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EMILY DICKINSON'S SPECTRUM

EMILY DICKINSON'S SPECTRUM:  
AN ANALYSIS  
OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COLOUR-IMAGERY  
IN THE POEMS AND LETTERS

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## ABSTRACT

The implication of the title of this thesis, Emily Dickinson's Spectrum, is that this poet had a highly individual attitude towards colour, an attitude which the analysis of colour-imagery in the poet's writings will illuminate. The first chapter of the thesis demonstrates how the poet's scientific background enabled her to set up a spectrum that differed from the "received" Newtonian spectrum in many ways. The second chapter shows how Dickinson's originality, a quality often noticed by critics, is to a large extent the product of her ability to manipulate the colours of her spectrum in a manner analogous to the practice of the pictorial artist. The third chapter explains, however, that though her use of colour was indeed original, her practice reflects the international anti-Newtonian "colour-revolution" of the era in which she lived, a revolution in which she had a significant role to play notwithstanding her apparent seclusion in Amherst. In the final chapter, Emily Dickinson's spectrum is set out, and each of its chief colours is shown to be a concise means of referring to a different complex or node of emotions that are at once personal and universal in their import.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

- L. or  
Letters.....The Letters of Emily Dickinson. 3 vols.  
 Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Associate  
 editor Theodora Ward. Cambridge, Mass.:  
 The Belknap Press of Harvard University  
 Press, 1958.  
 [e.g. L.79 is the letter of that number  
 in this edition].
- P. or  
Poems.....The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including  
Variant Readings Critically Compared with All  
Known Manuscripts. 3 vols. Edited by Thomas H.  
 Johnson. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press  
 of Harvard University Press, 1955.  
 [e.g. P.106 is the poem of that number in  
 this edition].
- PMLA.....Publications of the Modern Language Asso-  
ciation of America.
- Sewall, Life.....Richard B. Sewall. The Life of Emily Dickin-  
son. 2 vols. London: Faber and Faber, 1976.
- S.O.E.D......The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On  
Historical Principles. Prepared by William  
 Little, H. W. Fowler and J. Coulson. Revised  
 and edited by C. T. Onions. Oxford: Claren-  
 don Press, 1964 [3rd edition, reprinted with  
 corrections and revised addenda].
- Webster.....Noah Webster. An American Dictionary of the  
English Language. Revised and enlarged by  
 Chauncey A. Goodrich. Springfield, Mass.:  
 George and Charles Merriam, 1859.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout her writings, Emily Dickinson shows a remarkable fascination with colour. Colour-words, common and exotic, abound in her poetry and letters, and a number of her poems have a colour, the contrast of colours, or the emotional effect of colour as their main theme. The purpose of this study is to analyse the significance of this fascination.

A colour, in its usual sense, is a phenomenon apprehensible by the sight alone of the senses. A writer who wishes, for whatever reason, to mention a colour, must use a colour-word, and when Rebecca Patterson remarks of Dickinson that "Even a casual reading of her work makes a kaleidoscopic impression on the mind of the reader",<sup>1</sup> she is implying that this poet uses colour-words frequently and powerfully. But what is a colour-word?

We think of colour-words primarily as adjectives used by a writer to give his reader a clearer mental picture of what he is describing:

The ouzel-cock, so black of hue,  
With orange-tawny bill.<sup>2</sup>

Here Shakespeare's use of colour is descriptive, and we might add that even here the colour-words are not without emotional bias, but evoke a picture of the bird which pleases. Further, a colour-word, without the least modification, can also play

the part of a noun:

Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,  
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose.<sup>3</sup>

Here the nominalised colour-words, and not the flowers, may be said to be the focus of the poet's interest. In the first quotation, the colours are merely attributes of the bird; in the second, the lily and rose are, as it were, subordinated to their respective whiteness and redness. In the latter case, the poet brings into play the symbolic, rather than the descriptive power of colour-words. For over the centuries each colour has accumulated a broad range of associations -- a "spectrum", so to speak -- only part of which a writer intends to refer to when he identifies the colour with a particular object. So, whiteness symbolises purity when identified with a lily, and redness love when linked to a rose, though with other objects these same colours might represent, respectively, death or danger. Yet even in this second quotation the issue is far from clear-cut: "deep vermilion" contains a descriptive element that mere "red", which would satisfy symbolic demands, certainly lacks.

As we have seen, to maintain a sharp distinction between adjectival-descriptive and nominal-symbolic use of colour-words is impossible. The matter is complicated further by the fact that, in the hands of a great poet, colour-words often assume a burden of meaning far beyond the capacity of conventional descriptive or symbolic language:

. . . how far off from the mind of Bolingbroke  
 It is, such crimson tempest should bedrench  
 The fresh green lap of fair King Richard's land,  
 My stooping duty tenderly shall show.<sup>4</sup>

Here the colour-words are adjectival, and are certainly descriptive in a limited sense: blood may be crimson and grass green. But Shakespeare is at the same time alluding to traditional colour-symbolism, in one tradition of which red represents the pain and danger of bloodshed, and in another of which green symbolises the tranquillity of Nature.<sup>5</sup> Yet this is by no means the whole story, for here Shakespeare the poet "composes" his colours like a painter, while having the advantage over the pictorial artist in that his colours, once applied, need not remain static. So, in the above-quoted lines, the unnatural horrors of civil war are evoked, as the correspondingly unnatural redness overwhelms its complementary colour and emotional opposite, the greenness of Nature.<sup>6</sup>

When we consider that colour-words are not restricted to adjectival or substantive forms, but can also be verbal or even adverbial -- "redden", "empurpling", "greenly" -- it becomes harder still to categorise a writer's use of colour-words under headings such as Descriptive, Symbolic, Anagogical, or any other that come readily to mind.<sup>7</sup> Emily Dickinson's writings, in which most of the possible forms and functions of colour-words are exploited to the full, offer serious problems to the critic who seeks to analyse this poet's use of colour in this way. This study approaches the subject

from a different angle.

"Imagery" is a word that has fallen into critical disrepute in recent times, most particularly because it has come to be used as a synonym for "figurative language of any kind". It originally meant only language by means of which a writer appeals to his reader's visual imagination. As Rosemond Tuve points out, for Shakespeare and his contemporaries the Horatian tag ut pictura poesis, misinterpreted though it was, was accepted as a truism.<sup>8</sup> In stating that colour-words form a part of Emily Dickinson's imagery, I am reverting to the original sense of that word: language which appeals to the reader's visual sense, which helps to create pictures in his mind.<sup>9</sup> This study will demonstrate, among other things, that Dickinson's colour-imagery shows that the poet on many occasions thought of herself as a "painter-poet" whose medium had numerous advantages over that of the painter, advantages she was not ashamed to boast about.

What might a study of a limited aspect of a writer's imagery, namely colour, be expected to achieve? In what is probably still the best critical work on a writer's imagery, Caroline Spurgeon legitimises her pursuit in these terms:

In the case of a poet, I suggest it is chiefly through his images that he, to some extent unconsciously, "gives himself away" . . . The imagery he instinctively uses is thus a revelation, largely unconscious, given at a moment of heightened feeling, of the furniture of his mind, the channels of his thought, the qualities of things, the objects and incidents he observes and remembers, and perhaps most significant<sup>10</sup> of all, those which he does not observe or remember.



In this way the student of imagery may distinguish a long-dead poet from his contemporaries by the characteristic arrangements of the "furniture of his mind", and may go on to establish, for example, precisely to whom may be assigned works of disputed, or parts of works of combined authorship. Further, he may better acquaint himself with a poet by discovering with which subjects or areas of experience the poet was familiar -- so familiar indeed as to be able to use them to evoke striking images in his reader's mind. As Emily Dickinson's imagery is very colourful, the student of imagery might conclude that this poet was unusually sensitive to visual stimuli. With some knowledge of the biographical background, he might go further and suggest that any sensitive, poetically-inclined intelligence living a life of seclusion and thus having a narrowly circumscribed range of experience would be likely to respond intensely to the simplest forms of sensory stimulation: the scent of a flower in a garden, birdsong through an open window, the colours of the sunset sky. He would conclude that while other poets were living more sociable lives, Emily Dickinson watched the changing colours of the seasons from her solitude and, for want of other subject-matter, wrote again and again about those colours. What more is there to be said?

Spurgeon provides, if not the answer, then at least a signpost out of this apparent impasse:

In any analysis arrived at through his poetry of the

quality and characteristics of a writer's senses, it is possible in some degree to separate and estimate his senses of touch, smell, hearing and taste, but his visual sense is so all-embracing -- for it is indeed the gateway by which so large a proportion of life reaches the poet, and the registration, description and interpretation of things seen depend so completely on faculties of mind and imagination -- that to deal with this sense at all adequately almost amounts to the same thing as to deal with the man as a whole and his work in its entirety.<sup>11</sup>

While Shakespeare could draw his images from the worlds of the city and the country, the court and the stage, Emily Dickinson had only her flowers, birds and sunsets to make of what she could. That the result was often major poetry is almost miraculous, but this is easily said; it is more difficult to come to an understanding of how she achieved this near-miracle. It is the main contention of this study that her achievement was aided above all by her ability, hitherto unparalleled by another poet, to manipulate an apparently very limited poetic resource -- the colours of the spectrum. By using the word "manipulate" I imply that this process was largely conscious: we are a long way advanced from the view of Shakespeare as piper of wild woodnotes, nor should we excuse a critic who maintains such a view of a poet of Emily Dickinson's manifest complexity.

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each approaching Dickinson's colour-imagery from a different angle. As the spectrum is primarily the concern of the physicist, so the first chapter aims to describe the scientific milieu in which Dickinson found herself, and to discover what her

ideas about the phenomenon of colour were. It begins by showing how she used the prism-image to reveal the failure of the Newtonian spectrum to embrace the emotional implications of colour. It continues with a synopsis of colour-theory from ancient times to the present day, and shows how Dickinson lived at a time when a reaction to Newton's theories of light and colour, initiated by Goethe, was at its height. The chapter concludes by showing how Dickinson was steeped in the ideas of Edward Hitchcock, a figure who created a highly original synthesis from the orthodox Congregationalism of Amherst and the rapid advances of contemporary scientific theory. The further point is made that Dickinson had specialised scientific knowledge in many fields, which helped her to develop a range of ideas otherwise unavailable to poets in a manner that parallels the Metaphysical poets' adaptation of scientific terminology in the seventeenth century.

The second chapter starts with the premise that Dickinson's ability to manipulate colour is the key to her originality as a poet. The chapter goes on to demonstrate how some critics who have tackled Dickinson's colour-imagery have tended to rely on misleading statistical analysis, while others have perhaps unwittingly come closer to a better understanding of her methods by drawing analogies between her poetic practice and that of the painter. In the third section of this chapter is introduced the idea of Emily Dickinson as "painter-poet", who tried to ensure that her colours were

seen afresh and not through the haze of their traditional associations. The theory is proposed that there is a "spectrum" of colour-imagery available to poets, the extremes of which are the "allegorical" and the "expressionistic". It is claimed that Dickinson anticipated the Modernist or post-1914 poets by exploring the latter extreme of this spectrum.

While Chapter Two concentrates upon her originality, Chapter Three emphasises the lines of influence that connect Dickinson with her literary predecessors, contemporaries and heirs in the field of colour-imagery. It places her use of colour in a larger context by locating it in the continuum of literary tradition. It claims too that there is an American tradition in the treatment of colour as "theme-in-itself", a tradition in which Dickinson has a central role. The chapter ends by showing how this characteristically American trait is nonetheless a product of a larger European "colour-revolution" stemming from the work of Goethe and subsequently involving both the literary and pictorial arts.

Chapter Four deals in turn with each of the major colours used by Dickinson in her poetry and letters. It reveals how in her early writings colours usually have a purely descriptive function and appear often in the most hackneyed phrases. As time progresses, however, her colours take on a charge of meaning that may be comprehensible to the reader only if he traces the whole process of accretion back to its source. Each colour is shown to represent for the

mature poet a complex of emotions that are intensely personal and which she found impossible to articulate in any other way. Once the knot of each colour's associations is disentangled, some light is shed upon the obscurity still prevailing in a by no means inconsiderable proportion of Dickinson's writings.

At this point I would like to acknowledge my debt to two critics' pioneering studies of Dickinson's colour-imagery. Sister H.M. Cullen, in an unpublished Master's thesis entitled "Color Imagery in the Poems of Emily Dickinson", states her intention thus:

. . . to examine the color images and metaphors in the poems of Emily Dickinson to discover if her specific use of color reveals knowledge and insights not so artistically manifested by other poetic techniques.<sup>12</sup>

Rebecca Patterson, in her two-part article "Emily Dickinson's Palette", makes limited use of the letters in her analysis of Dickinson's "deliberate cultivation of color".<sup>13</sup> My disagreement with the methods of these critics is expressed in some detail in the second section of Chapter Two. Here I would like to express my indebtedness to them: to Sister Cullen for her brave attempt to lay down guidelines for a better approach to a difficult subject; and to Mrs. Patterson for demonstrating the importance of the analogy between poetry and painting in Dickinson's work, for showing the advantages of a colour-by-colour analysis, and for her belief that "What [Dickinson] was trying to do, and for the first time, was to see her world in the emotional tone of its colors".<sup>14</sup> I am

no less convinced of the originality of Dickinson's colour-imagery.

My texts of the poems and letters are those of the three-volume Harvard editions,<sup>15</sup> from which I quote verbatim, allowing Dickinson's idiosyncratic spelling to stand. Though a precise chronology is not essential to this study, I reject the view of critics like Charles Anderson that "There are no marked periods in her career, no significant curve of development in her artistic powers".<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, I allege that Dickinson's colour-imagery gained in complexity and sophistication as she reached maturity, a theory I corroborate by examining colour-imagery in the letters, where dating is more precise. When colour-words are involved, I occasionally refer to the variant readings appended by Johnson to the poems but, aware of R. W. Franklin's argument that the variorum is seriously in need of revision,<sup>17</sup> I do not let my readings of variants form the basis of any central theory.

My critical approach to the texts is pragmatic. I favour close reading of the New Critical kind, but do not reject external evidence if it helps clear up an obscurity in this most difficult of poets. I do not believe that there is a great difference between Emily Dickinson the writer of letters, and the persona of the vast majority of the poems; nevertheless, I prefer to speak of "the poet" rather than of "Dickinson" when discussing particularities of the poems.

Finally, I am aware that colour is one of the most subjective of phenomena, and that its literary potentialities are almost infinite. I find it the more remarkable that Emily Dickinson was able to exploit these potentialities in so masterly a way, and believe that she is a poet whose originality and conscious control over her material have still to be fully appreciated.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (1), Midwest Quarterly, V (Summer, 1964), p.271.

<sup>2</sup>William Shakespeare, A Midsummer-Night's Dream, III, i, 131-132. [This and all subsequent quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the one-volume Oxford Standard Authors edition of the Complete Works. Please see Bibliography for a complete reference.]

<sup>3</sup>William Shakespeare, [Sonnet XCVIII], 9-10.

<sup>4</sup>William Shakespeare, Richard II, III, iii, 45-48.

<sup>5</sup>See the appropriate sections on these two colours in Chapter Four.

<sup>6</sup>See Chapter One, pp.31-32.

<sup>7</sup>These categories are used in Sister Helen Miriam Cullen, "Color Imagery in the Poems of Emily Dickinson" (M.A. dissertation, Boston College, September, 1959).

<sup>8</sup>See Rosemond Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery (Chicago and London, 1947), pp.50-60.

<sup>9</sup>The objections to the word "imagery" expressed by P.N. Furbank in Reflections on the Word "Image" (London, 1970) evaporate if this sense of the word is kept to.

<sup>10</sup>Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (Cambridge, 1935), p.4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.57.

<sup>12</sup>Cullen, op. cit., p.5.

<sup>13</sup>Patterson, op. cit., p.274.



<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.275.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1955) [Hereafter referred to as Poems]; Thomas H. Johnson, ed., and Theodora Ward, assoc. ed., The Letters of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) [Hereafter referred to as Letters].

<sup>16</sup>Charles Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (New York, 1960) xii. See also I.N. Kher, The Landscape of Absence (New Haven and London, 1974), pp.5-6.

<sup>17</sup>See R.W. Franklin, The Editing of Emily Dickinson: a Reconsideration (Madison, Milwaukee and London, 1967).

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

#### 1. Spectrum and Prism

The word "spectrum" (Latin: "a visible form") has designated from the time of Newton "The coloured band into which a beam of light is decomposed by means of a prism" (S.O.E.D.). As for which colours the spectrum contains, that depends upon how the eye of the beholder chooses to divide up the coloured band, for colours are ultimately entirely subjective phenomena. Newton, for reasons discussed later, divided his spectrum into seven colours, and because of his great influence, his divisions have persisted down to the present day in the familiar sequence: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

Rebecca Patterson, in reference to one of Emily Dickinson's early letters, claims that so vivid is the colour-imagery that "the new poet was striving to envisage a universe of color." But Patterson immediately qualifies this statement:

Not scientifically or naturalistically, however. Emily Dickinson shared the Romantic antipathy to science and was so little the close observer that she would write, "Nature rarer uses yellow than another hue."<sup>1</sup>

If this is true, can Emily Dickinson be said to have a spectrum

of her own at all? Was not her approach towards the creation of this "universe of color" simply the intuitive groping of a mind sensitive to beauty but ignorant of and indeed hostile to the world of science?

The Rosenbaum Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson<sup>2</sup> does not list the word "spectrum", nor have I been able to find an occurrence of the word in the letters. However, a spectrum is dependent for its existence upon a prismatic medium, and the word "prism" occurs four times in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Examining the first of these occurrences, we discover that Dickinson was not only familiar with the idea of the Newtonian spectrum, but also confident enough in that familiarity to reject the idea as being in some way deficient:

I see thee better -- in the Dark --  
 I do not need a Light --  
 The Love of Thee -- a Prism be --  
 Excelling Violet --  
 (P.611).

In this, the opening stanza of the poem, the poet is describing her feelings for her lover. They are, she says, a prism which casts rays transcending the spectrum of visible light to become (we might say) "ultra-violet".<sup>3</sup> Violet, one extremity of the Newtonian spectrum, is here "excelled" without vision being lost; indeed, the poet claims that her vision is actually enhanced by this new, non-Newtonian physics. We should not try to minimise the audacity of a poet who puts such an allusion into a love-poem of the utmost seriousness, audacity extending

to a reference to the miner's Safety Lamp in the second stanza.<sup>4</sup> We are reminded of Donne's use of motifs from alchemy, astronomy and geometry in his Songs and Sonets, for both poets are discovering fresh metaphors in the scientific world with which to deal with the ancient theme of love.

A second prism-metaphor occurs in a poem forming part of a late letter to Helen Hunt Jackson (L.937). It is helpful already to have established that Dickinson had expressed doubts as to the universal validity of Newtonian light and colour theory before approaching this poem:

Pursuing you in your transitions,  
 In other Motes --  
 Of other Myths  
 Your requisition be.  
 The Prism never held the Hues,  
 It only heard them play --  
 (P.1602).

In this case, it is also of help to know the biographical background to the letter of which this poem forms a part. Dickinson, having spent the summer of 1884 invalided by "Nervous prostration", writes to her fellow-poet Helen Hunt Jackson, herself incapacitated by a broken leg.<sup>5</sup> This poem celebrates the refusal of Mrs. Jackson's spirit to remain earthbound merely because her body is weak. In this late poem of friendship, as in the earlier love-poem P.611, the prism is characterised by its limitations. Here it is incapable of keeping the colours of life and vitality under restraint but must stand by like a mother whose children are making sport in some farther field. The word "play" is a

complex pun suggesting at once the movement of children, of light, and even of music.<sup>6</sup>

We may see, then, that the static "Prism" in this poem represents the handicapped body of Mrs. Jackson, while the "Hues" that "play" symbolise her undaunted spirit or soul. Moreover, just as the poem is inextricable from its biographical context, so it is grammatically inseparable from the body of the letter of which it forms part. For the subject of the verb "Pursuing" is the "waylaying Light" of the "wide and deep" summer referred to in the sentence preceding the first line of the poem.<sup>7</sup> This "waylaying Light" (which never quite enters the poem itself) is slower in movement than Mrs. Jackson's spirit, and so has little hope of catching her in her "transitions", such is the rapidity with which the soul of a poet undergoes metamorphoses. For a poet's soul has its "requisition" in futurity, and must not harp on the old "Myths" of the past that are as trivial as motes in that vainly pursuing light. So, in working towards an interpretation of this difficult but haunting fragment, we encounter another metaphorical idea drawn from the physics of light. For the full effect of the hyperbole of the matchless velocity of a poet's spirit is only felt if poet and reader are both aware of the significance of the speed of light.

In P.611 Newton's prism is deficient because it allows no colour to exist beyond its narrow range, while in P.1602 the poet has severed the spectrum's dependence upon the prism

altogether. We now turn to a poem in which the prism is seen as a corrupter of light, rather than an agent whereby colours are engendered:

Which is best -- the Moon or the Crescent?  
 Neither -- said the Moon --  
 That is best which is not -- Achieve it --  
 You efface the Sheen.

Not of detention is Fruition --  
 Shudder to attain.  
 Transport's decomposition follows --  
 He is Prism born.

(P.1315)

In the first line the poet asks the Moon which state it prefers, Stasis (the completed, full moon) or Process (the waxing, crescent moon). The Moon replies that neither is ultimately more desirable than the other. In the first place, the Process of Achieving removes the "Sheen" or spiritual value of what has been achieved. In the second place, Fruition cannot be arrested at its point of maximum sweetness, because once it attains it, "decomposition follows". The "Transport" or ecstasy attendant upon this climactic point should be clear and brilliant like the Sheen the Moon values so highly. Ironically, however, the instant Transport occurs, dissolution sets in, and what should have a Sheen becomes instead prismatic, refracting and dissipating the clarity and intensity of light.

In P.1315 the prism's role, even though ultimately destructive, is still a passive one. In the next poem, however, the prism is identified with the active forces of death and dissolution:

Like Time's insidious wrinkle  
 On a beloved Face  
 We clutch the Grace the tighter  
 Though we resent the crease

The Frost himself so comely  
 Dishevels every prime  
 Asserting from his Prism  
 That none can punish him  
 (P.1236).

Perhaps the fact that this poem is a "penciled work-sheet draft jotted down on a discarded piece of stationery"<sup>8</sup> accounts for its difficulty. The syntax is certainly awkward, and only becomes properly comprehensible if lines three and four are read as a parenthetical comment interpolated in a comparison between the destructive powers of Time and the Frost. In the second stanza it is clear that the Frost is being personified as a figure similar to the "blonde Assassin" of P.1624, but it requires an imaginative leap to explain what the Frost's "Prism" might be.

Such an explanation might take the following form: from a distance, frost appears white, but examined closely this colour disappears and a crystalline (hence prismatic) structure may be seen. To those who see only its white attire, the Frost asserts its coldness, its purity, and even its immortality<sup>9</sup> -- hence its seeming impunity. But the colour of this attire is an illusion, for in fact the frost is composed of prisms which, as we have seen, suggest to the poet deficiency, inadequacy, and even destruction and dissolution. Emily Dickinson's dictionary<sup>10</sup> may well have in-

fluenced her choice of vocabulary here: Webster derives the word "prism" from the Greek  $\pi\rho\iota\omega$ , meaning "to cut with a saw" -- so that etymology as well as shape suggests that the Frost's Prism can be used as a destructive weapon.<sup>11</sup>

Of the four poems with prism-metaphors considered above, only two, P.611 and P.1315, are bound in packets or fascicles and thereby have a claim to be considered completed works.<sup>12</sup> P.1602 is a fragment, perhaps an impromptu development in verse of an idea in the letter of which it is part, while P.1236 exists only as a work-sheet draft. Yet analysis of their common prism-metaphor has cast some light upon their obscurities. We have seen that Dickinson was familiar with the Newtonian spectrum; that it interested her as an attempt to explain certain universal principles by analogy; but that she rejected its explanation as surely as Blake had scoffed at Newton's light-theory.<sup>13</sup> Her rejection was made from a position of knowledge, however, not from one of ignorance or indifference. She knew, for example, that in the physical universe light ceases to be visible beyond the violet end of the spectrum, and that light's velocity is unsurpassable. In the world of the spirit, however, a world no less real to her, she found that there were no such absolutes. Emily Dickinson did not have an "antipathy to science", but absorbed its theories and borrowed its terminology to show how scientists' claims for the universal validity of their theories merely revealed the limitations of their vision of the universe.



## 2. Colour Theory: a Synopsis

It is now necessary briefly to leave Emily Dickinson herself, in order to summarise how present attitudes to colour have evolved. After becoming familiar with colour theory and terminology, we can make an attempt to find out to what extent Dickinson put her scientific knowledge to use in her colour-imagery.

While the study of the beam of white light before it enters the prism has been since Newton's time the exclusive province of the physicist, that of the spectrum which emerges has not, nor perhaps can ever be. The history of colour theory has been a stormy one, the field of colour long having been a battleground between the sciences and the humanities. The nineteenth century saw the struggle at its most frenzied: physicists and chemists on the one hand, and philosophers and poets on the other tried to claim colour as their own, while physiologists and psychologists began to approach the subject from new angles. Only in the present century has a truce been called and certain compromises been made, chiefly those involving the making of distinctions between the different phenomena that the word "colour" describes, each one of which has been allotted to a different discipline as its research-province.

Plato (427-347 B.C.) is the first philosopher to attempt to explain the phenomenon of colour. However, so elaborate is his theory of vision that it is not surprising

that he never goes more deeply into the implications of the subject. According to him, particles of various sizes leave the object to be perceived and, in proportion to their size, produce differing sensations when they strike the "visual stream".<sup>14</sup> These particles and the stream meet as flashes of fire, producing all sorts of colours which are then perceived by the observer. The brighter the colour, the less are the fire-flashes refracted by moisture in the eye. Here is his description of how the colour red comes about:

. . . when the kind of fire which is midway between these [i.e. neither bright nor dark] reaches to the liquid of the eyes and is mingled therewith, it is not brilliant but, owing to the blending of the fire's ray through the moisture, it gives off a sanguine colour, and we give it the name of "red".<sup>15</sup>

The first important treatise devoted to colour is Peri Chromatōn (also known as De Coloribus), sometimes assigned to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) but probably the work of one of this philosopher's Peripatetic disciples.<sup>16</sup> Its basic principle is that all colour is the result of a mixture of light and darkness in differing proportions. This principle, still being enthusiastically maintained in the nineteenth century, fails to take into account the fact that prismatic colour (that of a ray of light, the rainbow or the sunset sky, for example) is quite different a phenomenon from chemical colour (that of coloured objects, dyes and pigments). The failure to make this distinction leads the author of Peri Chromatōn to some very curious conclusions:

The earth is naturally white, but seems coloured because it is dyed.<sup>17</sup>

. . . when what is black and shady is mixed with light the result is red.<sup>18</sup>

Ideas like these do imply, however, that men from the earliest times have identified external colours with their internal lives. It is only a short step from here to ideas about how colour is a superficial mask, veil or cosmetic upon the face of objects; about how the colour white may symbolise both purity and a lack of vitality; and about how the colour red represents the essence of life, being, as it were, equidistant between black and white. Other passages from Peri Chromatōn reveal how the eye's instinctive delight in colour seems to override the Aristotelian preoccupation with objective analysis:

A golden colour appears when what is yellow and sunny gleams with great intensity. This is why the necks of doves and drops of water appear golden when light is reflected from them.<sup>19</sup>

It is Epicurus (c.341-c.270 B.C.) in his fragment "Against Theophrastus" who is the first to bring up the problem of the subjective nature of colour perception: ". . . I do not know how one should say that things in the dark have colour."<sup>20</sup> It is through Epicurus's historical approach to the question of colour theory, moreover, that we begin to understand how equally complex and very different theories of vision dating back to the pre-Socratic philosophers were responsible for complicating the whole issue, and how Plato's rather far-fetched theory was an attempt at a compromise. So, Epicurus

dismisses the twin claims of Empedocles (c.493-c.433 B.C.) and Parmenides (before 450 B.C.) that rays come from the eyes of the perceiver and join with other rays deriving from the object to form the perceived image.<sup>21</sup> He refuses also to accept the idea of Democritus (c.460-c.370 B.C.) that an object forms an "impression" in the air as if in wax. This impression, being "hard", can penetrate the soft eye and appear in the pupil as the perceived image.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Epicurus supposes that "models" of the objects themselves actually enter the eye:

For external objects could not make on us an impression of the nature of their own colour and shape by means of the air which lies between us and them, nor again by means of the rays or effluences of any sort which pass from us to them -- nearly so well as if models, similar in colour and shape, leave the objects and enter according to their respective size either into our sight or into our mind.<sup>23</sup>

For Epicurus, all objects possess both "properties" and "accidents" but he seems uncertain which of these categories colour falls under.<sup>24</sup> He is certain, however, that atoms themselves are colourless, but chromatic effects are produced when these atoms move in certain patterns.<sup>25</sup>

There is, then, from the earliest classical times, a controversy about the nature of colour that is all the more vehement for the disputants' suspicions that in the end all their conclusions are founded upon purely subjective impression. Though the author of Peri Chromatōn's ingenuity is remarkable and his detailed observation of colour-effects a continuing

source of aesthetic delight, neither he nor his fellow-theoreticians can in any way prove the existence of the various rays, effluences, impressions, streams, particles or fire-flashes which they claim enable them to see colour. Nor can they even be sure whether colour is, in Mediaeval terminology, "substance" or "accident", on the one hand remaining even when the source of light is removed, or on the other simply a by-product of the peculiar physiology of the eye. Plato's humility is quite untypical of participants in this controversy, though certainly salutary:

But should any inquirer make an experimental test of these facts [about colour-theory], he would evince his ignorance of the difference between man's nature and God's -- how that, whereas God is sufficiently wise and powerful to blend the many into one and to dissolve again the one into many, there exists not now, nor ever will exist hereafter, a child of man sufficient for either of these tasks.<sup>26</sup>

During Roman times no real theoretical advances were made; instead, the more fantastic theories were weeded out and what remained was expressed in a more lucid way. Lucretius (c.100-c.55 B.C.), for example, borrows most of his ideas about colour directly from Epicurus. In Book II of De Rerum Natura he even plagiarises the description in Peri Chromatōn of the colour-effect of sunlight on a dove's neck-feathers.<sup>27</sup> An Atomist, Lucretius is unequivocal in his belief that "The Primary particles of matter have no colour whatsoever",<sup>28</sup> colour being the result of patterns made by groups of atoms. His proof is ingenious: if the sea were

blue because it consisted of blue atoms, then it could never be whitened when ruffled by a breeze. His dogmatic "no light, no colour"<sup>29</sup> implies that objects in the dark lose their colour. He emphasises the evanescent qualities of colours, and goes so far as to say that "white objects are not created from white material nor black from black, but both from various colours."<sup>30</sup> He has a keen and independent eye for detail, noticing that when a bright scarlet cloth is taken apart, its colour is dissipated even though nothing else has been subtracted. His theory of vision, however, is a ponderous affair involving "films" emanating from objects. These films are solid enough to drive the air before them, and the more air driven between film and eye, the greater the impression upon the eye of the remoteness of the object. Colour is superficial and contained entirely within these films.<sup>31</sup>

It was not until the High Renaissance that any movement to escape the labyrinth of classical colour theory was initiated. According to his most recent editor, there is indisputable evidence that Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) planned to write a book on colour but, like many of his projects, this remained unrealised. There are passages in his notebooks and in his treatise Of Painting, however, when a new note is sounded. So, Leonardo suggests at one point that the problem of colour is in some way connected to that of motion, and that the relationship between colour and form

is of extreme importance, for the more formless a thing is, the harder it is for the eye to determine its colour.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore colour is not a superficial "garment" of form but has a subtle, organic relationship to it. Leonardo's efforts to capture this subtlety in his painting led to his exploration of the elaborate techniques of chiaroscuro. They also led him to experiment with theories of colour harmony, and in doing so to make the first significant selection of "primary" colours: white, yellow, green, blue, red and black.<sup>33</sup>

Descartes (1596-1650) took up the idea of the connection between colour and movement, and was the first to make the theoretical breakaway from the Greeks. For him,

All space was pervaded by the ether -- the "plenum". Light was essentially a pressure transmitted through a dense mass of invisible particles, and "diversities of color and light" were due to the different ways in which the matter moved.<sup>34</sup>

The effect of this was a movement away, for the moment, from the Aristotelian idea of colour as a mixture of light (white) and darkness (black) in different proportions. Robert Boyle (1627-1691), in a treatise written ostensibly to a painter friend, puts the matter quite simply:

I have not found that by any Mixture of White and True Black . . . there can be a Blew, a Yellow, or a Red, to name no other color.<sup>35</sup>

Boyle was also the first to distinguish two different kinds of colours which, as "film" and "surface" colours, would later have an important role to play in aesthetic theory.<sup>36</sup> Yet the establishment of the apparently elementary principle

that, say, the blue of the sky is a different kind of blue from that of a blue-painted ceiling was a great step forward in the development of colour theory.

