

EMILY DICKINSON

258

There's a certain Slant of light
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

1540

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.



812

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period –
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay –

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

THE SEASONS OF LIGHT

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The selection of Emily Dickinson's three poems "A Light exists in Spring" (812), "As imperceptibly as Grief" (1540) and "There's a certain Slant of Light" (258) as texts which portray primarily the significance of the presence/absence of "light" coincides with Yvor Winters' choice of them for different reasons: he sees them as poems in which "seasonal change" is employed "as a concrete symbol for (...) moral change" and, further, he considers this a "legitimate and traditional form of allegory, in which the relationships between the items described resemble exactly the relationships between certain ideas or experience."¹ This is also Roy Harvey Pearce's opinion, who almost repeats Winters' arguments twenty years later:

in these poems the natural images exist only that they may contribute to the definition of a moral experience; they are not in any sense there for their own sakes, scenically; the language in which they are cast has no meaning except as it is focused on the moral experience involved.²

I question these assumptions: it seems to me that in each of these three poems, a different process is taking place in relation to light. To be precise, the dramatic situation

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depicted in each poem is essentially a means for grasping the importance of the presence of light, of its leaving, or its oppressiveness, and not the focus of the poem *per se*. As to the language having no meaning in itself, I hope to show through the fusion of form and content in the texts, that language *means*, in the process of giving meaning to light.

Richard B. Sewall, Dickinson's biographer, already confirms her concern with "light", when he quotes a letter that she wrote to Mrs. Holland: "February passed like a Skate and I know March. Here is the 'light' the Stranger said 'was not on land or sea.' Myself could arrest it but we'll not chagrin Him." Sewall comments,

by this time she was something of a specialist on light. She had told Higginson that the 'sudden light on Orchards was one of the things that moved her to write verses, and she had already shown what she could do toward 'arresting' such phenomena - that is, getting them 'truly' in her poems.³

In the following analyses, I shall also be using A. J. Zolkovskij's theory of amplification, which he explains as follows:

"Che cos'è un amplificatore? In termini generali è un congegno che riceve qualcosa in piccola quantità e lo emette quindi immutato in grande quantità". (...) Nel processo di amplificazione una piccola quantità di energia, agendo come segnale, mette in moto grandi massi di energia immagazzinata che si libera e produce effetti di grande rilievo. (...) L'opera d'arte viene costruita con frammenti di realtà come un complesso amplificatore a più fasi che agisce entro la coscienza del lettore. Il suo svolgimento procede a piccoli passi determinati arbitrariamente dall'artista, ma ognuno dei quali, una volta che il lettore si presta ad accettarlo per vero, acquista un'importanza assai maggiore e incondizionata per effetto dell'amplificazione. (...) Nell'arte sono sottoposte ad amplificazione cose di tutti i giorni e note a tutti, quali la vita, la morte, l'amore, la bellezza, più in genere il mondo che ci circonda, il lavoro, i successi, la povertà ecc. (...)

(...) nell'opera d'arte l'amplificazione è condizione necessaria e sostanziale. (...) Lo scrittore riesce a collegare tra loro gli elementi di un fatto in modo tale, che ne risultano amplificati determinati

suoi aspetti significativi. Così il corso stesso degli avvenimenti viene a costituire un amplificatore della loro comprensione e di conseguenza la cosiddetta rappresentazione obiettiva della realtà esprime simultaneamente l'atteggiamento dell'autore verso la realtà stessa. (...) L'interpretazione dell'effetto estetico come prodotto di amplificazione appare ricca di sviluppi (...) perché ci offre una spiegazione (...) da colmare l'abisso tra forma e contenuto. L'amplificazione rappresenta ad un tempo il procedimento e il risultato.⁴

Amplification, as will be seen, pervades the poems, and it is through amplification that we can trace how form and content interact to convey meaning.

"A Light exists in Spring" (812)

The poem is made up of five quatrains in Short Meter (6-6-8-6), and Winters considers this use of the short line as the basis of the rhetoric, as permitting "a more varied adjustment of sentence to line than if the long line were the basis."⁵

The iambic pattern which runs through the first three stanzas only comes to a halt at the end of line twelve, thus giving a certain stability to the natural fluidity of the rhythm. In spite of the punctuation, our expectations are not defeated as to the regularity of the rhythm, for the dash at the end of line three only signals that the "introduction" of light is over, before the topos is further developed, while the periods at the end of lines eight and twelve are just the natural pauses in speaking, marking the end of a sentence. One could relate, already at this early stage, the steadiness in the rhythmic contour of the first three stanzas to the almost edenic serenity of the picture presented and the momentary immutability of the experience described by the poet: light exists in time, and is present "on" nature.

But when we reach the fourth stanza, there is a halt, for we start with a trochee before resorting back to the iambic pattern ("Then as horizons step") and this sudden tension in the rhythm confirms, at the level of sound, a change at the level of meaning:

movement is introduced into the initial situation, leading light to depart, together with time and space. And this metrical stress on "then" (which some editions other than Johnson's⁶ further stress by having a comma after "then," thus introducing a silent stress in the line) not only announces change but **is** change: for the slightly accelerating rhythm that follows "then", in "as horizons step", reminds us of the anapest, already a lighter and quicker foot than the iamb. This confirms the horizons stepping away in contrast to the heavier "then" which marks the end of a process, by introducing the break.

