use her as his touchstone of a superior woman throughout his life. In singling out unnatural morbidity as the single defect in an otherwise flawless character, he was referring, I think, not merely to Dickinson's early and lifelong fascination with illness, with death, and with dying. He was suggesting also the absence of inner vitality, the emotional numbness which was the subject of many of her greatest poems and the enabling wound to her artistic bow. Her poetry was an attempt to keep herself alive by memorializing a range of feeling and experience threatened with extinction from without and within. The relationship between the "Death blow" aimed by God, nature, and human beings, and the "funeral" in the brain was one to which Dickinson addressed her sharpest creative intuitions. She explored this relationship with particular subtlety and sophistication through images of thirst and starvation.

Dickinson uses thirst and starvation metaphorically to represent a broad spectrum of needs: spiritual, emotional, and intellectual. The characteristic response of her deprived persona is to strive for self-sufficiency, for intellectual mastery, and for esthetic sublimation of the debilitating emotions occasioned by neglect or persecution. To this end, her starving-thirsting "I" cultivates a strategy of renunciation, a "Banquet of Abstemiousness," which is an attempt to deny the needs of the social self. However, the Dickinsonian persona cannot depend on the religious, social, and moral context which made the economy of compensation work for such Puritan poets as Anne Bradstreet and such transcendental philosophers as Emerson and Thoreau. Thus her persona also responds to deprivation imposed by

[1] *The Lyman Letters*, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Amherst, Mass., 1965), p. 65.

God, by nature, and by humans, involuntarily. The strategy of shrinking vital needs to the point where crumbs and drops suffice, if pushed to the limit, results in the extinction of appetite. What Dickinson portrays, in her most psychologically complex poems, is that loss of life-hunger causes the death of the self.

The "Death blow" in Dickinson's poetry is typically inflicted on a powerless, guiltless self. Her poetry incorporates a wide range of references to such deaths as crucifixion, drowning, hanging, suffocation, freezing, premature burial, shooting, stabbing, and guillotinage. Perhaps because of her deep religiosity, she excludes images of sudden, overt self-destruction from her poetic universe. She does not eliminate images of lingering, covert self-destruction, "Murder by degrees." The most thoroughly worked out of these images is the "I" whose response to privation imposed from without is abstinence to the very point of death, if not beyond. Starving and thirsting occur because of the parsimony of a stingy god; the inaccessibility of nature; and the failure of human love. Or starving and thirsting occur without identifiable cause. Starving and thirsting can also be the unconscious response of a self conditioned by deprivation. Striving desperately for self-reliance, the Dickinsonian persona finds itself unable to respond when

> Victory comes late—
> And is held low to freezing lips—
> Too rapt with frost
> To take it—
> How sweet it would have tasted—
> Just a Drop—
> Was God so economical?
> His Table's spread too high for Us—
> Unless We dine on tiptoe—
> Crumbs—fit such little mouths—
> Cherries—suit Robins—
> The Eagle's Golden Breakfast strangles—Them—
> God keep His Oath to Sparrows—
> Who of little Love—know how to starve—(690)[2]

[2] All references to Dickinson's poems are taken from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1955). The parenthetical numbers refer to the chronological numbering in this work. Citations from Dickinson's letters are taken from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958). The letter "L" precedes such citations to differentiate letters from poems.

Thus death from thirst or starvation can represent extinction from without and from within, as in the poem just cited. It is the interface of murder and suicide.

While the backgrounds of Puritanism and transcendentalism have been fully explored in discussions of Dickinsonian renunciation, the importance of gender has not been sufficiently recognized. Throughout the nineteenth century, the compensatory ethic of "woman's sphere" incorporated the tensions of self-sacrifice and self-affirmation which Dickinson characterized as "The Battle fought between the Soul / And No Man."[3] The imagery of eating and drinking is especially appropriate to this theme, drawn as it is from woman's sphere. If the persona of her food and drink poems appears devoid of gender and history, her letters make it clear that the strategy of shrinking vital needs to the point where crumbs and drops must suffice developed as a defense against the sexual politics of Victorian America, especially as represented by the Dickinson family. Like her poems, her letters show that this defense was not fully adequate to the monumental task of negating the cultural and psychological tensions it was designed to contain. In 1859, writing to her friend Elizabeth Holland, whose husband was about to return from a lecture tour promoting his best-selling books, she commented, "Am told that fasting gives to food marvellous Aroma, but by birth a Bachelor, disavow Cuisine" (L204). Emily Dickinson was not by birth a bachelor, as even the most superficial reading of her poems and letters indicates.