A greater step was that of Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who proved that white light does not produce colour when blended with darkness but is itself a mixture of colours.<sup>37</sup> This, we might imagine, would have been enough to banish Aristotelian colour theory forever to the realms of myth. Newton divided his spectrum into seven colours because he wished to demonstrate that there was a parallel here with the seven notes of the diatonic scale and the seven planets, and so convince sceptics thereby that he had discovered a fundamental principle underlying creation. Further, noticing the closeness between red and violet, the two extremities of his spectrum, he was able to construct the first colour-circle, symbol of a perfected theory. As for the actual constitution of colour, Newton believed that light contained particles or corpuscles of varying size, the red being the largest and the violet the smallest. This idea is curiously reminiscent of Plato's theory of vision.<sup>38</sup>

Newton's impact on the eighteenth century was enormous, and perhaps for the first time since Lucretius the literary world was inspired to embrace the scientific. Voltaire, for example, considered Newton the greatest man who ever lived and was moved to set up his own laboratory at Cirey and to write Éléments de la Philosophie de Newton. Marjorie Hope



Nicholson has described Newton's influence upon the English poets:

To the descriptive poets of the Age of Newton, light was the source of beauty because it was the source of color. . . . With Newtonian eyes, the poets discovered new beauties in the most familiar aspects of nature, which had always been the stuff of poetry: in individual colors seen through the prism, in the rainbow, in sunrise and sunset, in the succession of colors throughout the day. There entered into eighteenth century descriptive poetry what might be called a "symbolism of the spectrum".<sup>39</sup>

However, while Locke, Berkeley and Addison (among others) subscribed to the view that sight was "the most comprehensive of all our senses",<sup>40</sup> and while poets like James Thomson developed a "symbolism of the spectrum" as a way of expressing their new-found delight in colour, a "dissociation of sensibility" had nevertheless occurred.<sup>41</sup> Poets noticed colours, rejoiced in them, but did not "possess" them -- they remained strictly external phenomena and never reflections or projections of the workings of the mind. Locke's mockery of synaesthesia in his story of the blind man who thought that scarlet was the sound of a trumpet<sup>42</sup> remained unchallenged until Burke's tentative probing of the idea in . . . the Sublime and Beautiful.<sup>43</sup> The descriptions of each of the colours in the set-piece of the spectrum in Thomson's Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton turned up repeatedly in the work of less skilful poets.<sup>44</sup> It was left to Blake to pour bitter scorn on the limitations of Empiricism,

. . . closing and restraining  
 Till a Philosophy of Five Senses was complete.  
 Urizen wept & gave it into the hands of Newton &  
 Locke.<sup>45</sup>

One figure of greater stature than Blake, however, not content with attacking Newton and his Empiricist interpreters in print, determined to do so in the laboratory and so crush Newtonianism once and for all.

It is easy to scoff at Goethe (1749-1832) when we learn that he rejected Newton's theory of light and colour after looking at a white wall through a prism and finding that it remained white. Although he did indeed fail to make the distinction between prismatic and pigmentary colours, his experiments and the conclusions he drew from them are still of great significance, if more for the history of poetry than that of physics. For only a figure of Goethe's enormous international prestige could have given poets the confidence to repossess colour from the Empiricists and begin to use it as a medium to express more than simple delight in natural phenomena.

Goethe's aim was to disclose colour's secrets and remove it from the obscurity into which he believed the work of Newton had ironically cast it. In the early Beiträge zur Optik (1791) the mythopoeic imagination of the poet can already be seen at work on the subject of optics. While darkness is characterised as "an abstraction without objects, a negation", light on the other hand

. . . can never be thought of as an abstraction. We become aware of it as the activity on a specific object . . . Light and darkness engage each other in continuous contest.<sup>46</sup>

With this idea of colours as the result of a Manichean struggle between light and darkness, Goethe returns to Peri Chromatōn. But he claims proof of his theory by experiment, not simply observation: colour only appears in the sky (when beheld through a prism) when clouds appear, so a "regular interchange of light and shadow"<sup>47</sup> is needed before colour is born, something even a black and white chessboard can achieve.

The product of Goethe's exhaustive re-examination of colour-theory is his major work Zur Farbenlehre (1810), translated into English as Goethe's Theory of Colours as early as 1820 by the painter Charles Lock Eastlake.<sup>48</sup> In his Preface, Goethe states that "colors are acts of light", and if one wishes to judge a man thoroughly, one does so from his acts, not by abstract speculation.<sup>49</sup> Goethe was by nature an Augenmensch, or one who believes in the primacy of sight ✓ over all the other senses, and nowhere are we more aware of that fact than in this work:

From . . . light, shade, and color we construct the visible world . . . The eye may be said to owe its existence to light, which calls forth, as it were, a sense akin to itself.<sup>50</sup>

To Goethe, the significance of the play of colours is greater than that of the apparent form and fixity of objects. The colour white represents perfection, while the variegated colour of certain animals shows "how far such creatures are

removed from a perfect organization", the nobler creatures exhibiting fewer "elementary colors".<sup>51</sup> This leads inevitably to a racial theory which is the most unfortunate aspect of this book: white men are by nature the "most beautiful", because their skin "appears most neutral in hue and least inclines to any particular or positive color".<sup>52</sup> This view is perhaps at the other extreme from the one that claims colour is a superficial garment of form.

Just as there is a black/white, dark/light polarity, so there is a polarity of colour, with yellow as positive and blue as negative pole. In the part of the work headed "General Introspective Views", Goethe lists the attributes of each pole:

<u>Plus</u>	<u>Minus</u>
yellow	blue
effect	deprivation
light	shadow
brightness	darkness
force	weakness
warmth	coldness
proximity	distance
repulsion	attraction
affinity with acids	affinity with alkalis <sup>53</sup>

This is far more than Thomson's "symbolism of the spectrum". It is a comprehensive schema in which the effect of chromatic stimuli is described in terms of as many different areas of human experience as possible. What is more, the apparently subjective phenomenon of colour is also claimed to have analogies with the broader scientific world: Goethe borrows the terms "plus" and "minus" from electricity, "repulsion"

and "attraction" from magnetism, and "acids" and "alkalis" from chemistry. Significantly, the scientific terms are subsumed under the idea of colour-polarity, indicating that the synthetic imagination of the poet is asserting its primacy over the analytic method of the scientist.

The real target of Zur Farbenlehre was Newton, and it is indicative of the esteem in which Goethe was held that two great German philosophers of the nineteenth century were moved to make statements supporting Goethe against Newton, based on unquestioning acceptance of the conclusions Goethe drew from his experiments. Hegel, in the middle of a lecture on painting, comments thus:

Colour, which in contrast to light is something relatively dark, entails something different from light, a murkiness with which the principle of light is united, and it is . . . a bad and false idea to suppose that light is compounded out of different colours, that is out of different darkenings.<sup>54</sup>

Schopenhauer, in an essay on colour theory, grants that Goethe sometimes errs because he is a poet, but avers that Newton is nothing more than a mountebank.<sup>55</sup> Magnetism, he claims, can be induced with a coil, but also occurs naturally in the lodestone. In the same way, colours can be phenomenal or inherent. Newton dealt only with the first kind, while the second are far more important. When these are mixed, it is impossible for white to be produced. In his route away from Newton back to Peri Chromatōn, Schopenhauer invokes the Aristotelian law on continuity, Natura non facit saltus.

For when light enters a prism it is bent twice, and therefore it is probable that a little of the ray would split off from the main beam to form a secondary image. Showing his familiarity with Goethe's experimental methods, Schopenhauer claims that when a white circle on a black ground is viewed through a prism, the colours seen at the edge of the circle are the result of this little escaping light blending with the surrounding darkness. This proves that Aristotle and Goethe are right, and colour is indeed light impaired by darkness:

In the same way, the rising sun, at first covered by the denser lower atmosphere, appears yellowish-red and is yellow only when it has reached the more rarefied atmosphere.<sup>56</sup>

Schopenhauer goes on to call Newtonians prisoners of the will and Newton himself a charlatan for seeing the colour indigo in his spectrum: ". . . this mixture of  $3/4$  black with  $1/4$  blue is said to be found in light!"<sup>57</sup>

Nineteenth-century attitudes towards colour were shaped by the effects of the clash between the theories of Newton and those of Goethe, and will be dealt with in more detail in subsequent chapters. At the present day, a truce has been declared, and the territory of colour parcelled out among the various disciplines claiming an interest in it. For the twentieth-century physicist, therefore, colours are phenomena of light. With the aid of Planck's Quantum Theory (1900), Einstein showed that all forms of energy travel in quanta rather than in waves that are smooth and symmetrical.

There is a continuous "electromagnetic spectrum" ranging from very long radio waves, often over a kilometer from crest to crest, to cosmic rays, measured in tiny x-units. The range of visible light is measured in millimicrons ( $1 \text{ m}\mu =$  one millionth of a millimeter) and comes between these two extremities. It is only a tiny fraction of the whole electromagnetic spectrum, extending between low-frequency red ( $800\text{--}650 \text{ m}\mu$ ) and high-frequency violet ( $430\text{--}390 \text{ m}\mu$ ). Colour can thus be defined by its wavelength, but light itself is apparently not coloured of itself: "Sensations of colour arise from the bombardment of our optic nerves by light quanta that differ from one another."<sup>58</sup> Colour is therefore "in the mind", and the result of qualitative differences in sensitivity in the retina which are not yet understood. As for the colours themselves, white is the unity of all the hues of the physical spectrum, as Newton showed. Some of the spectral hues are complementary: that is to say, should the green part of the spectrum be isolated and the other colours collected with a converging lens, red is obtained. Green and red are therefore complementary, producing white again when allowed to mix. The primary colours of the physical spectrum are red, green and blue-violet.

For the chemist, colour involves the molecular structure of pigments and dyes. The colour of a painted object is subtractive: a red chair does not emanate red light of itself, but absorbs all the other colours, reflecting only

red to the eye of the perceiver. Complementary chemical colours produce black, not white: if paper that is red in daylight is illuminated by a green light, it appears black, because green light contains no red to be reflected. The chemical primaries are red, yellow and blue, and the secondaries are the mixtures of two primaries: green, orange and purple.

For the physiologist, the effect of colours upon the eye and brain is of primary importance. He studies, for example, the phenomenon of the after-image, when the eye, resting on one colour for a period of time and then looking away, produces an image of the spectral complementary of that colour. The after-image is but one example of "colour-induction", that is, an induced colour-effect such as can also be achieved by hypnosis, drugs, or even a blow on the head. It was a study of colour-induction which led a recent researcher to the conclusion that rays of light are not only colourless of themselves, but also not colour-making in any absolute sense: "Rather, they are bearers of information that the eye uses to assign appropriate colors to various objects in an image".<sup>59</sup> This accounts for the effect of colour-constancy, whereby the eye, unlike the camera, can adjust itself so that a house known to be white in daylight can after a few moments be seen as white even when continuously illuminated in red light.

For the psychologist, finally,



. . . colors are the properties neither of luminous objects nor of luminous radiations but are contents of consciousness, definite qualities of vision.<sup>60</sup>

Like Goethe, the psychologist interests himself in the ethico-aesthetic value of colours held by the individual psyche, as well as their more general symbolic associations in society. The psychological primary colours are red, yellow, green and blue, for each has specific emotional/symbolic associations quite different from the others, and none is generally ever confused with other colours. Because colours are such subjective phenomena, colour preferences and dislikes may sometimes prove the key towards isolating certain psychological traits, especially when these preferences are unusual. In respect to literature, several critics have assumed that a writer's personal colour-preferences are revealed by statistical analysis of his work. This leads them to the belief that the proper end of the study of colour imagery is to discover biographical facts about the writer. As this study progresses, we will discover that there are a number of fallacies underlying this view, and that the analysis of colour imagery need not be restricted to a focus upon the psyche of the writer himself.

### 3. Light and Colour in Amherst

We must now attempt to discover what scientific world-picture prevailed at Amherst during Emily Dickinson's

lifetime. By doing so, we may ascertain what kinds of light and colour theory the poet absorbed, and what consequences this had upon her writings.

There is no work devoted specifically to the science of colour in the Harvard Handlist of books found in the Dickinson home.<sup>61</sup> It is therefore necessary to turn to a contemporary work on colour and allow it to serve as a preliminary guide to the kind of ideas about the topic held by the poet's contemporaries. Such a work might be Dr. R. Hay's A Nomenclature of Colours (Second Edition, 1846).<sup>62</sup> One of Hay's purposes was to provide a guide to colour harmony for artists, so much of his book is taken up with plates reproducing groups of related colours. In his introduction, Hay clearly aligns himself with Goethe against Newton: "Light is understood to be an active and darkness a passive principle: while colour is an intermediate phenomenon."<sup>63</sup> He divides colours into warm and cold, and claims that "absolute colour is represented by red", thereby implying a belief in that colour's pre-eminence.<sup>64</sup> He goes on to list the emotional effects of the (pigmentary) primaries and secondaries, then to give examples of their occurrence in the natural world. He stresses his incapability of believing that objects absorb or reflect certain colours; he offers some etymological information about the origin of colour-names; he attempts to define the difference between tints and shades; and in an appendix he summarises other colour-theories, including

those of Newton, Huygens and Herschel.<sup>65</sup>

There is no evidence that Emily Dickinson ever read Hay's book, but much to suggest that she shared his views. Her idea of the relationship between light and darkness, for example, appears as a poetic paraphrase of Hay's:

The Light His Action, and the Dark  
The Leisure of His Will -- (P.820).<sup>66</sup>

She too believed in the pre-eminence of red;<sup>67</sup> knew something about the etymology of colour-names;<sup>68</sup> and was even familiar with the name of Herschel (see P.835). More significantly, she too rejected Newtonianism for a much less empirically-based approach towards colour. Moreover, there is another aspect of Hay's work, revealed in the opening remarks of A Nomenclature of Colours, that further links it to Dickinson's Amherst:

There is not among the various phenomena of nature, one that more readily excites our imagination, or imparts a more vivid impression of the order, variety, and harmonious beauty of the creation, than that of colour . . . . Although genius is continually struggling, with but partial success, to imitate these effects, yet through the Divine beneficence, all whose organs of sight are in an ordinary degree of perfection, can appreciate and enjoy them.<sup>69</sup>

Here Hay, rather spiritlessly to be sure, feels the urge to reconcile what will be an essentially scientific attitude towards colour with religious orthodoxy. Nowhere was this urge felt more intensely than in the Amherst of Edward Hitchcock, and in no other works of the period can such a reconciliation have been made more passionately or more ingenious-

ly than in those of the President of Amherst College from 1845-1854.

In his biography<sup>70</sup> of Emily Dickinson, Richard Sewall traces in some detail what up to then had been a seriously-neglected influence on the young poet. A poet in his youth, Hitchcock's development was, in Sewall's words,

. . . a fascinating story of a born scientist gradually becoming a devout apologist for revealed religion but never once relinquishing his dedication to the discovery and propagation of scientific knowledge . . . Hitchcock was largely responsible for attracting the science faculty that put Amherst on even terms with Harvard and Yale and opened up such unusual opportunities for students in Amherst Academy.<sup>71</sup>

There are five books by Hitchcock on the Harvard Handlist, and there can be little doubt that, even if Dickinson never met Hitchcock or heard him speak, she read all these. One, Elementary Geology, was likely to have been a textbook at Amherst Academy, where Emily was a schoolgirl from September, 1841, until August, 1847.<sup>72</sup> Another was a biography of Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where Emily spent two terms from September, 1847, and during which time she seemed to have been engaged in a battle of wills with this formidable lady about the salvation of her soul.<sup>73</sup>

Far more important for present purposes than either of these works is Hitchcock's remarkable Religion of Geology.<sup>74</sup> In his preface, Hitchcock informs his reader what is to be required of him in order to master the topic in hand:

First, an acquaintance with geology in all its details, and with the general principles of zoology, botany, and comparative anatomy; secondly a knowledge of sacred hermeneutics, or the principles of interpreting the Scriptures; thirdly, a clear conception of the principles of natural and revealed religion.<sup>75</sup>

In this book, Hitchcock deals briefly but in a very significant manner with the question of the nature of light. At the time, he is discussing the concept of the "future glorified body"<sup>76</sup> -- the reanimated, eternal body after the Resurrection -- and attempting to make the idea comprehensible through scientific analogy. Is it possible, he asks, that in the universe as it is understood by the scientist, something can exist that is neither matter nor spirit? For this glorified body cannot be matter because, according to St. Paul, it is not composed of flesh and blood and so cannot decay; nor can it be spirit, "for then it would not differ from the soul itself, by which it is to be animated".<sup>77</sup> Having thus posed his problem, Hitchcock then suggests a solution:

Do we know of any form of matter in the present world which remains the same at all temperatures, and in all circumstances, which no chemical or mechanical agencies can alter? -- a substance which remains unchanged in the very heart of the ice around the poles, and in the focus of a volcano; which remains untouched by the most powerful reagents which the chemist can apply, and by the mightiest forces which the mechanician can bring to bear upon it? It seems to me that modern science does render the existence of such a substance probable, though not cognizable by the senses. It is the luminiferous ether, that attenuated medium by which light, and heat, and electricity are transmitted from one part of the universe to another, by undulations of inconceivable velocity.<sup>78</sup>

At no time in the course of arguments such as these does Hitchcock lose sight of the scientific facts as established by the most up-to-date research. He talks, for example, of the ether which "propagates" the undulations of light at "the astonishing rate of two hundred thousand miles per second",<sup>79</sup> but goes on to use these hard figures for the glorification of the Divine Will:

If we suppose the soul . . . could transmit its thoughts and desires, and receive impressions, through the luminiferous ether, with only the same velocity of light, it might communicate with other beings upon the sun, at the distance of one hundred million miles, in eight minutes; and such a power we may reasonably expect the soul will hereafter possess, whether derived from this or some other agency.<sup>80</sup>

Another of Hitchcock's works that Emily Dickinson certainly read is the much shorter Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons.<sup>81</sup> This contains the texts of four lectures, each centred upon a different season of the year, in which the author shows how contemporary scientific discoveries are prefigured in certain Biblical passages. It is extremely likely that Emily Dickinson heard at least the first of the original lectures, namely the one called "The Coronation of Winter", for this was delivered at Amherst College with the students of Amherst Academy present in 1845.<sup>82</sup> She would also have undoubtedly encountered the book at the bookstore of its publishers, J.S. and C. Adams of Amherst, a meeting-place for the village literati.<sup>83</sup> More than anything else, however, the echoes of this work

in Emily Dickinson's writings attest to her familiarity with it, actual proof of her having read more than a handful of books being impossible to establish.<sup>84</sup>

Hitchcock's technique prefigures that of The Religion of Geology. Each lecture is a commentary upon the Biblical passage forming its epigraph, as in a sermon. So, in "The Resurrections of Spring", the epigraph is a passage from Corinthians dealing with the resurrection of the dead after the Last Judgement.<sup>85</sup> St. Paul's metaphor of the wheat, which must die before it can be reborn, is restated by Hitchcock in botanical terminology: "the decaying cotyledon . . . the ascending plumule . . . the descending radicle".<sup>86</sup> We are told of the "vegetable physiologist", who can observe, by means of a microscope, the embryonic plant in the dead kernel.<sup>87</sup> Molecular theory is used to prove the indestructibility of matter, explaining the ease with which God can reconstitute it in different forms.<sup>88</sup>

Moving on to physics, Hitchcock once again refers to the idea that light, especially as it is seen through the eyes of the physicist, is a natural phenomenon resembling the Biblical description of the glorified body. A powerful passage imagining the vast multitude of the resurrected dead makes use of recent archaeological discoveries:

Think of Jerusalem, which for more than 2,000 years has been the great central slaughter house of the world; there human relics and comminuted dwellings have accumulated on the surface to a depth of 40 or 50 feet.<sup>89</sup>

Hitchcock also lays emphasis upon the springtime metamorphosis of insects and its symbolic significance, as well as the "curious transmutations and molecular forces" which come into play in winter, when the snow itself prevents the loss of vital heat in living creatures.<sup>90</sup> Hitchcock could assume that his largely youthful audience would recognise local flora from their generic names, for he speaks of how, from their first appearance, ". . . the Festuca is at once known from the Poa and the Agrostis, and the Dactylis from the Phleum".<sup>91</sup> Finally, he reassures the sceptical that, though without the worldly advantages of paintings and photography, they will be able to recognise their loved ones among the millions of the morning of the Resurrection by a "characteristic something in their spiritual bodies".<sup>92</sup>

In the course of this lecture alone, Hitchcock refers to the following: microscopy, botany, organic and inorganic chemistry, the physics of light, archaeology, the Linnean system of classification, and photography.<sup>93</sup> Whether it was through her attending Hitchcock's lectures personally, or indirectly through the school curricula at Amherst Academy or Mount Holyoke; through personal familiarity with his written works, or through contact with friends either at the bookstore or at their homes; or, most probably, through a mixture of all these, Emily Dickinson acquired a broad background of scientific knowledge, a fact that critics with one or two exceptions have ignored.<sup>94</sup> She could follow Hitch-



cock's allusions, and in time came to make similarly oblique ones of her own, such as the prism-metaphors already dealt with, which demand specialised knowledge of the reader. It has been pointed out that a recipient of one of Dickinson's letters was often required to reconstruct a scriptural verse from the barest reference, sometimes a single word.<sup>95</sup> In Hitchcock's Amherst, however, the lecture and the sermon, scientific knowledge and sacred hermeneutics bore such a close relationship to one another, that the reader must familiarise himself with another range of Dickinsonian allusions stemming from a level of scientific attainment surprising to us nowadays, but not extraordinary in Hitchcock's Amherst.

Emily Dickinson's scientific references in her poetry come most frequently from the fields of botany, geology and astronomy, her interest in which derives directly or indirectly from Hitchcock. It is significant that in the first two sciences colour (of flowers and gems respectively) plays an important part, while in the third, the interplay of light and darkness seems to fascinate the poet. Indeed, it might be said that in each case colour or light in the abstract is of greater interest to her than the actual objects -- flowers, precious stones or stars -- upon which the science is based. Here she differs from Hitchcock: while her allusive technique is indebted to him in the case of these three sciences, she has none of his confidence in

orthodox religion, and puts her knowledge to use towards the end not of reconciliation, but of ironic juxtaposition.

To deal briefly first with botany: in this poem, botanical terminology and biblical allusion appear together, but there is nothing Hitchcockian in the poem's tone:

The Lilac is an ancient shrub  
 But ancierter than that  
 The Firmamental Lilac  
 Upon the Hill tonight --  
 The Sun subsiding on his Course  
 Bequeathes this final Plant  
 To Contemplation -- not to Touch --  
 The Flower of Occident.  
 Of one Corolla is the West --  
 The Calyx is the Earth --  
 The Capsules burnished Seeds the Stars --  
 The Scientist of Faith  
 His research has but just begun --  
 Above his synthesis  
 The Flora unimpeachable  
 To Time's Analysis --  
 "Eye hath not seen" may possibly  
 Be current with the Blind  
 But let not Revelation  
 By theses be detained --  
 (P.1241).

Here the colour, "Firmamental Lilac", takes precedence over the "ancient shrub" itself. In its apocalyptic appearance at sunset, this colour reveals how far it is beyond the grasp of the "Scientist of Faith" -- a suitable nomenclature for Hitchcock himself. In other words, practitioners of neither the science of botany nor that of hermeneutics can make anything greater of this colour now it stands alone and transcendent; on the contrary, their analysis would only serve to "detain" or diminish it. Like a soul freed from a body, the colour stands triumphantly apart from the flower;

those who wish to dissect the mortal part direct their attention downwards instead of in the nobler direction, upwards.

Yet to give this lesson about "Color's Revelations" (P.496), Dickinson had to know her botany as well as her Bible, and indeed it was one of the first sciences she studied at school.<sup>96</sup> At the age of fifteen she began keeping a herbarium, which Richard Sewall tells us reveals "a concern for precise Latin nomenclature".<sup>97</sup> Another critic speaks of the success Dickinson had in maintaining far from their sub-tropical habitats the large number of exotic plants she kept in her conservatory garden.<sup>98</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Dickinson wrote the following to Higginson in 1877:

When Flowers annually died and I was a child, I  
used to read Dr Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers  
of North America. This comforted their Absence --  
assuring me they lived. (L.488)<sup>99</sup>

It is hard to maintain a view of Dickinson as a poet who, in Patterson's words, was "so little [a] close observer of Nature",<sup>100</sup> when these facts are taken into account. It is harder still when we remember that Dickinson wrote numerous poems describing specific flowers in detail;<sup>101</sup> that she sent a large number of poems and letters inspired by and accompanying floral gifts to her friends;<sup>102</sup> and that, as in P.1241, she frequently employed botanical terminology.<sup>103</sup>

Like botany, geology, as a result of Hitchcock's presiding influence, had an important place on the curricu-

lum at Amherst Academy.<sup>104</sup> In botany, the significance of the colours of flowers seemed to Dickinson greater than that of the knowledge to be gleaned from botanical dissection -- but this was the conclusion of an amateur botanist of some distinction. In the case of geology, the colours of gems certainly attracted her more than any other aspect of the field, but her knowledge of the nature and properties of gems and other minerals underlies her use of jewel-imagery and ensures its effectiveness. Rebecca Patterson's article "Emily Dickinson's Jewel Imagery" goes into this topic in detail, implying that the poet could have obtained all her jewel-names, together with those of other "precious organic substances"<sup>105</sup> such as pearl, ivory and amber, from the Bible, particularly the "Gem chapter" (L.536) from Revelation.<sup>106</sup> We may recall this stanza:

Of Mines, I little know -- myself --  
 But just the names, of Gems --  
 The Colors of the Commonest --  
 And scarce of Diadems --  
 (P.299).

But this ingenuousness is a poetic mask. Dickinson's frequent use of jewel-names does more than simply increase her colour-vocabulary, as for example, analysis of her use of "emerald" will show.<sup>107</sup> Her mineralogical knowledge, moreover, was not confined to gems. The phrase "Quartz contentment" (P.341) demonstrates that she knew of the hard, transparent and brittle qualities of this rock, while in the metaphors of granite and wedge (P.789) and flint and adze (P.958) can be

seen evidence of her familiarity with geological method.

Dickinson shares with Hitchcock a fascination with more sensational aspects of geology, though she uses them in quite a different way from he.<sup>108</sup> The volcano, for example, symbolises in her poetry violent emotion often unsuccessfully repressed:

Volcanoes be in Sicily  
And South America  
I judge from my Geography  
Volcanoes nearer here  
A Lava step at any time  
Am I inclined to climb  
A Crater I may contemplate  
Vesuvius at Home  
(P.1705).

The most effective development of this motif occurs in another poem in which allusions to geology and archaeology (Pompeii) help towards the creation of an image of fiery red glimpsed against a backcloth of darkness, itself a pictorialisation of the poet's emotional predicament:

A still -- Volcano -- Life --  
That flickered in the night --  
When it was dark enough to do  
Without erasing sight --  
  
A quiet -- Earthquake Style --  
Too subtle to suspect  
By natures this side Naples --  
The North cannot detect  
  
The Solemn -- Torrid -- Symbol --  
The lips that never lie --  
Whose hissing Corals part -- and shut --  
And Cities -- ooze away --  
(P.601).

The "ooze" of the last line refers of course to the movement of molten volcanic lava.

Dickinson's knowledge of botany and geology has not passed unnoticed by critics, nor indeed have her volcano-metaphors.<sup>109</sup> Little notice, however, has been taken of her interest in another science in which the nature of light, and hence of colour, plays an important role, namely astronomy. Her interest in the stars dates from her early youth:

Your beau idéal D. I have not seen lately. I presume he was changed into a star some night while gazing at them, and placed in the constellation Orion between Bellatrix and Betelgeux.

(L.5)

In this letter of 1845, the whimsicality of the idea of this starry-eyed young man's translation to the heavens should not blind us to the fact that this knowledge of the constituent stars of the constellation of Orion was surely unusual in a fourteen-year-old girl of that time. Yet this girl lived in Hitchcock's Amherst, a town whose College in 1848 "celebrated its relief from financial stringency" by constructing an observatory.<sup>110</sup> Sewall informs us that astronomy was one of the subjects studied by the older students at Amherst Academy,<sup>111</sup> while an entry in the Mount Holyoke Journal in 1848 notes that "Miss Hazens classes in Astronomy are now up".<sup>112</sup> On May 16 of the same year, Dickinson wrote to a friend that "My studies for this series are Astronomy and Rhetoric".<sup>113</sup>

In her use of astronomical metaphors, Dickinson goes far beyond the conventional symbolic associations drawn upon by so many of her contemporary poets. In P.591

she alludes to the effect of the sun upon the atmosphere and the moon upon the tides, while in the following short poem she succinctly summarises the limitations she has discovered in her studies in astronomy:

Nature assigns the Sun --  
That -- is Astronomy --  
Nature cannot enact a Friend --  
That -- is Astrology.  
(P.1336)

The poetry is very rich in astronomical terminology: Leverrier and meteors appear in P.149; Herschel and the planet Mercury in P.835,<sup>114</sup> then there are "Pleiads" (P.23, P.82, P.282, P.851), "Orion" (P.1538), "Saturn's bar" (i.e. rings) (P.1086), "Asteroid" (P.1137), "Galaxies" (P.168), "Constellation" (P.78), "Planet/ary" (P.433, P.560), "Meteor" (P.792, P.1466), "Ellipse" (P.728), "Meridian" (P.611, P.1058), "Solstice" (P.322, P.592, P.1056), "Equinox" (P.1137), "Zodiac" (P.1025), and, in P.70, "Zenith" and "Arcturus".<sup>115</sup> The most elaborate metaphorical use of astronomical motifs occurs in this stanza from P.1299:

Enchantment's Perihelion  
Mistaken oft has been  
For the Authentic orbit  
Of it's Anterior sun.

The idea here is that "Enchantment" is but a close planetary approach to the Sun of Love, and should not be confused with that more "Authentic" Sun itself.

P.70, "Arcturus" is his other name --, is an early poem satirising the pretensions of scientific analysis. The

third stanza goes as follows:

I pull a flower from the woods --  
 A monster with a glass  
 Computes the stamens in a breath --  
 And has her in a "class"!