At the end of the same stanza, a similar phenomenon happens, for the iambic rhythm is again interrupted in line sixteen: "It passes and we stay." If the metrical regularity were maintained and the line read like an iambic trimeter ("It passes and we stay"), the enhancement of the immobility of "we" in contrast to the mobility of "light" passing, would be lost. But if read like two unstressed, followed by two stressed syllables, (a pyrrhic followed by a spondee), the reading would become much more meaningful: the rhetorical emphasis cutting against metrical regularity, marking not only the end of the process of mutability, but the very act of staying would be foregrounded in the two heavy syllables at the end of the line; and the falling rhythm of the spondee would further suggest the inability of the poet to follow light. The device of the two stressed syllables to enhance meaning seems to be common in Dickinson, for R.P. Blackmur comments that she wrote like an Italian "with recurring pairs of stressed syllables."⁷

The dash following "stay" and the pause it connotes confirm the end of the experience, while the resort to the iambic pattern in the last stanza could suggest that a new state of equilibrium is achieved, one which, in the realization of the loss of light, would stand in contrast to that of the initial situation.

In the same way that rhythm can become an expressive device to convey the amplification of the theme of light in the poem (with the departures in metrical regularity foregrounding points of tension), the phonological texture projects this amplification further.

The poem is characterized by an end-rhyme scheme in the second and fourth lines of each quatrain ("year"/"here", "fields"/"feels", "away"/"stay", "content"/"sacrament", with the variants "hills" for "feels" and "me" for "you"). At this point, the rhyme "content"/"sacrament", as the only words of Latin origin, is set in contrast to the other rhymes of Anglo-Saxon origin.

But more important than the imperfect rhyme scheme, it seems to me, are the subtle sound parallelisms interspersed in the poem, confirming Jakobson's statement that "words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning."⁸ And this return of corresponding sounds - reminding us, like an echo, of the words that have come before - works again like an amplifier: alliterative, assonantal and consonantal effects foreground the sound texture of each line, stanza, and group of stanzas, either through the proximity of words or through their syntactic relationships, establishing connections which point to similarity/dissimilarity in meaning.

In the first stanza, "Spring" has its consonant cluster carried into "present"/"period", and it also partially alliterates with "scarcely", while the partial consonance in "March"/"scarcely" (almost an eye-rhyme) suggests, by the similarity of /rtʃ/rs/, the earliness of this Spring light. The rhyme "Year"/"here" is also reechoed in "period" and the last sound of "scarcely" is repeated in the word that follows it, "here". These parallelisms, even if imperfect, enhance the interrelationships established among the different words which refer to time, as the "setting" in which Spring light exists.

If the word "light" in itself did not have its sounds repeated in the first stanza, this process starts in the second, in relation to its color, and this amplification will be carried on to the end of the poem. It starts with the assonance "color"/"abroad"/"solitary", as if color were extending its reach up to the fields, corroborating its expanse in meaning. Although "Fields" rhymes with "feels", even if imperfectly, I consider the alternative "hills" (found in the Variorum⁹) a better choice, for the chiasmus established between "solitary hills" ("hills" is actually contained in "solitary") merges the meaning of both, as if the quality of being solitary were part of the essence of

hills. "Hills" also receives an echo from "color" in the consonance "hill"/"color", as part of the expansion process. And the plosives¹⁰ in "cannot"/"overtake", with their hardness standing in contrast with the softness of the liquids and nasals in the following line, suggest, again through sound, that "feeling" can grasp the color of the light much better than the heavy reasoning of science.

The reverberation of "color" continues in the next stanza, in the internal rhyme "upon"/"lawn", as also in the chiasmus "color"/"lawn", while the assonantal effects of "shows"/"slope"/"know" although forming a different phonemic pattern, nevertheless belong syntactically together, as parts of the sentence having "it" ("color") as subject, and thus remind us again indirectly of the presence of color. "Color" reappears again assonantically in "almost" thus carrying its presence to "you", to which "almost" is syntactically related. More effective is the variant reading "me", instead of "you", for it not only makes the rhyme scheme more perfect ("tree"/"me"), but also lends to the experience a much more personal note, through the emotive function focused on the addresser himself. This same observation is also valid for the variant "we", instead of "you", in the line before.

In stanza four we are reminded again of "color" in its assonance with "or"/"report"/"formula", while visually "-or" (the unstressed syllable of "color") is also present in these words, as also in "horizons" (in this last word actually also in sound again), thus continuing the amplification of the sounds of "color" (previously identified as "light"), now in the process of leaving the scene.

The line "Without the Formula of Sound" presents an interesting characteristic: it is one of the most resounding lines in the poem, with the openness of the diphthongs in "without"/"sound" framing "formula", but this sonority refers back to the line before - the noons reporting away - for light does not announce its passing. Thus the echoing moves not only forward in the poem, but has even a retroactive effect, in the same way that "formula" recalls the "report" (ing) of noons. One could even

suggest that the repetition of the diphthongs /au/au/ recalls the striking sound of clocks or church bells, which announce "formally" the reporting away of noons (the very noun "report", with its secondary meaning of a loud noise, as from an explosion, confirming the echoing in "sound" and "without"). And if "it passes" and "and we stay" are contrasted in terms of rhetorical emphasis, the first half of the line ("it passes and") moves rather quickly, while the second portion ("we stay") is somewhat slower. As a result, the same foregrounding is achieved in terms of sound. The alliteration "**step**"/"**stay**" and the rhyme "**stay**"/"**away**" further signifying the contrast between leaving and staying. Through the amalgamation of "**Step away**" and "stay", emerges "**stay**", the very word "stay" therefore subliminally reminding the reader of the stepping away.

