

## Emily Dickinson, “As Imperceptibly as Grief”

with a byway into “Further in Summer than the Birds”

*Let me begin with a story.*

*It was 1969 and I was a graduate student at Duke University. I had a special fellowship which stipulated that in addition to doing my doctoral research I work with a ‘master teacher.’ Working in American literature, I was assigned to Louis Budd, a Mark Twain scholar. He was an exceptionally fine and decent man. I faithfully attended his introductory survey of 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature.*

*Before the course began, Professor Budd suggested I teach a week of classes. “Anyone you like,” he said of the lineup of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau and several others. I thought for a while and replied, “Anyone except Emily Dickinson.”*

*He misheard me. When the syllabus came out I found myself scheduled to teach a week of Dickinson.*

*I panicked. I’d read Dickinson, of course, but never fully appreciated her nor fully understood what her poems were about. Now, because Lou Budd had misunderstood my saying I didn’t want to teach Dickinson as an offer to teach her, I was scheduled to teach her poems.*

*I did what any graduate student would do and went to the library to take out critical studies of Dickinson. Lo and behold, several were stunningly educational. I remember in particular a book by Chester Anderson and an essay by Yvor Winters. They revealed to me that Dickinson was no so much an idiosyncratic poet as an incredibly rich one. I learned from their careful analyses that a reader of her poems had to pay attention to each word and to how each word and phrase interacted with every other phrase.*

*In several ways, I turned out to be lucky. In a sense, Dickinson is the most teachable of poets. She rewards close and careful reading: The more careful and attentive you are, the more her poems make sense. (I hasten to add my belief that no poem entirely makes sense: There is always something that Freud would have called ‘uncanny,’ some part of the poem that goes beyond making sense. Poems can never to be reduced to paraphrase, not only because their rhythm adds ‘more,’ but because our understanding is never fully capable of being expressed in and through the rational.)*

*Lucky, too, in that I ended up learning a lot by teaching Emily Dickinson. I learned that teaching poetry meant asking students to pay close attention to the poem. I learned that what seems strange or odd or without meaning at first can emerge as a deeply significant experience if one not only reads but rereads. I learned that what seems small can sometimes be very large: I think, as I argue in the essay that follows, that the link between the particular and local, on the one hand, and the universal, on the other, is a hallmark of Dickinson's poetry. She does what Emerson had called for, seeing the universal in the local<sup>1</sup>. But Dickinson, as I hope the following essay will show, departed greatly and with a full awareness from Emerson's confident Romanticism.*

*Lucky: I learned to love Emily Dickinson.*

*A book I read a while back claimed that 'Emily Dickinson is the greatest woman poet.' It's hard to argue with that assessment. Sappho is one rival, but all we have are a hundred brief fragments. Anna Akhmatova in my view is the greatest twentieth century woman poet. Although her *Requiem* may be the century's single best poem, her overall accomplishment does not quite match the full breadth of her American predecessor. The palm goes to Emily Dickinson, writing way off there in small-town Amherst, Massachusetts in the last third of the nineteenth century.*

*But lest the mantle of 'greatest woman poet' seem to be a diminishment, let me state categorically that she, along with Whitman and maybe William Carlos Williams and T. S. Eliot, is one of the small handful of toweringly important American poets.*

*Dickinson requires, as I have just said, very attentive reading. Overall, I believe that the search for 'deeper meanings' is anathema to approaching poetry. It privileges an intelligence that is good at puzzles, yet poems are not puzzles to be solved. They are a route through which human beings can speak to one another about important things, things that don't always get discussed in the hurly-burly of daily life. But although we should not ever begin by seeking deeper meanings, some of the things we have to say to one another, some of the most important things we have to say, are of a complexity that is greater than we can encounter in daily speech. "How are you doing?" "Good, and you?" is a start to many conversations; most of the time, they barely get beyond that.*

*Sometimes we need to tell one another that our lives are almost unspeakably rich, or our experience almost inexpressibly complex, or our pain runs deep and unassuageable. That is what Dickinson does. She begins, in the poem we are about to read, with noticing that the days are growing shorter as summer declines into autumn. She moves from that, if we pay great*

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<sup>1</sup> Her contemporary Whitman also was guided by the powerful thought and vision of Emerson. Dickinson was even better than Whitman at seeing the local as the route to the universal, even though Whitman adulated Emerson while she did not. Whitman pretty much plagiarized one of his essays "The Poet" when he wrote his own "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*.