As John Cody has remarked in a psychoanalytic discussion of oral imagery in *After Great Pain,* Dickinson's letters reveal her preoccupation with oral nourishment.[4] She refers to food and drink in approxi-

[3] Three recent works defining nineteenth-century American attitudes toward women are Nancy R. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977); and Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1976).

[4] (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). Cody believes that Dickinson suffered a total mental collapse just before the onset of her great creative period 1858–1862, and that this breakdown was due, in no small measure, to the inadequacies of Emily Norcross Dickinson as a mother during the poet's childhood. Cody sees in Dickinson the characteristics of the emotionally starved child, and has found her oral imagery especially compelling. He writes, "Her insatiable love needs and their frustration saturate the poetry and the letters, and one finds her forever deriving new images of emotional want and fulfillment from the basic metaphor of food and drink," p. 39. Unlike Cody, I believe that Dickinson's gradual withdrawal from the social world was primarily a political response to the extreme sex segregation of mid-century Victorian America, and that the psychodynamics of the Dickinson household represented cultural, rather than personal, disease.

mately three hundred letters, a ratio of almost one in three. Humans, animals, literary, historical and Biblical figures hunger, feed, drink, thirst, starve. Uninterested in housework, she took to cooking easily and naturally. In 1845, at the age of fourteen, she explained to her friend Abiah Root, "You asked me if I was attending school now. I am not. Mother thinks me not able to confine myself to school this term. She had rather I would exercise, and I can assure you I get plenty of that article by staying at home. I am going to learn to make bread to-morrow. So you may imagine me with my sleeves rolled up, mixing flour, milk, salaratus, etc., with a deal of grace" (L8). Fine cooking became her forte. Her father, so she told T. W. Higginson "*very* dreamily" in 1870, would have no bread but hers, "& people must have puddings" (L342a).

Emily Dickinson's letters tell another story as well. Her descriptions of herself stress her smallness, her frailty, her thinness. Especially during her teens and early twenties, the figure of the starved, stunted child, unable or unwilling to take on the plumpness of true womanhood, is essential to her self-characterization. She uses smallness to disguise and to suppress appetites Victorian America was attempting to refine out of "Woman's Sphere": especially anger and aggressive sexuality. In "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," Ann Douglas describes the ruses resorted to by popular women writers during the 1840's and fifties, to obscure their effective competition with men.[5] Fearful of rendering themselves unfeminine in their own eyes and in the eyes of society, they insisted on their own passivity, helplessness, and weakness, while functioning effectively and aggressively in the literary market place. Hawthorne, writing to his publisher in 1855, protested, "America is now given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash." Grace Greenwood, a member of the flowery sisterhood enraging Hawthorne, defined "true feminine genius" as "ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood." She concluded, "A true woman shrinks instinctively from greatness."[6]

[5] *American Quarterly*, XXIII (Spring, 1971), 3–24. Elaine Showalter's analysis of "feminine" literature in England, represented by such writers as the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot, whom Dickinson especially admired, advances the same sort of argument for the conflict between the vocation of the artist and the vocation of the true woman. See *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, N.J., 1977).

[6] The citations are from "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote."