The assonance in "loss"/"quality", in the last stanza can also be considered a chiasmus, carrying on the sound of "color" of the foregoing stanzas. "Color" achieves a last highlight in its "alliteration" with "content" (although "con-" is unstressed) to then end with its echoing in the assonance "color"/"upon", already referred to above. Besides, the alliteration "feel"/"affecting" reminds us, through their sound similarity, of their synonymity, one Anglo-Saxon, the other Latin in origin, but both conveying the sense of "feeling" light, either its presence, or its loss. The consonance "pass"/"loss" also carries associations in meaning from one stanza to the next, for the loss of light is a consequence of its passing, while the alliteration "loss"/"light" binds the two distant words together in meaning. Coming to the last two lines, the alliteration "suddenly"/"sacrament" seems to prepare, through the first word, the appearance of the second, while the foregrounding of the consonant cluster "**trade**"/"**encroaching**"/"**sacrament**" binds the simile together in sound, for the effect of "trade encroaching" reverberates in "sacrament". In this way, the violation transmitted by the simile, in which the poet equates the loss of light to the intrusion of trade upon something sacred, is made palpable through the "hardness" of the consonants.

Therefore, one can see how meaning in the poem can be conveyed

through sound, projecting the presence of light and its color through the various sound parallelisms, in subtle nuances. As the poet says, "it almost speaks to you." Light pervades the whole poem, like an impressionistic landscape painting, and this craftsmanship and conscious labor with the metrical scheme, rhythm and sounds of the poem already deny Pearce's position that the language in which the images are cast has no meaning in itself.

Let us now see how amplification, working at the level of grammar and lexicon, also contributes to the poem's meaning.¹¹

The poem can be divided into four segments: light present in time (lines 1-4); light present in time and space (lines 5-12); light leaving in time and space (lines 13-16); light being evaluated in terms of its loss (lines 17-20). Or, if we prefer, an edenic initial situation (stanzas I-III), a change (stanza IV), and the evaluation of the change (V) - this latter division following closely the changes in rhythm above.

The poem opens with "light", this form of radiant energy with its associated meanings of brightness, illumination, enlightenment, and a universal symbol of generative forces deriving from the contemplation of nature.¹² Because of its luminous intensity, light has also been traditionally equated with the spirit, and, psychologically speaking, to become illuminated is to become aware of a source of light and of spiritual strength.¹³ The indeterminacy which the indefinite article lends to "light" allows for this opening up from the denotative to the connotative meaning, besides reminding us of Dickinson's letter above, in which she characterizes the light of March as being neither on land nor sea, but which she could arrest. And the semantic capsule "year, Spring, period, March" of the first stanza completes the picture of the "time" on and in which light is present.

The immutability of this initial situation is corroborated by the verbs related to light, all of them in the present tense - denoting a state that is always true (light exists) - and denoting presence much more than movement: "exists, stands, waits, shows, speaks"; even the adjective "present" helps to confirm this presence. And these same verbs seem to acquire an almost human

characteristic, in an ascending gradation (in contrast to the descending gradation of "year-March") which starts with "exists" and ends with "almost speaks." Light is now shown as color, and the natural scenery on which it focuses is again symbolic of life and creation: the fields and slopes, the lawn, the tree. As Cameron comments, "Dickinson's light is presented in a bold effort to show the world made new as our perception can grasp it."¹⁴

But there is a further widening of meaning taking place in this picture, enhancing the importance of light: the fact that this far-reaching color cannot be "explained" by science, but only "felt" by human nature. This incapability of science to "overtake" light, projected at the level of sound, seems to point to the superiority of empathy and feeling over science, which is confirmed by the very symbolism of light: light as the creative force, cosmic energy, irradiation, light as knowledge perceived by direct intuition. The poet's soul can apprehend light's essence, and no further understanding is necessary, no scientific explanation is needed. As Paul J. Ferlazzo remarks, "the light of spring cannot be grasped by science because it affects our intuition, not the rational or pragmatic sides of our nature."¹⁵ And this is why I cannot agree with Sharon Cameron's argument that this light

(even as early as the first three stanzas) specifies its distance from the speaker who is its witness. Captivated by but unable to spell out light's meaning, there is no rhapsodic praise here because there is no understanding (...) We see the form of the . . . revelation without a clue as to its content.¹⁶

For, considering that light symbolizes revelation, and that every epiphany is surrounded by a nimbus of pure light in which one recognizes the presence of the beyond (something that will be confirmed at the end of the poem when the speaker equates light with a sacrament), I would say that the poet's feeling that she is in a state of grace when she receives the sacrament of light annuls the distance Cameron says exists between both, while at the same time light reveals its symbolic content of creative energy and spiritual strength to the poet. It is only **we** who discover

later what the poet already perceived when she says "a color (...) that human nature **feels**", and the word "feels" is underscored in the Variorium. Dickinson has "felt" light in her depiction of it, although she only names and specifies it to us in its loss, as if the sacredness of the word "sacrament" prevented her from using it earlier in the poem. Feeling light as creative energy and absorbing its spirit is what makes the poet personify the verbs attached to it, confirming once more there is no estrangement between light and the beholder, for personification can only be used when there is emotional identification with another. Thus, being in physical and intuitive contact with light, through sight and feeling, in which the "voice" of light as symbolic of the spirit becomes almost audible, is the culmination of the process of amplification.