*attention, to an awareness that we are not one with the natural world, are not at home in the world. Our consciousness – what most fully makes us human – separates us from the world.*

*This is one of her great themes. In rereading what I wrote, I am struck by how, wanting to emphasize Dickinson's depth and breadth, I approached a second poem, "Further in Summer than the Birds." It is about as hard a poem as she ever wrote. I would never have understood its dimensions, back when I was reading Dickinson for Lou Budd, but for critics who showed me how carefully one needs to read Dickinson. Should I offer such a difficult poem to my readers with their busy lives...?*

*Yet here, below, I handed it to the readers of my letters almost in passing. I'm not sure if that was a good move. In my classes, I usually introduce Dickinson by spending a whole class on one poem. Often it is a poem about paying attention and not paying attention: "I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl." Sometimes it is a poem about a robin, "A Bird came down the Walk," a poem which like the two you will read shortly moves from what she finds in her garden to the large truth she intuits about human existence, that we – by reason of our consciousness – are never at home in the natural world.*

*In "Further in Summer than the Birds" she listens to crickets and arrives at a large and disquieting truth, a truth that is at once religious (or anti-religious), metaphysical, epistemological. And she gets to that truth through language that requires us to listen very carefully and to think even more carefully about the words she has chosen.*

*Before we move on to the poems, let me emphasize something that too few people are willing to acknowledge. This somewhat solitary spinster in rural New England had a tougher mind, a greater willingness to look at the tragedies of our being in the world, than any other poet I know. I love Whitman, Wordsworth, Williams: None of them is as hard for me to come to terms with as Dickinson. Not because of any failing of hers but because she is so courageously willing to look at truth, even when the truth is not comforting. As T. S. Eliot famously and controversially wrote in a late poem, "Human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality." In poems about birds and crickets and seasonal change she asks us to confront great and difficult truths about what we are.*

### **As Imperceptibly as Grief Emily Dickinson**

As imperceptibly as Grief  
The Summer lapsed away—  
Too imperceptible at last  
To seem like Perfidy—

A Quietness distilled  
As Twilight long begun,  
Or Nature spending with herself  
Sequestered Afternoon—  
The Dusk drew earlier in—  
The Morning foreign shone—  
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,  
As Guest, that would be gone—  
And thus, without a Wing  
Or service of a Keel  
Our Summer made her light escape  
Into the Beautiful.

It is perhaps not surprising that Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson, the two American poets who write the most about the seasons, are New Englanders. A Stevens poem about the seasons – there are many – may eventually be the subject of one of these mailings. But for today, Emily Dickinson.

The ‘situation’ of Emily Dickinson is widely known and often misunderstood. Dickinson lived all her life in the town in which she was born, Amherst, Massachusetts. In her early years she went to Boston; after school she attended Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary (today Mt. Holyoke College) for ten months; once as an adult she travelled from her small western Massachusetts town to Washington for three weeks and Philadelphia for two. She lived in the family home from her birth until her death, a home she shared with her father, her mother and her sister Lavinia. After his marriage her brother Austin lived in a house he built next door; his wife, Susan Gilbert, would become Dickinson’s best friend for a number of years.

Dickinson, famously, did not receive visitors. The narrative of a recluse has taken hold: the poet separate from the world, dressed in white, not venturing beyond her house and garden. In some senses, it is accurate. In other, more important ways, it is not. She had an extensive correspondence, including among her friends a member of Congress, an important editor, a leading feminist, a famous preacher and others: her intellectual and social contacts were, in fact, rich and extensive. More important, to my mind, was how intensely she perceived and absorbed the world around her.