The ethic of abstinence Dickinson came to employ grew out of cultural tensions she shared with the women of her generation. A paradigmatic letter of the early 1850's shows her withdrawing from confrontation with her father and brother by invoking the protection of smallness. Letter 45, to Austin, begins with an excited observation on the female usurpation of male prerogatives. At a time when Edward Dickinson was comparing Austin's letters home from Harvard Law School to Shakespeare's, and threatening to publish his correspondence because of its literary merit, his sister was replying,

> I have just finished reading your letter which was brought in since church. *Mr.* Pierce [the postmaster] was not out today, the wife of this same man took upon her *his* duties, and brought the letter *herself* since we came in from church. I like it grandly—very—because it is so long, and also it's *so* funny—we have all been laughing till the old house rung again at your delineations of men, women, and things. I feel quite like retiring, in presence of one so grand, and casting my small lot among small birds, and fishes—you say you dont comprehend me, you want a simpler style. *Gratitude* indeed for all my fine philosophy! I strove to be exalted thinking I might reach *you* and while I pant and struggle and climb the nearest cloud, you walk out very leisurely in your slippers from Empyrean, and without the *slightest* notice request me to get down! As *simple* as you please, the *simplest* sort of simple—I'll be a little ninny—a little pussy catty, a little Red Riding Hood, I'll wear a Bee in my Bonnet, and a Rose bud in my hair, and what remains to do you shall be told hereafter.

Two years later, when Austin's letters are still the focus of family praise (there isn't a single description of family approval of *her* writing), she asks him, "Are you getting on well with 'the work,' and have you engaged the Harpers? Shall bring in a bill for my Lead Pencils, 17, in number, disbursed at times to you, as soon as the publishment" (L110). No Freudian eye is necessary to see that the humor, like her insistence on her smallness, disguises jealousy.

The autobiographical sources of Dickinson's starving-thirsting persona, and the culturally sanctioned, defensive denial of appetite, are evident by the time she had begun organizing her poetry into packets in 1858. The following cycle of deprivation, self-deprivation, and attempted self-sustenance emerges from her poems. The chronology is psychological and internal, and bears no significant relation to the probable order of composition. It does, however, bear a strong rela-

tionship to Dickinson's life experience, as my discussion of her letters has suggested.[7]

The Dickinsonian speaker, contrary to all expectations, has been deprived of ordinary "food." Her hunger absorbs all of her attention, and the value of food is inordinately inflated. When she finally approaches a full table, she finds it strongly distasteful. She watches others eat, unable to understand their savage appetites, while she makes do with her "crumbs." She is surprised and awed to discover that she has lost her appetite when invited to partake of the "feast," and concludes that while there may be something profoundly distastful about the feast, there may also be something wrong with her. She expends a good deal of psychic energy insisting that anyone in her situation would make the same observations, but one of the satisfactions denied her is a steady sense that others are really responding as she does. Appetite which she identifies with both the desire to live and the imagination, always dies as soon as it is gratified, and satiation, even disgust, then sets in. The sensuous apprehension of reality depends, in her view, on distance and denial. Prudence and happiness consist in knowing that the feast is available but untouched. The highest gratification is the ecstasy of the realization that, at last, the feast is available, but wisdom consists in not eating, since eating will destroy the self. This, then, is the "Banquet of Abstemiousness."

In all, slightly more than 10 percent of Dickinson's poems employ images of food and drink, but because these poems are among her best, incorporating as they do the basic tensions of her experience, the qualitative impression exceeds numerical weight.[8] The chief interest

[7] For an intelligent justification of the virtues of viewing Dickinson's lyrics as "one long poem," see Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago, 1975), pp. xi–xxv. He writes, "I choose to view Dickinson's lyrics as one long poem, to the same extent that Whitman's lyrics constitute a *Leaves of Grass*. It is a key tenet of romanticism, put forth by Emerson in the past century and by Yeats in ours, that a writer's work, in its totality, should constitute a biography of his consciousness. To treat such a 'life' critically, categories and subcategories may be necessary; but they had best be willing to destroy themselves by merging finally into a totality."