The theme of the presence of light now comes to a halt; immutability is substituted by movement, and a reversal of the process sets in, to receive its innermost contraction at the end of the poem, in the word "sacrament". Verbs now convey movement, as the change in rhythm has announced; and, even more than that, personification continues in the horizons "stepping" and the noons "reporting away", as if actual steps were taken and formal announcements were made, while light, reminding us of a real "presence" leaving the scene, also takes "steps" in passing (as "pass" comes from the Latin "passus" = step) thus making the contrast with our staying more poignant and concrete. Light leaves together with space and time, as boundaries (Horizon in Greek means boundary) recede and noons announce their going, the plural form of both nouns suggesting the passing of many days and not of a single day, as we are dealing with the passing of Spring light and not day light. Even so, the symbolism of noon in reference to light being at its highest point at midday cannot be ignored, since it enhances and confirms the significance of the meaning of light to the poet: noon as a symbol of light in its plenitude, marking a kind of sacred instant, which is an image of eternity, before the equilibrium breaks and light goes towards its decline. It is, in a microcosm, the cycle of light in Springtime.

There seems to be an ironical touch, though, in the departure of noons being announced "through the formula of sound",

through the striking of clocks at noontime, reminding us of the formulas of science; science, which could not overtake color, again can give no formula, as with time, to announce the passing of this Spring light, and thus it leaves soundlessly, and inconspicuously, in contrast to the noons. And the quickness of the act of leaving supports the very act of reading the poem, for if it takes us three stanzas to absorb the presence of light, only one is needed to perceive its passing and the realization of our staying behind.

The last stanza concentrates in presenting the meaning of the loss of light for the poet and it is here that the process of involution reaches its center and its conclusion. The number of Latin words increases, starting with "a quality of loss affecting our content", in which "quality", "affect" and "content" suggest that the loss (the only Anglo-Saxon word) experienced by the poet cannot be expressed in concrete words, as it affects our innermost being, our contentment. "Affect" again reminding us, through "feel", of line eight and confirming that, just as only human nature could feel light, now again its loss affects us in our deepest emotions (or our "affections"). As John Crowe Ransom has remarked,

abstract key words like Democracy and Equality (...) are resonant words, and the clang of them is Latinical and stylistically exact yet provocative. Our poet had a feeling for the metaphysical associations of her Latinities, and almost always invoked them when she dealt with ultimate or theological topics: the topics of the soul.¹⁷

And the simile introduced in the last two lines confirms Ransom's remarks even more, for if

as { loss (ASaxon) affects (Latin) our content (Latin)
trade (MLGerman) encroaches (OFrench) upon a sacrament (Latin)

the harshness and discordance of the word "trade" emphasizes the ominousness of "encroaching" (etymologically = to hook, with its implications of trespassing or grabbing by means of a hook), while both words at the same time convey their "difference",

through their roots, from the metaphysical associations of the Latin "sacrament". In this way, the pejorative insinuation of "trade encroaching" enhances the violation of the sacrament, of the sacrilege being committed, while at the level of sound, the act of "trade encroaching" is made palpable by the fusion of its consonant cluster /tr/kr/ in the consonant cluster /kr/t/ of "sacrament", thus completing the violation.

This simile, which shocks us by the incongruous combination of "Trade" encroaching "Upon a Sacrament", is semantically much more interrelated than it appears at first sight. It is, in a way, an amplification of the idea of "A quality of loss/Affecting our Content", and not just there to shock. For "loss" (with its root meaning damage) stands in metonymical relation with "trade", as "affects", with its secondary meaning of "striving after" (affectare) besides meaning "to influence" (ad-facere), relates to "encroach"; and "content" meaning the state of being contented, happiness, bliss (besides reminding us of "contents" as conveying "significance, meaning", in this way encompassing "contentment"), relates again to "sacrament", for it is when we receive a sacrament that we have a foretaste of a state of bliss.

A further correspondence could be established between the incongruity of the word "Trade" in relation to "sacrament", even if somewhat far-fetched. A question occurred to me, in the last stanza, as to what could possibly have led Emily Dickinson to have chosen the word "trade" to exemplify the violation she has felt with the loss of Spring light. If we remember that Springtime is consecrated to Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who presides over commerce and is symbolic of creative intelligence but also of perverted intellect, as he is the protector of thieves¹⁶, one could suggest that, when Springtime leaves, it is as if Hermes (trade) had stolen its light, or taken it away with him, and thus encroached upon a sacrament. In this way, the complementary character of Hermes comes to the foreground - as if he, by leaving, had stolen the blessing or sacrament that light, which Springtime brought, had given the poet. If we take into consideration this mythical element, the choice of "trade" does not seem to be arbitrary anymore.

A last technical remark about the simile, one which shows again the tightness of the structure of the poem in its concentration on the theme of light, is to note the use of the preposition "upon" in relation to sacrament. As light is present "on" the year and "on"/"upon" the natural scenery, with its positive associations, the use of the same preposition to convey the idea of trade encroaching upon a sacrament inverts these positive associations and the parallelism becomes one of contrast instead of similarity: instead of light infusing sacredness upon us, we have trade trespassing and encroaching upon this sacrament, with the adverb "suddenly" adding a final touch of shock to the violation that has taken place.