Although she along with Melville and Hawthorne was in rebellion against Ralph Waldo Emerson and his optimistic philosophy of growth and expansion, Emily Dickinson deeply resonated with Emerson’s perception that “the world,-- this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys

which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself.” Dickinson would find in her garden, in the view from her window, in the daily doings of her house, the ‘stuff’ out of which to enter into a great self-knowing.

Since her poems were published only after her death, and their importance was not widely recognized until many decades later, she was at first diminished by critics who thought her domestic world was not large enough to rank her as a major poet. To which the poet and critic Allen Tate responded, in wonderful words I have always carried with me, “All pity for Miss Dickinson’s ‘starved life’ is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent.”

Emerson understood that the ‘business’ of the poet is to observe what is about him – or her. My favorite passage in all his writing is this. I have taken the liberty of placing several lines I particularly treasure in bold print:

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia ; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. **What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;— show me the ultimate reason of these matters;** show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; and the shop, the plough, and the ledger, referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing; – **and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order.**

Emily Dickinson did not, and here she is unlike Emerson, see the world as symbol of something beyond it but she did, like that great philosopher and critic, understand that if we look closely and carefully at what is around us, “the common...the familiar, the low,” we can see extraordinary things.

“As imperceptibly as Grief” is a poem of the seasons. It is a poem of close observation. The particular seasonal moment Dickinson describes is one that we in Washington have just seen pass, the imperceptible juncture when summer ends and fall begins.

There is an artfulness to the poem we may not notice as we read these sixteen lines for the first time. Rereading carefully can bring the verse form to

light: if we reread and pay attention, we see the poem is far more tightly structured than we might have imagined on first acquaintance with it<sup>2</sup>.

Though there are no stanza breaks in this poem, it follows Dickinson's usual pattern of common meter. It is helpful to think of it as being comprised of four stanzas. Why? First, because each stanza is a sentence; second, because in each stanza the second and fourth line rhyme. A master of slant rhyme – words which tend toward rhyme but don't have the often deadening conclusiveness of full rhymes, words whose sounds echo other words but do not match those sounds precisely – Dickinson rhymes 'away' with 'Perfidy,' 'begun' with 'Afternoon,' 'shone' with 'gone' (with 'in' placed in the stanza for good measure as an additional slant rhyme – and with all three echoing the earlier 'n' rhymes of the second stanza) and 'Keel' with 'Beautiful.'

These slant rhymes, you might ask, why are they important if we tend not to notice fully that they are there? Well, first, they tighten the poem: they pull it together more than we 'know.' And second, we do know: rhymes are not merely technical things that poets insert to meet some abstract poetic standard, but audible repetitions and variations that make us think that more has gone into the poem than goes into the vagaries of everyday speech. Just as with music, which so often most of us cannot explain, we can hear the rhythms and repetitions and riffs. When we hear these patterns we intuit that a mind is at work making some sense – sometimes only auditory sense – of the “dull miscellany and lumber room” that is our jumbled experience of the everyday. [As long as we are paying attention to sounds and how they tighten our auditory experience, note that in each of these first four lines there is at least one 's' sound and an 'l' sound. These sounds recur throughout the poem, creating another series of repetitions that tie the lines together into one whole.]

Extraordinary, those first two lines. I once had a teacher, Ennis Rees, a modest poet and a highly regarded translator of Homer, who said that every poem by Dickinson had a line or two that any poet would give his right arm to have written. In this poem, I dare say, most poets would give their right arm to have written any of the two line phrases. Here is how the poem begins, marvelously:

As imperceptibly as Grief

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<sup>2</sup> Only six of Dickinson's 1775 poems were published in her lifetime, so what we have are printed approximations of the handwritten versions she carefully copied out and bound into little self-made 'books' that scholars call fascicles: forty manuscript books, each 'bound' since she sewed their pages together with thread. The published versions we have today strive to reproduce her unusual style – the dash is her preferred mode of punctuation, her words (especially nouns) are often capitalized, and her syntax – not at all unlike her contemporary Gerard Hopkins – is often stretched. Usually she wrote in four-verse stanzas, in what is called common meter – alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter (think: eight syllables, then six syllables).

