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is to us, a theory which, if true, perhaps explains why the interpretations of Hamlet as "weak" are fairly modern.

Hamlet is an extraordinarily complex play. It has been made more complex than perhaps the text warrants by conflicting interpretations. Could we find an

interpretation that would bring many of the difficulties together, much of the bewilderment that the inexperienced student finds with the play might be obviated. It is hoped that the present interpretation may help to reconcile at least some of the conflicting theories.

Emily Dickinson—Mystic Poet?

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OF ALL the terms in the vocabulary of the average critical writer, perhaps "mystic" and "mysticism" are the most misused. Probably the ambiguity surrounding the usage is inevitably attendant upon the borrowing of a term from one field for use in another; however, to anyone with the slightest respect for the theological definitions of these words, the lack of discrimination with which they are employed in literary criticism is appalling. Poetry which evades the stereotyped classifications either by reason of its intellectual complexity or, on the other hand, by reason of its vague elusiveness is catalogued as "mystical"; its authors become thereby "mystics" or, at least, "mystic poets." The difficulties of understanding religious poetry and the scarcity of it in modern times are apparently reasons sufficient for placing such work under the title of "mystical" without further analysis.

It is therefore not at all surprising to discover that Emily Dickinson has been called a "mystic poet" by many of her critics. Too often, of course, Miss Dickinson's work has been subjected to those commentators who are intrigued with the romantic biography, charmed with the love poetry, but somewhat baffled by

the more significant poems, and thus the term "mystic" has been called into play. One can be almost certain that in enthusiastic biographies or sketches like that of Macgregor Jenkins' *Emily Dickinson, Friend and Neighbor*, there will be passages such as the following:

She was sensitized to life in a different key, the whole cadence of her being was quicker, she felt acutely things that were but dull intimations to most people. She responded to a wholly different set of stimuli and her reactions were individual reactions, not herd or clan reactions.²

This is preceded by a reference to the "mystic" as one of a series of epithets.³

It is rather disconcerting, however, to find a seriously intentioned biographer, George Frisbie Whicher, stating of the elusive Emily:

... Her delight was to test all conceivable points of view in turn. At any moment she was ready to acknowledge in herself the claims of rationalist and mystic, Pyrrhonist and Transcendentalist. A mood of faith that possessed her in the morning might become matter of delicate mockery in the afternoon, a piercing grief could be sublimated overnight into a rapture of spiritual purgation.⁴

² (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.), p. 145.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴ *This Was a Poet* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 305.

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Even to those who are able to reconcile the contradictions of the last statement, such an analysis presents difficulties.

However, the tendency of the more staid literary historians to carry on the tradition that Miss Dickinson's poetry is mystical in nature has been not only amazing in its universality but bewildering in its variety of forms. For example, Kreymborg tells us in his *History of American Poetry*:

If Emily Dickenson is comparable with Blake in her dynamic mysticism, with Emerson in her intoxicated independence, and with the Elizabethans in her daring range of imagery, she is also fascinating as the first and best of American women poets.⁵

Walter Fuller Taylor states in his *History of American Letters*: "Upon her [Emily Dickinson's] mysticism there rests unquestionably the stamp of Emerson."⁶

As a matter of American literary history, it is perhaps Emily Dickinson's sharp divergence from the paths of her predecessors which has puzzled these various critics. Even a superficial study of American poetry will convince one that Miss Dickinson, who was unable to accept Calvinism from her schooldays, would not be satisfied with the clichés of a moderate Unitarianism such as Bryant professed. Her poetry indicates a capability of logical consideration of fundamental truths, and her self-chosen isolation gave her opportunity for such thought. Her continued questionings of the accepted beliefs would have made her a stranger to those who received gratefully the moralistic generalities of Unitarianism.

On the other hand, the perspicacious Emily was not befogged by cloudy Emersonianism.