Thus, if the simile in the last stanza makes the poet fuse an aesthetic sensibility of the presence of light to a religious sensibility as to its loss (the religious sensibility already subliminal or latent in the aesthetic one), this simile is here to project the significance of light to the poet. Dickinson is not exploring loss: she is exploring light, its presence, its leaving and **then** its absence so the moral change she suffers heightens the importance of the meaning of light. This is why I can agree with neither Winters nor Pearce, that the poem is built to show the moral change that has taken place. Nor can I agree with Kher, for although his sensitive analysis of the poem develops points similar to my own, he nevertheless concludes by saying that "it is by the feeling of loss or absence of light that Dickinson proposes the **presence** of light".¹⁹ I say the poem shows the **importance** of the presence of light, for the presence in itself has been developed in the first three stanzas. The same is true with Paul Ferlazzo's analysis, which, although stressing the "mystical quality" of this light, nevertheless centers the meaning of the poem on the "elusive beauty of the spring" of which the glow of light is a part.²⁰

As to Pearce's assertion on the lack of meaning of the language in which images are cast, an idea that Cameron also shares when she says that as "language can neither repair the space between the speaker and the light nor reproduce the light in comprehensible terms (...) language confronts the despair of

its own dead-end,"²¹ I believe that my analysis applying the concept of amplification has shown that the gap between form and content can be filled out. Light is the process as physical presence and the aesthetic result as spiritual strength simultaneously. Light is there, present in itself at the beginning of the poem, as radiant energy, brightness, illumination, enlightenment, and present as a metaphor, at the end, with its symbolic connotations of generative force, cosmic energy and spiritual strength, corroborated by the religious connotations of "sacrament". This spirit stands "on" the year - a prototype of all cyclic processes, like the four seasons - and it does not announce its passing, as the physical hours of the day. This is why the poet feels its loss in religious terms, as if she has been robbed of a celestial thing. Thus, if on the denotative level one can think of Spring light as a light of a special colour which infuses nature in such a way that it "almost speaks" to the poet, this last concept becomes clear when we think of light connotatively and symbolically as energy, as spiritual strength, when light reaches a further amplification to then become identified with a sacrament. The very word "Sacrament" has the same initial and final letters of "Spring light," thus binding both together, once more.

A last remark could be made in relation to the significance of light to the poet. If we take into consideration that symbolically an actual landscape can be the manifestation of inner forces - for the unconscious detects in the landscape an affinity that makes us return to it again and again; that there is an analogy whereby the landscape is adopted by the spirit in consequence of the inner bond linking the character of the scene with the spirit of the observer himself; that the cosmic element predominant in the landscape binds all other components together²². Then the basic symbolism of the landscape in the poem as a "mundane manifestation" of the landscape of the poet's soul becomes heightened by its being suffused with light, a light that suffuses even the beholder of the landscape, for light - the cosmic element predominant in the landscape - binds all other components of the landscape. In this way, light works again on several planes, moving from a purely physical presence in the

landscape, through the beholder's empathy of light as cosmic energy to then become metaphorized into spiritual strength, for a sacrament gives us, by extension, spiritual energy.

Light matters to Emily Dickinson; it matters so much that in this poem light becomes equated with sacredness, for its loss is presented in terms of the deprivation of a sacred state. For Emily Dickinson's sensibility, "it was natural and necessary that things be touched with infinity."²³

"As imperceptibly as Grief"(1540)

If in "A Light exists in Spring" Dickinson grasped the essence of light primarily in the process of existing, in "As imperceptibly as Grief" she concentrates on presenting light in the process of change; and the imperceptibility of this process, as summer lapses away, becomes the "topos" of the poem: it is developed in the first twelve lines, reaching its furthest amplification, and is then repeated, in a microcosm, in the last four lines.

In contrast to "A Light exists in Spring", this poem is presented as a compact bloc (although the earlier versions are in stanzas²⁴), and this enhances the development of the theme, which does not suffer a reverse process, as in the first poem, but has its theme restated at the end. Moreover, the dashes and commas interspersed in the lines become much more visible than if the poem were segmented in stanzas.

The imperceptible leaving of light, involved in "a quietness distilled", becomes expressed first of all in the rhythm of the poem, as lines become more and more fragmented with pauses. For, although the iambic pattern of the poem maintains its regularity, there is almost a mathematical precision in the ever increasing number of pauses, slowing down the rhythm: line 2 dash; line 4 dash; line 6 comma; line 8 dash; line 9 dash; line 10 dash; line 11 comma and dash; line 12 comma and dash. This rallentando, projecting the silence which accompanies the stages of the change, achieves its end in "gone" and reminds us of the effect of music

dying out.

But another interpretation seems equally valid as to this increase in the haltingness of the rhythm: considering that summer light is in the process of leaving and autumn light through twilight and dusk is drawing in, the morning light associated with summer days is more and more reluctant to shine, and it is this reluctance in staying that could be expressed in the broken rhythm of lines eleven and twelve. And rhetorical emphasis cuts once more against metrical regularity, for line eleven would become much more expressive if, besides the pauses, the iambic pattern would be read "A cōurtēōus,|| bŭt hārrōwīng Grāce", an iamb followed by a pyrrhic, and this unstressed foot, followed by the silent stress of the comma, would make the whole weight of the line fall on "harrowing Grace", to then reach its dénouement in line twelve.

And, after a last pause at the beginning of line thirteen, as if "reechoing" the silent and slow lapsing away of summer light, the rhythm again corroborates the restatement of the theme of light escaping, as a coda, by regaining its regularity undisturbed up to the end. The movement of the rhythm could even be slightly increased in the last line, if the iambic pattern would be read, for rhetorical purposes, as a tribrach followed by a dactyl, enhancing in this way through the removal of two stresses, the "lightness" of the escape and simultaneously the escape itself, through the acceleration of rhythm. Again, these are only suggestions pointing to places where tension can lead to meaning, for in this way, the weight of the line would fall on the word which is the final destiny of the escape of light: "Intō thē Beautiful."