This monstrous botanist is probably based upon one of those indefatigable scientists drawn to Hitchcock's Amherst, such as Charles Baker Adams, ". . . whose zeal as a collector and teacher was so extreme that he could hardly bear to snatch the necessary hours for food and sleep".<sup>116</sup> However, it would be mistaken to think that in P.70, in P.1336, or in any of the poems with prism-metaphors, Emily Dickinson is really displaying a "Romantic antipathy to science".<sup>117</sup> A fairer judgement is that of Christine Avery:

She was out of sympathy with most of the basic assumptions of science, but some of its methods appealed to her and she was uniquely sensitive to the incisive quality of scientific terms and used them whenever she wanted a patch of clear, hard meaning; and she was good at a sophisticated and valuable humanizing of science.<sup>118</sup>

Dickinson is perpetually aware of the extreme limitations of scientific theory when it comes to "explaining away" the universe, and ruthless with any claim for the universal validity of a scientific hypothesis. On the other hand, "She had an essentially exact mind, naturally delighting to entertain both logical and scientific concepts."<sup>119</sup> So, she took care with the Linnean plant-names in her herbarium, and drew throughout her life upon the rich seams of vocabulary and ideas opened up to her by her education in the Amherst of



Edward Hitchcock. Then even in P.70 we may detect a delight in the weighty and mysterious "other name" ("Arcturus") which the poet invokes before dismissing it for the unpretentious monosyllable "star". We remember her fascination for sonorous place-names "for their power of suggestion and the strangeness and allusiveness of the distant and the unknown", as McNaughton puts it.<sup>120</sup>

Emily Dickinson, by virtue of her education and milieu in the days before her seclusion became total, absorbed a surprisingly large amount of knowledge of scientific fact, methodology and terminology. This is very significant for the purposes of this study: being aware of scientific theories of light and colour enabled Dickinson to invest these phenomena with new charges of meaning. Further, being able to allude to contemporary scientific developments from a position of knowledge enabled her confidently to free herself from the dissociation of sensibility vis-à-vis colour that characterised the eighteenth-century Newtonian afterglow, while at the same time to stand aloof from the often wild flailings of the first-generation Romantic poets with their doctrine of "we murder to dissect".<sup>121</sup> She knew enough about Newtonian light and colour to join in the prevailing trend of pointing out the limitations of that spectrum, yet unlike Goethe she was prepared to retain certain concepts from it for figurative purposes, such as the prism-metaphor. Like Goethe, she was an Augenmensch, a fact attested to as

strongly by those critics taking a biographical approach to her work as those concerned in the strictest sense with her imagery alone.<sup>122</sup> For the first time in poetry in English since the time of the Metaphysicals, here was a poet able to rejoice in the possibilities of science as well as thoroughly understand its limitations.

I will conclude this chapter by returning briefly to the idea of the prism that began it. Here is a poem in which prism and spectrum appear together with other scientific concepts — the artificial vacuum, crystallisation, the steam engine — in order to be put to work towards a quite unscientific goal:

Banish Air from Air --  
 Divide Light if you dare --  
 They'll meet  
 While Cubes in a Drop  
 Or Pellets of Shape  
 Fit.  
 Films cannot annul  
 Odors return whole  
 Force Flame  
 And with a Blonde push  
 Over your impotence  
 Flits Steam.

(P.854)

This is not addressed to the "monstrous" botanist who would rather see a butterfly pinned in a case than a live one in a field, but to the scientist who has come to a truer understanding of where an increase in knowledge should lead. For all man's ingenuity in analysis and classification of the natural world is expended ultimately in vain, such is the profound unity and indivisibility of that world. The

prism is inadequate as a tool for human spiritual advance, because it sunders rather than emphasises that unity. It is the great task of a poet, in the eyes of Emily Dickinson, to act not as prism but as converging lens, to aim at, if not to achieve the gathering together of the different coloured rays into the white light of unity, eternity, and immortality.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup>Patterson, op. cit., p.275.

<sup>2</sup>S.P. Rosenbaum, A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson (Ithaca, N.Y., 1964).

<sup>3</sup>This, as an example of poetic clairvoyance, is hardly diminished by the fact that it would be by using the other, infra-red end of the spectrum that twentieth-century technologists would develop a means of literally seeing in the dark.

<sup>4</sup>The Miner's Safety Lamp was developed by Humphrey Davy in 1815. But Emily Dickinson can be even more up-to-date than this: Christine Avery, "Science, Technology and Emily Dickinson", British Association for American Studies Bulletin, IX (December, 1964), p.52, shows how in P.954 Dickinson uses the doctrine of the Conservation of Energy proposed by Von Helmholtz in 1847.

<sup>5</sup>See Letters, III, pp.840-841.

<sup>6</sup>This suggests Dickinson knew of the analogies drawn by Newton himself between the colours of his spectrum and the notes of the diatonic scale in, for example, Opticks. . ., III, i, 14. See n.37 below.

<sup>7</sup>The full sentence is as follows: "The Summer has been wide and deep, and a deeper Autumn is but the Gleam comitant of that waylaying Light --" (Letters, III, p.840).

<sup>8</sup>Poems, III, p.860.

<sup>9</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.279-280.

<sup>10</sup>Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (Amherst, Mass., 1844). A copy of this two-volume work, signed by Edward Dickinson, the poet's father, is in the Houghton Library at Harvard. It is traditionally held to be the one used by the poet herself. It will subsequently be referred to as "Webster".

<sup>11</sup>Webster correctly derives the word "crystal" from the Greek κρυσος, "frost". Cf. P.1624 for the personified Frost's "cutting edge".

<sup>12</sup>See Poems, II, p.470; Poems, III, p.911.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, "Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau" (c.1804).

<sup>14</sup>Plato, Timeus, trans. Rev. R.G. Bury (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1929), p.173.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.175.

<sup>16</sup>Aristotle, On Colours [Peri Chromatōn], in Minor Works, I, trans. W.S. Hett (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1936), pp.3-45. According to the translator, "All authorities are agreed that this tract was not written by Aristotle; but though it has been assigned both to Theophrastus and to Strato there is really no evidence upon which to determine the authorship" (p.3).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.5.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.9.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.15.

<sup>20</sup>Epicurus, The Extant Remains, trans. and ed. Cyril Bailey (Oxford, 1926), p.121.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.195.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp.194-195.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.27.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp.22, 182.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.388.

<sup>26</sup>Plato, op. cit., p.177.

<sup>27</sup>Lucretius, On the Nature of the Universe [De Rerum Natura], trans. R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth, 1951), p.83.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.81.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.83.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.83.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp.131-146.

<sup>32</sup>Leonardo da Vinci, The Literary Works . . ., I, trans. and ed. Jean Paul Richter (Oxford, 1977), p.121.

<sup>33</sup>Aristotle omitted blue as a primary colour; Pliny claimed that there were only three primaries, kermes red, amethystine, and a "conchyliated" colour. See Faber Birren, Color: a Survey in Words and Pictures (New Hyde Park, N.Y., 1963), p.68.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp.69-70.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p.70, quoting Boyle's Experiments and Considerations Touching Colors (1670).

<sup>36</sup>See Adrian Stokes, "Colour and Form", in The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, II (London, 1978), pp.14 ff.

<sup>37</sup>See Sir Isaac Newton, Opticks. . . (1704 ed.) [Facsimile by Culture et Civilisation (Brussels, 1966)].

<sup>38</sup>See Plato, op. cit., p.173.

<sup>39</sup>Marjorie Hope Nicholson, Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's "Opticks" and the Eighteenth Century Poets (Princeton, 1946), pp.23-25.

<sup>40</sup>John Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Book II, Chapter IV, section 4. This work, Berkeley's New Theory of Vision, and Addison's Spectator (No.411) are quoted in Nicholson, op. cit., p.82.

<sup>41</sup>The phrase is T.S. Eliot's. See "The Metaphysical Poets", in Selected Essays, 3rd ed. (London, 1951), p.288.

<sup>42</sup>Locke, op. cit., Book III, Chapter IV, section 11. Quoted in Nicholson, op. cit., pp.83-84.

<sup>43</sup>See Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, ed. with an intro. by James T. Boulton (Notre Dame, Ind., and London, 1968), p.121: "But there is such a similitude in the pleasures of these senses [touch and sight] that I am apt to fancy, if it were possible that one might discern colour by feeling (as it is said some blind men have done) that the same colours, and the same disposition of colouring, which are found beautiful to the sight, would be found likewise most grateful to the touch."

<sup>44</sup>See James Thomson, "A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton" (1727):

First the flaming red  
Sprung vivid forth; the tawny orange next;  
And next delicious yellow; by whose side  
Fell the kind beams of all-refreshing green;  
Then the pure blue, that swells autumnal skies,  
Etherial played; and then, of sadder hue,  
Emerged the deepened indigo, as when  
The heavy-skirted evening droops with frost;  
While the last gleamings of refracted light  
Died in the fainting violet away.

(102-111)

See Nicholson, op. cit., pp.45 ff.

<sup>45</sup>William Blake, "The Song of Los" (1795), I, 46-48.

<sup>46</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Contributions to Optics [Beiträge zur Optik], in Rupprecht Matthaei, ed., Goethe's Color Theory, trans. Herb Aach (New York, etc., 1971), p.20.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.25.

<sup>48</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, The Color Theory [Zur Farbenlehre], in Matthaei, ed., op. cit., pp.69-200. A facsimile of the 1840 edition of Eastlake's translation is reproduced in ibid., pp. 209-275.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.71.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.73.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.155.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.156.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.158.

<sup>54</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, II, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), p.810.

<sup>55</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Theory of Colours", In Parerga and Paralipomena, II, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford, 1974), pp.177-200.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.193.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.195. Schopenhauer concludes with a sarcastic jibe at the German nation, claiming their stupidity in preferring Newton to Goethe is only equal to that in their extravagant praise of Hegel, ". . . that scribbler of nonsense and absolutely hollow philosophaster, who is devoid of mind and merit". (Ibid., p.196).

<sup>58</sup>Birren, op. cit., p.76.

<sup>59</sup>F. Birren, [A] History of Color in Painting (New York, 1965), p.157.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.140.

<sup>61</sup>[A] Handlist of Books Found in the Home of Emily Dickinson at Amherst, Massachusetts, Spring, 1950 (Cambridge, Mass., 1951). This list is not entirely reliable, however, as an indication of what Emily Dickinson read. See Jack Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886 (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p.8: ". . . even the usefulness of the Dickinson family library now at Harvard is limited by the fact that books from the Austin Dickinson and Edward Dickinson households have been mixed and, in most cases, dates of acquisition and individual ownership are uncertain."

<sup>62</sup>D.R. Hay, A Nomenclature of Colours, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh and London, 1846).

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p.6.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p.9.



<sup>65</sup>In 1678, Christian Huyghens proposed the first wave-theory of light, thus opposing Newton's particle theory. Circa 1800, William Herschel discovered that there was invisible radiation below the visible range of the spectrum (infra-red rays).

<sup>66</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.206-207.

<sup>67</sup>See Chapter Four, p.261.

<sup>68</sup>See Chapter Four, p.261 and n.122.

<sup>69</sup>Hay, op. cit., p.[1].

<sup>70</sup>Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson (2 vols.) [hereafter referred to as Life] (London, 1976).

<sup>71</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.343.

<sup>72</sup>Edward Hitchcock, Elementary Geology, 3rd ed. (New York, 1842). See Sewall, Life, II, p.346.

<sup>73</sup>Edward Hitchcock, The Power of Christian Benevolence Illustrated in . . . Mary Lyon (Northampton and Philadelphia, 1851). See Sewall, Life, II, pp.358-367.

<sup>74</sup>Edward Hitchcock, The Religion of Geology and Its Connected Sciences (Boston, 1852).

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., vi-vii.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.398.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p.398.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.399.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., pp.399-400.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p.401.

<sup>81</sup>Edward Hitchcock, Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons (Amherst, Mass., 1850).

<sup>82</sup>"The lecture entitled "The Coronation of Winter" . . . has been published in a pamphlet form at the request of the students of Amherst College, and the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, before whom it was originally delivered" (ibid., p.[5]). See also Sewall, Life, II, p.344.

<sup>83</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.344.

<sup>84</sup>See n.61 above.

<sup>85</sup>1 Corinthians 15: 35-38.

<sup>86</sup>Hitchcock, Religious Lectures . . ., p.13.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p.25.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p.31. In 1799 Broussard, an officer in Napoleon's army, discovered the Rosetta Stone. By 1821 Champollion had come to an understanding of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics with the help of the Stone. By 1846 Rawlinson had deciphered the cuneiform script of Ancient Mesopotamia. There had been excavations at Pompeii (buried by an eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D.) since 1738. See P.175 and p.49 of this chapter.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p.34 ff. See P.129.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p.43.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p.47.

<sup>93</sup>It has not, I think, been pointed out that Dickinson used terminology from the new art or science of photography in her poetry. Daguerre produced his first pictures in 1830, the year of Dickinson's birth, and seventeen years later, she sat for a daguerreotype at Mount Holyoke, the only certain photograph of her still to exist. Surely she is the first major poet to have used metaphors taken from photography to talk about the soul?

The Soul's distinct connection  
With immortality  
Is best disclosed by Danger  
Or quick Calamity --

As Lightning on a Landscape  
 Exhibits Sheets of Place --  
 Not yet suspected -- but for Flash --  
 And Click -- and Suddenness.

(P.974)

A variant "Developes" [sic] for "Exhibits" makes the photographic element in the metaphor clearer. There is also an appearance of the word "negative" in a photographic sense in P.1042. Once again, her tropes are audacious: "Negative" does not make an appearance in its photographic sense in Webster until the Appendix of the 1859 edition.

<sup>94</sup>The most notable exceptions are C. Avery (see n.4 above) and Henry W. Wells in his chapter "Science and Poetry" in Introduction to Emily Dickinson (Chicago, 1947), pp.180-186. See also Sewall, Life, II, pp.354-356. William Howard, "Emily Dickinson's Poetic Vocabulary", PMLA, LXXII (March, 1957), 230, and Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p.75, both mention Dickinson's borrowings from scientific terminology.

<sup>95</sup>See Sewall, Life, II, p.698: "She almost always clipped down the Biblical rhetoric or used a single word or phrase as shorthand for the original . . . Matthew 25: 40 ("Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me") becomes "Unto the little, unto me," and in another letter simply "Inasmuch --"."

<sup>96</sup>See L.3 (12 May, 1842).

<sup>97</sup>Sewall, Life, I, p.86n.

<sup>98</sup>Jean McClure Mudge, Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home (Amherst, Mass., 1975), p.148.

<sup>99</sup>Quoted and explicated by Sewall in Life, II, p.348 and n.

<sup>100</sup>See n.1 above.

<sup>101</sup>Suffice it to say that no fewer than fifty poems mention the rose in greater or lesser detail.

<sup>102</sup>See L.739, L.812, L.848, L.904, L.935 etc.

<sup>103</sup>Such as "sepal" (P.19), "stamens" (P.70), "Corolla" (P.1424), and "Calyx" (P.339 and P.606).

<sup>104</sup>See L.6.

<sup>105</sup>Rebecca Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Jewel Imagery", American Literature, XLII (1970-1971), 496.

<sup>106</sup>See Revelation 21: 9-12.

<sup>107</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.242-245.

<sup>108</sup>For Hitchcock, volcanoes exemplify divine benevolence, in that they provide safety valves for otherwise far more destructive forces. See The Religion of Geology, pp.204 ff.

<sup>109</sup>See, for example, Sewall, Life, II, p.516, on the Vesuvius metaphor in the second "Master " letter (L.233), and Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Jewel Imagery", p.503 on volcanoes, garnets and teeth.

<sup>110</sup>George Frisbie Whicher, This Was a Poet (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1957), P.44.

<sup>111</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.349.

<sup>112</sup>See Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, I (New Haven, 1960), p.141.

<sup>113</sup>See L.23.

<sup>114</sup>Urbain J.J. Leverrier's calculations, based on gravitational forces the source of which was at that time unknown, led to the discovery of the planet Neptune in 1846 by Galle. It was in 1845 that Leverrier noticed that Mercury's perihelion (the point in a planet's orbit when it is nearest the sun) changed each year, and he posited from this the existence of a planet "Vulcan" between Mercury and the Sun. It was only after Einstein had redefined the laws of gravitation that it was discovered that all planets have a similar shift, the less pronounced the farther from the Sun they are. Johnson is correct when he calls Leverrier's name "a synonym for skilled scientific observation" (Poems, I, 107). For Herschel, see n.65 above. Capps, op. cit., p.105,

points out that Dickinson learnt her Herschelian astronomy from Denison Olmstead's An Introduction to Astronomy, an 1861 edition of which appears on the Harvard Handlist. . . .

<sup>115</sup>To this list might be added three uses of the word "observed" in its astronomical sense (P.3, P.985, P.1672).

<sup>116</sup>Whicher, op. cit., p.47.

<sup>117</sup>See n.1 above.

<sup>118</sup>Avery, op. cit., p.53.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., p.51.

<sup>120</sup>Ruth Flanders McNaughton, The Imagery of Emily Dickinson (Lincoln, Neb., 1949), p.16.

<sup>121</sup>William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned" (1798), 28.

<sup>122</sup>See John Cody, After Great Pain: the Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p.416: "Emily Dickinson suffered for a protracted period from photophobic and ocular pain . . . whatever physical pathology was present was emphasized by the intense emotional investment the poet had in her eyes and by her irrational expectations of blindness". See also John Evangelist Walsh, The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson (New York, 1971), pp.136-137, 142 for the idea that the words "I had a terror -- since September -- I could tell to none --" in the second letter to Higginson (L.261) refer to the poet's fears of losing her eyesight.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE POET AS PAINTER

#### 1. The Problem of Originality

Critics continue to show an interest in attempting to isolate and define the distinctive qualities of Emily Dickinson's work. Some seek to do this by an intensive analysis of a portion of her oeuvre, others by contrasting the poet with her contemporaries or by drawing analogies between her work and that of poets far removed from her by time, language or geographical distance. The conclusions reached by critics adopting these different approaches have often been remarkably similar; as Louise Bogan has said: "At the highest summit of her art, she resembles no-one".<sup>1</sup>

One of the most thorough-going of the first kind of approach is Porter's Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry.<sup>2</sup> Porter examines only the poems which, according to the Harvard dating, were written before and during the poet's initial correspondence with Higginson in 1862. His aim is to discover what, in Dickinson's case, is the "conventional vocabulary of basic forms"<sup>3</sup> that he feels is essential to the creative act in general. That is to say, he attempts to define what combination of stylistic elements is characteristic of the poet's formative years, elements later to develop into her unique

poetic voice. He summarises his conclusions in this way: Emily Dickinson's early poetry is particularly successful in its "artful generation of multiple contexts";<sup>4</sup> in its "ability to bring the formless remembrance of experience into intense and present reality";<sup>5</sup> and in its "concision".<sup>6</sup> Porter continues:

But ultimately the totality of her art in the early years is greater than the sum of the individual elements that go into its makeup. Her expressive skills combined to effect a concision, a specific gravity, as it were, not often encountered in English poetry.<sup>7</sup>

This "specific gravity" is a scientific metaphor we might expand further: Emily Dickinson's poetry has a high density and weightiness in relation to the small volume of the individual poem. Porter implies that to achieve such a quality of compression requires a mastery of technique beyond the capabilities of many poets, and so Dickinson stands out among her contemporaries for her technical achievements.

In a chapter of his Introduction to Emily Dickinson entitled "Literary Analogues", Henry Wells arrives at a similar conclusion.<sup>8</sup> His route, however, is different from Porter's: he attempts to draw parallels between Dickinson's stylistic characteristics and those of other poets from the earliest times, and in so doing to place her in the broadest possible literary-historical context. In many cases, the basis for his comparisons is a quality that he, like Porter, sees as being particularly characteristic of her work -- compression of thought, or, as we now might term it, "spe-

cific gravity". So, Wells finds that Sappho and Anacreon are like Dickinson in their "terseness, directness and fervor";<sup>9</sup> Lao Tse and other Chinese poets share her "aphoristic and oracular style";<sup>10</sup> the Japanese Hokku poets her "extraordinary delicacy and succinctness";<sup>11</sup> and the Persians Saadi and Omar Khayyam parallel her in their mastery of the verse aphorism.<sup>12</sup> Writers as different as Pascal, Goethe as aphorist, and Heine, claims Wells, also have close affinities with her in this respect.<sup>13</sup> As for poets writing in the English language, Wells believes that she is closer to Shakespeare than to Donne (a rather surprising statement), but she "drains off Shakespeare's baroque eloquence, leaving the terser New England statement".<sup>14</sup> Of the other seventeenth-century poets, she has affinities with Herrick in form, but is closer to the austere Vaughan in content<sup>15</sup> -- and Wells also notes that a poem of Herbert's was mistaken for one of hers by Millicent Todd Bingham and found its way into Bolts of Melody.<sup>16</sup> Finally, she is close to the Emerson of the "racy verse aphorism"<sup>17</sup> and, in different ways though none of them of the first importance, to Traherne, Prior, Smart, Burns and Blake.<sup>18</sup>

We may be tempted to conclude that for a poet to have so many and various apparent affinities with others implies that she has genuine affinities with none, and that Louise Bogan is right. Certainly, several critics have gone out of their way to minimise the closeness of the relationship



between Dickinson and the group of English poets who unquestionably possess "specific gravity", namely the Metaphysicals. Whicher, from her misspelling of Vaughan's name, surmises that "she was not well acquainted with her distant predecessors";<sup>19</sup> Ruth Miller believes that so little was the esteem in which the Metaphysicals were held by Dickinson's contemporaries that it is unlikely she would have had access to more than the smallest selection of their work;<sup>20</sup> and Sewall thinks that the differences are more fundamental than the similarities: "She lacked the sense of sin that plagued Donne, and the prevailing serenity of Herbert."<sup>21</sup> To summarise: one of the outstanding stylistic characteristics of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and recognised as such by two critics adopting very different approaches to it, is what might be called her "specific gravity". This is a quality found most obviously in poets who seem to have had very little influence on her, yet scarcely at all in most of the poets she professed to admire, such as the female Victorians. With the exception of Emerson, the poets with whom she has most in common were probably completely unknown to her.

Some critics have been content not to pursue the question of her relationship to the continuum of literary history, seeing no reason why a great poet should not bloom spontaneously given the right climatic conditions. In Douglas Duncan's words:

Her originality was to a large extent the natural flowering of her poetic personality, and was not achieved, as is more usual, through a painful breach with tradition. We therefore find in her manner of writing, as in her vision of life, the sort of essential honesty which Eliot found in Blake and attributed to his freedom from the pressures of a literary education.<sup>22</sup>

This "essential honesty" is not the same as naivety; its possessor is not thereby characterised as an unlettered bard, but as an artist who is prepared to subordinate the demands of convention to those of inner compulsion. It is necessary to strike a balance between this view and the one that seeks to synthesise a poet from a mixture of literary influences, if we are to understand the nature of Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery.

It is my belief that Dickinson's use of colour in her writings is the aspect of her work in which much of her originality resides. Indeed, much of her "specific gravity" is the product of her discovery of the literary potential of colour. Yet as we may allow that a poet should bloom spontaneously only if we are sure what made the climatic conditions favourable, so we must establish what links Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery with that employed by her predecessors before we can estimate the extent of her originality in this field. To those who believe that colour is merely a descriptive resource which a poet may occasionally choose to elevate to the rank of symbol, such arguments may sound far-fetched. Yet for Emily Dickinson, colour is both a means of expression and a theme in its own right; in her

colour-imagery lies the key to her "specific gravity" and thus to her originality. The implications of these ideas have not yet been fully explored by critics, and this chapter, before coming to grips with Dickinson's own attitude towards colour, will offer an explanation of why such an exploration has not yet been undertaken.

## 2. Emily Dickinson's Use of Colour: the Critics

Several critics have talked about Emily Dickinson's use of colour in passing, and two have dealt with it in some detail. Yet though these critics have stated or implied that colour is a prominent feature of this poet's work, none has managed to answer the question whether she uses colour differently from other poets, or only more frequently.

Sister Cullen does not attempt any kind of comparative study.<sup>23</sup> Instead, she associates different kinds of colour-imagery with different themes: descriptive colour-imagery with Nature poetry, allegorical with Love poetry, and anagogical with poetry of Death and Eternity. At the same time, she reveals some of the standard emotional associations of the individual colours, and shows how Dickinson uses colours for these conventional associations, if occasionally in "peculiar ways".<sup>24</sup> So, according to Sister Cullen, "Purple is Emily Dickinson's favorite color",<sup>25</sup> a judgement based on the frequency with which this colour appears in her

poetry. The reason for this frequency is the "traditional connotation of purple", namely "a combination of courage (red) and nobility (blue), producing a twofold connotation of royalty and spirituality".<sup>26</sup> This works, perhaps, for the "allegorical" Love poetry, but in dealing with the other categories Cullen runs into difficulties. So, in her chapter on "descriptive" colour-imagery in the Nature poetry, Cullen admits that Dickinson "rarely uses color in a non-metaphorical manner"<sup>27</sup> but is not prepared to explain how the "metaphorical" level in the poems of Nature differs from that of the "allegorical" Love poems or the "anagogical" Eschatological poems. The problem is that the poet herself does not keep to Cullen's neat schema, nor do Cullen's categories of colour-imagery have any real meaning, as she herself recognises when she speaks of the "metaphorical" use of colour in "descriptive" poetry.<sup>28</sup>

Cullen's concluding remark to her third chapter implies that Emily Dickinson did make metaphorical use of the Newtonian spectrum, but in a far more conventional way than the one described in the previous chapter.<sup>29</sup> According to Cullen, white is Dickinson's ultimate colour because it contains all the others -- as God contains all perfections. She concludes: "Because her equation is perfect, with theological exactitude, she knows that God is 'white' because God is All".<sup>30</sup> It is probably wishful thinking more than anything else that prompts this, Sister Cullen's most sustained attempt at symbolic exegesis. The evidence of numerous poems

in which God is directly invoked shows that in no sense does Emily Dickinson's attitude towards God reflect a belief in Him as repository of all perfections.<sup>31</sup> The colours of the spectrum, moreover, do not all have equally positive or even aesthetic value for the poet, as a glance at P.1045, "Nature rarer uses Yellow", will immediately reveal. Even if Dickinson's God did contain all the perfections, her white certainly does not, and Cullen's equation loses its exactitude. In the end, therefore, Sister Cullen provides little help in resolving the question of what is unusual or original about Dickinson's colour-imagery, beyond the suggestion that this poet "felt" colour and "freshens her poetry"<sup>32</sup> by using it to express certain emotional states.

Rebecca Patterson's motive for her study of Emily Dickinson's use of colour has already been mentioned.<sup>33</sup> In spite of her belief in Dickinson's antipathy to science,<sup>34</sup> Patterson raises many interesting points, even if she does not go on to develop them in detail. She speaks, for example, of the "synesthesia, perhaps playful"<sup>35</sup> that is a characteristic of Dickinson's colour-imagery in both the poems and the letters, although she does not elaborate upon this. Nor does she explain why, as a "belated Romantic", Dickinson "knew that a poet handled color words as a painter handled colors".<sup>36</sup> She is sure, however, that Dickinson's colour-imagery is typical of belated Romanticism:

One of the marks of Romantic style was a deliberate cultivation of color, and Romantic theorists devo-

ted chapters of mystic speculation to its influence on the soul. . . . when she decided to become a poet she set about acquiring a serviceable selection of color words as one more element in the vocabulary appropriate to her craft.<sup>37</sup>

Yet if this is true, we may wonder why Patterson should bother studying what is merely a reflection of Dickinson's debt to the most conventional elements in the work of her immediate antecedents.

The statistical tables that Patterson provides to support her theories<sup>38</sup> reveal instead the dangers of misapplying Caroline Spurgeon's methods. According to Patterson, the whole of Emily Dickinson's poetry (19,537 lines) has an average of one colour-word per thirty-seven lines. This she compares with arbitrarily-selected portions of the works of the Brownings, Emerson, Keats and Shakespeare; the Emerson selection, for example, has a total of only 3,900 lines, a mere fifth of the Dickinson total. The colour-words are picked for statistical analysis as arbitrarily as the poets and the selections from their work: red, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, black, gray-white (as though these two colours were habitually linked in poets' minds) and "variegated". It is by no means clear what this last word refers to. According to Patterson, it has an incidence of zero in Dickinson's poetry, so it cannot refer to the effects achieved in a line like "She sweeps with many-colored Brooms --" (P.219) nor to the numerous occurrences of such adjectives as "spotted", "dappled" and "freckled". Finally, to choose only the word

"red" and not the more than twenty colour-words intimately connected with it -- "scarlet", "crimson", "vermilion" and "pink" are the most obvious examples -- is utterly to fail to do justice to Emily Dickinson's remarkable sensitivity to colour tone. It is hardly surprising, then, that Patterson's charts of comparative incidence yield little of significance. Her results may be summarised thus: Dickinson's poetry is, on average, a lot more colourful than Aurora Leigh and Shakespeare's Sonnets together with six of his plays; a little more colourful than Emerson's "Early Poems"; but not as colourful as Men and Women or Keats's "Narrative Poems and Odes".<sup>39</sup>

If the chart of comparative usage is unfruitful, more promising is the table used to clinch the major thesis of Patterson's pair of articles: that an increase in colour-incidence in the poetry reflects one of the poet's emotional peaks. Yet even this chart is a disappointment in the end. Patterson analyses year by year (according to the Harvard dating) the poems of 1858-1866, and works out a figure representing lines-per-colour-word. The year 1862 produced the largest crop of colour-words, but also by far the largest number of lines (5,420). This gives a figure of forty-one lines-per-colour-word for 1862, rather moderate when compared, for example, to the figure of 20.5 for 1859. Yet the critical consensus, which Patterson does not dispute, is that the poet had some sort of severe emotional crisis in

1862, while 1859 was a comparatively uneventful year in her life.<sup>40</sup> Patterson explains that the high figure for 1859 reflects a burst of interest on the poet's part in the Book of Revelation.<sup>41</sup> But even if this is true, this is hardly the emotional crisis that warrants Patterson's concluding remarks on this topic:

There is a disturbing impression of intense, restless color in a period of raging creativity and of powerful emotional tensions. . . by 1865 the fire is virtually extinguished.<sup>42</sup>

The key word here is "impression": for Patterson's articles, though having greater pretensions to scientific analysis, are in the end quite as impressionistic as Sister Cullen's thesis. It is safe to say that tabulations of this sort would be quite misleading in the study of any poet's colour-imagery.<sup>43</sup>

Few of the major critical works on Emily Dickinson have failed to mention her sensitivity to the visual world in general and to colour in particular. Some have seen her use of colour as a stylistic idiosyncrasy, to be compared with her use of exotic geographical names or her metaphors drawn from royalty. Whicher, for example, adopts a patronising tone:

The undistinguished verses written before Emily was twenty . . . show her using birds and flowers and sunsets as threads whereon to string words like bright beads. She revels in gold, crimson, opal, ermine, purple, and cochineal, but there is little substance within all this gorgeousness.<sup>44</sup>

Whicher believes that Dickinson's later poetry, in its "stripping off of loose, extraneous material until only the



essential remained",<sup>45</sup> is a great advance on this earlier "undistinguished" stuff. He compares two poems about hummingbirds, P.500 and P.1463, to prove his point, and shows how the latter, unlike the former, captures the "whole sensation of hummingbird".<sup>46</sup> He recognises that a sophisticated manipulation of colour is important to the success of P.1463, but not that a sense of the bird's gorgeous colour is what is lacking in P.500 -- that "cochineal" that he has dismissed as a feature of Dickinson's juvenilia. It is in the mature poem that the poet revels in emerald and cochineal, while the early poem is quite colourless by comparison. It will not do, therefore, to dismiss Dickinson's love of colour as the over-lush sensuousness of the young poet later pared away for the better by the experienced artist. For Emily Dickinson, there was no diminution of interest in colour between, for example, the "Purple and Cochineal" of P.60 (c.1859) and the "Rush of Cochineal" of P.1463 (c. 1879). Instead, there is a continuing concern on the part of the poet to enable colour to bear more and more emotional weight.