[8] David Luisi came to similar conclusions in "Some Aspects of Emily Dickinson's Food and Liquor Poems," *English Studies*, LI (Feb., 1971), 32–40. He established that "Among the poems of Emily Dickinson are an impressive number which deal directly or indirectly with food and liquor. Of the more than two hundred poems which employ this kind of imagery, approximately three quarters of them do so in a subordinate fashion. The remaining fifty or more poems, however, provide a sufficient number in which this imagery supplies the basic metaphors for her thoughts." Luisi concentrates primarily on the "spare richness" of this imagery, seeing in it the conjunction of both the Puritan and Epicurean strains of Dickinson's sensibility.

of these poems is the way in which they document the changes in the self wrought by deprivation; that is, the internalization of deprivation by the poetic persona. Thus the term "compensation," which critics such as Whicher, Gelpi, Sherwood, and Wilbur have employed, while of historical value, is misleading as a characterization of Dickinson's meaning, since it fails to take account of the vulnerability and threatened deterioration of the self.[9] "Compensation" implies, at least by omission, that the suffering soul remains constant while waiting for its ultimate reward. The Dickinsonian persona concentrates its energies on redefining the normal meaning of starvation and repletion, and in the process attempts to redefine and recreate the self.

Excluded from the feast, excluded from raw experience and especially from human love, the loss of appetite and the romantic aggrandizement of appetite confront her. Obsessively, she watches bees drink from flowers, cattle being led to pasture by boys, apples being harvested, birds dining off worms, dogs sucking the marrow out of bones, while she is starving silently and helplessly. Why is she starving? Why did God give a loaf to every bird, while she has only a crumb, why do gnats get more to "eat" than she does? These are the fixed parameters of her world, and she doesn't always question their genesis. She clings to the vestiges of hunger, to the gnawing pain within, as a vital sign. Hunger seems, *in extremis,* her only link with the living.

It becomes clear that, whatever interest Dickinson had in daily life in baking for her father and in winning prizes for her rye and Indian bread, in her poetry eating and drinking are symbolic, highly stylized acts. Solitary rituals concern her, not the actual or immediate sensuous properties of any particular kind of food or drink. The specific foods her poems record, cocoa, berries, dates, bread, are few. On the other hand, she describes "feeding" off of improbable substances such as her lexicon, hermetically sealed minds, and logarithms, observing

[9] George Frisbie Whicher, *This Was a Poet* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1960); Albert Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); William R. Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance* (New York, 1968). The most extended study of Dickinsonian compensation is Richard Wilbur's essay, " 'Sumptuous Destitution' " in *Emily Dickinson: Three Views* (Amherst, Mass., 1960). Wilbur discusses the poet's "repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty; that to renounce is to possess the more; that 'the Banquet of abstemiousness/Defaces that of wine.' " When he goes on to observe, "The frustration of appetite awakens or abets desire, and that the effect of intense desiring is to render any finite satisfaction disappointing," he anticipates some of my concerns.

wryly, " 'Twas a dry Wine" (728). She capitalizes on the capacity of liquors to alter consciousness and to arouse sacramental associations. Spices, stimulating and insubstantial, have a special fascination for her.

Dickinson's food and drink images are not closely observed, detailed representations of actual sense properties. Food has no taste, no texture, no color, no shape. What it has is size, which she manipulates to great effect to symbolize status; and odor, which can be perceived from afar. The perception of these qualities does not depend on ingestion. The poet is concerned with the acquiring of food and the retention of it, and with its psychosocial effects on the communicant, but implicitly her poems announce that she never gets close enough to it to describe its immediate sensuous properties. The very lack of elaboration of her imagery illustrates one form of abstemiousness, of the poet's distancing of the world.[10]

Let us examine more closely the concept of the Banquet of Abstemiousness, as set forth in a poem written about 1877, in the highly compressed, antinarrative manner of Dickinson's late style:

> Who never wanted—maddest Joy
> Remains to him unknown—
> The Banquet of Abstemiousness
> Defaces that of Wine—
>
> Within it's reach, though yet ungrasped
> Desire's perfect Goal—
> No nearer—lest the Actual—
> Should disenthrall thy soul—(1430)

The setting is formal: a banquet for one. "Abstemiousness" serves as food and drink, and is superior, in its ability to confer pleasure, to wine. "Wine" represents anything rare and fine, implying the esthetic connoisseurship the poem endorses. The shocking negative abstraction, "Abstemiousness," coming after a sequence which pre-