The imperceptibility of light is also foregrounded in relation to meter, for the contrast between the first stanza in common meter (8-6-8-6) and the other stanzas in short meter (6-6-8-6) helps to foreground the first stanza as containing the longest and most meaningful word in the poem - imperceptibly - which characterizes the way in which light leaves. Winters, nevertheless, gives another interpretation to this foregrounding, by saying that "the shift into the normal six, six, eight, and six in the second stanza (...) results in a subtle and beautiful muting of both meter and tone" and he considers this "a brilliant

technical invention."²⁵ The imperceptibility of the experience also receives a suggestion of remoteness, since what is being retold is in the past - in contrast to the present tense in the first four stanzas of "A Light exists in Spring" - and the "toned down" words further corroborate this.

At the level of sound, "quietness" and "twilight" merge into assonance, while the alliteration "imperceptible"/"Summer" binds even more the quality of imperceptibility to summer leaving. This quality is further carried on in the poem, by a series of sound parallelisms remaking this alliteration either in initial, medial or final position, such as in "spending", "sequestered", "service", "summer", "herself", "dusk", "lapsed", "last", "guest", "grace", "thus", "escape". The nasals and liquids in "long begun" prolong the impression of twilight having started in the past, reverberating in the nasal of "afternoon" as also in the assonance "morning/foreign". These last two words, similarly to "quietness/twilight", also form imperfect chiasmus, increasing in this way the similarity in sounds between them and their similarity in meaning: "twilight" in association with "quietness", and "morning" with "foreignness", as morning is a reluctant guest. This idea is further corroborated in the alliteration "guest/gone", at the emphatic beginning and end of the line, as if being a guest presupposes his going.

The hardness of the cluster of plosives in "grace"/"courteous" reminds us of their synonymy, while the openness of "harrowing" which is further enhanced by being preceded by an aspirate, foregrounds its contrast in meaning to "grace".

The imperceptibility of light is further suggested in the alliteration "without/wing" (unstressed in first word) and its escape into the Beautiful is also visually suggested by these two words having their letters forming a chiasmus, "light/Beautiful", as if light were "hidden" inside Beautiful. Actually this last stanza, in terms of parallelisms in sound, form, and meaning, results in what Samuel Levin calls "poetic coupling,"²⁶ and it projects again the topos of the poem:

the summer	lapsed away	imperceptibly
our summer	made (her light) escape	without wings (into the Beautiful) without s. of keel
NOUN PHRASE	VERBAL PHRASE	ADVERBIAL PHRASE

In this way, although the poem is developed in terms of amplification of theme from line one to twelve, and the last four lines present the theme in a "condensed" way (12 lines to 4 lines) it is actually in the added details of the conclusion that we perceive what was being "hidden": the imperceptibility of light disappearing, for even in the last two lines "light" is presented indirectly, in a pun with the adjective "light". And by the time we become aware of this, "light" has already "tricked" us and is in another region. This is also why the poem ends on a "lighter" mood than it started, in which "grief", although not present, colors the images of vanishing light with quiet undertones. There is no real "presence" of light in the poem, as in "A Light exists in Spring"; we have only twi-light, two half-presences, like dusk, and the sequestered afternoon and foreign morning confirm this. There is no edenic atmosphere, either, for summer lapsed away with light, and the grace that remains, is "harrowing", distressing, for it is perfidious.

The very meaning of "imperceptible" is also confirmed by the abstractness of the Latin word, which is further increased by the Latinity of "grief" (gravis), "quietness" (quies=rest), "perfidy" (fides=faith), and "distilled" (to let fall in drops), all of them contributing to suggest the impalpability and imperceptibility of the experience. Even Nature is abstract (nasci=be born) for there is no detail in the poem which would recall a natural scene, thus centering the leaving of light projected in time, and not space. (This is confirmed by Dickinson removing four stanzas of the earliest copy, which dealt exactly with details of nature). The abstractness of words goes on in "sequestered" (sequestrare=remove) which, together with "lapsed" (labi=to slip) and "escape" (ex+cappa=out of cloak), corroborates again the imperceptibility of the moving out of light, besides these words being also related in sound ("escape" and "lapsed away" forming actually another chiasmus, pointing to their synonymity, while at the same time

the slower movement of "lapsed away" and the quicker movement of "escape" being corroborated, as seen, by the increase in rhythm in the last four lines).

The striking synonymity between "twilight" and "dusk", enhanced by the removed "afternoon" and the foreignness of the "morning", is further foregrounded by the fact that all are Anglo-Saxon words, like "summer" and "light", thus pointing to the "concreteness" of their presence and to the "abstractness" or imperceptibility of their escape, as seen above. And this same idea is again perceptible in the "means" summer light does not have to use in order to flee, for besides "wings" and "keel" being preceded by "without", suggesting they are not there, their Anglo-Saxon concreteness is again undermined by the Latinity of "service" (servus = slave, while "to serve" comes from servire = helpful action) which is explicit in relation to "keel" and is implicit in relation to "wing".