It is becoming customary for those who desire to prove the Emerson-Emily alliance to quote stanzas of similarity from one or the other of these poets and to defy identification of the author by all except the specialist.⁷ It should, of course, be unnecessary to point out that a similarity in sources of poetic style does not lead inevitably to an identity of philosophical system. An examination of the body of Miss Dickinson's nature poetry leaves one with no evidence that she was a pantheist; rather is there constant reference to God as the Creator and Ruler of creation in the orthodox Christian sense. To ally her independence of mind with the doctrine of "self-reliance" as preached by Emerson is only to show a lack of understanding of that specious teaching.

What is striking in the work of Emily Dickinson as one searches it for her beliefs is the frank, thoughtful, sometimes playful, but always direct approach which she makes to the problems of life, death, and immortality. Her concern with these problems and her expression of the judgments she has made in her own highly individualistic idiom has probably led to the classification of much of her poetry as mystical.

A brief summary of the principles of mysticism as found in the mystical writers of all times will assist in ascertaining what qualities are, in general, characteristic of their work. The application of these principles to the work of Miss Dickinson will not lead to incontestable conclusions, but the process may be valuable in indicating the position of this great lyricist in our literature.

Dr. Joseph Collins, in his study *Christian Mysticism in the Elizabethan Age*,

⁵ (New York: Tudor Pub. Co., 1934), p. 201.

⁶ (New York: American Book Co., 1936), p. 281.

⁷ Percy H. Boynton, *Literature and American Life* (New York: Ginn & Co., 1931), p. 696; cf. also Whicher, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

after a survey of the mystical literature of all ages and places states:

... The writings of the mystics, irrespective of time or country, show forth a number of common features. They reveal an attempt on the part of the individual soul to arrive at a self-proposed Object, conceived as apart from itself in terms of the Absolute and final Reality. They also indicate an enjoyment of communion or intimate union with the Object, this Reality, this Divine Being, a union commonly transient, even momentary in character, which brings the soul to further longing, to greater purification, and to a deeper contemplation.⁸

The same author goes on to point out that contemplation is the basis of all mysticism, and it is to prepare for this contemplation that the mystics "take up ascetic exercises of purification; and during the course of contemplation, experience the inexplicable and indescribable joys of the mystics."⁹ Of the writings of the mystics, some common deductions are thus made:

... The literature of the mystics is the literature of their methodology. They speak for themselves, not indeed so much about union with the Absolute, as of the necessary preludes to this union; not in analysis of the psychological or ontological aspects of spiritual communion, so much as in an arrangement of veritable rungs of the spiritual ladder by which the soul ascends to perfection.¹⁰

Helen C. White, in her scholarly research on *The Mysticism of William Blake*, comes to conclusions remarkably similar; in describing mystics in general she says:

Divers rare and beautiful gifts of mind and spirit do they possess, but the heart of their genius is to be found in these three things: a deep and immediate consciousness of the reality of the spirit, a rare ability to concentrate all upon one end, and an ethical strenuousness that is the inevitable and logical outcome in such spirits of their way of looking at the world.¹¹

⁸ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

With regard to the idea of purification which occurs in almost all mystic writings, Miss White states that "all mystic effort, both eastern and western, requires not only strenuous discipline, but also a very real surrender of self."¹²

Such summaries must, of necessity, represent only the bare outlines of the ideas of mysticism which have been represented in writings throughout the history of its literature. It is useful, also, to note the essential nature of the Christian mystic as distinct from the non-Christian mystic. The three main stages of all mysticism, purgation, contemplation, and union, are developed into the three "ways" of the Christian mystic: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. Essentially, however, Christian mysticism differs from non-Christian mysticism chiefly through the Christian belief in the Incarnation of Christ. The Christian mystic possesses a model, an inspiration, a mediator, and an object of his personal love in the Person of Jesus Christ. Further, the purificatory process in Christian mysticism is not that of the Platonic ascent, which was "rarely more than a freedom from the senses to ensure that virtue and wisdom necessary for intellectual contemplation and ascent to the simple purity of the Absolute."¹³ For the Christian mystic holds the doctrine of sin, and he is intensely concerned with his personal guilt. Sin, as related to the Incarnation and the Redemption, inspires in him a sense not only of shame but of sorrow and of love as well.