[10] This perspective enables her to describe any abstraction as food or drink. Success is a nectar, best understood by dying soldiers who will never actually taste it (67). "Fame is a fickle food," scorned by crows, coveted by men (1659). "The Consciousness of Thee" is a "single Crumb" (815). "Impossibility" is like wine, "Possibility/Is flavorless," "Enchantment" is an "ingredient" (838). "Victory comes late—/And is held low to freezing lips—" (690). "Surprise is like a thrilling—pungent—/Upon a tasteless meat" (1306). Thoughts are "signal esoteric sips/Of the communion Wine" (1452). "Grief is a Gourmand" (793). "Hope is a subtle Glutton" (1547): "His is the Halcyon Table—/That never seats but One—/And whatsoever is consumed/The same amount remain."

pares for the introduction of some actual food or drink, startles the reader into attending closely to what follows. The image itself brings the banquet tantalizingly near, then whisks it away. The images in the second stanza, where Desire, another abstraction, grasps like a hand, again brings the material world up close, yet distances it. The second stanza indicates that the banquet of life is to remain untouched, except by the imagination. This notion that anticipation is always superior to fulfillment, that fantasy is the only fulfillment, is the most limited aspect of Dickinson's ethic and one which her poetry as a whole, in its concern for preserving and gratifying the urgent thirsts and hungers of the instinctual self, refuses to accept.[11]

Having established a psychological law in this representative poem, which in effect posits an absolute cleavage between reality and imagination, Dickinson predictably violates the tenets of this rigid dualism in much of her poetry. The need for closure which her philosophy of renunciation attempts to satisfy is but one aspect of the unstable flow of experience. If one compares this paradigmatic poem to earlier formulations of the theme of renunciation, it is evident that this is a weak poetic statement. In the famous "Success," for example, written in 1859, and subsequently extorted from the poet for publication by Helen Hunt Jackson, Dickinson poises perfectly between the extremes of morbid cynicism and naive idealization. In that poem, published anonymously and attributed by reviewers to Emerson, intellectual clarity is balanced against agonized defeat. The poet does not assert the superiority of defeat to victory, as is sometimes supposed.[12] Rather, she juxtaposes the perception of victory to the experience of defeat, making perception and experience interdependent antagonists. And while Dickinson writes a good many poems asserting the inviolability of the soul and the educative value of suffering, she also recognizes that clarity of vision is not a necessary or even a probable consequence of exclusion:

[11] Other food and drink poems which affirm the central Dickinsonian paradox of possession through renunciation are "Who never lost, are unprepared" (73); "Water, is taught by thirst" (135); "To learn the Transport by the Pain" (167); "I taste a liquor never brewed" (214); "Exhilaration—is within" (383); "A Prison gets to be a friend" (652); "Deprived of other Banquet" (773); "God gave a Loaf to every Bird" (791); "The Luxury to apprehend" (815); "To disappear enhances" (1209); "Art thou the thing I wanted" (1282); "I took one Draught of Life" (1725).

[12] Wilbur, p. 40, asserts that "the more one ponders this poem the likelier it grows that Emily Dickinson is arguing the superiority of defeat to victory, of frustration to satisfaction, and of anguished comprehension to mere possession."

Undue Significance a starving man attaches
To Food—
Far off—He sighs—and therefore—Hopeless—
And therefore—good—

Partaken—it relieves—indeed—
But proves us
That Spices fly
In the Receipt—It was the Distance—
Was Savory—(439)

Both "Who never wanted—maddest Joy" and "Undue Significance" do, in fact, reflect some loss of the life-hunger which is the inevitable consequence of the atrophy of the social self. Despite Dickinson's intermittent adherence to a religion of art, this religion must feed on the vitality of ordinary human appetitiveness. Thus her philosophy of renunciation receives its strongest poetic embodiment when the starving-thirsting "I" is still capable of imagining what freedom and amplitude might mean. Such a poem as the following, for example, invokes self-restraint only in response to an inflexible economics of scarcity:

God gave a Loaf to every Bird—
But just a Crumb—to Me—
I dare not eat it—tho' I starve—
My poignant luxury—

To own it—touch it—
Prove the feat—that made the Pellet mine—
Too happy—for my Sparrow's chance—
For Ampler Coveting—

It might be Famine—all around—
I could not miss an Ear—
Such Plenty smiles upon my Board—
My Garner shows so fair—