This leaves us only with the discussion of the "climactic" lines eleven and twelve, in which the slowing down of rhythm achieves its greatest emphasis, confirmed by the tension existing between rhetorical and metrical stress. If the Latinity of "foreign" (foras = out of doors) already makes the shining of morning be somewhere else, situated in another country, with the further suggestion of not shining characteristically, but strangely - a foreign guest and not a familiar presence - this idea achieves its ultimate emphasis in the simile that follows. The Latinity of "courteous" (cohors = enclosure) and "grace" (gratus = pleasing) in relation to the "Guest, that would be gone-" (all Anglo-Saxon words), pointing to his "acquired" gracious courtesy - the behaviour due in a court - is then undermined by the crushing reality of the Old Nordic "harrowing", working like a harrow to destroy the Latin roots of "courteous grace", and thus revealing the perfidy of the guest, who, behind his façade of courtesy, actually wants to leave.

The oxymoronic combination of "harrowing Grace" thus reminds us, on one level, of the shocking of "encroaching upon a sacrament" of the former poem, with the suggestion that, if the presence of Spring light is a sacrament, the light that remains in

Autumn is a harrowing "grace" (as the love and favor of God upon man) bestowed on the poet; on the other level, it reminds us of the "trick" light is playing on us, for the perfidy of its "grace" (as pleasing behavior, charm) in staying is revealed in "harrowing" (hurting, distressing). Thus, the light shining from this uncharacteristic morning is equaled, even metaphorized into the contradictory and perfidious grace of a condescending guest; and this perfidy, which actually **is** perfidy, and not **seems** (or **feels**, as in the Variorum), seems to be "forgiven" by the poet, through the guest - light - moving out imperceptibly, for the poem ends on a lighter mood. Ferlazzo's interpretation does not really convey the shocking revelation of this perfidy in "harrowing grace", as he concentrates more on the guest growing "ever more withdrawn and restless", while his "behaviour remains courteous"²⁷, than on the real issue, the metaphor.

As the parallelism shows,

is	[the morning's foreign	shining (light)
]	the guest's harrowing	grace,

for both want to leave.

Thus, it is on the imperceptible process of light leaving that this poem concentrates. Enhanced by the quietness that accompanies the process - as silence is a great ceremony, enveloping great events as a prelude to revelation - Summer light is gradually transformed into twilight and dusk, the "suspended instant"; this image and hour of nostalgia is set in contrast to the pure and paradisaical light of morning, which characterizes Spring light. And the wing and the keel (the first a symbol of flight, liberation of the material and related to aerial movement, while the second is a symbol of voyage and also spiritualization) even if not used by light in its escape, they remind us of the airiness and movement of light's voyage; and the visual beauty of the wings and the keel, prepare us for the ineffable realm of the Beautiful, into which light has fled. As the line suggests, the Summer is "ours", but light is "hers", and this is why Summer can make it escape, imperceptibly, confirming the ineffability of the noun "Beautiful" (from the Latin bell(us)+itat) as a concept

or ideal of beauty connoting aesthetic delight, which always lies beyond our reach.

"There's a certain Slant of light" (258)

The "harrowing Grace" of the foreign morning light, which the poet feels the vanishing summer to have, is transformed in poem n. 258 into the "Heavenly Hurt" caused by the oppressive slant of light of winter afternoons. And, in contrast to the first poem, in which the presence of spring light suffused all images with its "magic hue"²⁸, or to the second poem, in which an autumnal melancholy pervades the scene, here it is the total despair and affliction which winter light causes in us, which is amplified throughout.

This poem starts, like the other two, with the stating of its motif: the presence, "on" (as reads the Variorum) winter afternoons, of "a Certain Slant of light" that oppresses. Instead of "light", as in the first poem, "Slant" is capitalized, projecting the poet's emphasis on this characteristic oblique direction of light in this poem; besides, "slant" is further stressed by its alliteration with "certain", which precedes it. It is the quality of slantness that gives light its oppressiveness, for, in contrast to the positive emanations of expanding light, here its negative emanation is sensed, through its being compressed into a slant and which, like a shaft in its obliqueness, oppresses the speaker with a weight that comes from above. And it is this slant of light which also traverses the whole poem, through similes and metaphors, amplifying its largest latitude in the identification "Slant of light"/"Seal Despair-" (again brought together through alliteration) to then reach its furthest longitude and its final destination in the word "Death", on which the poem ends.

This process of amplification becomes increasingly apparent, line after line, if set in a structure:

The Slant of light

- oppresses (like the weight of cathedral tunes)
- it gives us Heavenly Hurt
- it leaves no scar but internal difference (where the Meanings, are)
- none may teach it - Any (thing)

- it is the Seal Despair
- it is an imperial affliction (sent us of the Air)

On the one hand, the effect of the slant of light is enhanced through the activity of the present tense verbs (as in the first poem) in a gradation from oppressing to hurting and to leaving internal scars (again through the Latinity of "oppress" and "internal difference" and the abstractedness of Anglo-Saxon "heavenly hurt" and "meanings"); on the other, it is emphasized by the impossibility of someone acting on it, by its imperviousness to any form of communication; and this power reaches its climax in its metaphorization into "Seal Despair" and into an "imperial affliction". Besides, the alliteration "imperial/despair" (forming also a chiasmus), the gradation from "Affliction" to "Despair", the assonance "seal/imperial" and the connotations these two words have with the realm of the celestial but also with oppressiveness and authority (the lay meaning of "seal" denoting the design **impressed** on a letter, and "imperial" denoting supreme authority and great size), bind the two metaphors into one, leaving us with a sense of total despair, from which no reaching up is possible, for "none may teach it - any".