Notwithstanding his prejudice against her "gorgeousness", Whicher, in a passing remark about P.1463, reveals more understanding of the nature of Dickinson's mature colour-imagery than is to be found in either Cullen or Patterson:

So, it is said, Japanese artists study bird or fish or flower until they have absorbed it into themselves, and when they paint, paint not an object before them but a mental image.<sup>47</sup>

For it is in the drawing and development of the analogies between the art of poetry and that of painting that critics have come closest to seeing Emily Dickinson the colourist as she saw herself. Henry Wells, for example, cites P.627, "The Tint I cannot take -- is best --", as the poet's statement in support of his idea that "Her art, like that of a great painter, depends on delicate inflections of line, color, and texture".<sup>48</sup> Earlier, Wells draws a close analogy between Dickinson and Albert Pinkham Ryder, the "chief painter to express American transcendentalism", who

. . . composed many poems of a highly symbolical or mystical nature which in their general conception and technique are by no means far removed from Emily's much more skilful verses. The two had kindred minds.<sup>49</sup>

This poet-painter analogy seems to illuminate the painter rather than the poet, but in another context Wells makes one that, in bringing in Dickinson's innovative use of colour, works the other way: "In many cases her radical and experimental imagery points the way to modern impressionism".<sup>50</sup> He cites P.265, "Where Ships of Purple -- gently toss --", in this connection. It is in reference to Dickinson's concision and the emotional force of her metaphor-making that Wells remarks: "All true poets are imagists, but Emily is so in a most searching sense of the word", a sense that relates her more closely to the French Symbolists than to the essentially superficial poets of the Imagist movement.<sup>51</sup>

Although his points are still based upon impression-

istic criteria -- he offers no specific parallels -- Wells has in his unsystematic way linked for the first time ideas that this chapter seeks to examine in greater detail, and later chapters will develop. He has done so by suggesting that Emily Dickinson is a poet who uses colours in a manner that is both innovative and analogous to that of certain painters. According to Wells, indeed, if we were to look for artists who express the "new tonalisms" to be found in Dickinson's poetry, we would have to do so among the European avant-garde of the time: to the French Symbolists, and even to "Debussy with his new scale in music and Monet with his new scales in color".<sup>52</sup>

For the most part, Richard Chase does not seem to have a high opinion of Dickinson's poetic vocabulary.<sup>53</sup> He dismisses as "somewhat dubiously colored" her description of a sunset sky in a letter of 1858;<sup>54</sup> he speaks of her "ideas about friendship translated into the uneasy language of jewelry";<sup>55</sup> and he places her "curious subjunctives, her jewels, her exotic names and colors, her estates, and (in one or two places) her incomprehensible shorthand" under the heading of unfortunate mannerisms.<sup>56</sup> For Chase, Dickinson's colours are not even to be viewed as imagery proper, but as an element of her "poetic stock in trade" like bees, blossoms and plush,<sup>57</sup> of her "private convention . . . of jewelry and geography",<sup>58</sup> or perhaps simply of her "paraphernalia of phoebes, leontodons, Indian pipes, orioles, and robins".<sup>59</sup>

Of her poetry as a precursor of the Modernist movement, Chase remarks:

Emily Dickinson's imagery of natural objects is usually nothing more than decoration or, at best, imagism (several critics . . . have remarked that her nature poems anticipate imagism and that like many imagist poems they show an affinity with Chinese and Japanese practice).<sup>60</sup>

That some of Dickinson's poems "at best" demonstrate a poetic technique which was not developed until the advent of a revolutionary international movement fifteen years after her death, does not strike Chase as noteworthy.

Thomas H. Johnson, in his biography of Emily Dickinson,<sup>61</sup> shows more appreciation of her image-making power than Chase, but less curiosity about the way it operates. He too uses the two hummingbird poems, P.500 and P.1463, to distinguish between the earlier and later descriptive methods in the Nature poetry. He goes on to explain why he believes the poems about flowers are not successful:

The fact is that her special talent in nature verse lay in transmuting motion, and the evanescence of color in motion, into poetry, and flowers are still life. Her sensitivity to color, to yellow in particular, she acknowledged in one poem.<sup>62</sup>

This "one poem" is P.1045, "Nature rarer uses Yellow", the very poem that the colour-specialist Rebecca Patterson had used to show how little the poet was a close observer of Nature.<sup>63</sup> Is it likely that a poet can show "sensitivity" to colour — "marked responsiveness" is Patterson's phrase<sup>64</sup> — and yet be quite wrong about its actual occurrences in Nature? Either a case needs to be made for a poet who

suffered from a strange form of colour-blindness, or these critics' judgements are founded on purely impressionistic criteria.

It is unfortunate that the critic who has made the most lengthy study of Dickinson's imagery is one of the most impressionistic of all. In her book The Imagery of Emily Dickinson, Ruth Flanders McNaughton<sup>65</sup> makes little attempt to define the scope of her study. Her two pages on colour-imagery read as a list of critical platitudes about an aspect of Dickinson's work that is too prominent to be ignored, yet apparently too elusive to be engaged in any more searching manner. So, for example, McNaughton comments:

. . . she reveals a truly feminine appreciation of color variations. Color was indeed a revelation to Emily. Her constant use of flowers as images, of course, gives color; she runs the whole gamut of the rainbow . . . often the poet uses gems for color . . . Purple, however, is her favorite color. Often she employs it for its connotation as the symbol of nobility, a practice which is similar to her usage of titles for the same purpose . . . white has a varied symbolism for Emily Dickinson . . .<sup>66</sup>

McNaughton may be said to typify the critic who has observed that Dickinson's use of colour is in some way different, special or unique, but who finds it impossible to explain in what way this is the case. It is now time to turn to three critics whose attitudes towards Emily Dickinson vary, but who have made some attempt to explain how her colour-imagery functions.

In 1937, R.P. Blackmur attempted a revaluation of the poet with the aim of piercing the fog of uncritical

idolatry characteristic of that period, and thereby destroying the "prejudice of Emily Dickinson's magnitude".<sup>67</sup>

Blackmur decided that her greatness, if it existed, lay above all in her "aptitude" for manipulating language.<sup>68</sup> He speaks perceptively of the salient characteristics of her vocabulary:

It is not a large vocabulary compared to Whitman's, nor rich like Melville's, nor perspicuous like Henry James', nor robust like Mark Twain's. Nor is it . . . homogeneous . . . the pattern of association is kaleidoscopic and extraneous far more frequently than it is crystalline and inwardly compelled. What it is, is a small, rigidly compartmented vocabulary of general and conventional groups of terms, and a moderately capacious vocabulary of homely, acute, directly felt words from which the whole actualizing strength of the verse is drawn.<sup>69</sup>

It is curious that a critic so concerned with the removal of prejudice should compare the vocabulary of a lyric poet with those of three prolific novelists. Indeed, even the comparison with Whitman is irrelevant, because for that poet a large vocabulary was an important element of his poetics, in that it was a sign of his all-inclusiveness. Nevertheless, Blackmur has made an attempt to define the characteristics of Dickinson's vocabulary by comparison, and he continues by dealing with specific words, one of which is "purple". Of this word, he remarks:

. . . it is very near an obliteration of everything but a favorite sound, meaning something desirable, universal, distant and immediate . . . It is thoroughly representative of Emily Dickinson's habit of so employing certain favorite words that their discriminated meanings tend to melt into the single sentiment of self-expression.<sup>70</sup>

Emily Dickinson did indeed subordinate everything to the "single sentiment of self-expression"; whether or not this is a reprehensible poetic practice depends solely on the amount of sympathy the critic is prepared to extend to his subject. For if we agree with Blackmur that Dickinson's "whole actualizing strength" lies in her manipulation of a limited vocabulary of "directly felt" words, then it should be clear to us that this is exactly what lies behind her repeated use of "purple" and other colour-words.<sup>71</sup> For by repeating them in different contexts, Dickinson is able to break down the rigid, conventional structure of associations colour-words have accumulated through the centuries, and to discover in them new expressive power. This strategy is what has been referred to as her "artful generation of multiple contexts".<sup>72</sup> The colour purple, therefore, never fulfils a merely heraldic function in her poetry: that is to say, it is never allowed to become one term of an equation, "purple=royal or imperial". By using this colour in ways that are, at different times, "desirable, universal, distant and immediate", Emily Dickinson repossesses purple as a vital tool of expression.

In an essay of 1960, the poet Archibald MacLeish realises that there is something problematic about Dickinson's "imagery":

"Amethyst remembrance", "Polar expiation". Neither of these exists upon the retina. Neither can be brought into focus by the muscles of the eye. The "blue and gold mistake" of Indian summer seems to exist somewhere in the visible -- or would if one could only get rid of that "mistake" . . . But who

can describe the graphic shape of ". . . that white sustenance/Despair"? And yet all of these present themselves as images, do they not? -- act as images? Where can remembrance be amethyst? Where but in the eye?<sup>73</sup>

McLeish offers a solution to this problem by showing how Dickinson consciously mingles the invisible (Despair, the Indian summer) with the visible (the colour-words) to create an imagery that is at once abstract and visual. It is unfortunate that he never attempts to define the difference between an epithet with a colour element, such as "Amethyst", and the true colour-epithet "blue and gold".<sup>74</sup> For then he would have realised that the mind can visualise when prompted by the latter without the need of "graphic shape", for colours lose little of their evocative power when freed from objects and placed in abstract patterns. In the phrase "blue and gold mistake" (P.130), the poet is reducing the landscape of Indian summer to a semi-abstract composition of colours in much the same way as an Expressionist painter might do so.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the colours, being the visual and therefore the prominent element in the phrase, begin to usurp the position of central interest normally reserved for the noun to which the colours serve as epithet. This idea is crucial to an understanding of Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery: colour itself, freed from objects or even "graphic shape", is often the real subject of interest for the poet. In poem after poem, colour is to be found either in a completely disembodied state -- in sunrises, sunsets and other



heavenly phenomena -- or deliberately separated from an object, as in the hummingbird poem, P.1463.<sup>76</sup>

It is David Porter who perhaps comes closest to understanding the mechanics of Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery, even though he never deals with this specific aspect of her poetry. In a chapter appropriately entitled "New Ways of Articulating the World", he defines how that Dickinsonian ability to break down conventional symbolic patterns operates:

Her tendency is first to establish an equivocal locus of meaning in a poem through imagery that has more than one possible symbolic extension. The poet then proceeds to base her line of thought in only one of the symbolic extensions. The result is that, while the central argument of the poem unfolds, the other symbolic possibilities are held in suspension, functioning as complicating commentary or subdued background texture.<sup>77</sup>

This is the other side of the coin from Blackmur. That critic sees what Roy Harvey Pearce terms Dickinson's "fullest and most direct expression of that egocentrism basic to the mid-nineteenth-century American style",<sup>78</sup> as an irresponsible disregard for anything hindering the expression of self. Porter, on the other hand, shows that such disregard was essential for Emily Dickinson, and had to be systematically achieved if she were to say anything forcefully new. Porter goes on to enumerate her techniques for making this breakthrough. Often, because of the brevity of her verses, "a single word must carry all of the meaning without the benefit of contextual help from additional and qualifying words."<sup>79</sup> More significantly, there are the poet's "word tricks":

Among them are the recurrent habits of disorienting the reader's expectations by substituting an abstract word for an expected concrete word (and vice versa), by employing a noun to denote the quality of an object rather than its image, and by synesthetic employment of imagery.<sup>80</sup>

All of these "tricks" break down the rigidity of symbols in different ways: by confusion of the abstract and the concrete (a symbol is most rigid when it embodies a specific abstract quality in a specific object); by blurring the distinctions between nouns and adjectives; and by synaesthetic confusion of sensory stimuli, as when colours are made "audible". Emily Dickinson uses all of these "tricks" -- let us refer to them less disparagingly as "techniques" -- most effectively in her use of colour.

We might summarise critical attitudes towards Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery as follows. The poet was very sensitive to colour to the extent of "feeling" it and expressing this feeling synaesthetically. In so doing she is consciously or unconsciously innovative. Her interest in colour is largely confined to her poems about Nature. She uses some colours, for example purple, so frequently that they appear to have a special symbolic significance for her. This significance is in the end obscure, however, because the words occur in such different contexts that it is impossible for the reader to fit them into a symbolic equation relating either to the external world or the poet's internal life. Depending upon the individual critic's sympathy towards the

poet, this practice is either confusing and irresponsible or a systematic attempt to infuse new vigour into old ideas. Critics have noticed too that there are interesting analogies to be drawn between Dickinson's poetic technique in general, and the technique of a pictorial artist. They have been remarkably slow to realise, though, that there are excellent grounds for such a comparison, for this is a poet who uses colour, the artist's medium, for a variety of effects.

I say, "remarkably slow", without exaggeration, for how is it otherwise possible to understand this comment of the art critic Herbert Read, in a review of the London Poems of 1933?<sup>81</sup>

It would not be unfair to compare these poems with the works of a painter who had all his life painted pictures of similar subjects in one colour.<sup>82</sup>

Clearly Read was not struck by the "kaleidoscopic" sense of colour that Patterson believes any reader of Dickinson cannot fail to see.<sup>83</sup> Archibald MacLeish draws a far more sympathetic analogy:

Occasionally, in the nature pieces, the sunset scenes, which are so numerous in the early poems, one feels the presence of the pad of water-color paper and the mixing of the tints, but when she began to write as poet . . . all that awkwardness disappears.<sup>84</sup>

But even this view of the poet as amateur water-colourist has a patronising quality; Emily Dickinson wrote "as poet" from the beginning, nor did she ever cease from "mixing . . . the tints". Only Porter manages to draw an analogy worthy of Dickinson the major poet. He is discussing what Jay Leyda

calls the "omitted center"<sup>85</sup> of many of the poems, and shows how this familiar idea, by means of "shifting symbolic values",<sup>86</sup> can be extended to incorporate not just the themes of the poems, but the language used to express these themes:

Here is the verbal equivalent of sfumato, the technique in expressionistic painting whereby information (color and line) on a canvas is given only piecemeal and thereby necessarily stimulates the imaginative projection of the viewer, who, out of his own experience, supplies the missing contours and, ultimately, the context.<sup>87</sup>

It is time to examine in some detail the validity of such analogies, most particularly in order to discover whether or not Emily Dickinson, that compulsive user of colour-imagery, saw any parallels between her art and that of the painter.

### 3. Emily Dickinson as Colourist

In a letter of April, 1852, to her future sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, Emily describes her feelings of depression:

Oh, Susie, it is dismal, sad and drear eno' -- and  
the sun dont shine, and the clouds look cold and gray,  
and the wind dont blow, but it pipes the shrillest  
roundelay, and the birds dont sing, but twitter --  
and there's nobody to smile! Do I paint it natural  
-- Susie, so you think how it looks?

(L.85)

By "natural", she means "naturalistically": she is asking her friend if her gloomy picture does not portray her life as it is, a life in which grey predominates. In a letter of March, 1853, however, Emily describes the effect Susan has on her own perception of life:

All life looks differently, and the faces of my fellows are not the same they wear when you are with me. I think it is this, dear Susie; you sketch my pictures for me, and 'tis at their sweet colorings, rather than this dim real that I am used, so you see when you go away, the world looks staringly, and I find I need more vail—

(L.107).

Emily claims that her own vision of reality is drab and monochromatic, while Susan has the ability to give this drabness lively colouring by her mere proximity. ". . . For bleak, and waste, and barren, are most of the fields found here", Emily continues, emphasising the blankness of her existence without the distractions provided by her friend's "sweet colorings". In a third letter to Susan of November–December, 1854, Emily asserts that, could she paint a picture expressing her feelings, it would serve as an admonition to others in happier circumstances to count their blessings:

I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be — solitude, and the figures — solitude — and the lights and shades, each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there; then haste grateful home, for a loved one left.

(L.176)

In each of these three passages, the young writer has declared herself incapable of bringing colour into her vision of the "real" world.

The very next two sentences from L.176 after the passage cited above describe the weather in these terms:

Today has been a fair day, very still and blue. Tonight, the crimson children are playing in the West, and tomorrow will be colder.

These two sentences are a repetition, word for word, of lines in L.175, the previous letter in the Harvard collection -- a letter which, according to the editors, may well have been written the day before L.176.<sup>88</sup> If this is true, then the word "Today" refers to two different days. In any case, Emily clearly valued these sentences enough to send them unchanged to two separate correspondents. Yet these lines contain nothing more profound than a whimsical comment upon the weather, expressed by means of a "kinetic" colour-image (the "crimson children") contrasted with a "static" one (the blue stillness of the day). Why should these colourful lines warrant repetition, especially when the writer has just declared herself, feelingly if with a touch of self-pity, to be marooned in a monochromatic solitude?

Although it may be considered premature to draw conclusions from three passages in these early letters, I suggest that between them they contain a clue to the nature of Emily Dickinson's attitude towards colour, an attitude that persisted throughout her life. She continued to feel that ordinary life was a grey backcloth against which every manifestation of colour appeared with heightened intensity. When two bright colours formed a vivid contrast, then they often formed an arrangement or composition in her mind so vivid as temporarily to banish the "dim real" from her consciousness altogether. This might occur even if the appearance of the colours was separated by a period of time, as in L.175 and L.176 the blue

of day is divided from the crimson of evening. If she saw the "dim real" as colourless or grey, she came to associate the moments of heightened feeling, such as those giving birth to poems, in terms of bright colour. She knew that colours are the most evanescent of phenomena, but that the painter could capture them; she set herself a similar task. She discovered, as many painters of the same period were beginning also to do, that colour is sufficiently important to constitute a theme in itself. She thus wrote numerous poems, inspired by the sun rising or setting, but with the play of disembodied colour as her real theme. She came to the discovery that the poet, in dealing with colour, has many great advantages over the painter, not the least of which is the poet's ability to describe pure or ideal hue, to describe colours in movement by means of "kinetic" colour-imagery, and to use synaesthetic techniques. As will be seen, she was not above exulting in the superiority of the poet as colourist over the painter.

Colour, for the pictorial artist, has three main aspects. First there is hue, which may be defined as the position a colour occupies on the colour-wheel in relation to the other hues. Generally speaking, the colour-word itself, "green" or "red" for example, is a designation of hue and refers strictly to a "pure" hue that exists only in an ideal sense: there is no such colour as pure red. Secondly, there is tone, sometimes called chroma or brilliance, which is the

measure of a colour's strength. Light blue and dark brown are designations of tone. Finally, there is intensity or saturation, which is a measure of a colour's proximity to or distance from neutralisation or greyness. As for the colours of the real world, Adrian Stokes comments:

Most colours in both nature and art are to some extent neutralized (greyed) and their 'natural' tone value is either deepened or heightened. In a word, we do not often encounter pure hues.<sup>89</sup>

In the literary use of colour, however, all hues may be said to be pure unless the writer deliberately chooses to qualify them by, for example, adding epithets to the simple colour-words; using the very limited selection of colour-words referring specifically to colour tones, such as "vermilion" (a tone of red); or inventing colour-words of his own.

In poetry in English since mediaeval times, the poetic use of colour has moved quite consistently from the "allegorical" or "heraldic" pole to the "expressionistic" pole.<sup>90</sup> At the allegorical extreme, colours gain their significance from being identified with certain objects. There is a pre-existing set of equations based on traditional usage of the "white = purity" type, which are then identified with certain objects, such as a lily. In the equation, "lily = white = purity", all of the terms are of equal importance, and no others can be substituted without damage to meaning. In allegory, a red lily can no more symbolise purity than a white narcissus. An example of colour-imagery at the allegorical pole is the description of the bride in Spenser's



Epithalamion. Here each colour represents a separate and clearly-defined abstract quality, while at the same time being associated with a particular part of the bride's anatomy.

Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,  
 Her forehead yvory white,  
 Her cheeks lyke apples which the sun hath melded,  
 Her lips lyke cherryes charming men to byte,  
 Her brest lyke to a bowle of creame uncrudded,  
 Her paps lyke lyllies budded,  
 Her snowy necke lyke to a marble towre . . . .<sup>91</sup>

An example of the expressionist pole is the description of the woman being addressed by the poet in "Gray Room" by Wallace Stevens:

Although you sit in a room that is grey,  
 Except for the silver  
 Of the straw-paper,  
 And pick  
 At your pale white gown;  
 Or lift one of the green beads  
 Of your necklace,  
 To let it fall;  
 Or gaze at your green fan  
 Printed with the red branches of a red willow . . . .<sup>92</sup>

Here the purpose of the enumeration of the colours is not to suggest spiritual qualities in the woman or what surrounds her, but to create a deliberately random chromatic arrangement. The mind's eye is thus challenged by the poet to resolve the complex inter-relationship of colour into a harmony, so that the colourfully-dressed woman might seem to become one with the monochromatic decor of the room. Yet once the internal eye has, with difficulty, resolved this chromatic problem, the poet then ironically shatters the harmony:

What is all this?  
 I know how furiously your heart is beating.<sup>93</sup>

The movement from allegorical to expressionistic use of colour may be seen as one away from allegory towards naturalism, then beyond naturalism to symbolism. This latter symbolism, of the kind most usually associated with certain French poets of the late nineteenth-century, differs from the symbolism of the allegorical kind in that equations of the "white = purity" kind have no part to play in it. Instead, colours are given an emotional charge by the poet which may or may not correspond to a pre-ordained system. If there is such a system, it is usually a private one created by the poet. Because of possible confusion with the unambiguous symbols of allegory, I prefer to refer to this most recent development in the use of colour-imagery as expressionistic. For poets working in this vein are trying to express emotional nuances beyond the capabilities of techniques associated with naturalism or "truth to life" and, like certain Modernist painters, are finding that to do so involves a movement towards the abstract. It is possible to sketch the larger movement from allegorical to expressionistic use of colour-imagery by means of a few examples, without suggesting that this is by any means the whole story.

We may leave Spenser's bride, therefore, for the poet's mistress in Shakespeare's [Sonnet CXXX], of whom he says, "If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun".<sup>94</sup> Here Shakespeare mocks the rigidity of the allegorical significance of colours, rejecting Spenser's bride's "paps lyke lyllies" for

a more naturalistic description. The implication is that the symbolic system has frozen into artificiality and is now incapable of expressing sincerity and human warmth. The process of debunking allegorical equations is furthered by Marvell in "The Garden":

No white nor red was ever seen  
So am'rous as this lovely green.<sup>95</sup>

Marvell's manipulation of green in this poem is perhaps the high point of colour-experimentation in English poetry before the Romantics. For Milton, apart from some interesting monochromatic effects,<sup>96</sup> tended to look backwards towards the "gay enamelled colours mixed"<sup>97</sup> of allegory, and was probably partly responsible for poets' loss of interest in colour before the effects of Newton's work began to be felt. After Opticks . . ., poets began to rediscover colour and even, like Thomson in "Spring" from The Seasons, to despair of ever finding words adequately to capture the beauty of Nature:

Ah, what shall language do? ah, where find words  
Tinged with so many colours and whose power,<sup>98</sup>  
To life approaching, may perfume my lays . . .

Here already is a crude attempt at synaesthesia, brought about by the poet's consciousness of the limitations of one sense alone in dealing with an experience so overwhelming.

From here we pass to the Romantic poets, in whom a delight in the gorgeousness of colours is usually tempered by the demands of naturalism. So, the "warm gules" on the heroine's breast in Keats's Eve of St. Agnes<sup>99</sup> is not heraldic at all, but the result of moonlight through a stained glass

window.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps a naturalistic extreme is reached in Hopkins's "Pied Beauty",<sup>101</sup> where the language strains to capture a variegated world where there are no pure hues. Hardy's "Neutral Tones"<sup>102</sup> goes beyond the urge to capture Nature's everchanging garment, and moves into the expressionistic realm, where colour itself (or in this case the lack of it) has become a subject in its own right. Different facets of the fascination of twentieth-century poets for colour may be represented by Robert Frost's white-garbed dance of death in his sonnet "Design";<sup>103</sup> by D.H. Lawrence's "Bavarian Gentians", ". . . where blue is darkened on blueness";<sup>104</sup> by Prufrock's yellow fogs;<sup>105</sup> and by the delicate tints of Ezra Pound's Japanese-Imagist phase.<sup>106</sup>

If there is a "spectrum" of poetic colour-use spanning the two poles referred to earlier, then Emily Dickinson's position upon it is transitional. The traditional equations sustaining allegorical colour-imagery had been dismantled long before her. The Romantics and Victorians had taken to the limit the naturalistic-descriptive possibilities of the colours in Newton's spectrum, and, taking their cue from Goethe, had begun to delve into the psychological implications of colour. Poets were becoming aware that colour had to be reclaimed from the external world, freed from its subordinate role to objective reality, and repossessed as a vital tool with which to express the inner life. As will be seen in Chapter Three, several of Emily Dickinson's contemporaries

had begun to explore colour's new potentialities, but none did so as thoroughly as Dickinson herself. Few poets can ever have wrought so many variations upon such apparently simple material.

Emily Dickinson's primary response to colour is a delight in the separateness and distinctness of simple hues -- hues quite devoid of any symbolic value. In a letter to her brother Austin of the Spring of 1853, she writes:

Today is very beautiful -- just as bright, just as blue, just as green and as white, and as crimson, as the cherry trees full in bloom, and the half opening peach blossoms, and the grass just waving, and sky and hill and cloud, can make it, if they try.  
(L.122)

Here she divides the colours from the part of the landscape they belong to in order to ensure, as it were, that they are not viewed as being merely one attribute of the natural beauty she is describing, but seen as being in themselves equal to that beauty. It is as if the colours themselves -- blue, green, and so on -- are blossoms hung upon the landscape, so that the scene as she describes it forms itself into a composition of colours in relation to each other, like a painting. Furthermore, because colour is viewed as equal in value to what it colours, it already begins to take on the attributes of a theme in its own right.

An extract from a letter of 1859 describes the colour-metamorphoses of the hills as the seasons pass. Here the element of time divides the colours from each other, but the contrast between them persists as a quasi-static arrange-

ment in the writer's mind. The resulting sequence of colours becomes an extended synecdoche or objective correlative for death and resurrection:

Indeed, this world is short, and I wish, until I  
tremble, to touch the ones I love before the hills  
are red -- are gray -- are white -- are "born  
again"!

(L.207)

Many of the early poems also express this love of pure hues. Apart from the phrase "Ruby Trowsers", this poem might be a description of an Abstract Expressionist painting,<sup>107</sup> for the opening lines even suggest brushstrokes:

A slash of Blue --  
A sweep of Gray --  
Some scarlet patches on the way,  
Compose an Evening Sky --  
A little purple -- slipped between --  
Some Ruby Trowsers hurried on --  
A Wave of Gold --  
A Band of Day --  
This just makes out the Morning Sky.

(P.204)

This is not a naturalistic descriptive poem for two reasons. First, the poet is using pure hues without any attempt to qualify them. Secondly, the time element is minimised while the compositional element is stressed -- these colours "Compose" first an evening, then a morning sky. The poem is done by a "painter-poet"<sup>108</sup> who has formally arranged her colours so that they appear on two canvasses hanging side by side, with the titles "Morning Sky" and "Evening Sky". Yet the poem is more than a painting could ever be: the artist, be he representational or abstract in style, could never transform an Evening Sky into a Morning one by the light

touches of the poet in P.204. If he could, by artistic sleight-of-hand, change one skyscape into another, he could still never manage to emulate the effect of change and contrast achieved by the painter-poet. The representational painter is confined to capturing moments in time, while the abstract painter's greater freedom in this respect does not extend to the ability to make his colours reflect the barely-perceptible chromatic changes of the sunset sky, followed by a brief night and then sunrise -- all in one picture.<sup>109</sup>

P.204 is a poetic expression of the colour-imagery of the kind found in L.207, where temporal elements are suppressed for the sake of compositional. P.469 takes this process further, expressing times of the day as a sequence of pure hues:

The Red -- Blaze -- is the Morning --  
 The Violet -- is Noon --  
 The Yellow -- Day -- is falling --  
 And after that -- is none --  
(P.469).

In these, the first four lines of the poem, there is no pretence on the poet's part at basing her colour-sequence on reality. Only in a personal symbolic system of the poet can noon ever be "Violet" or the day "Yellow". Indeed, even the word "system" is misleading, for while red in this poem is the colour of sunrise, in numerous other poems it appears as a characteristically sunset colour.<sup>110</sup> It is, after all, the poet's aim to ensure, through the "shifting symbolic values of her images",<sup>111</sup> that each of her colour-compositions re-

mains fresh, and that she does not fall into the error of substituting inflexible symbolic equations of her own for traditional ones. Detailed interpretations of the significance of the individual colours in Dickinson's writings are provided in Chapter Four. At this point, it suffices to show that, though Dickinson does shift the symbolic values of colours from poem to poem, there are certain constants in her spectrum. So, noon can be "Violet" because that colour, which represented a terminus in the Newtonian spectrum, represents a meridian in the Dickinsonian.<sup>112</sup> The line, "The Yellow -- Day -- is falling --", moreover, is one of the many echoes, throughout Dickinson's writings, of a particular line in Macbeth which so evidently fascinated her that she strove again and again for a colour-image containing the colour yellow that would be worthy of the Shakespearean paradigm.<sup>113</sup>

It was Emily Dickinson's eye for detail that led her to explore colour tone, the second aspect of colour as painter's medium. She combed her dictionary and other reading for the more abstruse colour-words which, when she was concerned with description of the more naturalistic kind, would enable her to render a nuance of colour with the greatest precision.<sup>114</sup> A passage from a letter to her brother of 1851 illustrates, in its description of an aurora borealis, how the magnificence of the spectacle did not overawe her into vagueness:

The sky was a beautiful red, bordering on a crimson, and rays of a gold pink color were constantly shooting off from a kind of sun in the centre.

(L.53)



Almost every conceivable tone of red, from the lightest tint to the darkest shade, makes its appearance in her poetry. We might delineate her "red spectrum" as follows (with the number of occurrences of the colour-word in the poems following in parentheses): "pink/s" (15); "rosy" (2); "flamingo" (2); "rouge" (1); "scarlet" (18); "vermilion" (7); "cochineal" (5); "carmine" (3); "crimson" (6); "ruby/ies" (8); "cardinal" (2); "russet/ly" (5); and "rust/y" (2).

Because Emily Dickinson must surely have made the discovery that the English language lacks names even for many of the commoner colour-tones,<sup>115</sup> and because she frequently demanded that her colours contain special qualities, she resorted to vocabulary drawn from the world of gems, of flowers, of minerals and of fabrics. The language's paucity of colour-words probably drove her first into the realms of synaesthesia. Being so sensitive to nuances of colour-tone, she found the dearth of vocabulary frustrating when trying to capture these nuances in writing. She therefore began to explore new modes of expression. An early poem attests to her struggle to describe an apparently simple object, namely a rose:

Artists wrestled here!  
 Lo, a tint Cashmere!  
 Lo, a Rose!  
 Student of the Year!  
 For the easel here  
 Say Repose!

(P.110)

There are two artists here, Nature and the painter-poet.

Nature has struggled to create this beautiful flower, and now the painter-poet is struggling to portray it. Finding that the vocabulary of colour lacks subtlety for descriptive purposes, the painter-poet is forced to use the phrase "tint Cashmere", in which she substitutes texture for colour. But as a description of this flower, this phrase is weaker than the simple name "Rose". Realising this, the painter-poet gives up her struggle to "paint" the flower, and offers instead an abstract quality, "Repose", which seems better to characterise it.