The Summer lapsed away –

One of the most stunning things in Dickinson (and the aforementioned Wallace Stevens) is how often the outer climate in her poems is connected to inner climate. We could tease out a question raised in these first two lines: is the poem about summer, or is it about grief? There is, of course, no answer: the poem is about both.

Thus, the poem begins with a comparison (summer/grief). Both summer and grief lapse so gradually that we do not notice their going. Even “imperceptibly” lapses slowly in line three to “imperceptible,” a movement I have never noticed until now, though I have read the poem for many years<sup>3</sup>. The repetition of imperceptible does not call attention to itself: what happens is that the word itself silently slides into a shorter form and at the same time becomes a more substantial phenomenon, moving from adverb to adjective, from process to thing. The lapsing of summer is barely noticeable, if noticeable at all.

So too with grief, because the metaphor (the ending of summer compared to grief) works both ways. Summer lapses away like grief lapses away. And grief lapses away just as summer does. Summer is linked to grief because the end of summer betokens the slow onset of winter, the displacement of sunlight by darkness. The seasonal shift Dickinson is describing is one of transition, and more specifically, loss.

We easily understand the simile that the leisurely lapsing away of summer is like perfidy – treachery, betrayal – as we likewise understand that the gradual ebb is so unhurried that it doesn’t really seem like betrayal. Put metaphysically, we are betrayed by time, time in which fullness declines; in more concrete terms, time is represented by the glorious days of summer which slip into declining light, declining warmth and declining fruitfulness.

The first stanza is further enriched when we think of grief: it too ebbs away. This lapse is a more perfidious, a greater betrayal. We betray the lives of those for whom we grieve when the slowly slide from our memory. Our loss, their meaning to us, slips away from consciousness.

A Quietness distilled  
As Twilight long begun,  
Or Nature spending with herself  
Sequestered Afternoon—

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<sup>3</sup> Why now? When I first wrote this sentence, I was spending a large amount of my time editing newsletters, op-eds, letters, press releases. I always underlined repetitions of words that recur and then suggested synonyms. None of us wants to look like we have a limited vocabulary and a limited imagination. So I was more attuned to word repetition than I had ever been.

At the turning point, as summer drifts away, all is quiet – how wonderfully Dickinson puts it, the essence of quiet, “quietness distilled” – into long evenings, which come earlier than they did before. (“A Dusk drew earlier in,” the poet tells us several lines later.) Nature seems to pull into herself, “sequestered” in that quiet turning point.

Loneliness and a distance adhere to time as the afternoon is “sequestered,” cut off. No one, no one, can use a word as precisely and yet as surprisingly as Dickinson. It is one of the characteristics of her greatness, one of the marks of her acute consciousness of the world in which she lives. In poem after poem, language shocks us as she uses terms are reasonably familiar in ways that no human being has ever used them before. Often, as in this poem, such words appear in line after line, as with “perfidy,” “distilled,” “foreign,” “harrowing,” “light escape” and here, “sequestered.”

**Sequester:** – verb (used with object)

1. to remove or withdraw into solitude or retirement; seclude.
2. Law: to remove (property) temporarily from the possession of the owner; seize and hold, as the property and income of a debtor, until legal claims are satisfied.

Origin: 1350–1400; Middle English *sequestren* (Latin *sequestrare* to put in hands of a trustee, derivative of *sequester* trustee, depositary)

The afternoon is removed from the day, its solitude presaged by the use of “quietness distilled.” The afternoon that is taken from both summer’s brightness and from our human sphere is presaged by the “Perfidy” of the fourth line.

The Dusk drew earlier in—  
The Morning foreign shone—  
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,  
As Guest, that would be gone—

Dickinson is the least sentimental of all the great American writers. This is no paean to the calm of late summer. This is no hymn to a “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,/ Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,” though it is autumn and not the slow decline of summer that Keats describes in these lines from his great ode, “To Autumn.”

