

The Tension of the *Metaxy* in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Of American poets taught regularly in secondary education, the two most ill-served, it seems to me, are Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson.¹ [1] Students are typically introduced to these poets through their most-anthologized poems, and the majority of these are chosen in part for their accessibility--not too undaunting conceptually, and technically fluid--but also for a sort of charmingness, albeit in both cases of a slightly dark and eccentric kind. The best-known and most-taught of their poems present the *personae* of these two quintessentially American poets as, respectively, a wise, avuncular, white-haired, cracker-barrel lover of New England country life and its rugged solitudes, and as the whimsical and ladylike recluse spinster, the belle of Amherst, prone to occasional morbidity but mostly concerned to express her delight in bees, flowers, sunsets, and assurances of Eternity. This image of Frost is not unsettled by acquaintance with his most-anthologized poems "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Mending Fences," "The Road Not Taken," and "Birches"; nor is this caricature of Emily Dickinson undermined by her poems "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed," "I Like to See It Lap the Miles," "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," "A Bird Came Down the Walk," "I Never Saw a Moor," nor even by "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" or "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" or "There's a Certain Slant of Light." But a truly broad and penetrating familiarity with the works of these two poets subverts fairly radically the benign portraits sketched above.

¹ [1] A third candidate might be e. e. cummings, a misrepresented and sadly underrated poet.

Frost and Dickinson both, in fact, are in the fullness of their work extremely difficult poets, and of unusual depth. Both are exceptional as poets of spiritual struggle, and are experts of the uncanny and inexplicable. Both radiate an anxious isolation; both are obsessed with death and tragedy; and both of them are, without question, intimates of agony. Frost, upon close examination, turns out as well to be surprisingly devious with a slight sadistic streak, and not infrequently nihilistic. And Dickinson, the focus of this essay, is revealed by her approximately 1,800 poems and poetic fragments to be, despite her unquestionable experiences of elation, joy, nature-sympathy and illuminative transcendence, more typically and generally a poet of doubt, loneliness, longing, inward struggle, alienation, dread, terror, and depression--a master, as Harold Bloom puts it, "of every negative affect."² [2] Also, contrary to her popular image, she is among the most cognitively demanding poets America has produced. And finally, as I will try to indicate, she is a brilliant poetic explicator of what it means to live in the anxious openness of what Voegelin calls the tension of the "In-Between,"² or *metaxy*—that is, in the unrestful, inescapable, and irresolvable tension of existence in between ignorance and knowledge, despair and hope, time and timelessness, world and transcendence.

Before exploring the way Dickinson's artistic corpus constitutes an unusually faithful, extended testimony to this metaxic condition of human existence, we might briefly consider why a more accurate understanding of the character of Dickinson's poetry and outlook, and, more important, an appreciation of her greatness as a poet, are not more common.

² [2] Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York , NY : Warner Books, Inc., 2002), 345.

First, there was the long delay in the initial coming to light of her achievement, due to her life of intense privacy, to the withholding of her poems (no more than ten of which were published during her lifetime),³ [3] and to their first being published—beginning in 1890, four years after her death—in small or incomplete editions, with the poems edited, punctuationally modified, and even linguistically altered, to suit conventional tastes. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the full scope of her accomplishment and her original versions became well known, and that she entered the mainstream teaching canon and anthologies. And only the last few decades have shown a careful critical devotion to repairing the changes inflicted by her early editors, to the compiling of folio and variora editions, and to making publicly available her work as she wrote and preserved it.

Second, there is her poetic originality. Although her forms and meters are often familiar or even commonplace--especially the hymnal stanza form that she employs so frequently in her work—her poetic voice is utterly unique, and, once encountered, is instantly recognizable in its peculiarities of diction, concision, and metaphoric invention. Harold Bloom, however prone to enthusiasms and hyperbole, does not overstate in remarking that "[l]iterary originality achieves scandalous dimensions in Dickinson . . . ⁴ [4]

Third, Emily Dickinson's literary originality, however impressive, is in service of an even greater gift: what Bloom calls her "cognitive originality." "Cognitive originality" is the

3 Marietta Messmer, "Dickinson's Critical Reception," in Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbühl, and Cristanne Miller, eds., *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 320n4.