Synaesthesia in Emily Dickinson's work usually contains a strong visual element, and when it does so, it is often the product of the urge to describe having been thwarted by the limited resources of the language in colour-terminology. In a sense, then, Dickinson's use of synaesthesia is the result of the poet taking one more step towards the goal of precise rendering of colour-tone. Perhaps the most admired colour-images in Dickinson's work reveal this process at work:

A Resonance of Emerald --  
 A Rush of Cochineal --  
(P.1463)

The "Rush" of bright red here is related to the "Slash of Blue" in P.204, and shows the painter-poet in her role as Abstract Expressionist. The colour of the hummingbird is given not as red but as "Cochineal" (a dye giving a particularly brilliant red), revealing the poet's willingness to

import colour-words from the most unlikely sources<sup>116</sup> in order to describe what she sees as precisely as possible. However, the hummingbird in flight flashes green as well as red, and the English language is far poorer in names for tones of green than it is for tones of red.<sup>117</sup> By substituting a jewel-name ("Emerald") for a colour-word, the poet immediately avails herself of synaesthetic possibilities, for jewels exist in the tactile realm, not just in the visual. She then adds a third, aural level to the image ("Resonance"), and the green plumage of the rapidly-hovering bird is encapsulated in an image of such "specific gravity" that useful paraphrase is transcended.

The third aspect of colour for the painter-poet is intensity or saturation and, as might be expected, Dickinson often strains towards the goal of utmost intensity in her colour-effects. Notwithstanding the earlier-cited passage from L.176 concerning her urge to create monochromatic landscapes, there is no equivalent of "Neutral Tones" in Dickinson's oeuvre. Although there are many notable examples of light/dark and white/black contrasts,<sup>118</sup> grey, the extreme of low saturation, does not figure prominently in her work.<sup>119</sup> There are many examples, however, of the poet revelling in colour — usually, but not always red — at its highest intensity. The colour of autumn leaves inspires this poem:

The name -- of it -- is "Autumn" --  
 The hue -- of it -- is Blood --  
 An Artery -- upon the Hill --  
 A Vein -- along the Road --

Great Globules -- in the Alleys --  
 And Oh, the Shower of Stain --  
 When Winds -- upset the Basin --  
 And spill the Scarlet Rain --

It sprinkles Bonnets -- far below --  
 It gathers ruddy Pools --  
 Then -- eddies like a Rose -- away --  
 Upon Vermillion Wheels --  
 (P.656).

This macabre picture of the world bleeding to death while the poet looks rapturously on has a quality that can only be described as surreal.<sup>120</sup> After this colour-saturated tour-de-force, moreover, we might be tempted to draw up an equation that has validity throughout Dickinson's work. Because in this poem the red leaves seem to represent the precious life-blood of the year leaking away (perhaps to leave the corpse-white of winter), may we not expect that for Emily Dickinson, high-intensity redness commonly symbolises life or vitality, even when, as here, it is in the process of draining away?

To maintain such an expectation is, however, to forget that Emily Dickinson continually manipulates symbolic values, refusing to allow one-to-one symbolic relationships to crystallise. So, for example, highly-saturated red/blood imagery occurs in these lines from a "sunset poem":

Whole Gulfs -- of Red, and Fleets -- of Red --  
 And Crews -- of solid Blood --  
 Did place about the West -- Tonight --  
 As 'twere specific Ground --  
 (P.658)

It is of course possible here that the intense redness suggests an elegiac quality residing in the end of the day, as the redness in P.656 dealt with a similar quality in the end of the year. Yet then we are left with the problem of the line from P.469, in which red was unequivocally and apparently once and for all associated with the rising of the sun. The proper strategy for the determined exegete of Emily Dickinson's colour-symbolism is to take each poem separately, avoiding all temptations to extrapolate a system based on preconceived formulae of the "allegorical" type.

It is significant that Dickinson does not confine her experiments with high-density colour-imagery to the colour red, that most "extroverted" of colours.<sup>121</sup> A passage from a letter of 1856 reveals that "introverted" blue is subject to similar treatment but with quite a different effect:

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June . . . .  
(L.185)

Here the writer exploits blue's quality of "remoteness"<sup>122</sup> in order to "sketch" a picture of her own curious mixture of feelings when confronted with the idea of Heaven -- feelings of smallness combined with those of emotional distance. In another poem, in which there is a sustained "shipwreck" metaphor, intensified blueness represents the indifference of the ocean to those it has destroyed:

Ah, Brig -- Good Night  
 To Crew and You --  
 The Ocean's Heart too smooth -- too Blue --  
 To break for You -- (P.723).

The remarkably different effect achieved by the intensification of different colours can be seen when the cool inscrutability of the blueness in P.723 is set against the warm vigour of the redness of sunset in P.221:

It cant be "Dying"!  
 It's too Rouge --  
 The Dead shall go in White --

P.221 is also an "autumn-poem", the redness being partly that of autumn leaves.<sup>123</sup> In that the poet here denies the possibility of Fall redness signifying the bleeding to death of the year -- she claims that "Rouge" is too vital a hue -- we notice that she has once more practised her habit of "shifting symbolic values" in the later P.656, dealt with above.

We have seen that Emily Dickinson makes full use of the three aspects of colour, using each for a different purpose. She uses pure hues as a sort of symbolic shorthand; colour-tones in her endeavours more accurately to portray natural phenomena; and colour-intensification or saturation to render with maximum vividness her own intense response to such phenomena. This method of approaching her colour-imagery is based on the assumption that there is a valid analogy between Dickinson's manipulation of colour and the practice of a pictorial artist. It is now necessary to

demonstrate the validity of this analogy more fully, by showing that Emily Dickinson drew such parallels herself.

In her fourth letter to Higginson (August, 1862), Dickinson tells her mentor, presumably in reference to poems she has included in the letter for his comments:

I marked a line in One Verse -- because I met it  
after I made it -- and never consciously touch a  
paint, mixed by another person --  
I do not let it go, because it is mine.  
(L.271)

This is perhaps too imprecise to be taken as the credo of a painter-poet. She may mean either that she strives for total originality and is determined at all costs to disassociate herself from other poets, or simply that she takes pains not to plagiarise, and if she echoes other poets, she does so quite by accident. Nevertheless, this is as clear a statement of poetic policy as any we have from Emily Dickinson, and, moreover, one that is couched in pictorial terms. Metaphors taken from the art of painting are by no means infrequent in Dickinson's poetry. Significantly, these metaphors often refer, directly or indirectly, to the practice of poetry. When examined in a sequence that approximately reflects the order in which they were written, the poems with painting-metaphors reveal an increasingly sophisticated attempt on the poet's part to define her own art to herself by using the analogy of another art.

In the early P.163, some half-whimsical lines envisage Autumn, personified as an artist with coloured

crayons, as harbinger of the more sinister figure of Death the Reaper. The poet asks that both figures be banished from the circle of friendship enclosing the Hollands, to whom the poem was sent, and herself:

Roses of a steadfast summer  
In a steadfast land,  
Where no Autumn lifts her pencil --  
And no Reapers stand!  
(P.163)

Here the act of colouring is a fateful one, producing colours that have the tinge of mortality. The gorgeousness of the rose is destroyed by the "punctual fingers" of the Frost, but the plainness of the speaker's "little sunburnt bosom" contains within it an immortal part. About the same time as she wrote P.163, Dickinson produced this short poem in which the figure of the colourist is also associated with mortality:

Portraits are to daily faces  
As an Evening West,  
To a fine, pedantic sunshine --  
In a satin Vest!  
(P.170)

Given that the poet is known to delight in sunsets, this poem must mean that "Portraits" are to be preferred over real faces. For while sunsets are colourful and possess transcendental, elegiac qualities that elevate the soul, the "pedantic sunshine" is colourless, mundane, and even bourgeois in its "satin Vest". Therefore in "Portraits", the artist, manipulating his colours, penetrates the bland facade of reality and opens up the abode of the spirit within. At this stage in her development, Emily Dickinson



seems to assume that the finest colours have a valedictory quality, as day sinks in glory towards night, or autumn briefly blazes up before being quenched by the snows of winter.

In P.291, a particularly impressive sunset is described in detail, but not until the last stanza does the poem move into a more universal realm:

These are the Visions flitted Guido --  
 Titian -- never told --  
 Domenichino dropped his pencil --  
 Paralyzed, with Gold --.

Here Nature unveils herself in glory to the great masters of the Renaissance so that, confronted with the colours of the sunset, they become incapacitated with awe and shamed by their own inadequacies. This poem appears at first to be the post-Romantic poet's conventional obeisance to Nature as the greater artist. A second glance reveals, however, that while the painters remain paralysed by the splendours of Nature, the poet has been busily encompassing the sunset, Nature, and the painters in her own work of art. For we see nowhere more clearly Emily Dickinson's "egocentrism"<sup>124</sup> than in the theme of the painter-poet who is not only superior to the artist with brush and canvas, but who claims a greater facility than Nature herself. So, in P.307, the poet guarantees immortality to the artist who fulfils certain conditions:

The One who could repeat the Summer day --  
 Were greater than itself -- though He  
 Minutest of Mankind should be --

And He -- could reproduce the Sun --  
 At period of going down --  
 The Lingering -- and the Stain -- I mean --

When Orient have been outgrown --  
 And Occident -- become Unknown --  
 His Name -- remain --

(P.307).

It is surely not far-fetched to read this poem as Emily Dickinson's challenge to herself -- she who in her social withdrawal became the "Minutest of Mankind" but who, following the programme outlined in this poem, aimed at the greatness of immortality. The very next poem in the Harvard Poems, much less grave in tone, offers a clue as to how the poet thinks this greatness might be achieved:

I send Two Sunsets --  
 Day and I -- in competition ran --  
 I finished Two -- and several Stars --  
 While He -- was making One --

His own was ampler -- but as I  
 Was saying to a friend --  
 Mine -- is the more convenient  
 To Carry in the Hand -- (P.308).

The poet's apparently flippant comment in the last stanza masks a serious point: she beats "Day" in the competition because her sunset, though lacking amplitude, is a triumph of facility and compression.

Charles Anderson believes that Emily Dickinson did feel that Nature filled the artist with a sense of his limitations:

Direct representation . . . was impossible . . . The artist who could reproduce a summer day or a sunset, she said, must needs be "greater than itself."<sup>125</sup>

However, while Dickinson does indeed describe the helpless-

ness of painters to capture the glory of Nature's colours, she by no means views herself as poet to be disabled in this way. Indeed, as the hybrid "painter-poet", she does not feel the painter's sense of futility at trying to match Nature's colours, because her chosen medium, language, is far more versatile than paint. When she concludes a poem describing a summer's day in this way,

'Twas more -- I cannot mention --  
How mean -- to those that see --  
Vandykes Delineation  
Of Nature's -- Summer Day!  
(P.606)

she is certainly not admitting defeat. The poem itself has been a vivid evocation of the day in question, and every feature of the day, from the sun to the flowers, has been filled with mysterious significance by the transforming power of the poetic sensibility. As a "Delineation" of the day, it is beyond anything a painter could achieve, for this artist could not begin to match the range of effects produced by such poetic techniques as complex personification (the sun appears as a hermit, divine but capricious) and synaesthesia (the "silver matters" of the birdsong). The poet's final statement is a sort of self-congratulation upon how well she has accomplished the task, considering how "mean" would be the version produced by even the greatest of painters.<sup>126</sup>

The most complex of the earlier poems containing metaphors drawn from painting is P.451. The first two

stanzas of this poem speak of the "Central Mood" of a being, the invisible, internal qualities that determine the outer self which the world sees. The final stanzas are as follows:

The Inner -- paints the Outer --  
 The Brush without the Hand --  
 It's Picture publishes -- precise --  
 As is the inner Brand --

On fine -- Arterial Canvas --  
 A Cheek -- perchance a Brow --  
 The Star's whole Secret -- in the Lake --  
 Eyes were not meant to know.

(P.451)

The soul, then, is an artist, painting itself on the "Canvas" of the face so that the "Outer" becomes a portrait of the "Inner". The first two lines of the poem,

The Outer -- from the Inner  
 Derives it's Magnitude --

suggest that the Star in the poem's penultimate line represents the Inner Self.<sup>127</sup> This Star is secret and invisible, but is reflected in the "Lake"<sup>128</sup> of the face.

Those who are sensitive to the relationship of Inner and Outer selves may therefore discern the "Magnitude" of the Star, even though knowledge of the soul is not intended to be available to the naked eye. If the soul is an artist, then those who wish to read her secrets must become well-versed in pictorial technique. Once again, therefore, this poem may be read as a triumphant (though restrained) celebration of the powers of a painter-poet; one who, schooled in the world of appearances, has gained from her training an entrée into the invisible mysteries of the soul.

In later poems, the poet comes to identify this secret knowledge with the idea of a colour not found in the visible world. It is a colour which is thus within the province of the painter-poet alone, whose palette consists of language, not chemical dyes. In my discussion of P.611 in Chapter One, I touched upon the idea of a colour which, "Excelling Violet", thereby showed the limitations of the Newtonian spectrum. This is a colour which makes several appearances in Dickinson's poetry. In the following poems, for example, it occurs when the natural hues of living tissue are replaced by the pallor of death:

It moved away the Cheeks --  
 A Dimple at a time --  
 And left the Profile -- plainer --  
 And in the place of Bloom

It left the little Tint  
 That never had a Name --  
 (P.559).

This "little Tint" is only an intimation of the inconceivable colour of Death, to be gleaned only by the sharp eye of the painter-poet. There is no name for this colour, just as there is no means whereby a living being can ever describe a state of non-being.

Another poem about the discovery of the limitations of language, but inspired by a different emotion from P.559, runs thus:

I found the words to every thought  
 I ever had -- but One --  
 And that -- defies me --  
 As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races -- nurtured in the Dark --  
 How would your own -- begin?  
 Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal --  
 Or Noon -- in Mazarin?

(P.581)

In this case, the "thought" is probably of love rather than death, for as Sherwood has pointed out, the fragmentary P.826 deals unequivocally with that emotion in very similar terms.<sup>129</sup> Yet we get no discovery of her limitations; on the contrary, as Sewall remarks, her tone here is one of "sublime arrogance" as she makes her "moral or psychological distinctions for the benefit of those whose vision is not as clear as hers".<sup>130</sup> After all, it is only in the face of the ultimately ineffable -- Death and Love -- that she resigns herself to the restrictions of language. Yet even as she asks herself, "Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal --", we may get the feeling that she is at that moment mixing the colours on her palette in order to make an attempt. Here the answer remains in abeyance, but in a later poem she does her best to express her love in the red-saturated imagery the expressive power of which she called into question in P.581:

Sang from the Heart, Sire,  
 Dipped my Beak in it,  
 If the Tune drip too much  
 Have a tint too Red

Pardon the Cochineal --  
 Suffer the Vermillion --  
 Death is the Wealth  
 Of the Poorest Bird.

(P.1059)

Through the idea of the "nameless hue", Emily Dickinson tried as strenuously as she could to engage the problems of the expressive limitations of her art. She was never content to remain at a respectful distance from the ineffable, but had to make her presence felt by, as it were, hammering at the gate. Her supreme attempt to describe something which by its very nature cannot be visualised, even by the mind's eye, is probably P.627. In this poem she tries to pin down the nameless hue by describing the circumstances in which it manifests itself:

The Tint I cannot take -- is best --  
 The Color too remote  
 That I could show it in Bazaar --  
 A Guinea at a sight --.

The verb "take" in the first line of the poem has a similar meaning to the modern, photographic sense of the word. The poet means that the colour of which she speaks cannot be captured and fixed by resort to colour-terminology. In subsequent stanzas she goes on to explain where and how this colour appears: in the "impalpable Array" of certain cloud-formations; in "The Moments of Dominion" that sometimes visit the soul, leaving it dissatisfied with its earthly lot; and in peculiar seasonal light-effects.<sup>131</sup> The poem's final stanza reminds us how acute was Sewall's judgement of the poet's tone in P.581:

Their Graspless manners -- mock us --  
 Until the Cheated Eye  
 Shuts arrogantly -- in the Grave --  
 Another way -- to see --  
(P.627).

It is seeing above all, and then the ability to render what she sees through her art, that is so important to Emily Dickinson. In the world of the visible, colours are the first things to catch her eye, and by using their names in her writings she captures what she sees in language. She is aware that the art of poetry, far more easily than that of the painter, is able to render "visible" the subtleties of hue, tone and intensity, and at the same time evoke correspondingly subtle emotional responses in her audience. When something too abstract, too ineffable, frustrates this image-making process, she still refuses to admit total defeat. Instead she employs the expedient of a nameless hue of which the Newtonian spectrum takes no account. Finally, with "sublime arrogance" but with moderating irony, she prophesies that even death will not quench her desire or ability to see. The dead certainly see no conventional colour, as P.1026 makes clear. Who, however, is to say that they have not a whole spectrum of colours "Excelling Violet"? For the world is full of intimations of the existence of this spectrum:

A Color stands abroad  
On Solitary Fields  
That Science cannot overtake  
But Human Nature feels.  
(P.812)

It is the painter-poet's privilege to describe this colour, though not alone to see it. It waits on us all equally, -- "Democratically" would be Dickinson's word -- "It almost



speaks" to us, and then it departs leaving us with "A quality of loss" as mysterious and nameless as the colour itself. It is Emily Dickinson's supreme task as painter-poet to paint in this colour.

I have spoken in this chapter of Dickinson as "painter-poet", aware that it is an awkward but at the same time unavoidable designation. By it I mean that she is a poet who consciously sees herself as a manipulator of colour whose practice is analogous to that of pictorial artists. She borrows or invents certain techniques of dealing with colour and in so doing raises that phenomenon to the status of theme-in-itself. She is as aware as a painter is of the different aspects of colour and their potentialities. She delights in sequences of pure hues and their flexible symbolic possibilities. She delights in the contrasts of colour-tone, unearths or invents colour-words to describe what she sees with precision, and when the language fails her, she is prepared to move into the barely charted realms of synaesthesia. She revels in colour-saturation and in the sometimes surreal or overpoweringly intense emotional response this can evoke. While acknowledging her debt to the painter in her metaphors, she is aware that she has transcended the capabilities of his art, and is not above exulting in that sense of transcendence. For she is aware of colours that exist in the world and yet beyond it, colours without a name but which

hint at a spectrum lying beyond the range of mortal vision, colours leaking through only at "Moments of Dominion", when the soul is deeply stirred by death or love.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup>Louise Bogan, "A Mystical Poet", in R.B. Sewall, ed., Emily Dickinson: a Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), p.141.

<sup>2</sup>David T. Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., x.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.153.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.153.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.154.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.175.

<sup>8</sup>Wells, op. cit., pp.115-132.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.118.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.120.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.120.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp.120-121.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp.122, 125.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.127.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.128.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp.128-129; see Capps, op. cit., p.69 for details.

<sup>17</sup>Wells, op. cit., p.132.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp.128-130.

<sup>19</sup>Whicher, op. cit., pp.210-211.

<sup>20</sup>Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Middletown, Conn., 1968), pp.213 ff.

<sup>21</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.708.

<sup>22</sup>Douglas Duncan, Emily Dickinson (Edinburgh and London, 1965), pp.51-52.

<sup>23</sup>Cullen, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.23.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.50.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>29</sup>See Chapter One, pp.14 ff.

<sup>30</sup>Cullen, op. cit., p.76.

<sup>31</sup>See, for example, P.251, P.357, P.376, P. 690, P.744, P.1076, P.1260, P.1439, P.1551, P.1719, P.1751, etc.

<sup>32</sup>Cullen, op. cit., p.11

<sup>33</sup>See Introduction, p.1.

<sup>34</sup>See Chapter One, p.14.

<sup>35</sup>Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (1)", p.271.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.274

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.274.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp.[272-273].

<sup>39</sup>Patterson does not specify the titles of the six plays by Shakespeare, of the poems by Emerson, nor of the poems by Keats which she uses, nor does she explain why she chose these particular works.

<sup>40</sup>Though it is not the purpose of this study to involve itself in biographical problems, it might be pointed out that at various times in 1862 Frazar Stearns was killed, a third, anguished "Master" letter was written (L.248), the correspondence with Higginson was initiated, including the letter in which the poet spoke of her "terror -- since September -- I could tell to none --" (L.261), Samuel Bowles left for Europe and Charles Wadsworth for San Francisco. Though Sewall dates the "crisis years" from c.1858-1862 (Life, II, p.803), the year 1859 seems to have little to counter Whicher's claim that "The winter of 1861-62 was the sharpest psychic corner in Emily Dickinson's life" (op. cit., p.113).

<sup>41</sup>There are three references to Revelation in L.185 alone, dated "early August 1856" by the Harvard editors (see Letters, II, pp.329-330), indicating a much earlier interest in the biblical book. Hitchcock had preached at Mount Holyoke on the "Gem Chapter" as early as 1847 (see Sewall, Life, II, pp.347-348). As Sewall says, Revelation was a continued source of inspiration to the poet, "especially in her later years, when phrases from the book resound through the letters" (Ibid., p.695). There is little to suggest that 1859 was a year in which Dickinson had Revelation especially in mind, everything to suggest it had become a perennial favourite long before that date.

<sup>42</sup>Rebecca Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Spectrum (II), Midwest Quarterly, VI (Autumn, 1964), p.115.

<sup>43</sup>As well as failing to justify her selections from other poets and her choice of colour-words, Patterson's judgement is sometimes simply untrustworthy. According to her, the 272 lines of poetry Dickinson wrote in the years 1867-68 contain no colour-imagery at all. P.1130, however, is entirely based on light/dark contrast; the word "hoar", appears in line 6; and the third stanza begins, "Oh Life, begun in fluent Blood/And consummated dull!". There is certainly colour-imagery here, even if the word "red" is not actually mentioned.

<sup>44</sup>Whicher, op. cit., p.260.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.261.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.262.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.262.

<sup>48</sup>Wells, op. cit., p.210.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp.136-137.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.251. Wells does not make it clear, however, if he means that Dickinson's manner has affinities to the movement in painting associated with Monet, Degas, et al., or simply that she is concerned more with tone and effect than detail.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.254. We sense that Wells is avoiding accusations of anachronism by using the words "impressionism" and "imagists" with lower-case initials.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.266. Much less tentative than Wells is Robert Goffin, in his essay "Emily Dickinson", New Hungarian Quarterly, V (Autumn, 1964), pp.181-186. He shows how in certain respects Dickinson's poetic techniques make a "parallel revolution" to that of Mallarmé: "The difference between narrative and suggestion as the life-giving principle of poetry seemed to have gained general recognition when Mallarmé told Degas that poetry is made not with ideas but with words" (Ibid., p.181). Colours might seem by their nature to be descriptive ("narrative" in Goffin's sense), but Dickinson's achievement is to render them infinitely suggestive. It might also be pointed out that the French poets were far more self-conscious in their exploration of colours than Dickinson was: hence Rimbaud's ultimately impenetrable sonnet "Voyelles" (1871). Even in this tour-de-force of synaesthesia, Rimbaud is more restrainedly Newtonian than Dickinson: "O l'Oméga, rayon violet de ses Yeux!".

<sup>53</sup>But see n.114.

<sup>54</sup>Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (London, 1952), p.108. The letter is L.189, which Chase attributes to 1861.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.109.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.109.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.221.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p.223.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.225.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.224. Like Whicher, Chase uses the lower-case initial in "imagist", implying that imagism existed before the Imagists.

<sup>61</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: an Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p.200.

<sup>63</sup>See Chapter One, p.14.

<sup>64</sup>Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (I)", p.271.

<sup>65</sup>Ruth Flanders McNaughton, The Imagery of Emily Dickinson (Lincoln, Neb., 1949).

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., pp.20-21.

<sup>67</sup>R.P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact", in The Expense of Greatness (Gloucester, Mass., 1958), p.109.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p.123.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., pp.130-131.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p.134.

<sup>71</sup>Blackmur also singles out "white" and "ruby" as other words revealing Dickinson's irresponsible use of vocabulary.

<sup>72</sup>See n.4 above.

<sup>73</sup>Archibald MacLeish, "The Private World: Poems of Emily Dickinson", in Sewall, ed., op. cit., p.152.

<sup>74</sup>For reasons of space, this study confines itself to the study of demonstrably "pure" colour-epithets, and to the light and darkness from which, according to the neo-Aristotelian theories of Goethe, they derive. In P.130, for example, "gold" appears in its colour-sense (a rich yellow), but far more often in Dickinson's work the poet uses the word primarily for its associations with the metal (preciousness, solidity, beauty and durability -- see P.11, P.400, P.1072 etc.). It is usually the case with jewel-names -- amethyst, pearl, garnet, etc. -- that the colour is only a secondary motive behind its appearance in the writings (but see the discussion of "emerald" in Chapter Four, pp.242-245). The best discussion of the significance of jewels in Dickinson is Rebecca Patterson's essay, "Emily Dickinson's Jewel Imagery" (see Chapter One, n.105).

<sup>75</sup>Expressionism (with a capital E) was a name associated first (c.1911) with the German avant-garde in painting and literature. In painting it was not an abstract movement, though it did move away from representational treatment of objects towards a use of "nervous lines and stark colors . . . to evoke highly personal and intense responses" (Henry Pachter, The Fall and Rise of Europe (New York, 1975), p.67, speaking of the Expressionist movements known as Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter.) The French Fauves were related. In literature, "Expressionism is a blanket term whose meaning evolves and modifies . . . It . . . moved to an aesthetic reaction against the representational and descriptive art of late Romanticism . . . when adjectives are used, they do not describe a surface but reveal a metaphorical energy which is latent within the noun" (from a definition in Roger Fowler, ed., A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms (London, 1973), p.65. Emily Dickinson's literary motives differed from Expressionist writers, who aimed to show the savagery and despair behind the urban facade of modern civilisation. Nevertheless, her use of colour is analogous to that of the Expressionist painters; she too often applies her colour in broad swathes, and then primarily to express emotional intensity, using the nominal rather than adjectival force of colour-words. I therefore take the liberty of sometimes using "expressionist/ic" in its lower-case form to describe one characteristic of Dickinson's colour-imagery, taking as precedents Wells's "impressionism" and Chase's "imagism" (see n.50, n.60 above).



<sup>76</sup>See p.90 below.

<sup>77</sup>Porter, op. cit., p.131.

<sup>78</sup>Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J., 1965), p.174.

<sup>79</sup>Porter, op. cit., p.135.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p.145.

<sup>81</sup>Herbert Read, "The Poems of Emily Dickinson", Spectator, CLI (December 20, 1933), p.971. This was a review of The Poems of Emily Dickinson (London, 1933), a reprint of the 1929 Centenary Edition introduced by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Read's review is reprinted in Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells, eds., The Recognition of Emily Dickinson (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1964), pp.173-174.

<sup>82</sup>Read, op. cit., p.971.

<sup>83</sup>See Introduction, p.1.

<sup>84</sup>MacLeish, op. cit., pp.159-160.

<sup>85</sup>Leyda, op. cit., xxi.

<sup>86</sup>Porter, op. cit., p.97.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p.99.

<sup>88</sup>See Letters, I, p.310.

<sup>89</sup>Stokes, op. cit., p.26.

<sup>90</sup>These designations are my own. See n.75 above.

<sup>91</sup>Edmund Spenser, Epithalamion (1595), 171-177.

<sup>92</sup>Wallace Stevens, "Gray Room" (1917), 1-10.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 15-16.

- <sup>94</sup>William Shakespeare, [Sonnet CXXX], 3.
- <sup>95</sup>Andrew Marvell, "The Garden" (1681), 17-18.
- <sup>96</sup>See Chapter Three, p.178.
- <sup>97</sup>John Milton, Paradise Lost (1667), IV, 149.
- <sup>98</sup>James Thomson, "Spring" from The Seasons (1726-1746), 475-477.
- <sup>99</sup>John Keats, The Eve of St. Agnes (1819), XXV, 2.
- <sup>100</sup>Even the famous lines from Shelley's Adonais (1821) gain force from the fragility of the stained-glass dome that colours the white light from Heaven:  
 The One remains, the many change and pass;  
 Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
 Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
 Until Death tramples it to fragments.  
 (LII, 460-464).
- <sup>101</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty" (1877).
- <sup>102</sup>Thomas Hardy, "Neutral Tones" (1867).
- <sup>103</sup>Robert Frost, "Design" (1936).
- <sup>104</sup>D.H. Lawrence, "Bavarian Gentians" (1932).
- <sup>105</sup>See T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), 15-16.
- <sup>106</sup>See, for example, Ezra Pound, "Ts'ai Chi'h" (1916).
- <sup>107</sup>See Chapter Three, p.182.
- <sup>108</sup>This is my own designation, the necessity for which is gradually revealed during the remainder of this chapter. See pp.117-118 for a definition.

<sup>109</sup>Emily Dickinson did anticipate abstract art as she prefigured Expressionism. According to legend, Wassily Kandinsky produced the first abstract or non-objective painting "almost by accident" in Paris in 1910. See Nigel Gosling, Paris 1900-1914 (London, 1978), p.165.

<sup>110</sup>See, for example, P.28, P.60, P.120, P.204, P.223, P.269, P.291, P.658, P.666, P.1390, P.1414 etc.

<sup>111</sup>See n.86 above.

<sup>112</sup>The painter-poet colours actual noon violet in order to hint at the "ultra-violet" of the noontide of spiritual transcendence. P.611, discussed in Chapter One, p.15, links these ideas together. The last stanza reads:

What need of Day --  
To Those whose Dark -- hath so -- surpassing Sun --  
It deem it be -- Continually --  
At the Meridian?

<sup>113</sup>See William Shakespeare, Macbeth, V, iii, 22-23; also [Sonnet LXXIII], 1-3. See also Chapter Four, p.296.

<sup>114</sup>But see Chase, op. cit., p.201: "She made constant use of her lexicon. And to a very good purpose, her vocabulary being undeniably rich, subtle, and strikingly original. But the ever-present lexicon promised too much, and the poet who consulted it was often too eager to find within its covers some marvelous word, like attar, extrinsic, cochineal, plush, or phosphor, which would body forth a complicated range of meaning . . . One might also say that her poetry was written in the hope of some day finding the magic phrase, some revelatory fusion of such words as noon, blaze, mazarin, circumference, and recess."

<sup>115</sup>See Havelock Ellis, The Colour-Sense in Literature (London, 1931), p.5: ". . . while man's colour-vision has in all probability always been excellent, his colour-vocabulary has sometimes been extremely defective, even amongst ourselves to-day remaining very vague." See also Birren, Color, p.113.

<sup>116</sup>Whatever Whicher says about the gorgeousness of cochineal (see p.76 above), Dickinson had the most prosaic associations to overcome. Cochineal is an extract derived from the cochinilla, a Mexican insect similar to a wood-

louse. It was used until comparatively recently as a food-dye -- the poet may even have had a phial of it in her kitchen.

<sup>117</sup>Roget's International Thesaurus (London, 1963), for example, provides fourteen sections under the heading "Redness", only six under "Greenness".

<sup>118</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.202-216.

<sup>119</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.245-248.

<sup>120</sup>See Anderson, op. cit., pp.91-92: ". . . she anticipates the belief of twentieth-century poets in the magical transformation which the consciousness can make out of the world by a new union of word, thing, and thought. Her essential kinship lies not with literary realism but with that development of poetry From Baudelaire to Surrealism so persuasively set forth by Marcel Raymond. Although she had no knowledge of the French symbolists and their successors, nor they of her, the literary historian will enrich our understanding of this great modern tradition by finding her proper place in it."

<sup>121</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.260 ff.

<sup>122</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.226 ff.

<sup>123</sup>See editor's note, Poems, I, p.159.

<sup>124</sup>See n.78 above.

<sup>125</sup>Anderson, op. cit., p.131.

<sup>126</sup>Dickinson's knowledge of art-history could not have been good, for it seems certain that she thought Vandyke was a landscape painter!

<sup>127</sup>Emily Dickinson's astronomical studies will have informed her that "Magnitude" is a term meaning "each of the classes into which the fixed stars have been arranged according to their degrees of brilliancy" (S.O.E.D.).