Nor is night a friend, here, as it is for Yeats in his early poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” when twilight falls and “peace comes dropping slow.” Here, as the days shorten, the dusk comes earlier: “drew earlier in” echoes the sequestering of the previous line.



The following day's later dawn is "foreign." It comes later than it did in summer: we are not accustomed to the changing of the season which has crept up on us. That dawn is – a surprise, more: a shock – a grace which harrows. The phrase is an oxymoron; that is, grace is conventionally the opposite of harrowing, yet here it is conjoined with it.

But let's look at the phrase even more closely and consider its concrete elements. Dickinson lived in rural New England: "harrowing" to her would not be, as it is to us, merely a very tough time. Unlike we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who are so accustomed to the term that we don't call to mind the metaphor on which it is based, the Amherst poet would be very familiar with a harrow. To Dickinson and to her nineteenth century rural contemporaries, the term "harrowing" would refer directly, visually, to a field that is being been harrowed, carved up by sharp disks or harsh iron pegs that scour acreage like savage mechanical teeth. Here, it is Grace which harrows – not, as we might expect from what we know of loss, grace which is being harrowed. Grace is what rips into us, the grace (of our loss fading from memory) serving as the instrument of "Perfidy."

The morning is "courteous" despite the fact that its grace harrows<sup>4</sup>. The grace (think of summer, which disappears with later dawns) like a guest takes its leave of us<sup>5</sup>. Here, we return to the "Grief" of the first line, which slides away, the sliding a "grace" because it allows us to live but a "harrowing grace" because forgetfulness is the most terrifying of things<sup>6</sup>.

And thus, without a Wing  
Or service of a Keel  
Our Summer made her light escape  
Into the Beautiful.

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<sup>4</sup> The echo of "harrowing Grace" also suggests that grace itself is harrowed. As I read and reread the phrase I am more and more convinced that it is grace which harrows: Dickinson is more tough-minded than we readers with our mindsets oriented toward the conventional expect her to be. She always pushes language and thought to their limits. But it is also the case that whatever 'grace' the warm and sunny days of summer bring is now 'harrowed' by the lessening light, the shorter days, the presentiment that winter is coming.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most anthologized of Dickinson's poems (a fine one, but not her best) is "Because I could not stop for Death/He kindly stopped for me," in which death is personified as a gentleman, stopping to take the narrator for a leisurely carriage ride, a ride which leads ultimately to the grave. Again, here, Dickinson is the anti-sentimental poet: neither death, nor harrowed grace, nor summer's end, come to us in the shrouded garments of terror (like they do in Edgar Allen Poe's stories) nor in the body of a huge white whale (as in *Moby-Dick*).

<sup>6</sup> When I have need of comforting words for those who face a deep grief, I often send a late great sonnet by Wordsworth, "Surprised by joy." It is, as far as I am aware, his only late great poem – though he wrote many great poems in his earlier years. I shall append that poem, which may shed light on the "harrowing grace" that time's passage occasions to those who grieve, to the end of this letter.

In the final lines the summer slips away. Its passing is not like the things we know in this world: its transit out of our existence is “without a Wing/Or service of a Keel,” neither bird nor sailing boat.

And the summer leaves us behind. We, it turns out, are sequestered in the world, while summer, well, “summer made her light escape/ Into the Beautiful.” Make no mistake, the escape is not light, although it occurs so “imperceptibly” (to return to the first line) that it seems light. The summer escapes into a realm that is not ours: the Beautiful, which we encounter only briefly (if at all) before it escapes from us. It leaves us behind, harrowed, with darkness settling earlier and more thoroughly upon us. That “light escape” refers to the light of summer, which passes easily; meanwhile, possessing consciousness, aware of the passing even if only imperceptibly, that escape of summer is not ‘light’ for us.