4 [4] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 295.

capacity for, and the realized expression of, thinking that breaks new ground. It is the discovery or invention of new, previously unthought, interpretations and meanings, the forging of new imaginative and ideational connections. Of Dickinson's cognitive originality, it is nearly impossible to gain the measure. Again to quote the exuberant Bloom, with whom in this matter I once more agree:

Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other Western poet since Dante. . . . Dickinson rethought *everything* for herself . . . No commonplace survives her appropriation. . . . [Further], she can think more lucidly and feel more fully than any of her readers, and she is very aware of her superiority. . . . [Indeed, we] confront, at the height of her powers, the best mind to appear among Western poets in nearly four centuries5 [5]

Bloom is not alone in this assessment. Dickinson's most admired biographer, Richard B. Sewall, also asserted that her genius for metaphor was matched only by that of Shakespeare, and placed the power and depth of her writing on the level of the author of the *Book of Job*.⁶ [6] Why, one might ask, is this extraordinary appraisal not more widely known? One answer is that few people read beyond the anthologized poems; and for those who attempt to, it is often difficult to keep up with Dickinson's flashes of insight and audacities of expression. She is a poet, as Robert Weisbuch writes, "who *will not stop thinking*,[?] and who in fact frequently thinks harder and more deeply than we wish her to. Thus it is that, as Clark Griffith writes, in the popularizing

5 [5] Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 291, 305; *Genius*, 350 (emphasis added).

6 [6] Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2 vols.) (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974).

anthologies Dickinson's worst poetry is often "confounded with her best," her work persistently being misappreciated and "misread for the simple reason that her intelligence is slighted."⁷ [7]

And fourth, we must take into account that Dickinson was a woman. Most citizens in the republic of letters have simply not been prepared to accept that it is a woman who, at the height of her powers, confronts us with "the best mind . . . among Western poets" since Shakespeare.

Now let us point out right away that neither literary power nor intellectual brilliance are invariably employed in serving an accurate explication of the truths of existence. Both literary and cognitive originality may, alas, provide us only with stunningly detailed accounts of "second realities," to use the term for ideological fantasies that Voegelin borrows from Musil and von Doderer.⁸ [8] But in Emily Dickinson's case, intellectual, emotional, and imaginative power is indeed matched by a severe honesty and perspicacious openness to reality. Her poems consistently explore and articulate genuine truths about the human situation in the cosmos; about the intricacies of consciousness and the ongoing constitution of "self"; about the facts, surprises, and mysteries of the natural world; about the central importance and yet ultimate impotence of language; and about our human relationship to the mysterious divine ground. This

7 [7] Robert Weisbuch, "Prisming Dickinson; or, Gathering Paradise by Letting Go," in Grabher, Hagenbuchle, and Miller, eds., *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, 219 (emphasis added); Clark Griffith, *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 5.

8 [8] On "second realities," see, for example, Eric Voegelin, "The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era," in Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 16, 33-34; Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 36-38, 44, 49; and Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 237, 242-54.

being the case, it is not surprising to find in Dickinson's work a recurrent emphasis on the fact that human beings are, first and last, *passionate questioners and unsatisfiable yearners* for a certainty and fulfillment that remain unavailable to us in this lifetime. In this regard, her poetry repeatedly echoes Voegelin's analyses of consciousness and existence. For Dickinson, as for Voegelin, to be human is to *be* "the Question"—the questioning tension toward that divine ground of existence that is the origin, deepest identity, and ultimate concern of each of us—in the enacting of which, as long as we live, "there is no answer," finally, "other than the [comprehending] Mystery as it becomes luminous in the acts of questioning."⁹ [9] We might say that for both writers existence is essentially a desire, a longing—and Dickinson could well be described as "the poet of longing" *par excellence*. One critic has indeed described her complete *oeuvre* as "a dramatization of a philosophy of desire."¹⁰ [10] Taking Dickinson's desire, then, as *normative* desire, faithful to the truths of existence, let us examine, now, some of the evidence for Dickinson being a pre-eminent witness to the *metaxic*, or "in-between," structure of existence.