<sup>128</sup>The fact that the word "Lake", surprisingly, occurs only this once in Dickinson's poetry, possibly

suggests that the poet has chosen the word in this context for a special reason. Could there be a quibble on "Lake", so that it means both a body of water and the (cochineal-derived) scarlet or crimson colour used by painters? In this case "Lake" (the colour) might allude to the blood in the arteries that form a framework over which the canvas of the skin is stretched. This would mean that the poem's theme is expanded to include the idea of Microcosm (the Inner "Magnitude") containing and having knowledge of Microcosm ("The Star's whole Secret"). Perhaps this interpretation influenced the decision of the editors of Unpublished Poems (Boston, 1935), to alter the singular possessive to the plural "stars".

<sup>129</sup>William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance (New York, 1968), p.175 n.

<sup>130</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.712.

<sup>131</sup>Anderson, op. cit., pp.85-86 analyses this poem very well.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INFLUENCES

#### 1. The Problem of Influence

Emily Dickinson's position in the "spectrum" of literary colour-use has already been established in a general sense by Chapter Two. The aim of the present chapter will be to discover, not how she used colours in a new and original way, but how much her use of them reveals a conscious or unconscious debt to the work of her predecessors and contemporaries. Original as she was, she did not work in a vacuum, even if such a thing were possible. Much convincing critical work has been done on what she owed to the Bible, Shakespeare and others,<sup>1</sup> and such work is certainly justified by the numerous literary references and allusions in her writings. The advantage in tracing parallels of colour-use between Dickinson and other writers is that a more specific focus is thereby provided in order to assess the nature and extent of these writers' influence on the poet. Most critics have felt, for example, that Emerson was a strong influence on Dickinson, and Thoreau a considerably weaker one. A study of the contrasts between these writers' colour-imagery confirms the views of some of these critics that, though Emerson's influence on Dickinson might have been

considerable, it was largely negative:<sup>2</sup> that is to say, the writers had utterly different temperaments, and Dickinson was, as Clark Griffith has remarked, an inverse-Emersonian<sup>3</sup> who used Transcendental doctrines chiefly for their ironic potential. Thoreau, on the other hand, Emily Dickinson felt to be a kindred spirit, and nothing reveals this more clearly than a comparative study of colour-imagery.

Though Emily Dickinson was one of the most self-contained of writers, she is nonetheless a part of the continuum of literary tradition. As she was influenced by her predecessors, so she influenced writers coming after her. This chapter will therefore have a further aim: to demonstrate how the discoveries she made in the field of colour were assimilated by later generations of poets either at first hand or more indirectly. Another explanation will therefore be offered as to why Emily Dickinson has so often been seen as a poet who was "modern" before her time.

What, then, is the problem of influence? Surely the existence of demonstrable lines of influence stretching backwards and forwards in time is less of a problem for the critic than is extraordinary originality? In Chapter Two, it was shown that Dickinson's transitional place on the "spectrum" of colour-use is not out-of-the-ordinary for a poet in the mid-nineteenth-century.<sup>4</sup> If she had been in the mainstream of her age and in contact with the avant-garde in several of the arts, her status on the "spectrum" might be taken for

granted and passed by. She was, however, a long way from the mainstream. The first chapter of this study showed that Amherst was by no means a backwater, but its Hitchcockian synthesis of science and revealed religion is alone not enough to account for the similar fascination with, and treatment of colour shown by Emily Dickinson and certain contemporary American writers of whom she may have known something, and certain contemporary European writers of whom she probably knew nothing at all.

The influence of the writers closer to home is the more intriguing problem. It will be seen that Emily Dickinson's poetic heirs in America particularly admired her versatility in the manipulation of colour-imagery. The lines of influence linking her to her immediate forebears and to her contemporaries are more problematic. As well as Emerson and Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville all show unusual interest in the expressive possibilities of colour. Indeed, colour seems almost to be a characteristically American theme. How may we account for its importance in, say, the last chapter of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, The Scarlet Letter, the chapter of Moby-Dick entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale", Emily Dickinson's "colour-poems", and The Red Badge of Courage?

A good deal of Chapter Two was taken up with the idea of Dickinson as "painter-poet". The final section of the present chapter examines the analogy between painting and



poetry in the light of the broader nineteenth-century cultural scene. It will be seen that a characteristic of the time was a close partnership between poets and painters. The implication of this point is that even the most secluded artist is influenced by the spirit of an age, consciously or otherwise, even though he may be cut off from the storm-centre by upbringing, temperament, social milieu, geographical distance or other personal or environmental factors. The problem of influence is here at its most acute: for the question of what constitutes and defines the force-field of a culture is too large and diffuse to be answered here. We must be content to conclude that Emily Dickinson, like all great artists, showed almost supernatural receptivity to new ideas "in the air". Our business, then, is to draw the parallels and to show how they represent the spirit of the age in action.

The first approach to the question of which writers influenced Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery must be made by means of a comparative study. Here a more specific problem arises: that of laying down guidelines for how this should be undertaken. With the exception of Rebecca Patterson,<sup>5</sup> critics have not paid much attention to this problem. There is, however, one significant general attempt to lay down such guidelines in a short work entitled The Colour-Sense in Literature by Havelock Ellis,<sup>6</sup> and this should briefly be tested for its effectiveness.

Ellis considered his work a "pioneering effort in an interesting field",<sup>7</sup> perhaps not anticipating that his would

be both the first and last word on the subject. He begins with tables showing the incidence of certain colour-words in a selection of literary works ranging from the Mountain Chant of the Navajo Indians to d'Annunzio.<sup>8</sup> His first task is to establish the favourite colours of his chosen writers, and then to see whether or not any historical pattern can be discerned in the way these favourite colours change. Finally, he offers an explanation for both preferences and changes. However, as has already been demonstrated, tables of comparative incidence tend to be untrustworthy, and Ellis's are for much the same reasons that Patterson's were: the selections are unrepresentative. From Shakespeare, for instance, Ellis chooses only The Sonnets and Venus and Adonis. He tells us, moreover, that he "decided to neglect all rarely used metaphorical colours (such as "sapphire," "emerald," "sable," "argent".)"<sup>9</sup> It is as well that Emily Dickinson is not one of his chosen authors, for in her poetry alone these four "rarely used metaphorical colours" occur eighteen times, and "emerald", with its eleven occurrences, is found more frequently than eight out of the seventeen colours Ellis surveys.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear to Ellis, and rightly so, that just because a writer uses one colour more often than the others does not mean that this colour is his personal favourite. He therefore tries to avoid the ambiguity of "favourite" colour by speaking

instead of a writer's "colours of predilection — that is to say, the colours he uses with special frequency as compared with other writers".<sup>11</sup> Yet even this will not do, as the case of Emily Dickinson will show. It has often been assumed that purple was Emily Dickinson's favourite colour in both senses, because the colour-word itself occurs far more frequently in her poetry than any other.<sup>12</sup> But taken together, all the colour-words in the "red spectrum"<sup>13</sup> occur over twice as often as purple. Surely, then, red was Dickinson's "favourite" colour? Is it not inconceivable that someone should like red but not scarlet, crimson, vermillion and so on? In fact, other factors altogether are at work here. Emily Dickinson liked purple as she liked all rich, suggestive colours with euphonious names. The word "purple", however, has very few synonyms or separate words for its tones,<sup>14</sup> and the poet was forced to make what she could of the word itself. It is significant, though, that in the letters, those more personal utterances in which we might expect a personal favourite colour to become apparent quickly, if only through repetition, purple occurs far less times than most of the other principal colours.<sup>15</sup>

Ellis is on firmer ground when he deals with the possible reasons why certain colours turn up more frequently in certain historical epochs. Here too he shows the flexibility of mind demanded by his topic. So, one reason may be inherent in the language of the author:". . . the colours

that predominate in Catullus are those with the most numerous synonyms"<sup>16</sup> — that is, Latin, unlike English, had a wealth of terms for white and yellow. Another reason may be temperamental: Walter Pater the Classicist loved white, while his contemporaries are generally noted for much livelier hues.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the reason may be environmental, so that the predominance of green in ancient Hebrew literature may reflect "the green luxuriance of Galilee" in contrast to the "desert barrenness of Judea".<sup>18</sup> In other words, Ellis understands the complexities of the problem of influence, and is prepared to use his imagination to solve them.

Unfortunately, however, Ellis is tempted to resort to formulae when trying to summarise his conclusions:

There are three things, it seems to me, which colour in literature describes or symbolises: nature, man, imagination. These three cover the whole ground. The predominance of green or blue — the colours of vegetation, the sky, and the sea — means that the poet is predominantly a poet of nature. If red and its synonyms are supreme, we may assume an absorbing interest in man and woman, for these are the colours of blood and love, the two main pivots of human affairs, at all events in poetry. And where there is a predominance of black, white, and, I think I would add, yellow — the colours that are rare in the world, and the colour of golden impossibilities — there we shall find that the poet is singing with, as it were, closed eyes, intent on his own inner vision. Wordsworth and Shelley belong largely to the first class; Chaucer and Whitman largely to the second; Homer, Marlowe, Blake, Poe, and Rossetti largely to the third.<sup>19</sup>

"We cannot, of course, expect any degree of precision in the matter",<sup>20</sup> he continues: a timely qualification, for Homer and Poe make the most unlikely bedfellows. We are left wondering

where Emily Dickinson would fit in, for we find her at different times (and sometimes at the same time) a poet of nature, of man, and of the imagination, and showing a never-dwindling fascination for all the colours Ellis mentions above, and more. At all events, armed with foreknowledge of some of the pitfalls threatening the study of comparative colour-use in literature, we may begin to tackle the problem of influence.

## 2. The Sources of Emily Dickinson's Colour-Imagery

Of all the individual poets of whose colour-imagery Havelock Ellis offers a summary description, only one seems to handle colour in a manner similar to Emily Dickinson:

[His] use of colour is very extravagant, symbolical, often contradictory. He plays with colour, lays it on to an impossible thickness, uses it in utterly unreal senses to describe spiritual facts. Colours seem to become colourless algebraic formulae in his hands. It may safely be said that no great poet ever used the colours of the world so disdainfully, making them the playthings of a mighty imagination, only valuing them for the emphasis they may give to the shapes of his own inner vision.<sup>21</sup>

This poet is of course Shakespeare. Shakespeare's centrality in Emily Dickinson's reading has been well-documented by critics.<sup>22</sup> Both Higginson and Lyman report remarks of the poet from which it may be inferred that her attitude towards Shakespeare was little less than idolatrous.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding, her more tranquil words to her sister-in-law at a much later

date summarise her feelings better:

With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living -- To say that sincerely is strange praise.<sup>24</sup>

We cannot doubt, then, her enthusiasm for Shakespeare. It is more difficult to decide whether this enthusiasm influenced her use of colour-imagery.

Caroline Spurgeon claims that Shakespeare was fascinated with colour,

. . . not chiefly for its colour value, as is an artist, but rather as it appears in some definite object, and for the emotion it thus arouses and conveys. This accounts, probably, for the fact that what he notices about colour and what attract him supremely are change and contrast . . . almost exclusively in two phenomena only . . . in the human face, with the emotions it denotes, and the glory and changing colours of the rising sun.<sup>25</sup>

What Spurgeon is saying is that Shakespeare does not use colours for their power to describe static objects in a representational way, but for their capacity to put transient phenomena into words, and to invest these phenomena with emotional weightiness. Far ahead of his time, therefore, Shakespeare gravitated towards the expressionistic pole of colour-imagery. This is why Dickinson was particularly attracted to Shakespeare's use of colour. She too was intrigued with the effects of change and contrast -- in the rising and setting sun, in the seasonal transformations of the landscape, in the arrival and departure of a storm or a hummingbird. If she was not so concerned with the colours of the human face, that was because she rarely externalised

her inner conflicts more than was absolutely necessary.

In the letters that survive, the first allusion Emily Dickinson makes to a Shakespearean work takes the form of a paraphrase of the famous metaphor of aging and decay from Macbeth: "My way of life/Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf".<sup>26</sup> These lines haunted her; she refers to them again in a letter of a few years later,<sup>27</sup> lamenting her own advancing years (she was twenty-one at the time). What attracted her was certainly the use of a colour-image to convey an emotional state with intensity, and it is significant that her own poetry is rich in memorable, if sometimes enigmatic phrases in which the colour yellow is an important element, as if she were in some way trying to match the lines from Macbeth.<sup>28</sup> This play was, moreover, a favourite of hers, and she alluded to it in her letters more frequently than to any other work of Shakespeare.<sup>29</sup> It is, significantly, the play that contains what Spurgeon calls

. . . Macbeth's famous ejaculation. . . [which] stands almost alone, forming in itself the most thrilling and dramatic use of changing colour ever made by Shakespeare or by any dramatist.<sup>30</sup>

Spurgeon is referring to the lines from a brief soliloquy in Act Two of the play, when Macbeth, after murdering Duncan, contemplates his bloody hands:

No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine  
Making the green one red.<sup>31</sup>

Here is a clear precedent, taken from a play known to be

a favourite, both for Emily Dickinson's love of sonorous, exotic colour-words (the verb "incarnadine", a Shakespearean coinage), and for her use of expressionistic colour-saturation (here taken to the borders of the surreal).<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon also notes this striking if rarely-used Shakespearean technique, and calls it "flooded colour".<sup>33</sup> She gives two further examples of descriptions of spectacular sunrises in which Shakespeare uses "flooded colour",<sup>34</sup> both of which reveal a Shakespearean precedent for Dickinson's delight in and concern to describe the evanescent colours of the sky, in order to make them reflect the inner feelings of the poet. Recalling the lines quoted from Richard II in the Introduction,<sup>35</sup> we might add that Shakespeare's use of "flooded" or intensified colour is not as rare as Spurgeon makes out.

Apart from Shakespeare, the other universally-attested influence on Emily Dickinson is the Bible. A line from Ecclesiastes forms a biblical counterpart to the ones from Macbeth, in that she referred to it several times in her letters and its echoes reverberate throughout her poetry: "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken".<sup>36</sup> Here the adjectives are not pure colour-words, but give both colour and value to an object that is quite mundane, thereby investing it with a symbolic significance which is ultimately mysterious: this is prophetic language in operation. Emily Dickinson often attempted to capture



this vatic quality by employing a similar technique, but usually achieved at best an ironic bathos. This may be seen in the following lines:

The Day undressed -- Herself --  
Her Garter -- was of Gold -- (P.716).

On other occasions her aim was directly to mock the elevated prophetic style, yet as she does so we can see how that style permeated her thought:

Tho' my destiny be Fustian --  
Her's be damask fine --  
Tho' she wear a silver apron --  
I, a less divine -- (P.163).

According to Faber Birren, moreover:

Though the Bible is filled with references to jewels and silks, brilliant colors and rainbows, and with descriptions and metaphors that make it probably the most "colorful" of religious works, there is far more exuberance than there is symbolism.<sup>37</sup>

It is this quality of exuberance, too, which Dickinson learnt from her reading of the Bible how to capture. Her debt to the "Gem chapter" from Revelation has been pointed out by several critics.<sup>38</sup> It was surely the fact that the symbolism of Biblical jewels with sonorous, evocative names is so imprecise, that enables her to use chalcedony, topaz, amethyst and the like in contexts of her own choosing.<sup>39</sup>

After Shakespeare and the Bible, the next most important influences on Dickinson's colour-imagery are harder to determine. My strategy, therefore, will be to examine the work of writers known to have been influences

on the poet in a general sense, in order to find out whether there are any more specific parallels in colour-use. So, referring to the beginning of the poet's correspondence with Higginson in 1862, Rebecca Patterson remarks, "Aurora Leigh was Emily's Bible in those days".<sup>40</sup> In "Emily Dickinson's Palette", the same critic shows how the poet's jewel-imagery derives as much from Aurora Leigh as from Revelation (Mrs. Browning's poem ends with an unmistakeable allusion to Dickinson's beloved "Gem chapter").<sup>41</sup> Several other critics have also mentioned Dickinson's enthusiasm for Mrs. Browning's poetry, and Aurora Leigh in particular.<sup>42</sup> None, though, has gone as far as John Evangelist Walsh, whose conclusion in his book The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson is that Aurora Leigh is the single most important influence, not just on the poetry, but also on the personality of the poet.<sup>43</sup> Walsh claims that Mrs. Browning's poem turned Dickinson into a poet -- or rather into a "clever scavenger"<sup>44</sup> whose poems were little more than the disguised snapping-up of other poets' unconsidered trifles. Aurora Leigh started her on this path, claims Walsh, who goes on to state unequivocally and in all seriousness that her "profound entanglement" with this poem was no innocent heroine-worship on the part of the younger poet:

Emily's business in that enchanted preserve was not nearly so innocent as it has appeared, nor did she bear home from it a mere posy; rather she determinedly returned again and again to appropriate armloads of its blossoms.<sup>45</sup>

If, as Walsh maintains, Dickinson stole almost sixty poems directly from Aurora Leigh, not to mention other, miscellaneous spoils (including the word "circumference"<sup>46</sup>), then we might certainly expect to find a close parallel between Elizabeth Barrett Browning's colour-imagery and that of Emily Dickinson.

However, among the so-called borrowings Walsh tabulates in the "Notes and Sources" section of his book,<sup>47</sup> there is not a single example of a colour-image. On the occasion that a colour-image appears among the lines from Aurora Leigh that Dickinson is supposed to have plagiarised, it fails to appear in the Dickinson poem. When a colour-image appears in the "stolen" Dickinson poem, it has no parallel in the "original". Knowing Dickinson's fascination with colour, it would seem certain that if we were to believe Walsh, we could expect Dickinson to play the jackdaw and appropriate the particularly striking colour-images in Aurora Leigh, of which there are many. But this is not the case. Walsh sees Aurora Leigh, III, 326-340 as the source for P.773. Mrs. Browning's lines speak of the "fiery sap", which ". . . strikes/The summer foliage out in a green flame". None of this colour-imagery appears in P.773; instead, the only dab of colour is a robin ("Red Pilgrim"), which offers the poet an autumnal berry. If P.773 really were plagiarised from Aurora Leigh, it is hard to see how a poet with Dickinson's sensitivity to colour could have attempted to express the summary vitality of the image in Mrs. Browning's poem by

the autumnal, elegiac redness of the soon-to-depart robin and its meagre offering.

According to Walsh, the closest Dickinson gets to stealing a colour-image from Mrs. Browning is in the following lines:

I would rather take my part  
With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white . . . .

These lines, Aurora Leigh, II, 101-102, are supposed to be the origin for these of Dickinson's:

. . . We -- would rather  
From Our Garret go  
White -- Unto the White Creator --  
Than invest -- Our Snow --  
(P.709).

It does not occur to Walsh that it is more likely that the undoubted echo here is caused by both poets coincidentally alluding to the lines from Revelation of importance to both:

Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not  
defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me  
in white: for they are worthy.  
He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in  
white raiment. . . .<sup>48</sup>

It would be difficult to claim, however, that both poets invest their allusions with equal emotional weight. Whether we agree with J. S. Wheatcroft or not that Dickinson's poetry is an "emanation from New England orthodoxy", it is certainly true that "In Puritan eschatology the white robe in which the bride of Christ will be garbed is a persistently used figure",<sup>49</sup> and that Emily Dickinson came from a background which attributed much significance to the verses in Revelation concerning the white vestments of the bride of the Lamb.<sup>50</sup>

In the lines cited from Aurora Leigh, white is simply the conventional colour of heavenly robes and has no reference to any larger symbolic scheme. In Dickinson's poem, on the other hand, there is a characteristic and highly effective use of white-saturated colour-imagery in order to produce an effect of blinding purity. Moreover, P.709 is part of the poet's continuing symbolic exploration of the colour white, reflecting her concern to examine her religious heritage which in turn led to some of her most important poems.<sup>51</sup> In short, Walsh's suggestion that in this case Dickinson stole from Mrs. Browning is nothing short of preposterous.

To reject Walsh's major premise is not to deny that there are parallels between these two poets' use of colour-imagery. Mrs. Browning does exhibit a sensitivity to colour-effects which, though she is less bold than Dickinson, reveals her as something of a kindred spirit to the American poet. Aurora Leigh contains, for example, an elaborate "painter-poet" metaphor:

We [poets] are used to dip our artist-hands in gall  
And potash, trying potentialities  
Of alternated colour, till at last  
We get confused, and wonder for our skin  
How nature tinged it first.<sup>52</sup>

This typically Romantic idea that the poet is a greatly inferior artist to Nature has none of Emily Dickinson's "sublime arrogance"<sup>53</sup> in her role as Nature's rival. Mrs. Browning as painter-poet is far more conventional than Dickinson, but the parallel here is still a more significant one than

most of those Walsh tries to draw. Furthermore, there is in Aurora Leigh a delight in colour-contrast as well as a tendency to differentiate the abstract qualities of things by means of chromatic formulae, stylistic features that certainly point forward to Dickinson. So, Aurora herself is a child of the Mediterranean shore, and her spiritual homeland is characterised by clear, sunlit contrasts: "The white walls, the blue hills, my Italy".<sup>54</sup> These colours recur in other aspects of Italian life that fill Aurora with nostalgia: she recalls the "white-veiled maidens" who hold their tapers

. . . aslant  
To the blue luminous tremor of the air,  
And letting drop the white wax as they went,<sup>55</sup>

not to mention the "rare blue eyes"<sup>56</sup> of Aurora's dead Florentine mother, which Aurora has inherited herself. This white-blue contrast is lost in her new life in England, her first impressions of which are of "mean red houses through the fog"<sup>57</sup> and the "Eyes of no colour"<sup>58</sup> of her English step-mother. Aurora's description of her English bedroom shows the poet using colour-intensification techniques:

. . . the walls  
Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight  
Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds  
Hung green about the window which let in  
The out-door world with all its greenery.<sup>59</sup>

It is a reflection of the temperamental difference between Mrs. Browning and Emily Dickinson that the latter poet was never moved to manipulate the colour green in this way, pro-

bably because she was never able to envisage it in such negative terms.<sup>60</sup>

In a description of a London sky in Aurora Leigh, Mrs. Browning even moves towards the expressionistic use of colour to be found in Dickinson's poems of sunrise and sunset. Noteworthy here also is the English poet's interest in exotic colour-terminology (she borrows Shakespeare's "incarnadine"), and in synaesthesia (though in this case done in such overwrought language that its evocative force is dissipated):

I . . . watched the sun  
On lurid morns or monstrous afternoons  
(Like some Druidic idol's fiery brass  
With fixed unflickering outline of dead heat,  
From which the blood of wretches pent inside  
Seems oozing forth to incarnadine the air)  
Push out through fog with his dilated disc,  
And startle the slant roofs and chimney-pots  
With splashes of fierce colour.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, purple is a favourite colour of Mrs. Browning in her Sonnets from the Portuguese, where it is usually associated with the poet's lover. It can refer to his blood ("purple of thine heart"),<sup>62</sup> to his royal robes,<sup>63</sup> or even to his hair.<sup>64</sup> This is a clear and striking parallel between the two poets' diction, but curiously neither Patterson nor Walsh mentions it.

I have dealt with the influence of Mrs. Browning in some detail in order to show how instructive the comparative analysis of colour-imagery can be. It provides specific evidence towards proving that Walsh's charges of plagiarism

are groundless. It reveals a profound difference of temperament between the poets, in the way they handle certain colours. Yet it also shows that there was a stylistic aspect to the kinship Emily Dickinson felt for a near-contemporary who is often considered one of the most conventional of the Victorian poetesses. For Dickinson's colour-imagery was not something she developed entirely alone, but which grew out of a bolder and more imaginative attitude towards a subject that also fascinated her immediate predecessors.

No-one has suggested that there is much common ground between Emily Dickinson and Tennyson, but nothing illustrates better the debt Dickinson owed to the Victorian poets' interest in colour, nor reveals how more sophisticated was her own development of the subject, than a comparison between the following lines. The first come from "Locksley Hall":

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic  
sails,  
Pilot of the purple twilight, dropping down with  
costly bales.<sup>65</sup>

The second are a clear Dickinsonian echo:

Night after Night  
Her purple traffic  
Strews the landing with Opal Bales -- (P.266).

Tennyson is dealing with a vision of the future, and his "argosies" are aircraft of some sort. His lines are sonorous, but his images, though gorgeous, are vague -- he has the excuse that he is being prophetic. In her lines, Dickinson is dealing with the phenomenon of sunset, something far less tang-



ible than a flying machine, yet contrives to make her images gorgeous and at the same time concrete and sensuous, while keeping to the same colour of purple. Of Tennyson's use of colour, Ellis remarks:

It is Tennyson's distinction that in his work what may be called the normal aesthetic colour-vision is once more fully restored after the aberrations of two centuries . . . No poet uses crimson, and perhaps purple, with such brooding, sensual delight.<sup>66</sup>

No poet, we might add, apart from Emily Dickinson, whose use of purple is more truly sensual, rather than merely langorous. Yet Ellis's overall point must stand: without Tennyson as without Mrs. Browning, Emily Dickinson's far greater achievements in the field of colour-imagery would not have been possible.

The only other figure who is a universally-acknowledged literary influence on Emily Dickinson is Emerson. There is ample proof that she was familiar with a good deal of Emerson's work.<sup>67</sup> Some critics have gone on to show how she absorbed Transcendentalism and other ideas associated with Emerson,<sup>68</sup> others how she turned these ideas on their head for ironic purposes because she, unlike Emerson, had a tragic sense or even a sense of all-pervasive evil.<sup>69</sup> A few critics have contented themselves by demonstrating how her poetic style reflects Emersonian practice.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of the history of colour-theory, Emerson is the crucial link between Emily Dickinson and Goethe. Goethe was the paradigm of The Writer among the seven

figures discussed by Emerson in Representative Men<sup>71</sup> (a work Dickinson described to Mrs. Higginson as a "little Granite Book you can lean upon").<sup>72</sup> In this work, Dickinson will have read that Goethe was "Argus-eyed",<sup>73</sup> a faculty that enabled him to delve into the mysteries of all the natural kingdoms and come to startling conclusions:

In optics again he rejected the artificial theory of seven colors, and considered that every color was the mixture of light and darkness in new proportions.<sup>74</sup>

Emerson's personal alignment in the Newton-Goethe controversy may be inferred from that word "artificial". Dickinson will also have noted (and this is interesting as much for what it implies about the Dickinson-Emerson relationship as for what it states about the one between Emerson and Goethe) these lines about the part of Zur Farbenlehre in which Goethe makes philosophical connections:

. . . the charm of this portion of the book consists in the simplest statement of the relation betwixt those grandees of European scientific history and himself; the mere drawing of the lines from Goethe to Kepler, from Goethe to Bacon, from Goethe to Newton. The drawing of the line is, for the time and person, a solution of the formidable problem.<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps Dickinson felt that the comforting solidity of Representative Men, its "Granite" quality, was that it showed her, isolated though she was, how she could still take her place among the community of great minds by discovering the "lines" that connected them to her.

Dickinson will have undoubtedly made more specific discoveries about her kinship with Emerson the more deeply

she read in him. She may have marked, for instance, that Emerson offers a justification for synaesthesia in his doctrine of Compensation. As Vivian C. Hopkins, in his study of Emerson's aesthetic theory, puts it:

In his creative writing, Emerson draws more from sight than from any of the other senses. This emphasis is partly explained by the greater keenness of his own sense of sight, which led him to term his "musical eyes" compensation for his lack of musical ear.<sup>76</sup>

She may have found it surprising, though, that in spite of this visual emphasis, Emerson hardly ever seems to deal with the topic of colour itself in any detail. There is one exception, however. In a chapter entitled "Success" in Society and Solitude, Emerson imagines a city boy in the October woods for the first time. The boy walks through "tents of gold, through bowers of crimson, porphyry and topaz", while "The owner of the wood-lot finds only a number of discolored trees".<sup>77</sup> Emerson then summarises the significance of this disparity of vision:

The world is not made up to the eye of figures, that is, only half; it is also made of color. How that element washes the universe with its enchanting waves! . . . 'Tis the last stroke of Nature; beyond color she cannot go. In like manner, life is made up, not of knowledge only, but of love also. If thought is form, sentiment is color. It clothes the skeleton world with space, variety, and glow. The hues of sunset make life great.<sup>78</sup>

It is here at the closest point between Emerson and Dickinson that the differences between them -- differences of temperament and outlook, of which the individual's attitude

towards colour is coming to seem a good indicator -- first become apparent. If it is true, as some critics believe, that Emily Dickinson saw a painful duality in human existence while Emerson saw only a benign unity,<sup>79</sup> in the case of colour, surprisingly, it is Emerson who saw the duality. For him, colour is indeed splendid, but in itself ultimately of little importance. With form it exists as a duality, but as such is only really valuable as an illustration by analogy of other dualities such as knowledge and love, or thought and sentiment. The essence of such dualities for Emerson is that they contain two interdependent elements, and it is meaningless to attempt to isolate one element to the exclusion of the other. For Emily Dickinson, however, it is perfectly possible to separate colour from form and talk about it on its own, as she does in her "sunset poems" in which the contrast and flow of colours is itself the theme and is of significance in itself. For Emerson, colours were symbols of spiritual facts; for Dickinson, they were spiritual facts.

In a chapter called "Art" in Society and Solitude, Emerson says:

Nothing is arbitrary, nothing is insulated in beauty. It depends forever on the necessary and the useful. The plumage of the bird, the mimic plumage of the insect, has a reason for its rich colors in the constitution of the animal.<sup>80</sup>

We note here at once the Puritan ring of "necessary and useful", and may decide that this sort of aesthetic idea is one

aspect of her Puritan heritage that did not persist in Emily Dickinson. Emerson's major essay Art<sup>81</sup> clarifies the significance of the difference in attitude to colour between the two writers. In this essay, Emerson speaks of the "merely initial"<sup>82</sup> offices of the painter and sculptor; for when the true Artist can portray Everything, why should he be content with merely Something? He recounts how, on his Italian trip, he expected to be overwhelmed by the "barbaric pearl and gold",<sup>83</sup> but found instead, among the Old Masters he liked, not strangers but old friends, whom he could as easily have encountered at home. "I now require this of all pictures, that they domesticate me, not that they dazzle me",<sup>84</sup> he says, and makes this comment about Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling:

Slighting the secondary arts of coloring . . . he aimed exclusively, as a stern designer, to express the vigor and magnificence of his conceptions.<sup>85</sup>

Even if we can believe that the Sistine Chapel domesticated rather than dazzled Emerson, we would find it impossible to imagine Emily Dickinson responding in a similar way. For her, colouring was certainly no "secondary art".

Even when, as a poet, Emerson comes closest to Dickinson (and he comes closer to her than anyone else), the difference in attitude towards colour, and the temperamental and philosophical differences that underlie it, remain. A poem called "Rubies" may at first glance almost be mistaken for one of Dickinson's:

They brought me rubies from the mine,  
 And held them to the sun;  
 I said, they are drops of frozen wine  
 From Eden's vats that run.

I looked again, -- I thought them hearts  
 Of friends to friends unknown;  
 Tides that should warm each neighboring life  
 Are locked in sparkling stone.

But fire to warm that ruddy snow,  
 To break enchanted ice,  
 And give love's scarlet tides to flow, --  
 When shall that sun arise?<sup>86</sup>

The stylistic similarities to Dickinson's poetry are not hard to perceive: the quatrain-form and jingling metre; the unconcern with perfect rhyme ("ice"/"arise") and with maintaining a consistent rhyme-scheme; and even the phraseology ("Eden's vats", "ruddy snow", "scarlet tides"). Yet such a poem could not have been written by Emily Dickinson, for the good reason that she would have been unable to maintain the ironic distinction between the warm colour of the rubies and their inner coldness. For she would not see the gorgeous scarlet colour of the gems as a mask or surface phenomenon, rather as a bodying forth of secret and profound spiritual essences, particularly those associated with blood, love, and vitality itself.<sup>87</sup> In one of Dickinson's poems, the poet tells her lover,

I've Diamonds -- on my fingers --  
 You know what Diamonds are?  
 I've Rubies -- like the Evening Blood --  
 And Topaz -- like the star! (P.223).