And even if in the last stanza, the slant of light is presented in its process of coming and going, the oppressiveness seems to remain, for we listen (i.e., wait attentively) for its coming, in the same way that "Shadows - hold their breath-", and when it leaves, Death still continues to **look** on us, from the distance, and continues to act on us, through the power of his look.

My interpretation differs, in this aspects, from Kher's, for whom "to read the poem for negative despair, depression, and desolation is to read it incorrectly"²⁹; and although I agree with Weisbuch's opinion that "the 'Heavenly Hurt' inflicted by 'a certain Slant of light' is not chosen or denied," I cannot totally agree with his statement that

the poet must wait passively until it leaves **with the departing look of death**, and then can only examine the "internal scar" for its hieroglyph of meaning.³⁰

For in the poem, death is still present, it is still looking

at you, even if from the distance. One could consider that the internal scar the shaft of light leaves impressed on the poet is cathartic; even so, despair and death further remain in our internal as in our external landscape, which is confirmed by the physical and spiritual effects of winter light projected throughout the poem.

As Warren also confirms, "in this poem 'Death' is a metaphor for winter light and at the same time winter light is a metaphor for death: one inclines to say, preponderantly the latter."³¹ And this is why I also cannot agree with the end of Cameron's statement,

What Dickinson achieves in the poem is truly remarkable, for she takes a traditional symbol and scours it so thoroughly of its traditional associations with life that before we get to the poem's conclusion the image leans in the direction of mystery, dread, and darkness. By the time we arrive at the final simile and at the direct association of light and death we are not so much surprised as **relieved** at the explicitness of the revelation.³²

The weight the word "Death" acquires at the end of the poem (reminding us in a flashback of the weight of Sacrament in association with spring light) does not seem to me to bring release, it does not set us free, as she suggests; on the contrary, it continues to exert its influence on us. Even so, as we are dealing with polysemy, my reading does not invalidate the other interpretations, which only confirm the great complexity of theme this poem presents.

As a conclusion, then, I would argue that these three seasonal poems must be considered primarily as poems about **light**, in which the spiritual effect its different "seasons" produce on the poet, bringing revelation, serves to enhance the significance light has for the poet, instead of being "a concrete symbol for the moral change", as Winters and Pearce assert.

Emily Dickinson once remarked to Higginson that the change of seasons "hurt almost like Music - shifting when it ease us most."³³ I believe this same statement could be made about her

deep feeling about light in these poems: she has not only "arrested" light and grasped its essence, either as a quality of sacredness in springtime, or its imperceptible process of leaving at the end of summer, or as the weight of despair and death in winter. Through her mastery in adopting words for "expressive purposes" and thus redefining them,³⁴ she has also been able to redefine the significance of light for us.

NOTES

- ¹ Yvor Winters, "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment," in **Emily Dickinson, A Collection of Critical Essays**, ed. R. B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p.36.
- ² Roy H. Pearce, **The Continuity of American Poetry** (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p.179.
- ³ Richard B. Sewall, **The Life of Emily Dickinson**. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p.611.
- ⁴ A.K. Zolkovskij, "Del Amplificazione," in **I Sistemi di Segni e lo Strutturalismo Sovietico** (Milano: R. Faccani e U. Eco), pp.94-98.
- ⁵ Winters, p.38.
- ⁶ Thomas H. Johnson, ed., **The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson** (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).
- ⁷ R.P. Blackmur, quoted in Crawford, Kern, and Needleman, **American Literature** (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), p.233.
- ⁸ Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in **Style in Language** (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p.371.
- ⁹ Thomas H. Johnson, ed., **The Poems of Emily Dickinson** (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1955), vol. I, p.185.
- ¹⁰ Geoffrey N. Leech, **A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry** (London: Longman, 1969), p.98.
- ¹¹ My indebtedness to Leech's approach to poetry is readily apparent.
- ¹² J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, **Dictionnaire des Symboles** (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1982). All further references to symbolic meanings will be taken from this dictionary, when not otherwise indicated.
- ¹³ Juan E. Cirlot, **Diccionario de Símbolos** (Barcelona: Labor, 1974), p.298.

- ¹⁴Sharon Cameron, **Lyric Time** (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), p.179.
- ¹⁵Paul J. Ferlazzo, **Emily Dickinson** (Boston: Twayne, 1976), p. 111.
- ¹⁶Cameron, pp.179-80.
- ¹⁷John Crowe Ransom, "Emily Dickinson: a Poet Restored," in **Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays**, ed. R. B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p.93.
- ¹⁸Chevalier and Gheerbrant, IV, p.142, and III, p.19.
- ¹⁹Inder N. Kher, **The Landscape of Absence** (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), p.62.
- ²⁰Ferlazzo, p.111.
- ²¹Cameron, pp.181-82.
- ²²Cirlot, pp.177-80.
- ²³Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," in **Emily Dickinson**, ed. R. B. Sewall, p.134.
- ²⁴Johnson, ed., **The Poems of Emily Dickinson**, vol.III, pp.1060-63.
- ²⁵Winters, p.38.
- ²⁶Samuel Levin, **Linguistic Structures in Poetry** (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), p.39-41.
- ²⁷Ferlazzo, p.113.
- ²⁸Cameron, p.179.
- ²⁹Kher, p.81.
- ³⁰Robert Weisbuch, **Emily Dickinson's Poetry** (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), p.135.
- ³¹Austin Warren, "Emily Dickinson," in **Emily Dickinson**, ed. R. B. Sewall, p.115.
- ³²Cameron, p.102.
- ³³Sewall, p.409.
- ³⁴Wilbur, p.127.