The essential experience of human existence, writes Voegelin, is that of the "in-between,"

9 [9] Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 17, *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 404. On human existence as "the Question," see 388-410.

10 [10] Robert Weisbuch, "Prisming Dickinson," 203. She has been accorded other catchy titles as well. D. S. Savage has described her as "supremely the poet of death," and Clark Griffith as "the poet of dread." See D. S. Savage, "Dickinson—Death: A Sequence of Poems," in Oscar Williams, ed., *Master Poems of the English Language* (New York, NY: Trident Press, 1966), 751; and Clark Griffith, *The Long Shadow*, one of whose chapter titles is "The Poet of Dread."

the *metaxy* of Plato, which is neither time nor eternity. . . . [And] let us recall [that in the human] experience of the tensions between the poles of time and eternity, neither does eternal being become an object in time, nor is temporal being transposed into eternity. We remain in the "in-between, ♦ in a temporal flow of experience in which eternity is nevertheless present.¹¹ [11]

[Human existence is thus] a disturbing movement in the In-Between of ignorance and knowledge, of time and timelessness, of imperfection and perfection, of hope and fulfillment, and ultimately of life and death.¹² [12]

To show up the parallel between this description and Emily Dickinson's poetic vision of existence, let us begin with some verses that indicate her rejection of an externalized, hypostatized divine being—her acknowledgement that we experience divine, or eternal, reality, as *immediately present in temporal reality and consciousness*, thus leaving us always in a state of longing for that divine completeness which is in fact more intimate to us than our own thoughts. She writes:

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

He joins me in my Ramble
Divides abode with me
No Friend have I that so persists
As this Eternity (F1690)¹³ [13]

11 [11] Eric Voegelin, "Eternal Being in Time, ♦ in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 6, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak, based upon the abbreviated version original trans. by Gerhart Niemeyer; ed. David Walsh (Columbia, MO : University of Missouri Press, 2002), 329.

12 [12] Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture, ♦ in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 176.

13 [13] R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 608-609. All quotations and numbering of Dickinson's poems are from this edition. Thus, in the number designation following each poem or section of a poem, the "F ♦ stands for " Franklin . ♦ Franklin restores Dickinson's

This notion of Eternity "dividing his abode❖ with Dickinson—being present, that is, as the divine partner who dwells with, and indeed co-constitutes, her self—is not an isolated trope in her work. Her sense of the unimaginably intimate ontological interpenetration of her finite human longing and the divine presence who establishes and draws forth that longing is concisely conveyed in the following short poem, which in its second stanza goes on to suggest how any intellectual analysis of the paradoxical intersection of time and timelessness must seem only an artificial linguistic container for the lived experience, the life-giving organic miracle, of existence in the *metaxy*:

He was my host ❖ he was my guest,
I never to this day
If I invited him could tell,
Or he invited me.

So infinite our intercourse
So intimate, indeed,
Analysis as capsule seemed
To keeper of the seed. (F1754)

More penetratingly still, from a poem in which the word "awe❖ in the first line denotes Jehovah, and in which the word "residence❖ refers both to the divine Beyond *and* to the human soul:

No man saw awe, nor to his house
Admitted he a man
Though by his awful residence
Has human nature been.
[❖] (F1342)

Even the metaphor of intersection is used by Dickinson , though in a typically weird imaging:

sometimes idiosyncratic spelling and her deliberately unusual and evocative punctuation, and I reproduce them here. When quotations do not include the first line of the poem, I will reference the poem, along with its page number, by its first line.