The passage of time marks his poem. The season is changing. The “light escape” alludes to not just the imperceptible change from summer to after-summer, but also to that lessening of the light the central lines of the poem refer to. Light has begun the process of leaving. The poem, as beautiful as it is, as finely and delicately observed, is at once a poem of celebration – oh! that we were graced with that light – but even more, it is a poem of tragedy in which we are betrayed, left as foreigners in a land that should be ours, harrowed, adrift in a world which is separate from the beautiful and the natural and the eternal.

We grieve over that loss of summer, even before we know it, as the first line of the poem tells us. Ours is a lapsed world – what is beautiful is no longer ours, time has intruded, and our response to that is grief, which slowly steals over us<sup>7</sup>.

Were I to write a poem about the passing of summer, even if I recognized the slow silent change coming on, I would not be able to achieve either the lightness and courtesy, nor the ‘perfidious...foreign...harrowing... gone’-ness that Dickinson evinces. Extraordinarily often I marvel at Dickinson’s ability to see, in the things of daily life, what I could see if only I were more perceptive.

Dickinson sees what we cannot because she brings to her existence such an intense concentrated focus that we marvel that a human consciousness is capable of this degree of concentration. Were we more courageous and strong-willed, less sentimental, more open to the actuality of our experience, more attentive to each moment, we would see what she does. But it is, at least for me, only by and through reading her poems that I can reach this intense awareness of the world

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<sup>7</sup> The other subject of the poem, grief, also lapses away with the passage of time. Those who are lost to us, whom we mourn, are in a place which can no longer be touched by time. We, on the other hand, not only grieve but have even greater cause for grief because memory does not persevere. The grace of forgetfulness, so we can live onwardly, harrows us because it separates us from what has disappeared.

In “As imperceptibly as Grief” Dickinson has taken that moment when summer turns a silent and unseen – but not unfelt – corner toward something else, darker, colder, less conducive to life. Call it winter, though winter is far, far off. But she feels it coming, and knows that the bounty of the world has made its “light escape/ Into the Beautiful.”

Here is another poem by Dickinson that takes as its subject the slipping away of summer. It is harder and even tougher-minded. I offer it as a companion poem although I will not go through it with the same close attention as I have tried to bring to “As imperceptibly as Grief.” But having read one poem carefully, the next may prove to be accessible with less analysis.

Further in Summer than the Birds  
Pathetic from the Grass  
A minor Nation celebrates  
Its unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen  
So gradual the Grace  
A pensive Custom it becomes  
Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquiest felt at Noon  
When August burning low  
Arise this spectral Canticle  
Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace  
No Furrow on the Glow  
Yet a Druidic Difference  
Enhances Nature now

The poem is in part a riddle poem. Riddle poems go all the way back to the first poems in English, to Anglo-Saxon verse forms. The answer to the riddle – what is being described here? – is, since I want to make the poem accessible, a chorus of crickets. The crickets, chirruping in late summer with their mating calls, are the “minor nation” celebrating their obscure and unobtrusive rite (“Mass.”)

But nature’s ways are not ours, as we have just seen in “As imperceptibly as Grief.” We are, as so often in Dickinson’s poems, strangers to the natural world we inhabit, cut off by consciousness from being one with nature or even comprehending the natural. As she concludes in “What mystery pervades a well,”

But nature is a stranger yet;

The ones that cite her most  
Have never passed her haunted house,  
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not  
Is helped by the regret  
That those that know her, know her less  
The nearer her they get.

Anti-Romantic, anti-Emersonian, steadfastly unsentimental, Dickinson recognizes that we humans are very different from creatures in the natural world. Tragically, our difference cuts us off from the natural world. Consider these crickets: their sounds may sound like a religious ceremony, but it is not ours. Not ours. We cannot see the “ordinance” (the rule) that governs that “unobtrusive” ceremony. Their community has rites and songs and even “Repose:” All the poet has is a loneliness that is “enlarging” as she hears the crickets and realizes that their song is not hers.

The poet’s pensiveness increases the distance between herself and nature as she recognizes that she (like her readers, but even more so, since she thinks even more and more deeply than we do) is human, is a creature of consciousness, and that therefore she is sentenced to live apart from the natural order because of that consciousness<sup>8</sup>.