While Emerson's poem qualifies the warm appearance of the jewels with suggestions of their frigidity, Dickinson's

poem moves in the direction of colour-intensification. The red of the rubies, claims the poet, is comparable in purity and intensity only to the redness of the evening sky, which in turn is comparable only to the redness of heart's blood, the sole hue to express her passion.

Emerson, therefore, had little or no influence on Emily Dickinson's colour-imagery (apart from possibly its phraseology), because the two writers perceived the world in such different ways. For Emerson, colour and form are a duality belonging to the world of appearance, a world which drops away when the mind is on the level of communion with the Oversoul. At this level, the perceptual faculties become as a "transparent eye-ball", seeing everything and nothing.<sup>88</sup> For the artist, colouring is a secondary art, a useful tool to reach a world of transcendent reality beyond the range of simple perception. For Emily Dickinson, colours can stand on their own, and in so doing embody the essential truths of the perceived world. That a world without perception was inconceivable to her, may be seen in her idea of the colour or colours, nameless to the living world, but which tinge the transcendent realm, or the world beyond the grave.<sup>89</sup> For colours imply perception, and for her it is up to the artist to capture all the colours he sees as nearly as he can, and to verse himself in their infinite expressive possibilities.

If Emerson was a negative influence upon Dickinson's

colour-imagery, we need look no further than Thoreau among her immediate predecessors for a positive one. Regarding the reading-list Dickinson enumerates to Higginson at the start of their correspondence,<sup>90</sup> Sewall asks, "Where is Thoreau, for whom her few tantalizing references show a kinship greater than she ever acknowledged?"<sup>91</sup> Though other critics, too, have implied in passing that Dickinson was far more akin to Thoreau than to Emerson, it is not a relationship that has been scrutinised in much detail. "Like Thoreau", Whicher has said, "she traveled widely in her native village",<sup>92</sup> and this same critic also noticed that both writers showed that the "simplest commonplaces of life in practical America could be vitalized and made precious to the mind",<sup>93</sup> even when that meant coming to terms with contemporary technology.<sup>94</sup> To this may be added the facts that both writers were genuine naturalists, and that both withdrew from the world because, in Sewall's words, they appeared to have "certain private affairs to transact"<sup>95</sup> and were conscious that in these transactions, and not in the social world, lay their immortality.

Albert J. Gelpi, who confines his examination of the Dickinson-Thoreau connection to the enumeration of the works of Thoreau Dickinson might have known, claims that, apart from Walden and the other major works,

She must have read the essays which appeared in the pages of the Atlantic Monthly during 1862: "Walking", "Autumnal Tints", "Wild Apples" and others.<sup>96</sup>



Indeed, she must have, for the parallels are quite remarkable. Here at last is a writer -- almost contemporary, a fellow-New Englander, another close observer of Nature and lover of solitude -- who combines rejection of society with an intensely sensuous eye that glories in colour for its own sake. To take "Autumnal Tints" alone:<sup>97</sup> in this short piece Emily Dickinson could have found support for all her aesthetic ideas about colour, as well as inspiration for new ones. The first section of the essay, "The Sugar Maple", is a close description of a favourite tree of hers<sup>98</sup> in its autumnal glory, with emphasis on the way the colours of the foliage change according to the different intensity of light at different times of the day. This leads Thoreau to a more universalised, meditative passage, and we can imagine Dickinson concurring with every point even as she was making a note of the colour-terminology for her own use:

Indeed, neither the truant nor the studious is at present taught color in the schools . . . Shall the names of so many of our colors continue to be derived from those of obscure foreign localities, as Naples yellow, Prussian blue, raw Sienna, burnt Umber, Gamboge? (surely the Tyrian purple must have faded by this time), or from comparatively trivial articles of commerce, -- chocolate, lemon, coffee, cinnamon, claret . . . What do we know of sapphire, amethyst, emerald, ruby, amber, and the like, -- most of us who take these names in vain?<sup>99</sup>

The next two sections of the essay are entitled "Scarlet Oaks" and "Purple Grasses", and are prose exercises in the kind of colour-intensification or saturation that Emily Dickinson loved to indulge in:

Till the sun got low, I did not believe there were so many redcoats in the forest army . . . Every such tree becomes a nucleus of red, as it were, where, with the declining sun, that color grows and glows. It is partly borrowed fire, gathering strength from the sun . . . It has only some comparatively dull red leaves for a rallying-point or kindling stuff, to start it, and it becomes an intense scarlet or red mist, or fire . . . You see a redder tree than exists.<sup>100</sup>

Dickinson would certainly have agreed too with the generalities Thoreau extrapolates from his descriptions, such as the following:

We love to see any redness in the vegetation of the temperate zone. It is the color of colors. This plant speaks to our blood.<sup>101</sup>

In Emerson's writings, references to colour are few and far between, and then usually are made in order to express a non-chromatic point by way of analogy. The writings of Thoreau, on the other hand, are full of speculations on the topic; colour clearly interested him in its own right. In the Journals, this kind of statement occurs:

Color, which is the poet's wealth, is so expensive that most take to mere outline or pencil sketches and become men of science.<sup>102</sup>

This aphorism, both gnomic and double-edged, is one worthy of Emily Dickinson at her best. Here is that theme so close to her heart -- the poet's superiority to the painter in the realm of colour -- with the added idea that colour is a precious commodity, for which, unless he is content to become a mere sketchbook-naturalist, even the poet must strive if he is truly to take possession of it. On another occasion, Thoreau writes,

Color stands for all ripeness and success. We have dreamed that the hero should carry his colors aloft, as a symbol of the ripeness of his virtue. The noblest feature, the eye, is the fairest-colored, the jewel of the body. The warrior's flag is the flower which precedes his fruit.<sup>103</sup>

For Thoreau, the colour of the eye is of extreme significance, as it is also for Mrs. Browning and Emily Dickinson herself. This is because it is the index to the quality of the inner self, or soul.<sup>104</sup> Here Thoreau too stands apart from Emerson. Not just the colour of the eyes, but all natural colours have a deeper significance beyond their function as surface decoration. So, Thoreau notes that to the fancier of cats, "it is not indifferent whether one be black or gray, for the color expresses character".<sup>105</sup> We recall Dickinson's description of her sister Lavinia's new pussy, "the color of Branwell Brontë's hair" (L.471), and note how far both these writers are from Emerson's "necessary and useful" animal colourings. It is not surprising, also, to discover that Thoreau follows Goethe rather than Newton but, with characteristic independence of spirit, aligns himself with the neo-Aristotelian school of colour-theory only after conducting some experiments of his own:

Light, I should say, was white; the absence of it, black. Hold up to the light a perfectly opaque body and you get black, but hold up to it the least opaque body, such as air, and you get blue. Hence you might say that blue is light seen through a veil.<sup>106</sup>

This is another way of saying (and a tentative note may be detected) that colour is a mixture of light and darkness. It

is, however, conclusive evidence that the anti-Newtonian reaction initiated by Goethe had taken firm root in New England soil.

In conclusion, we may say that the major literary influences on Emily Dickinson, with one exception, influenced her colour-imagery also. It is quite possible to demonstrate which particular aspect of her colour-imagery she got from whom. Shakespeare showed her how a poet might make free with colour, and by so doing gain expressive power. The Bible provided her with a rich and exotic colour-vocabulary and a precedent for using certain colour-words in a way more evocative than truly symbolic. In Mrs. Browning's work she found a willingness, albeit less audacious than her own, to experiment with colour. Thoreau was a true kindred spirit, a writer who "felt"<sup>107</sup> colour as intensely as she did, as well as one who had more obvious similarities in outlook and temperament. Emerson is the exception, yet from him she probably gained a sense of her philosophical context as participant in the anti-Newtonian reaction, as well as theoretical justification for her explorations in the realm of synaesthesia. In terms of general outlook, though, Emerson was a negative influence on Emily Dickinson, and much of her poetry is an ironic critique of Emersonian Transcendentalism. A poet's use of colour-imagery is a good indication of his general outlook, and therefore it should be hardly surprising that in his use of colour, Emerson influenced Emily

Dickinson hardly at all.

### 3. American Analogues and Descendants.

Of all the major figures in American Literature, Emily Dickinson shows the greatest fascination with, sensitivity to, and willingness to explore the expressive potentialities of colour. As we have seen, Thoreau comes closest to her in sensitivity, but his Journals are not finished works of art. It is noteworthy, however, that other major American writers of the nineteenth century demonstrated, at times, an interest in exploring chromatic effects in their writings, an interest that has no real parallel, for example, in English writers of that epoch. Moreover, the "theme of colour" in American literature, as it might be termed, did not come to an end with the nineteenth century, but has continued in a flourishing state into the present one -- to a certain extent because of the influence of Emily Dickinson. This section of the chapter offers a brief outline of this "theme of colour", while the next section offers a tentative explanation of the reason why colour should be a typically American theme.

Of Poe, the first major American writer to interest himself in the theme of colour, Havelock Ellis writes:

Yellow, violet, purple and black are the colours preferred by this very personal and original poet . . . although he rarely elaborates colour-effects, his colour is precise and well realised, never merely conventional.<sup>108</sup>

Poe's idiosyncratic colour-preferences had vast repercussions.

The Masque of the Red Death,<sup>109</sup> for example, is almost a paradigm for writers who wish to achieve the maximum effect of colour-saturation so often cited as one of Emily Dickinson's favourite techniques. Poe's predilection for black had the greatest repercussions of all, for once seized upon by Baudelaire,<sup>110</sup> it resulted in a revolution in aesthetic taste as artists of all kinds scrambled to exploit that colour's macabre beauty. In the American literary tradition, however, it was Poe's fascination with white, particularly as it is expressed in the final chapter of his Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym<sup>111</sup> (which ends with the narrator in a drifting boat heading for a mysterious and apocalyptic white-skinned figure) that had most significance.

Perhaps the most profound literary examination in the English language of the suggestive possibilities of a colour is the chapter in Moby-Dick entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale".<sup>112</sup> The editors of the Hendricks House edition of Melville's novel claim that the author was familiar not only with Poe's Narrative . . ., but also with other theoretical works on colour from Sir Thomas Browne's "Digression Concerning Blackness"<sup>113</sup> to Goethe's conversations with Eckermann on the subject of colour.<sup>114</sup> We have already seen how Goethe-inspired anti-Newtonianism had taken firm root in New England, having conquered both Emerson and Thoreau. Now Melville takes Newtonianism to the limits of its philosophical implications in order to test it for himself:

And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues . . . are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot . . . and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, forever remains white or colorless in itself . . . -- pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us like a leper. . . .<sup>115</sup>

"And of all these things the albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"<sup>116</sup> Melville concludes this chapter. In other words, the quest for the whale is occasioned by the threat its whiteness symbolises, namely the blank horror underlying creation. Not even in the poetry of Emily Dickinson has the colour white such a titanic burden to bear.

Hawthorne is the other great forerunner of Dickinson to use colour in a manner especially worthy of note. A study by Richard Harter Fogle<sup>117</sup> has shown how much Hawthorne depended on the interplay of light and darkness to create the moral ambiguity that is such a characteristic of his fiction. Far more specifically, however, the symbolic structure of The Scarlet Letter centres on the colours of the letter itself:

The letter is glowing, positive, vital, the product of genuine passion, while the sable [background] may certainly be taken as the negation of everything alive.<sup>118</sup>

Yet, as Fogle points out, both red and black are traditionally associated with Hell.<sup>119</sup> In other words, using a similar technique to Dickinson's shifting symbolic values, Hawthorne counterposes the traditional, "allegorical" attributes of red

and black with the modified values they have when identified with the special case of Hester Prynne. The result is a moral ambiguity that the novelist deliberately does little to resolve, for in it resides a good deal of the novel's dramatic tension. In Moby-Dick, the ambiguity of colour-symbolism is the subject of only one chapter; in The Scarlet Letter this ambiguity becomes in a sense the subject of the whole novel.

So, in several of the major American writers of the last century, colour is well on the way to becoming a theme-in-itself, if never so consistently as in the writings of Emily Dickinson. When, after her death, Dickinson's poems began to be published, the theme of colour re-emerges almost immediately in the first writers to assimilate Dickinson's achievements. One of these writers was Stephen Crane:

It was Howells' reading of Emily Dickinson's poetry [in April, 1893] that started Crane writing the strange poems that were finally printed as The Black Riders in 1895.<sup>120</sup>

These poems are by no means distinguished, but in them can be seen, for the first time in Crane's writings, the kind of colour-imagery that was later to give The Red Badge of Courage<sup>121</sup> so much of its strange power. Crane's reading was never broad, but apart from Emily Dickinson, there was one other writer who proved influential in the genesis of The Red Badge of Courage:

Crane had read about Goethe's affective theory of color, he lived among young painters, he had heard



of impressionism; in short, conscious experimentation and unconscious obsession with color were plausible enough in the future author of The Red Badge.<sup>122</sup>

It seems certain, then, that Stephen Crane was one of the first to see Emily Dickinson as painter-poet, even if he left no other testament to the fact than his own works.

Although three series of her poems had appeared in 1891, 1892 and 1896,<sup>123</sup> it may be said that the twentieth century did not properly discover Emily Dickinson until the appearance of The Single Hound in 1914.<sup>124</sup> Then suddenly she became one of the "chorus of new voices — Lindsay, Pound, Williams, Robinson, Jeffers and Frost",<sup>125</sup> all of whom had important books published at that time, and suddenly, too, critics began to notice her affinities with some of these poets. In August, 1914, for example, only five months after the appearance of the Imagistes anthology,<sup>126</sup> a reviewer of The Single Hound wrote:

For starkness of vision, "quintessentialness" of expression, boldness and solidity of thought, and freedom of form, a New England spinster . . . might give the imagists "pointers".<sup>127</sup>

In other words, Emily Dickinson, on the occasion of the publication of her fourth posthumous volume, was suddenly being hailed as modern. Amy Lowell, in an essay written in retrospect,<sup>128</sup> saw her not as a precursor of the Imagists, but actually as a member of the group, referring to the poet's life as the "oddest and saddest moment" in the Imagist movement.<sup>129</sup> Amy Lowell tries to define what made Dickinson an

Imagist:

She, first of all in English, I believe, made use of what I have called elsewhere the "unrelated" method. That is, the describing of a thing by its appearance only, without regard to its entity in any other way.<sup>130</sup>

Here Lowell is implying that Dickinson's poetic practice conforms to the fourth and fifth dicta contained in the preface to the anthology Some Imagist Poets of 1915:

- (4) To present an Image . . . We are not a school of painters, but we believe poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities.
- (5) To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite.<sup>131</sup>

It must be pointed out, however, that Emily Dickinson hardly ever used adjectives simply to sharpen the outline of a described object, and colour-words never -- for it is colour-words that Amy Lowell has in mind, as we shall see. The reason Dickinson never did this has already been stated by implication: for her, colour and form were separable, and if she gave something a colour, then the colour of that thing tended to become of primary interest. For it was the colour that had the ability to express the poet's particular feelings at the moment she perceived the object, feelings which had, as it were, drawn the poet's attention to the colour in the first place.

The Imagists' dicta were deliberately extreme, providing a guide to a new generation of poets as to how to avoid the vague generalities of what T. E. Hulme called the "circumambient gas".<sup>132</sup> Ultimately, the best Imagist poems

shared a particular quality with a few of Dickinson's more restrained and objective poems, namely, an imaginative use of colour-imagery. Yet in her enthusiasm, Lowell sees more affinities between Dickinson and the Imagists than actually exist. Of the line, "This whole Experiment of Green —", from P.1333, for example, Lowell remarks, "see if it is not complete Imagism".<sup>133</sup> According to Lowell's own criteria, however, it is not Imagism at all: the colour does not delineate an object, but is attributed to something quite abstract, that is, the Spring (which is then rendered more concrete and "visible" by this attribution). According to Lowell, too, the best example of Dickinson's "unrelated" method is P.1463, the hummingbird poem. Yet here it is surely the case that the object being described (the bird) eludes descriptive language of the "hard and clear" kind, and so the poet is forced to use synaesthesia.<sup>134</sup> For Lowell, though, P.1463 is an Imagistic poem, and one that inspired her to write a poem herself on the same subject. This, while being full of much harder and clearer images than Dickinson's poem, and though showing the influence of Dickinsonian colour-imagery, is static and earth-bound compared to P.1463, one of the reasons being that the colours are too "related" to objects:

Up — up — water shooting,  
 Jet of water, white and silver,  
 Tinkling with the morning sun-bells,  
 Red as sun-blood, whizz of fire,  
 Shock of fire-spray and water:  
 It is the humming-birds flying against the stream of  
 the fountain . . . .<sup>135</sup>

There is a much better poet than Amy Lowell upon whom Emily Dickinson had an influence, an influence only recently detected by a German critic.<sup>136</sup> This poet, William Carlos Williams, began his career as an Imagist, but unlike Amy Lowell managed to develop far beyond this movement. Hans Galinsky, after revealing the evidence for Williams's early familiarity with Dickinson's work, summarises what the two poets have in common:

Auf der positiven Seiten hat man die Einfachheit und Wahrheit beider Autoren gerühmt, ihren Sinn für den Ausdruckswert der Farben, ihren Mut zum Experiment und -- mindestens in Amerika -- ihr Amerikanertum, ja ihre regionale Verwerzelung.<sup>137</sup>

It is surely this sensitivity to the "Ausdruckswert der Farben" that explains the original attraction of Emily Dickinson's poetry to those poets who took part in the Imagist movement. Indeed, we might say that what remains of value in the Imagist experiments, and perhaps what enabled Williams to transcend the movement in which he began as a poet, is a sensitivity to the expressive powers of colour. If we recall some of the most memorable lines in Imagism, in many cases it is colour-imagery that we find makes them so striking: Hulme's "ruddy moon" leaning "over a hedge/Like a red-faced farmer" surrounded by "stars/With white faces, like town children";<sup>138</sup> Pound's faces in the Metro, "Petals on a wet, black bough";<sup>139</sup> and Williams's most famous lines:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.<sup>140</sup>

In each of these examples, "so much depends" not only on the poet's discovery that objects can be crisply rendered in poetry without losing their hard edges, but also on the realisation that objects, however mundane, become visually interesting if they exhibit a sharp contrast of colours — red and white, or white on black, for example. There seems, perhaps, to be some archetypal significance behind such contrasts, which the poet exploits while being aware that the reason for this significance is ultimately mysterious. In other words, objects that are apparently "unrelated" (in Amy Lowell's terminology) become, through their colours, very deeply "related" indeed. Here is the rationale behind, for example, Emily Dickinson's "sunset poems". She did not pretend that her sunsets were "unrelated"; on the contrary, the arrangements of colours, composed like paintings, express the complexities of the poet's mental states to a degree beyond that of more subjective utterance. The successful Imagist poems reveal very similar compositional qualities of the expressionistic type.

The theme of colour in the American literary tradition continues unabated to the present day. Hart Crane, another admirer of Dickinson, used colours in a more self-consciously expressionistic manner in poems like "Royal Palm";<sup>141</sup> Sylvia

Plath employed harsh chromatic contrasts and colour-intensification in "Tulips",<sup>142</sup> to convey the sensation of life and its pain filtering back into the consciousness of a patient in post-operative stupor; and as recently as 1976 William Gass, known for his fiction, published On Being Blue,<sup>143</sup> an enquiry into the significance of that colour even more comprehensive in scope than Melville's exploration of white in "The Whiteness of the Whale".

#### 4. The Broader Cultural Context

In this final section of the chapter, it will be shown that Emily Dickinson's experimentation with colour, like that of the other American writers of her time, was a reflection of a major "colour-revolution" initiated by the European avant-garde. That is not to suggest that the American "theme of colour" is a pallid provincial aping of metropolitan trends. On the contrary, the continuing vigor of the American variations on the theme suggest that there are environmental factors that ensure that successive generations of American writers and painters find that colour offers them a challenge that is impossible to ignore.

The analogy that Emily Dickinson drew between her art and that of the painter has already been explored in some detail. Before continuing this exploration in the broader cultural context, it is timely to recapitulate the various pictorial techniques employed by Dickinson as painter-poet.

First, then, she uses simple, expressionistic brush-strokes to capture a particular chromatic contrast, the symbolic significance of which often remains latent, only becoming more clearly comprehensible when the same colours are examined in other contexts in her writings:

A curious Cloud surprised the Sky,  
 'Twas like a sheet with Horns;  
 The sheet was Blue --  
 The Antlers Gray --  
 It almost touched the Lawns. (P.1710)<sup>144</sup>

She is usually more effective when confining herself to such simple utterance, and the pictorial quality in P.1710 is what made Amy Lowell claim her for the Imagists. However, she can deal with a similar theme -- a cloud resembling something else -- with an effect far from the ideals of Imagism:

A Sloop of Amber slips away  
 Upon an Ether Sea,  
 And wrecks in Peace a Purple Tar,  
 The Son of Ecstasy -- (P.1622).

Here the extended metaphor, even in this brief verse, is laboured, and suffers from the use of "impure" colour-words ("Amber", "Ether") which tend towards the diffusion, not the focussing of the imagery.<sup>145</sup>

A favourite Dickinsonian pictorial technique is that of colour-intensification or saturation, in which the poet avoids colour-contrast and, so to speak, overpaints with the same colour again and again, as in this short poem:

Of Yellow was the outer Sky  
 In Yellower Yellow hewn  
 Till Saffron in Vermillion slid  
 Whose seam could not be shewn -- (P.1676).

This poem also comes under the category of poems the subject of which seems to be colour and colour alone, as if the poet's sole motive for writing is to capture a certain nuance of colour in the landscape or sky. As will be seen, however, P.1676 is in fact expressionistic and deeply "related" to the inner life of the poet.<sup>146</sup> It is harder to make out the same claims for the following short poem, in which the poet, imagistic though never really hard-edged, tosses off a flower with the same facility that she boasts about when tossing off her sunsets:

The stem of a departed Flower  
Has still a silent rank.  
The Bearer from an Emerald Court  
Of a Despatch of Pink.

(P.1520)

Then there are the poems in which the poet deliberately sets out to produce a composition of colours beyond the grasp of the painter's art to achieve. In some poems, a temporal sequence of colours, impossible for the representational artist to capture, is presented:

The Guest is gold and crimson —  
An Opal guest and gray —  
Of Ermine is his doublet —  
His Capuchin gay — (P.15)<sup>147</sup>

Other poems use the idea of the nameless hue, the colour which lies beyond the range of the Newtonian spectrum:

These held their Wick above the West —  
Till when the Red declined —  
Or how the Amber aided it —  
Defied to be defined —  
Then waned without disparagement  
In a dissembling Hue



That would not let the Eye decide  
 Did it abide or no -- (P.1390).

Emily Dickinson, who was concerned to express new ideas by means of the literary manipulation of these and other colour-effects, found that the painter and his art was an obvious model for her own. Unlike Stephen Crane, however, Dickinson did not associate with painters, nor is there any evidence to show that she practised the art of painting herself or read widely in art-history. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that her analogies, implicit or otherwise, between poetry and painting were often drawn in a manner characteristic of the avant-garde of her time.

As mentioned earlier, Henry Wells draws a parallel between Dickinson and Albert Pinkham Ryder, the nineteenth-century American painter sometimes viewed as a transcendentalist.<sup>148</sup> John W. McCoubrey, in his book on the American tradition in painting, describes how, when confronted with the problem of how to portray Nature in the truest possible way, Ryder

. . . "squeezed out great chunks of pure, moist color" and, with his palette knife, laid on "blue, green, white, and brown with great sweeping strokes. As I worked," he wrote, "I saw that it was good and clear and strong. I saw nature springing to life on my canvas, but it was better than nature, for it was vibrating with the thrill of new creation."<sup>149</sup>

This lavish, sensuous use of colour -- Ryder threw his brushes away because they restricted him -- reminds us very much of Dickinsonian technique. Ryder, like Dickinson, was certainly

no Transcendentalist of the Emersonian mould, for as Neil Harris, the art historian, explains: ". . . [the] Transcendentalists held that material objects were significant only as emanations of Spirit",<sup>150</sup> and so, "Painting . . . ranked lower than sculpture, since by using color it created more illusion".<sup>151</sup> For the Transcendentalists, in other words, colour served to mask rather than to reveal the quiddity of an object, and to chain the object to the earth rather than enable it to aspire upward towards the Oversoul.

Ryder was no solitary revolutionary among the American painters. Earlier, Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School had rejoiced in the spectacular colours of the New England landscape, even though their art was not held in high esteem by their contemporaries. For what seems to underlie the disparagement of the colourist's art by the philosophical leaders of their time (namely the Transcendentalists), is the persistence in their thought of the Puritan -- or puritanical -- strain. According to Harris, Cole's countrymen "agreed the appeal of color was so strong that the plain, white marble of the sculptor" was to be preferred when the subject was a nude, for it "cooled the passions instead of exciting them".<sup>152</sup> In reference to the English sculptor in The Marble Faun,<sup>153</sup> Hawthorne expresses the tension in his own mind between the Puritan suspicion of colour and the sensibility of the artist who must open himself to colour's expressive possibilities:

. . . he had . . . robbed the marble of its chastity,

by giving it an artificial warmth of hue. Thus it became a sin and a shame to look at his nude goddesses. They had revealed themselves to his imagination, no doubt, with all their deity about them; but, bedaubed with buff color, they stood forth to the eyes of the profane in the guise of naked women.<sup>154</sup>

On the other hand, when visiting European art-galleries,

[Hawthorne was] . . . in a continual state of irritation by the faded glories of old paintings . . . he could hardly bear to look at them if the original colors were gone. Painters' studios were more inviting than sculptors' precisely because they had "color, warmth and cheerfulness," from "the glow of some picture resting against the wall."<sup>155</sup>

There is none of Hawthorne's ambivalence in Emily Dickinson's writings. She never expresses any suspicion of colour as a vain or superficial phenomenon. Instead, she feels that the limitations of colour are those scientists have imposed upon it in their determination to analyse it, to divide it up into a finite spectral band, and to formulate it by means of seven inviolable designations. In her eyes, colour could only exhibit its full revelatory potential when this Newtonianism was sloughed off. There were two factors that ensured that the anti-Newtonian reaction, as manifest in Emily Dickinson and in painters as different as Cole and Ryder, would be particularly marked in America: the example of the European avant-garde, and the spectacular colours of the American landscape.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, colour had (with certain exceptions) been undervalued by European painters for two hundred years. Surprisingly, John Gage holds Leonardo responsible for this state of affairs:

. . . his much-publicized preference for chiaroscuro values to chromatic values, of light over colour, and his attack on the bright and barely-modulated pigments of the more old-fashioned colourists, generally had the effect of diverting painters' attention from colour-problems until the eighteenth century.<sup>156</sup>

As has already been stated, Leonardo's own fascination with colour was never expressed in a systematic theory.<sup>157</sup> In his painting, he was most concerned with attempting to render the solidity and texture of form by a subtly-modulated interplay of light and shade, and tended to mute his colouring in order to do so. So impressive was his achievement that painters soon came to see his work as an ideal after which to strive, and continued to do so until the work of Newton had begun to be assimilated by artistic circles.

According to Gage, England, Newton's birthplace, was also the country that initiated a colour-revolution in painting that has since had enormous significance in the development of painting. It was in England that first appeared the "readiness to regard scientific discoveries as relevant to art",<sup>158</sup> and where, thanks to Newton, painters first had a systematic colour-theory upon which to base their experiments:

From Newton, colours had acquired fixed values which made them capable of being seen as proportionate among themselves, whether musically or otherwise; and it was this capacity for . . . formal relationships which made colour for the first time accessible to aesthetics.<sup>159</sup>

However, before it was possible for a painter like Turner to arise, Newton had to be freed from his Empiricist commentators:

The Lockean distinction between the primary quality of form and the secondary quality of colour was itself eroded early in the eighteenth century, as far as vision was concerned, by Bishop Berkeley, who re-emphasized the mediaeval proposition that the eye sees "only diversity of colours" and no form. Goethe made this proposition the whole basis of painting.<sup>160</sup>

By Goethe's time, then, theories of vision were concerned, not with the forms of objects, but with constructions made by the perceiving eye of light, shade, and colour. Optics and aesthetics had become inextricably intertwined. Goethe's theoretical contribution was his resurrection of the Aristotelian idea that colour is no more than the combination of light and shade in different proportions. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the painter became free to test for himself whether what had appeared to be a world of solid forms could be satisfactorily represented by colour alone.

The first and most influential exploration of this new freedom was that undertaken by Turner. In a lecture, this painter explains that formerly, artists' interest in colour was confined to "emblematic theory . . . as white, followed by red, as attributes of light and power, yellow and blue, glory, purple, authority" and so on.<sup>161</sup> This, claims Turner, is mere heraldry and not a true colour-theory, because the colours are bound to an emblem. Gage has described Turner's own, very different way of proceeding:

Turner classified the three pigmentary primaries, red, yellow and blue, according to their tonal relationships, and their physiological impact. Red was the most commanding colour . . . in aerial perspective, red seems to be regarded as the colour of matter it-

self, yellow as the light . . . and blue the colour of distance. White Turner regarded as the union of the colours as lights, black (darkness) as the union of material pigments.<sup>162</sup>

In his appreciation of the importance of colour's psychological impact, Turner reveals his debt to Goethe; but in drawing a distinction between spectral and pigmentary colour, Turner anticipates modern colour-theory. He even went so far as to paint a picture entitled Light and Colour: Goethe's Theory: The Morning After the Deluge, Moses Writing the Book of Genesis, a painting which, according to Gage, was

. . . an attempt to restore the equality of light and darkness as values in art and nature, which Turner felt Goethe had unduly neglected.<sup>163</sup>

It is interesting in the present context to note that Turner himself was well aware that the poet was far freer than the painter when it came to the manipulation of colour to achieve specific emotional effects. Indeed, Turner was even prepared to show how the poet is able to find emotional coloration in monochrome. In his Fifth Lecture (1818), Turner quotes some lines from Paradise Lost:

Now came still evening on, and twilight grey  
Had in her sober livery all things clad.<sup>164</sup>

Of these lines, he remarks,

where can graphic art ask incidents or aid, foil'd  
by a word of her own, grey, defining dignified purity, without producing monotony of colour?<sup>165</sup>

In France, there had been a much clearer polarisation of artists asserting the primacy of form, and those making a similar claim for colour. The classicists, David and Ingres,

feeling themselves to be in the great tradition of Poussin, found themselves vehemently opposed by the more radical Romantics, with Delacroix at their head. Delacroix had been influenced not only by the Baroque sensuality of Rubens, but by the more recent English painters Constable and Bonington, whose use of colour was more intimately wedded to form than it was in Turner:

[Delacroix] specified colour in painting as the equivalent of style in literature and equally subject to the control of the intellect. "La couleur," he urged, "c'est la phrase, c'est le style. On n'est un écrivain que lorsque l'on est maître, et qu'on la fait obéir à sa pensée." 166

French colour-experimentation, though at first indebted to English initiatives, has ultimately led to some of the greatest achievements in painting of the modern era. Moreover, from the first there has been a close and fruitful connection between French colour-experimentation in painting and American literature. The connecting figure is Baudelaire, who links Poe with Delacroix and whose writings on art and artists form perhaps the best-known and most extensive exploration of the parallels between literature and painting:

Like our own Eugène Delacroix, who has raised his art to the height of great poetry, Edgar Poe loves to have his characters live and move against lurid backgrounds of mingled purple and green, which reveal the phosphorescence of decay and the smell of the storm. 167

Baudelaire also considers the origin of the contemporary fascination of artists with colour, a fascination he believes to be closely connected to the Romantic movement:

That colour plays a most important role in modern art,

is there anything to be astonished at in that?  
 Romanticism is a child of the North, and the North is  
 a colourist; dreams and fairy tales are children of  
 the mist. England, that homeland of out-and-out col-  
 ourists, Flanders, half of France are plunged in fogs.<sup>168</sup>

To this list of geographical regions, Baudelaire might have added, without weakening his argument, New England, with its Fall colours, its Northern Lights, and its glorious winter sunsets in contrast to the bleak monochrome of the snowy landscape.