Of Paradise ' existence
 All we know
 Is the uncertain certainty ♡
 But it's vicinity, infer,
 By it's Bisecting Messenger ♡ (F1421)14 [14]

"Eternity, ♡ "Paradise, ♡ "Immortality, ♡ "Heaven, ♡ and "God ♡ are all terms that serve Dickinson as references to what Voegelin calls the "pole of timelessness ♡ experienced in metaxic existence. For both writers, we may identify, and separately name, this reality, though we never experience it as "separate ♡ or "objective ♡ being—and to uncritically imagine it after the manner of spatiotemporal objects is to immediately and destructively misconstrue it. We encounter "eternal being ♡ only through the paradox of our consciousness as an ontological "in-between ♡ co-constituted by temporal and eternal reality. Again and again in Dickinson 's poetry, we encounter her evocations of precisely this experiential paradox, and thus the de-hypostatization of the terms or symbols mentioned above. On the one hand, as "Immortality ♡ and "God ♡ are symbols for the divine Beyond, a dimension of timeless meaning transcending anything we can experience or know in consciousness, she makes clear in many poems that we can never truly claim to possess or know it from within our situation in the "In-Between ♡:

[♡]
 Immortality contented
 Were Anomaly ♡ (F984)

And:

[♡]
 If end I gained
 It ends beyond
 Indefinite disclosed ♡

[❖]

(F484)15 [15]

On the other hand, she avers:

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

[❖]

(F820)

And:

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

(F1344)16 [16]

Thus the immediacy of divine presence.

With the paradox of metaxic consciousness—the ontological simultaneity of the immediacy of divine presence in consciousness together with its nonpossessable, unknowable, radically transcendent character—being constant in Dickinson's awareness, it is not surprising that longing suffused with doubt is ever-present in her poetry. A glance at her biography shows that the seeds of this outlook were sown early. The time of her youth in Massachusetts was the time of the Second Great Awakening, and the Congregationalist community within which she received her religious formation, with its Calvinist theology, was swept by a series of revivals during the first twenty years of her life. But Dickinson before long responded with skepticism and aversion. When pressed, at age seventeen, she refused to become a professing Christian. She

15 [15] Franklin, ed., *Poems*, 222 (from "From Blank to Blank ❖❖"); 412 (from "Satisfaction ❖ is the Agent❖").

16 [16] Franklin, ed., *Poems*, 361; 517.

dismissed the doctrines of original sin, hell and damnation, and election. She became the only adult member of her family who remained aloof from church membership and never took communion.¹⁷ [17] Her poetry often reveals a smiling contempt for those who presume assurance of salvation and election, who embrace the mysteries of Christian faith as settled facts, and who take God as definitively revealed in Scripture and doctrine. Nevertheless, and crucially, hers was from early years and throughout her life a profoundly religious temperament. Her sensitivity for, and openness to, the mystery of divine presence dominated her life and work. She could not doubt her experienced participation in transcendence, and recognized the longing for deeper and ultimate communion with the divine ground of being as the central human orientation. Thus in her poetry we find her constantly relying, to express her religious insights and intimations, on the language of the only religious tradition she knew—the language of *covenant, heaven, immortality, paradise, seal, promise, ordinance, Jesus, Gethsemane, Eden, crucifixion, spirit, grace, and God*—but with a difference. She uses them to explore and explain her own open-eyed quest of what it means to live in the in-between of the tension toward the divine mystery, with all of its doubts, unanswerable questions, struggles for faith, and dark nights of the soul.