With these ideas in mind, one returns to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. It is the relation of her soul to what she con-

¹¹ "University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature," No. 23 (1927), p. 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹³ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

ceived as Absolute Reality which must occupy us first. If we may except a few flippant references, the poetry seems to manifest a sincere and abiding faith in God. Her ideas of God appear to fluctuate. At times the childlike attitude prevails, and one has a curious mixture of the sophistication and innocence of Miss Dickinson. A rebellion against modern science justifies the naïveté of these lines:

Perhaps the kingdom of Heaven's changed!
I hope the children there
Won't be new-fashioned when I come,
And laugh at me, and stare!

I hope the father in the skies
Will lift his little girl,—
Old-fashioned, naughty, everything,
Over the stile of pearl!

Disillusionment seeks to express itself in "I meant to have but modest needs," and the same dramatization of herself as a rather independent child is used to express the disappointments of life more directly than the inhibited adult view would permit. Thus the anthropomorphic idea of God occurring in such a poem is not at all, I think, to be taken seriously:

A smile suffused Jehovah's face;
The cherubim withdrew;
Grave saints stole out to look at me,
And showed their dimples, too.

Miss Dickinson's own conception of God is that of a Supreme Power, and apparently her most intimate relations with God are those in which death brings her the poignant realization of His existence. Such a view is supported by two poems which have an intensity of feeling related to personal experience:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod;
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels, twice descending,
Reimbursed my store.
Burglar, banker, father,
I am poor once more!

and

It was too late for man,
But early yet for God;
Creation impotent to help,
But prayer remained our side.

How excellent the heaven,
When earth cannot be had;
How hospitable, then, the face
Of our old neighbor, God!

One need not doubt that Emily Dickinson believed in God and in the things of the spirit. But that such belief was enriched by contemplative vision of Him, or even a desire for such vision, is very much to be doubted. Death and heaven were the objects of constant speculation by Miss Dickinson, almost to the point of obsession, but the speculation was not that communion with the Divine which the mystic longs for; it was imaginative and entirely based upon sensory experience. Such thoughts are found in "Great streets of silence led away," "I went to heaven,—," "I died for beauty," "Safe in their alabaster chambers," "Ample make this bed," and "What inn is this," as well as many others. Death is seen in these poems as inevitable, its experience indefinable except in terms of what we know on earth. Union with God was to be reserved until death, for there was no venture into the supernatural beyond the realm of ideas for Emily Dickinson. For this reason, probably, there is none of that longing for death which the mystic expresses, the result of his communings with God while he remains in the flesh. One rather feeble expression of the idea occurs in:

If tolling bell I ask the cause,
"A soul has gone to God,"
I'm answered in a lonesome tone;
Is heaven then so sad?

That bells should joyful ring to tell
 A soul had gone to heaven,
 Would seem to me the proper way
 A good news should be given.

To compare this with Augustine's conversation with his mother concerning the kingdom of heaven is to distinguish platitude from passionate longing.

References to Christ in the poems of Emily Dickinson are usually not directly concerned with the Person of Christ but rather with some symbol:

Defeat whets victory, they say;
 The reefs in old Gethsemane
 Endear the shore beyond.

There are, however, a few exceptions. A spirit of Christian resignation which joins the individual's sufferings to those of Christ is found in:

I shall know why, when time is over,
 And I have ceased to wonder why;
 Christ will explain each separate anguish
 In the fair schoolroom of the sky.

He will tell me what Peter promised,
 And I, for wonder at his woe,
 I shall forget the drop of anguish
 That scalds me now, that scalds me now.