I wonder how the Rich—may feel—
An Indiaman—An Earl—
I deem that I—with but a Crumb—
Am Sovreign of them all—(791)

Dickinson's fullest poetic statement of the relationship between external deprivation and internal inhibition is poem 579, "I had been hungry, all the Years." It was written in 1862, before her own seclu-

sion had hardened into an unalterable mannerism, at a time when her hopes for love and literary recognition were still very much alive. The narrative structure provided by the journey allows her to incorporate the entire cycle of deprivation, self-deprivation, and self-sustenance. The poem records the death of the social self. After years of unsatisfied hunger, the speaker's "Noon" has come "to dine." The wonderful ambiguity of the phrase perfectly identifies her own effort with the cooperation of external circumstance. The moment she has been enlarging through anticipation, her moment of fulfillment, is before her. She had imagined this chance often enough, as she stared through windows into opulent houses where people were "eating" as a matter of course, knowing that she could not even hope for such abundant happiness. Trembling with eagerness, she draws the table close to her and merely touches the strange wine. Having anticipated some ultimate communion, her reaction startles her:

> I did not know the ample Bread—
> 'Twas so unlike the Crumb
> The Birds and I, had often shared
> In Nature's—Dining Room—
>
> The Plenty hurt me—'Twas so new—
> Myself felt ill–and odd—
> As Berry—of a Mountain Bush—
> Transplanted—to the Road—
>
> Nor was I hungry—so I found
> That Hunger—was a way
> Of Persons outside Windows—
> The Entering—takes away—

In the past she has successfully shared "crumbs" with birds, and it is possible to read the poem as contrasting this overwhelming "ample Bread" with her accustomed spare, yet life-sustaining ration. But the poem goes further. Since the crumbs always left her hungry and frustrated, exiled from human society and reduced to the company of birds, the really significant event is the loss of appetite she experiences when the opportunity to merge intellectual anticipation and sensuous realization occurs. The self has been so completely defined by its starvation that food threatens to destroy it. The speaker cannot, in the end, conceive of the relaxation of restrictions as enabling growth and change. Thus she resists food in order to survive. A berry

transplanted from a mountain bush to the public highway dies. Eating crumbs in nature's dining room is better than not eating at all. But the loss in human relatedness is awesome.

The paralyzing consequences of prolonged emotional starvation are subjected to further scrutiny in poem 612, where the low comedy analogy with the gnat controls the poet's despair. Here, the attempt to renounce natural hunger is thwarted, as is the ability to gratify instinctual urges.

> It would have starved a Gnat—
> To live so small as I—
> And yet I was a living Child—
> With Food's necessity
>
> Upon me—like a Claw—
> I could no more remove
> Than I could coax a Leech away—
> Or make a Dragon—move—

This hunger surprises her, as the single unavoidable confirmation that she is alive. Her hunger symbolizes her vitality, but it also serves to emphasize her powerlessness. The gnat has "The privilege to fly / And seek a Dinner" for himself: "How mightier He—than I—". She is totally dependent on mysterious forces beyond her control to supply her wants and enlarge her existence. The gnat can be forthrightly aggressive and acquisitive: she can only wait. Furthermore, the gnat can kill himself on the imprisoning window pane, ensuring the cessation of all consciousness. As a human being, she recognizes that, even after contriving her own death, she might have to "begin—again." In context, this suggestion of life after death is not comforting. The life that would begin again, she implies, would be a life so small, so constricted by want, that she would continue to envy gnats.

In her poetry as in her life, Emily Dickinson pursued a strategy of containing hungers, in response to externally imposed deprivation, beneath which the pressures of a volcanic self continually threatened to erupt. This strategy, as she recognized when her poetic vision was most comprehensive, became an active agent in the death of the psychosocial self. Like the paralyzed speaker in "It would have starved a Gnat," she was unable either to extinguish such inevitable hungers as the desire for literary recognition and for sexual gratification, or

to renounce them. As late as 1881, she jotted down the poignant lines, "Let me not thirst with this Hock at my Lip / nor beg, with Domains in my Pocket—" (1772). Thomas Johnson describes them as "the rough draft of lines on a scrap of paper in an envelope containing messages which in their final draft presumably were sent to Judge Lord." Striving to accept celibate obscurity, she wrote each of nearly eighteen hundred poems as though it were her last, and as though she were encapsulating a final vision. However, just as she could not accept the death of love and fame for herself, or the postponement of such rewards until eternity, neither could she wish such a fate on others. The desire to nurse the dying back to life with "food and drink" is everywhere recorded in her poems and letters.