Richard Wilbur puts the matter of Dickinson's use of traditional Christian language elegantly:

At some point Emily Dickinson sent her whole Calvinist vocabulary into exile,
telling it not to come back until it would subserve her own sense of things. . . .
[I]n her poems those great words are not merely being themselves; they have been

17 [17] Jane Donahue Eberwein, "Emily Dickinson and the Calvinist Sacramental Tradition," in Judith Farr, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1996), 89-98; Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," in Farr, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 54-55.

adopted, for expressive purposes; they have been taken personally, and therefore redefined.¹⁸ [18]

To put this in Voegelin's language: Dickinson sought and found in her own consciousness those experiences, insights, and passions for which the great religious language might be used as evocative symbols, and, in using them as she did in her poems, *revitalized* them, making them transparent for her own spiritual experiences, while destabilizing their stale, commonplace usages within what was to her a decadent and unconvincing religious tradition.

We hear Dickinson's clear rejection of the so-called "Christianity" of her religious community in a number of poems. In one, it is scorned as childishly naïve:

I'm ceded I've stopped being Their's
The name they dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading too
[] (F353)

Another seems to link her own rejection to a broader decline of genuine Christian faith, in a tone reminiscent of Matthew Arnold, or even Nietzsche:

Those dying then,
Knew where they went
They went to God's Right Hand
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found
[] (F1581)¹⁹ [19]

¹⁸ [18] Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," 53.

¹⁹ [19] Franklin, ed., *Poems*, 159; 582.

Some poems on this subject are more expansive, rehearsing Dickinson's young efforts to believe; her subsequent feeling of betrayal; and her anger in the wake of her intellectual and emotional dismissal of the platitudinous God of comfortable assurances, the revealed God deemed so readily available to congregants at prayer.²⁰ [20] In "I meant to have but modest needs," the full drama of betrayal unfolds:

I meant to have but modest needs
Such as Content and Heaven
Within my income these could lie
And Life and I keep even

But since the last included both
It would suffice my Prayer
But just for one to stipulate
And Grace would grant the Pair

And so upon this wise I prayed
Great Spirit Give to me
A Heaven not so large as Your's,
But large enough for me

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face
The Cherubim withdrew
Grave Saints stole out to look at me
And showed their dimples too

I left the Place with all my might
I threw my Prayer away
The Quiet Ages picked it up
And Judgment twinkled too
That one so honest be extant
To take the Tale for true
That "Whatsoever Ye shall ask
Itself be given You

But I, grown shrewder scan the Skies

20 [20] Her letters describe a "false conversion" in her childhood; see Jane Donahue Eberwein, "Dickinson's Local, Global, and Cosmic Perspective," in Grabher, Hagenbuchle, and Miller, eds., *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, 33.

With a suspicious Air
As Children swindled for the first
All Swindlers be infer (F711)21 [21]

Noteworthy here are the facts that human "Life" *does* require, in its longing, a "Heaven" for its proper counterbalance, to "keep even"; that nothing of the sort is assured, no matter how intense and sincere the longing; that the smiles, dimples, and twinkling of, respectively, God, the saints, and an anthropomorphized Judgment Day, are not emblems of tender affection, but condescending amusement at the petitioner's naivete; and that the final emphasis is on a general suspicion of all religious presumption.

Again, however, that *suspicion* is not a *denial* of the divine mystery. It is the acknowledgement that the human condition, first and last, is that of being a *questioner*—a questioner who, as Voegelin puts it, would "deform his humanity" by uncritically accepting answers and "refusing to [continually] ask the questions" about fulfillment of our yearnings for communion with that divine mystery which, if we are existentially honest, we cannot ignore, however difficult it may be to hold onto religious faith regarding our ultimate relationship to it.²² [22] Thus Dickinson repeatedly, in her work, opens with an affirmation of the reality of the transcendent pole of the In-Between, and then proceeds to express the true human relationship to it, which is that of, in her own words, "uncertain certainty" (F1421) and "exquisite

21 [21] Franklin, ed., *Poems*, 317-18.

22 [22] Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 175.

Discontent (F696).23 [23] We find a concise example of this trajectory in "I know that He exists":

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

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

But should the play
Prove piercing earnest
Should the glee glaze
In Death's stiff stare

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest
Have crawled too far!