Dickinson, to her great credit, never backs away from consciousness. It may cause “great pain,” as she acknowledges in another poem<sup>9</sup>, but it is what we have. It makes us human, a gift as well as a tragic burden. One critic, understanding that Dickinson explored areas of human consciousness with greater tenacity (and courage!) than any other writer, saw her as an intrepid explorer of human experience, going to frontiers we would rather not visit and returning with reports that we read with awe<sup>10</sup>.

But to return to the crickets singing in the grass in late summer. The nation of crickets go back — “antiquiest felt” – to a time before human time. Similar to “As imperceptibly as Grief,” this poem addresses the moment when summer turns into fall. Both the sun and the month of August are burning low: summer is

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<sup>8</sup> For Dickinson, and here I understand I am venturing into large theological territory, the fall of man and woman from paradise occurs because we have a consciousness that, at the very moment it observes and considers the world, separates us from it.

<sup>9</sup> “After great pain, a formal feeling comes”

<sup>10</sup> John Cody, in a strange book, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*. The book is strange because it is a psychoanalytic study, and some of its premises seem to me far-fetched. But its approach, that Emily Dickinson explored dimensions of human experience that no one has ever explored with equal tenacity and close observation, seems to me an extraordinarily apt way to read Dickinson.

ending. The crickets are not harrowed by this knowledge. Their “canticle” (a hymn of praise; ‘spectral’ means ‘ghostly’) suggests, embodies, ‘typifies’ repose. The crickets are at peace with the changing of the season.

Not us. We humans get no grace. We go onward. Although there is no “furrow on the glow,” no rift in the summer’s light, something immense has intruded. A “Druidic Difference” enhances nature now.

I wrote in the introduction to this essay, ‘sometimes we need to tell one another that our lives are almost unspeakably rich, or our experience almost inexpressibly complex, or our pain runs deep and unassuageable.’

So when Dickinson concludes,

Yet a Druidic Difference  
Enhances Nature now

she speaks about the depth of our human experience.

That difference she refers to? The minor nation (crickets chirping at the end of summer) with its ordinances and canticles, is Druidic. It represents times and customs and knowledge that preceded our own human existence. Dickinson lived in a conscious world, a world that for her was Christian, a world which had put aside its primitive and even prehistoric past. She, as we, was shut off from something earlier, here represented by the “Druidic,” to which the crickets are still connected.

What we are cut off from is nature. To be in nature, truly, to be a part of it and not feel individuated<sup>11</sup> from it, leads to a serene acceptance of the natural world, which includes seasonal change, the passing of time, and – ultimately – death. The crickets are at home in the world. We are not. The spectral song of the crickets reminds the poet, powerfully, of her separate and solitary existence (“enlarging loneliness”) in the world, of her necessary estrangement from nature, of her immense discomfort with the change that comes as summer “made her light escape/ Into the Beautiful.”

The crickets can bear it. Dickinson cannot, although the poem helps her, perhaps, because consciousness may have its own painful reward. That reward is comprehension, and its vehicle in her case is poetry.

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<sup>11</sup> Once again, with apologies, I will refer to Emerson. He was not only the leading intellectual of her times but, I would argue, the most important intellectual/philosopher in American history. In the essay from which I quoted earlier, “The American Scholar,” (1836) he concludes his address to Harvard students by saying with great perceptiveness, “Another sign of our times, also marked by an analogous political movement, is, the new importance given to the single person.”

I promised William Wordsworth's poem, "Surprised by Joy" as an exemplar of how the grace of forgetfulness can harrow us. I would merely note that it is addressed to his daughter, the "Thee" of the poem, who died young. Here it is:

### **Surprised by Joy**

Surprised by joy – impatient as the wind  
I turned to share the transport – Oh! with whom  
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb.  
That spot which no vicissitude can find?  
Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind –  
But how could I forget thee? Through what power,  
Even for the least division of an hour,  
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind  
To my most grievous loss? – That thought's return  
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore  
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,  
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;  
That neither present time, nor years unborn,  
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