What is not recorded is a single instance where this effort is unquestionably rewarded. Ranging from occasional verse to Samuel Bowles ("Would you like summer? Taste of ours. / Spices? Buy here! / Ill! We have berries, for the parching!") to private, confessional threnodies ("I am ashamed—I hide— / What right have I— to be a Bride— / So late a Dowerless Girl—"), these efforts are at best inconclusive.[13] Poem 773, "Deprived of other Banquet, / I entertained Myself—", is representative of these unconsummated transactions, with its "Berry" reserved for charity. The offering is made to an unrepresented other whose response is unknown. Even the manic exuberance of "Doubt Me! My Dim Companion!" results in a conditional phrasing when Dickinson attempts to describe herself as food offered to her lover (275).

None of these efforts yields a single poem in which the poet's summer is unmistakably tasted. Despite the fact that, from 1875–1882 Emily Dickinson was nursing her stroke-ridden mother with obvious fidelity; despite her Indian summer romance with the widowed Judge Lord; despite the lowering of gingerbread for children; despite the incessant exchanges of food and wine with the women of Amherst; none of these efforts yields a single poem where the offering of self as woman or as poet is accepted.

Inevitably, the starved self does not have the emotional or the practical resources to function effectively as a nurturer. The following poems, "A Dying Tiger—moaned for Drink—," and "I bring an unaccustomed wine," will serve as examples. The first is a brilliant

[13] Poems 691 and 473.

vision of the frustration of generous nurturing impulses in a dream-like setting charged with anxious sexuality. The second attempts to revivify moribund humanity, and fails. Verbal echoes of a distant religious tradition of charity cannot be reattached to present human sympathy. In both poems, the imaginative distance between Emily Dickinson and her persona has collapsed. The hardness of response she describes, the legacy of conflict, is unquestionably hers.

> A Dying Tiger—moaned for Drink—
> I hunted all the Sand—
> I caught the Dripping of a Rock
> And bore it in my Hand—
>
> His Mighty Balls—in death were thick—
> But searching—I could see
> A Vision on the Retina
> Of Water—and of me—
>
> 'Twas not my blame—who sped too slow—
> 'Twas not his blame—who died
> While I was reaching him—
> But 'twas—the fact that He was dead—(566)

The tiger, a potent threatening masculine symbol, has been rendered harmless because he is dying. The speaker carries the life-giving water in her bare hands, and the very sparseness of the wasteland makes this an elemental meeting. There are no cups or glasses. She has to offer herself, her hand, in offering the "dripping" of the rock. She arrives too late, the tiger is dead by the time she has returned to him, yet he arouses vague feelings of guilt in her. His last sight was "Of Water—and of me—" and she is haunted by his unfulfilled longing. Tiger and speaker are leagues away from parlor niceties. The last stanza attempts, somewhat lamely, to shift the blame away from the tiger and the tardy nurse "who sped too slow" onto an impersonal universe: "the fact that He was dead." The hardness of response, here, is a denial of feeling, a this-has-nothing-to-do with me statement. Yet the guilt is there, despite the denial. If there were no guilt, there would be no poem.

Wine functions as a potential medicine in "I bring an unaccustomed wine," just as water was a medicine in the preceding poem, but again, the speaker is neither Jane Eyre ministering to a blinded Rochester, nor Florence Nightingale:

I bring an unaccustomed wine
To lips long parching
Next to mine,
And summon them to drink;

Crackling with fever, they Essay,
I turn my brimming eyes away,
And come next hour to look.