(F365)24 [24]

In this poem of encompassing possibilities, we traverse the entire human pathway running between Aquinas's assertion that it is in the natural capacity of reason to know that God is real (*ST I*, Q12, a12) to Macbeth's horrifying vision of life as a cruel and pointless joke. But, of course, the latter possibility is posed in the subjunctive. The final word, for Dickinson, is always recognition of the unknowable, of the fundamental human-divine *mysteries*, whose denial would, in Voegelin's words, "destroy the In-Between structure of man's humanity."25 [25]

23 [23] Franklin, ed., *Poems*, 310 (from "The Tint I cannot take is best"); 540 (from "Of Paradise' existence").

24 [24] Franklin, ed., *Poems*, 166.

25 [25] Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 404.

With the foregoing examples and analyses in mind, let us conclude by considering two poems in which Dickinson , to my mind, succeeds in encapsulating the essence of our human situation in between time and timelessness, doubt and faith, blank ignorance and existential finalities of knowledge.

The first begins with one of her constant themes: that honest insight into the human condition begins with meditation upon the fact of death, and that authentic living is, in the sense of Socrates and Plato, the "practice of dying.❖

The Admirations ❖ and Contempts ❖ of time ❖
Show justest ❖ through an Open Tomb ❖
The Dying ❖ as it were a Hight
Reorganizes Estimate
And what We saw not
We distinguish clear ❖
And mostly ❖ see not
What We saw before ❖
'Tis Compound Vision ❖
Light ❖ enabling Light ❖
The Finite ❖ furnished
With the Infinite ❖
Convex ❖ and Concave Witness ❖
Back ❖ toward Time ❖
And forward ❖
Toward the God of Him ❖ (F830)26 [26]

If this last poem takes as its principal theme the experience of the intersection of the temporal and the eternal in consciousness and creation, the next emphasizes our metaxic situation between total ignorance and absolute knowledge, our awareness that the human drama takes place within an encompassing Mystery, whose divine ground is at once our deepest identity and yet unimaginably and inexpressibly Beyond any human having or knowing:

This World is not conclusion.
 A Species stands beyond ❖
 Invisible, as Music ❖
 But positive, as Sound ❖
 It beckons, and it baffles ❖
 Philosophy, don't know ❖
 And through a Riddle, at the last ❖
 Sagacity, must go ❖
 To guess it, puzzles scholars ❖
 To gain it, Men have borne
 Contempt of Generations
 And Crucifixion, shown ❖
 Faith slips ❖ and laughs, and rallies ❖
 Blushes, if any see ❖
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence ❖
 And asks a Vane, the way ❖
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit ❖
 Strong Hallelujahs roll ❖
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul ❖ (F373)27 [27]

Here we find most of the key Dickinsonian themes already touched upon: affirmation of the reality of transcendent being; the impotencies of analytical intelligence in grasping the mystery of transcendent meanings and of the soul's ultimate destiny; recognition that the dynamic essence of human consciousness is a longing for fulfillment through communion with that mystery; the vagaries and difficulties of true religious faith versus the comedy of smug religiosity, a contrast wonderfully conveyed by her depictions of pulpit oratory and fervid congregational hymn-singing as narcotics employed to ward off awareness of the tension of *metaxic* existence. The last word, as usual with Dickinson, lies with "the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul,❖ the spiritual tension experienced—as by many another modernist looking to rediscover and rearticulate the metaxic truths of existence (and Dickinson is unquestionably a modernist)—principally in the

negative modalities of doubt, anxiety, and an alienated and solitary seeking. But few modern writers, and perhaps none in American letters, have more vividly and eloquently shown that, whatever the difficulties imposed by culture and by personal circumstances, the dignity and authenticity of existence lies precisely in fidelity to that seeking—or, in traditional language, to the search for God, before resting in Whom we can only remain in honest restlessness.