This is a religious sentiment and a philosophical adjustment of attitude toward suffering. It is not, however, a mystical document; for, while the Christian practices resignation under the burden of grief and trial, the mystic, the saint—enamored of Christ and anxious to resemble Him—begs for the privilege of pain. Thus St. Theresa of Avila could cry out: "To suffer or to die," and three centuries later, St. Thérèse of Lisieux could say: "Like Thee, O Adorable Spouse, I would be scourged, I would be crucified!" And while these wrote of the martyrs with a burning desire to share their sacrifice, Miss Dickinson writes

with strong appreciation but with detachment:

Through the straight pass of suffering
 The martyrs even trod,
 Their feet upon temptation,
 Their faces upon God.

A stately, shriven company;
 Convulsion playing round,
 Harmless as streaks of meteor
 Upon a planet's bound.

Their faith the everlasting troth;
 Their expectation fair;
 The needle to the north degree
 Wades so, through polar air.

So far as one can penetrate the poetic mind and achievement of Emily Dickinson, one finds that her work on themes which might be designated as mystical in nature, her poetry concerned with the Creator, the Redeemer, with death and immortality, are the fruit of a peculiarly deep insight and an intensely emotional nature, but they are not of the body of that literature which is based on the search of the mystic for God and for union with Him. There is faith, certainly, and religious conviction; but nowhere is there that complete dedication to the search for perfection which motivates the mystic.

Mystic literature, as we have seen, is most often concerned with the methodology of mysticism. To describe the unitive way is a task which has proven impossible for most mystics. But the way of purgation, especially, has been fruitful of much of the most graphic of our mystical writing. In both Christian and non-Christian mystical literature there is a deliberate withdrawal from the external things of life in order that attention may be centered on the one thing necessary. In the Christian this purification is motivated by his sense of sin, but it goes much further than the conscien-

tious effort to rid himself of sin which is the duty of every Christian. For the mystic there is a deliberate choice of a difficult self-training, and it is this which constitutes the asceticism of the genuine mystic.

... The world is full of many beautiful and absorbing things that for most men are not only innocent, but profitable; yet they are not what he is seeking. There are people in the world to call forth his great faculty of love . . . but he is not seeking men. All the things interesting and beautiful and lovable he is gifted to appreciate better than most men; but what he is seeking is incomparably more interesting and beautiful and lovable. . . . So he leaves the things that warm the lives of other men and goes forth on a lonelier and a stricter way.¹⁴

In Emily Dickinson's poetry one finds indeed that intense sensitivity to experience which is characteristic of the mystic. Her self-chosen isolation from the world might easily be interpreted as the retirement for contemplation which the mystics practice. But the writing which came out of this solitude does not tell the story of the mystic quest. The motive for the secluded life is blurred a little in the biographies, but for present purposes it is not that life which one wishes to judge for its mystic experience but rather the poetry for its expression thereof. And, as far as one can perceive, the poems seem to evoke the picture of one whose intellectual and emotional equipment for life was extraordinary in perception and depth. There is a deliberate contraction of the circle of experience, but within that circle the ultimate meaning of each act is traced to its end. Experience is related to experience by

metaphor; intense conviction of truth is pointed by personification, but there is never the deliberate putting-by even of the infinitesimal which is the asceticism of the mystic. Miss Dickinson's assertion: "The time to live is frugal, and good as it is a better earth will not quite be this" is not the statement of an ascetic.

Intellectual discipline in Miss Dickinson means precision of thought and adequate relationship of the unique happening to its place in her scheme of things; it is not the withdrawal into contemplation by which the mystic seeks to establish contact with Ultimate Reality. Her immediate goal, poetic expression, is defined in her own lines:

This was a Poet—it is that
Distils amazing sense
From ordinary meanings,
And attars so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the door,
We wonder it was not ourselves
Arrested it before.

One searches in vain for the more particular signs of the Christian mystic in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The expression of personal guilt for sin, the feeling of Christian humility, the symbol of earthly love used to explain the Divine, the ecstatic joy of union, and the utter desolation of the "dark nights of the soul"—all these are recorded in the writings of the great mystics, but they are not found in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Mystical poetry—in the traditional sense, at least—is not Miss Dickinson's poetic gift. To make such a statement is not, however, to deny either her goodness or her genius.

¹⁴ White, *op. cit.*, p. 69.