The hands still hug the tardy glass—
The lips I w'd have cooled, alas—
Are so superfluous Cold—

I w'd as soon attempt to warm
The bosoms where the frost has lain
Ages beneath the mould—

Some other thirsty there may be
To whom this w'd have pointed me
Had it remained to speak—

And so I always bear the cup
If, haply, mine may be the drop
Some pilgrim thirst to slake—

If, haply, any say to me
"Unto the little, unto me,"
When I at last awake. (132)

At the beginning of the poem two figures, nurse and patient, are dying of thirst. This thirst is a compound of physical need and lovelessness. Both people are unused to "wine," let alone an ample supply of water. The patient is feverish and physically ill, the nurse is nominally healthy. Each has been, in some measure, dehumanized by thirst. Devoid of "Circumstances— / And a name" (382), they are both merely "lips." As the poem progresses, the speaker loses the ability to sympathize. At first her eyes are brimming with tears, but she turns them away, and when she takes another look at the striving lips an hour later, the patient is dead. Her tears were futile water. By stanza four she is describing the dead patient as "this" and "it." Cloaked with cheerfulness, hers is the frozen bosom of the automaton do-gooder. She dies emotionally, while the patient dies physically. Ironically, "its" spirit may have survived, while hers has been denied the sense of useful relatedness.

What kind of regrets does this situation engender? The speaker is

eager once again to absolve herself of all responsibility for the death. She does this by the comparison between the just dead corpse and "The bosoms where the frost has lain / Ages beneath the mould." In addition, she emphasizes her willingness to help by asserting that, if only the just dead corpse had remained to speak, it could have directed her to someone else in need of her ministering. This attempt to profit from misfortune, to bring good out of evil, becomes morally obnoxious when she goes on to explain that she intends to use a whole series of patients to ensure the welfare of her soul. She always tries to help dying people because, perhaps, her good deeds will be rewarded after her own death. Notice, however, that all she is able to describe is bearing the cup, and that the image of the cup of sympathy refused is the one the poem leaves us with, along with the eyes and lips and hands that never connect.

Dickinson's food and drink imagery, then, describes a cycle of deprivation, self-deprivation, and attempted self-sustenance. Typically, her persona is starving, unaccountably and unjustly, in a world of plenty. This prolonged exclusion causes her appetite to shrivel so that when the external restriction is removed, she no longer desires "food." She discovers that the only way she can sustain her desire to live and the vitality of her imagination is to welcome the absence of food and drink, symbolic of the desires of the social self. Inverting the normal meaning of starvation and repletion, she insists that the ideal constructs of her imagination are more vitalizing than any outer wine. However, although both her ability to be nourished and to nourish others has been impaired, she never fully renounces the thirsts and hungers of the social self.

While it is perhaps unnecessary to explain why the near contemporary of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Poe should have attempted to create an invulnerable artistic persona out of the ashes of a vulnerable human identity, Emily Dickinson's strategy of self-deprivation is best understood as a specifically female response, conditioned by American Victorian definitions of true womanhood. More isolated during her years of creativity than any of her literary contemporaries, "Homeless at home," she nevertheless emerges as the spokeswoman for a whole generation of nineteenth-century women. Her recoil from the world, her attempt to live in a separate sphere, and her obsessive fascination with the sexual and social power she could never attain was theirs. In *Literary Women,* Ellen Moers iden-

tifies "that vexed question of access to experience, the worst limitation, it is always assumed, that society has imposed upon the woman writer." She hastens to add that "It was by reading, of course, that women writers acquired the remarkable quantity and quality of information about workaday realities that they brought to literature."[14] Dickinson was alert to the compensatory function of art, to satisfy the thirsts and hungers of a deprived persona; but she was ever more insightful into the changes in the self wrought by exclusion. Struggling against the extremes of naive idealization and deadening cynicism, she would have understood the point of Joseph Lyman's comment, "Emily Dickinson I did like very much and do still. But she is rather morbid and unnatural." Virtually all of her critics have disagreed with this assessment, preferring instead to cast her in the role of a detached clinician of death. The starving-thirsting "I" of Emily Dickinson's poetry expresses its bitterness toward God, toward nature, and toward human society through the language of withdrawal. This language controls the impulses to murder and to create. "Renunciation," she tells us, "is a piercing Virtue" (745).

[14] (Garden City, N.Y., 1976).