If the nineteenth-century fascination with colour is at heart a response to environment, then this also helps to explain why colour had become a characteristically American ✓ theme. Henry James, who always followed developments in the pictorial arts very closely, was of a similar mind. At an exhibition of French painting in Boston, he describes a landscape by Theodore Rousseau:

It is not an American sunset, with its lucid and untempered splendor of orange and scarlet, but the sinking of a serious old-world day, which sings its death-song in a muffled key.<sup>169</sup>

As such, this sunset is in James's eyes a superior composition to its American counterpart, for the latter smacks of the barbaric. James is, both here and elsewhere, more of a Puritan than Hawthorne in regard to colour. So, he is restrained in his objections to Delacroix, perhaps because this painter's experimental urges are tempered by the "serious, old-world" quality of his environment;<sup>170</sup> but in describing the "certain geographical eccentricities in Utah" as rendered by the American colourist Thomas Moran, James is merciless:



The cliffs there, it appears, are orange and pink, emerald green and cerulean blue; they look at a distance as if, in emulation of the vulgar liberties taken with the exposed strata in the suburbs of New York, they had been densely covered with bill-posters of every color of the rainbow . . . but we remember that this all is in Utah, and that Utah is terribly far away.<sup>171</sup>

It is no wonder that James had not a good word to say about either Whistler or the Impressionists.<sup>172</sup> In his mind, we suspect that the New England Puritan's distaste for strong colour has been rationalised, and re-emerges as the contempt of the sophisticated European for the brashness and vulgarity of the New World, a vulgarity extending to the landscape of the wilderness itself. Ironically, however, Europeans as much as his fellow-countrymen were revelling in these barbaric hues, and never before so much as at the very time he was writing.

In spite of Henry James, the colourists triumphed, and their line extends unbroken to the present day -- ensuring that Emily Dickinson remains "modern" in at least one sense. For prose, Dickinson wrote to Higginson, she had Mr. Ruskin,<sup>173</sup> and it was Ruskin, that great theoretical champion of colour, who did more than anyone in English to popularise the colour-revolution in painting. According to George P. Landlow, it is Ruskin who,

. . . continuing the battle of the Rubenistes against the Poussinistes, of Delacroix against Ingres, of Turner against the reviewers . . . asks, is color, in fact, sensual, immoral, the lesser, debasing part

of painting?<sup>174</sup>

Ruskin's answer is, of course, quite to the contrary: "Colour is . . . the type of love";<sup>175</sup> it is "of all God's gifts to the sight of man . . . the holiest, the most divine, the most solemn".<sup>176</sup> We might be forgiven for coming to the conclusion, after reading Ruskin, that for him colour was the single most important thing in the world. It is hardly surprising that Emily Dickinson found his prose so congenial.

John McCoubrey has attempted to define the characteristic qualities of American painting. One such quality, he claims, is the treatment of space as a "shapeless void", so different is the American from the European landscape sheltering under its "humanizing cloud architecture".<sup>177</sup> In this space, human figures do not assume commanding poses, but "are given . . . only the barest means to contend with its emptiness".<sup>178</sup> In American painting, therefore, colours tend to be simple and bright, rather than subtle and quietly-modulated. Even in the non-representational painting of Bradley Walker Thomson, the practitioner of the homegrown American style of Abstract Expressionism, the colours "recall the crisp play of American light on white clapboard".<sup>179</sup> Further, the American artist is constantly confronted by the problem of portraying a country at once Edenic and yet beyond human grasp in its sheer size:

Consequently, American artists have seldom felt obliged to learn the mastery of their art . . . for the essential experience of America can never be the subject of traditional pictorial methods. This essential experience is of the individual standing alone in a sea of space and of change. If this is a modern phenomenon,

expressed in European painting as well as in American, it can only be said that American artists have always been modern.<sup>180</sup>

It seems to me that this analysis can be applied to the writings of Emily Dickinson without forcing the analogy at all. Frequently in her poetry we encounter the poet alone, confronted by a "sea of space and change" (the sunset sky, for example). In her attempts to portray this phenomenon, the poet, whose literary models are chiefly European, discovers that these New England sunsets are without European parallel as visual experiences, and that new diction and imagery — new colours, in fact — must be found if they are to be captured in words. We can be sure that it never occurred to Emily Dickinson to dismiss these colours as vulgar or barbaric; instead, she determined to possess and articulate them, for in their uniqueness they seemed to her to mirror her own emotional predicament.

Though the discovery of colour's expressive potentialities has been characterised as something "modern", colour in certain circumstances has always been seen by men to reflect profound truths about their existence. Colour appeals to the sense mankind esteems most highly and, as Jacques Itten, a modern theorist, shows, it is continually life-affirming:

When the individual dies, he blanches. His face and body lose color as the light of life is extinguished. The dead soulless matter of the corpse is devoid of chromatic emanation.<sup>181</sup>

Itten demonstrates, too, that the painter must, if he is to

use colour successfully, strike a balance between its three different potentialities: its power to express symbolically; its power to express with visual accuracy; and its power to express with emotional force.<sup>182</sup> The poet as colourist must achieve a similar equilibrium. For Bernard Berenson, it is the most obvious feature of colour -- its visual aspect -- which is the key to its importance, not just to the artist, but to all men:

[For] colour belongs to the world of immediately present and not merely imagined sensations, and is only less material than tasting, smelling or touching, because it is perceived by one of the two signalling, reporting, informing senses, and not by the three more cannibal ones.<sup>183</sup>

Berenson claims, however, that colour cannot stand alone, but serves to "accelerate the perception of form, or tactile values, and movement".<sup>184</sup> In this, the great art-critic is reacting against the movement (that has prevailed throughout most of the present century) towards the entirely abstract in the visual arts. For Kandinsky, on the other hand (who more than anyone initiated that movement), abstract art comes as a reaction to the "aimless, materialist art"<sup>185</sup> of the Aesthetic movement in the latter part of the last century. As far as Kandinsky is concerned, colour is the tool whereby the artist expresses the demands of the inner compulsion. Colour has a twofold effect on the perceiver (superficially physical and more profoundly psychological), and it has the virtue of versatility, in that it can suggest tactile and aural sensations as well as visual ones. Kandinsky finally notes,

When religion, science and morality are shaken . . . and when outer supports begin to fall, man withdraws his gaze from externals and turns it inwards.<sup>186</sup>

Colour, he states, is the medium which best expresses this inwardness, and it is with Kandinsky, far more radical than Berenson, that Emily Dickinson would agree.

More recently, Adrian Stokes, in his essay "Colour and Form",<sup>187</sup> manages to reconcile Ruskin with the inwardness of the Abstract school of painters. "Colour is inside", claims Stokes, "like the blood which comes to fullness in the lips, lights and vivifies the skin":<sup>188</sup>

To our fancies, colour and tone, and through them, forms, are the fruition of the earth's inner store of fire and form, of our own vital heat, of mind and spirit. Colour proceeds from earth to sky, and throughout this progression colour gives birth to colour, to new forms in harmonic and enhancing ratio with the old in turn renewed, until a vast and various equality perennially restocked with strength given and taken, spreads throughout and clasps, incorporates, the shifting vaporousness of sky. That is the true solidity of things.<sup>189</sup>

This mystical marriage of colour and form -- with colour in the dominant role -- manages also to incorporate Goethe's achievements into a modern theory, and not because for him colour was "a lesser light than light itself":<sup>190</sup>

Goethe explicitly states that colour is a quality of mitigated light, and I have described how colour is best seen . . . when the sky is darker in relation to the earth. All hue is to be considered as half light, since it is in every case lighter than black and darker than white.<sup>191</sup>

We are thus back with Goethe at least in spirit, when Stokes claims that, for the artist, colour is a "compensatory, poetic transmutation of light and dark".<sup>192</sup> The colour-revolution,

in the American version of which Emily Dickinson played such an important role, has been vindicated.

In summary: with the Romantic movement came a reassessment of the value of colour by artists. This was initiated by the prestige of Goethe as poet, critic and scientist. Even if artists went on to devise their own colour-theories, as Turner did, it was Goethe who drew their attention to the topic in the first place. Art-theorists came to see colour as equal or superior to form -- but no longer subordinate. The idea that colour was merely a superficial garment of form was rejected by those artists whom we, with hindsight, recognise as the forefathers of Modernism. For these artists, colour had the potential to express emotions of the most profoundly inward kind. It was, too, both sensuous and life-affirming, for death meant its extinction, a darkness over the spirit and a pallor over the body. It appealed to the noblest of the senses, and through synaesthesia, could also be made to appeal to the others. For the American artist, colour was a medium by which he asserted that it was a different experience to inhabit the New World. For there the colours of Nature seemed of a different intensity, the contrasts starker, sometimes more brutal, always disquieting; in Dickinson's poetry, we recall the black hemlock against the blankness of the snow (P.525) or the gold of Fall leaves against the unseasonable blue sky of Indian summer (P.130). Colour's power to express, not rigidly but flexibly, the inward self that has been increasingly stripped of the bulwarks of religion

and traditional moral values, was an important discovery of artists -- painters and poets -- who have come to seem modern to us, artists of whom Emily Dickinson is indisputably one.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>For Dickinson's knowledge of the Bible, see Capps, op. cit., pp.185-186; Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp.48-49; Johnson, op. cit., pp.151-153; Whicher, op. cit., pp.154-156. For her knowledge of Shakespeare, see Capps, op. cit., pp.60-66; Sewall, Life, II, pp.700-705; Richard B. Sewall, The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family (Amherst, Mass., 1965), pp.75-76.

<sup>2</sup>See particularly Hyatt H. Waggoner, "Proud Ephemeral", in American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present (Boston, 1968), pp.181-222 passim.

<sup>3</sup>See Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, N.J., 1964), p.225.

<sup>4</sup>See Chapter Two, p.96.

<sup>5</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.74-76.

<sup>6</sup>See Chapter Two, n.115.

<sup>7</sup>Ellis, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.9.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp.7-8.

<sup>10</sup>"Emerald", with eleven occurrences, appears more frequently in Dickinson's poetry than the following colour-words chosen by Ellis as being representative: "Brown" (9), "Black" (8), "Azure" (7), "Vermilion" (7), "Crimson" (6), "Grey" (6), "Violet" (6), and "Rosy" (2). (Figures in parentheses represent incidences of these colour-words in Dickinson's poetry).

<sup>11</sup>Ellis, op. cit., p.8.

<sup>12</sup>See Cullen, op. cit., p.23; McNaughton, op. cit., p.20.



<sup>13</sup>See Chapter Two, p.101.

<sup>14</sup>Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (II)", p.103, says: "Purple, amethyst, Tyrian, violet, lilac and iodine are freely interchangeable throughout the poetry". See, however, Chapter Four, p.242 and n.92.

<sup>15</sup>The following table shows the incidence of six of the commonest colour-words in the poetry, compared to the incidence of the same words (approximate) in the letters:

<u>Poems</u>	<u>Letters</u>
Purple (53)	Green (28)
Blue (35)	Blue (27)
Red (32)	White (21)
White (27)	Black (19)
Green (18)	Red (16)
Black (8)	Purple (10)

<sup>16</sup>Ellis, op. cit., p.12.

<sup>17</sup>See ibid., pp.22-23.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.13.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp.24-25.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.25.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp.14-15.

<sup>22</sup>See n.1 above.

<sup>23</sup>Higginson: "After long disuse of her eyes she read Shakespeare & thought Why is any other book needed." (From a note to his wife of 16 August, 1870, reproduced as L.342c in Letters, II, p.476). Lyman: "Why need we Joseph read anything else but him [i.e. Shakespeare]". (Quoted by Sewall, The Lyman Letters, p.76.

<sup>24</sup>L.757, about 1882.

<sup>25</sup>Spurgeon, op. cit., p.58.

<sup>26</sup>William Shakespeare, Macbeth, V, iii, 22-23. The allusion is from L.8 (25 September, 1845), and refers to the onset of autumn. The editors' note tells us that this is the "earliest known letter in which Emily Dickinson paraphrases lines from the Bible and Shakespeare" (Letters, I, p.23).

<sup>27</sup>L.73, 6 February 1852.

<sup>28</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.296 ff.

<sup>29</sup>She refers to Macbeth (approximately) eleven times in the letters; Othello is the nearest rival, with nine mentions.

<sup>30</sup>Spurgeon, op. cit., p.63.

<sup>31</sup>William Shakespeare, Macbeth, II, ii, 63-64.

<sup>32</sup>See Chapter Two, n.120.

<sup>33</sup>Spurgeon, op. cit., p.62.

<sup>34</sup>See William Shakespeare, [Sonnet XXXVIII], 1-4; A Midsummer Night's Dream, III, iii, 391-393.

<sup>35</sup>See Introduction, p.3. In the same scene, King Richard echoes Bolingbroke's lines with colour-imagery of his own:

Ten thousand bloody crowns of mothers' sons  
 Shall ill become the flower of England's face,  
 Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace  
 To scarlet indignation, and bedew  
 Her pasture's grass with faithful English blood.  
 (Richard II, III, iii, 96-100).

<sup>36</sup>Ecclesiastes, 12: 6. This line is also alluded to in L.11, L.39, and L.948.

<sup>37</sup>Birren, Color, p.33.

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, Anderson, op. cit., p.181; Capps, op. cit., pp.56 ff; Chase, op. cit., pp.108-109; Johnson, op. cit., pp.152-153; Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Jewel imagery", passim; Sewall, Life, II, pp.347-348; Sherwood, op. cit., p.145.

<sup>39</sup>See Chapter Two, n.74.

<sup>40</sup>Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (New York, 1973) [reprint of Boston, 1951 edition], p.231.

<sup>41</sup>Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (I)", p.278. The lines from Aurora Leigh are as follows:

. . . and when  
I saw his soul saw, -- "Jasper first," I said;  
"And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;  
The rest in order: -- last, an amethyst."  
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh (1857), IX, 961-964).

<sup>42</sup>See, for example, Capps, op. cit., pp.84-87; Johnson, op. cit., pp.225-226; Betty Miller, "Elizabeth and Emily Elizabeth", Twentieth Century, CLXIX (January-June, 1956), pp. 574-583; Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (I)", pp.277-279; George F. Whicher, "Emily Dickinson Among the Victorians", in Blake and Wells, eds., op. cit., p.246.

<sup>43</sup>Walsh, op. cit. (See Chapter One, n.122).

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.166.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.98.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.261. Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson, p.183, believes Dickinson also stole metaphors of gems, diadems and queens from Aurora Leigh.

<sup>47</sup>Walsh, op. cit., pp.257-260.

<sup>48</sup>Revelation, 3: 4-5.

<sup>49</sup>J. S. Wheatcroft, "Emily Dickinson's White Robes", Criticism, V (Spring, 1963), p.135.

<sup>50</sup>Other verses in Revelation using the figure of the white robes are 3: 18, 19: 8, and 19: 14.

<sup>51</sup>For further discussion of Dickinson and Calvinism, see Chase, op. cit., pp.56-65, 146-147; Gelpi, op. cit., pp. 30-54; Johnson, op. cit., pp.7-20; Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson",

in Sewall, ed., op. cit., pp.20-27; Theodora Ward, The Capsule of the Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), pp.15-26; Wells, op. cit., pp.144-156; Wheatcroft, op. cit., pp.135-147; Whicher, op. cit., pp.70-76; Yvor Winters, "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgement", in Sewall, ed., op. cit., pp.39-40.

<sup>52</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, op. cit., V, 1183-1187.

<sup>53</sup>See Chapter Two, n.130.

<sup>54</sup>E. B. Browning, op. cit., I, 232. Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson, p.148, cites this line as part of her theory that Emily Dickinson was in love with Kate Scott Anthon.

<sup>55</sup>E. B. Browning, op. cit., I, 82-83.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., I, 30.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., I, 253.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., I, 282.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., I, 570-574.

<sup>60</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.

<sup>61</sup>E. B. Browning, op. cit., III, 170-178.

<sup>62</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850), VIII, 3.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., IX, 11; XVI, 4.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., XIX, 5-6.

<sup>65</sup>Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall" (1842), 123-124. This parallel is noted by Johnson in Poems, I, p.190.

<sup>66</sup>Ellis, op. cit., p.20.

<sup>67</sup>See Capps, op. cit., pp.113-119.

<sup>68</sup>See Anderson, op. cit., p.57: "Through Emerson she was well aware of the Transcendentalists' doctrine that all books, including *The Book*, are secondary to the fountain of truth within". Granville Hicks, "Emily Dickinson and the Gilded Age", in Blake and Wells, eds., op. cit., p.171: "Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance takes on substance by virtue of its immediate reality for a real person, even though self-reliance meant for that person merely an isolate life in Amherst". Whicher, op. cit., P.202: "Emily Dickinson's hard-won discernment redeemed it [the Doctrine of Compensation], giving it new exactness and edge".

<sup>69</sup>See Anderson, op. cit., p.66: For Dickinson, poetry was "manufactured by man's cunning artifice. This is at the opposite pole from the theory of composition of the Transcendentalists". Gelpi, op. cit., p.53: "She could not ignore the presence of evil, or the inhibition of limits, as Emerson tried to do". Griffith, op. cit., p.10: Her atmosphere was "literally pervaded by Emersonian doctrines", but she is an "Emersonian-inverse"; "Born to the habit of personifying all experience, she continued to behold the non-human cloaked in a human form. But in the process she came to recognize her surroundings as hazardous and not friendly". (ibid., p.39).

<sup>70</sup>See Thomas W. Ford, Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (University, Ala., 1966), p.64: "Her irregularities in rhyme did defy the common practice of her day, but there was a possible precedent for this in poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson". F. O. Matthiessen, "The Private Poet: Emily Dickinson", in Blake and Wells, eds., op. cit., p.232: ". . . her conception of poetic language, of how the word becomes one with the thing in the moment of inspired vision, was basically his [i.e. Emerson's]". Austin Warren, "Emily Dickinson", in Blake and Wells, eds., op. cit., p.273: "Whitman took off from Emerson's theory of the poet and his poetic and rhetorical essays; Emily, from Emerson's own practice as a poet: his short-lined rhyming; his gnomic quatrains and gnomic short poems like "Brahma"; his "Hamatreya" . . .".

<sup>71</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Representative Men, in Works [Standard Library Edition], IV (Cambridge, Mass., 1870, 1883).

<sup>72</sup>See L.481.

<sup>73</sup>Emerson, op. cit., p.258.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p.262.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p.273.

<sup>76</sup>Vivian C. Hopkins, Spires of Form: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), p.26.

<sup>77</sup>Emerson, Society and Solitude, in Works, VII, p.281.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., pp.282-283.

<sup>79</sup>See n.69 above.

<sup>80</sup>Emerson, Society and Solitude, p.55.

<sup>81</sup>Emerson, Art, in Works, II, pp. [325]-343.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.332.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.336.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p.337.

<sup>85</sup>Emerson, Works, XII, p.129.

<sup>86</sup>Emerson, Works, IX, p.188.

<sup>87</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.268-271.

<sup>88</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature, in The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p.10.

<sup>89</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.113-117.

<sup>90</sup>See L.261.

<sup>91</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.543.

<sup>92</sup>Whicher, op. cit., p.143.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p.159.

<sup>94</sup>Thoreau's capacity to do so was, as Whicher admits,

rather more limited than Whitman's and Dickinson's: "Thoreau . . . could take a dreamy pleasure in the hum of telegraph wires, the aeolian harp of industry, but he balked at the Atlantic cable" (ibid., pp.159-160). On the other hand, Thoreau's use of the scientific word "nucleus" in the second passage cited from "Autumnal Tints" is noteworthy.

<sup>95</sup>Sewall, Life, I, p.11.

<sup>96</sup>Gelpi, op. cit., p.62.

<sup>97</sup>Henry David Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints", in The Writings of Henry David Thoreau [Walden Edition], V (New York, 1968) [reprint of 1906 edition], pp.[249]-289.

<sup>98</sup>See, for example, P.12, P.18, P.956, P.1320.

<sup>99</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., pp.272-274.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., pp.283.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p.254.

<sup>102</sup>Thoreau, The Writings . . ., IX, p.301.

<sup>103</sup>Thoreau, The Writings . . ., XVII, p.243. There are verbal echoes of this passage in P.67, and particularly in P.606:  
Bright Flowers slit a Calyx  
And soared upon a Stem  
Like Hindered Flags -- Sweet hoisted --.

<sup>104</sup>Eye-colour was always significant for Emily Dickinson. In a letter to Samuel Bowles, she characterises the three girls who were longingly awaiting his return by the colour of their eyes: ". . . the Black eye -- and the Blue eye -- and a Brown -- I know -- hold their lashes full" (L.259). The brown eye is her own (see L.268); the black eye must be Sue (see L.96); therefore the blue eye is probably Lavinia, though Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades (New York and London, 1945), p.297, quotes her mother's description of the aged Lavinia having grey eyes -- perhaps they had faded with age. Mrs. Browning shared this preoccupation with eye-colour: see Betty Miller, op. cit., p.578.

<sup>105</sup>Thoreau, The Writings . . ., XX, p.343.

<sup>106</sup>Thoreau, Writings . . ., XVIII, p.78.

<sup>107</sup>See Chapter Two, n.32.

<sup>108</sup>Ellis, op. cit., p.19.

<sup>109</sup>Edgar Allen Poe, The Masque of the Red Death, in Prose Tales [Virginia Edition], III (New York, 1965), pp.250-258.

<sup>110</sup>By 1856, Baudelaire had completed the first volume of Histoires Extraordinaires, his first translations of Poe. In L'Invitation au Voyage (1857-1861) he speaks of his "tulipe noire . . . Fleur incomparable, tulipe retrouvée", his own version of the mystic flower, die blaue Blume, of the German Romantics. See Chapter Four, p.255 and n.107.

<sup>111</sup>Edgar Allen Poe, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, Chapter XXV, in Prose Tales, II, pp.236-242.

<sup>112</sup>Herman Melville, "The Whiteness of the Whale", in Moby-Dick [Hendricks House Edition], eds. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York, 1952, 1962), pp.185-194.

<sup>113</sup>See ibid., p.705.

<sup>114</sup>See ibid., p.705. See also n.115 below.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., pp.193-194. Cf. Goethe's statement of principle quoted by J. P. Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe (Zürich, 1948), p.98: ". . . allein hätte ich nicht die Welt durch Antizipation bereits in mir getragen, ich wäre mit sehenden Augen blind geblieben, und alle Erforschung und Erfahrung wäre nichts gewesen als ein ganz totes vergebliches Bemühen. Das Licht ist da, und die Farben umgeben uns; allein trügen wir kein Licht und keine Farben im eigenem Auge, so würden wir auch außer uns dergleichen nicht wahrnehmen".

<sup>116</sup>Melville, op. cit., p.194.

<sup>117</sup>Richard Harter Fogle, Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and Dark (Norman, Okla., 1952, 1964).

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., p.133-134.



<sup>119</sup>See ibid., p.134.

<sup>120</sup>Stephen Crane, Letters, eds. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (New York, 1960), p.31n.

<sup>121</sup>Stephen Crane, The Red Badge of Courage, ed. Fredson Bowers, with an intro. by J. C. Levenson (Charlottesville, Va., 1975).

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., xx-xxi. See also Stephen Crane, Letters, p.336: "He [Crane] told me that a passage in Goethe analyzed the effect which the several colors have upon the human mind. Upon Crane this had made a profound impression and he had utilized the idea to produce his effects". (from a letter by Frank W. Noxon to Max J. Herzberg).

<sup>123</sup>Poems by Emily Dickinson, eds. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson (Boston, 1890); Poems by Emily Dickinson: Second Series, eds. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson (Boston, 1891); Poems by Emily Dickinson: Third Series, ed. Mabel Loomis Todd (Boston, 1896).

<sup>124</sup>Emily Dickinson, The Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi (Boston, 1914).

<sup>125</sup>Klaus Lubbers, Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1968), p.103.

<sup>126</sup>Des Imagistes was edited by Ezra Pound and published in March, 1914, by the Poetry Bookshop, London.

<sup>127</sup>F. W. Burrows, "The Single Hound", The New England Magazine, LII (December, 1914), pp.165-166. [Quoted by Lubbers, op. cit., p.104].

<sup>128</sup>Amy Lowell, "Emily Dickinson", in Poetry and Poets: Essays (New York, 1971) [reprint of Boston, 1930 edition], pp.88-108. According to Lubbers, op. cit., pp.111-114, as early as April, 1915, Amy Lowell was speaking of Dickinson as a poet "so modern that if she were living today I know just the group of poets with whom she would inevitably belong".

<sup>129</sup>Lowell, op. cit., p.89.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., p.107.

<sup>131</sup>See Peter Jones, Imagist Poetry (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.135.

<sup>132</sup>T. E. Hulme, Speculations, ed. Herbert Read (London, 1960), p.120 [Quoted in Jones, op. cit., p.29).

<sup>133</sup>Lowell, op. cit., p.102.

<sup>134</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.102-103.

<sup>135</sup>Amy Lowell, The Complete Poetical Works. . ., intro. Louis Untermeyer (Boston, 1955), p.476. Amy Lowell was not the first poet inspired by Emily Dickinson to write a poem about a hummingbird. Lubbers, op. cit., p.241, quotes a poem by Father Tabb, a Virginian lyricist and friend of Lanier. Called "The Hummingbird" and published in 1894, Tabb's eight-line poem begins:

A flash of harmless lightning,  
A mist of rainbow dyes,  
The burnished sunbeam brightening  
From flower to flower he flies. . . .

Comparing Lowell's and Tabb's poems with P.1463, we can see just how sophisticated and in advance of her time was Dickinson's synaesthetic imagery.

<sup>136</sup>Hans Galinsky, Wegbereiter Moderner Amerikanischer Lyrik (Heidelberg, 1968).

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., pp.16-17.

<sup>138</sup>T. E. Hulme, "Autumn" (1909), 3-4.

<sup>139</sup>Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro"(1916), 2.

<sup>140</sup>William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923).

<sup>141</sup>Hart Crane, "Royal Palm" (1927).

<sup>142</sup>Sylvia Plath, "Tulips" (1965).

<sup>143</sup>William Gass, On Being Blue: A Philosophical Enquiry (Boston, 1976).

<sup>144</sup>See Chapter Four, p.247.

<sup>145</sup>See Chapter Two, n.74.

<sup>146</sup>See p.166 above.

<sup>147</sup>See Chapter Four, pp.246-247.

<sup>148</sup>See Chapter Two, p.78.

<sup>149</sup>John W. McCoubrey, American Tradition in Painting (New York, 1963), p.36.

<sup>150</sup>Neil Harris, The Artist in American Society 1790-1860 (New York, 1966), pp.172-173.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid., p.176.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., p.134.

<sup>153</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Marble Faun (New York, 1961).

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., pp.102-103.

<sup>155</sup>Harris, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>156</sup>John Gage, Colour in Turner (New York and Washington, 1969), p.12.

<sup>157</sup>See Chapter One, p.26.

<sup>158</sup>Gage, op. cit., p.11.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., p.14.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid., p.14.

<sup>161</sup>From Turner's Sixth Lecture (1812), quoted ibid., p.199.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., p.111.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., p.185.

<sup>164</sup>John Milton, Paradise Lost, IV, 598-600.

<sup>165</sup>Gage, op. cit., p.202.

<sup>166</sup>George P. Mnas, Eugene Delacroix's Theory of Art (Princeton, N.J., 1966), p.120.

<sup>167</sup>Charles Baudelaire, Selected Writings on Art and Artists, trans. and intro. by P. E. Chervet (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.186.

<sup>168</sup>Ibid., p.53.

<sup>169</sup>Henry James, The Painter's Eye (London, 1956), p.45.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., p.47: "[Delacroix sees by] the light of the mind. This conceded, we must admit that the light of Delacroix's mind produced some very singular optical effects".

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., p.100.

<sup>172</sup>"Mr Whistler's experiments have no relation whatever to life; they have only a relation to painting" (ibid., p.143); " . . . the 'Impressionist' doctrines strike me as incompatible, in an artist's mind, with the existence of first-rate talent" (ibid., p.115).

<sup>173</sup>"For Prose -- Mr Ruskin -- Sir Thomas Browne -- and the Revelations". (L.261).

<sup>174</sup>George P. Landlow, The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin (Princeton, N.J., 1971), p.430.

<sup>175</sup>Kenneth Clark, Ruskin Today (Harmondsworth, 1967), p.155.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., p.156.

<sup>177</sup>McCoubrey, op. cit., p.115.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., p.116.

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., p.118.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid., p.123.

<sup>181</sup>Johannes Itten, The Art of Color, trans. Ernst von Haagen (New York, 1973), p.30.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., p.17.

<sup>183</sup>Bernard Berenson, Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts (New York, 1948), p.79.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid., p.81.

<sup>185</sup>Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (New York, 1947), p.26.

<sup>186</sup>Ibid., p.33.

<sup>187</sup>Adrian Stokes, "Colour and Form", in The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, II (London, 1978), pp.7-83.

<sup>188</sup>Ibid., p.43.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid., p.50.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>191</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid., p.56.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SPECTRUM DIVIDED

#### 1. Light and Darkness

For Emily Dickinson, light and darkness are the parents of colour. Yet the marriage of this pair is at times no more than an uneasy truce. Goethe stated that "Light and darkness engage each other in continuous contest";<sup>1</sup> Dickinson dramatizes this contest in a group of poems in which colours, the offspring of the more harmonious periods of the marriage, play no part. Many of these poems reveal the poet at her most obscure, her syntax at its most fragmented. This is because the titanic struggle between light and darkness represents an inner conflict of the poet's, a conflict that is intensely personal and correspondingly hard for her to articulate. Many of these poems, too, show the poet at her most despairing, as though she were unwilling or unable to break out from a monochromatic prison into the living world of colour.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, she continues to manipulate the "shifting symbolic values"<sup>3</sup> of light and darkness with assiduity. So, for example, death and darkness are never equated in one poem without an ironic qualification in that same poem or in another closely related to it in theme.

We have already seen how Dickinson often views colour

as subject-in-itself, and not just as a descriptive aid or ✓  
 as a ready-made and convenient symbolic shorthand.<sup>4</sup> We shall now  
 discover that she is also, in Sewall's words, "something of a  
 specialist on light".<sup>5</sup> As she tends to stress the nominal ✓  
 rather than the adjectival force of colour-words, so she does  
 with the words "light" and "dark". In one of her best early  
 poems, she tries to put the emotional impact upon her of a  
 particular light-effect into words:

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 -- (P.258).

Not only does she claim that this "certain Slant of light" has  
 the power to initiate and manipulate mental states in a general  
 sense, but she implies also that the resultant mood-changes  
 can be used, in their turn, to describe the light-effect. Her  
 success in this poem is the triumph of her own methods of  
 delineating the highly abstract -- indeed, the almost ineff-  
 able. Ernest Sandeen attempts to describe her technique thus:

None of the similes or metaphors in the poem [P.258]

has any intrinsic connection with winter or with light. They are figures of the inner life, analyzing and defining an introspective, not a physical reality.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the abstract quality of her figures (remote indeed from the concreteness of the objective correlative), and in spite of the particularity and interiority of the experience she describes, the poet convinces us that we too are bond-servants to light. This phenomenon, she claims, has the power to transform us in an instant, as it once transformed St. Paul;<sup>7</sup> for it operates, not superficially upon the retina, but synaesthetically, commandeering all the senses of the observer.<sup>8</sup> Nor is its transforming power ephemeral: its passage leaves "internal difference,/Where the Meanings, are --".

P.812 forms a counterpart to P.258:

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. (P.812)



Here the light is harbinger of the year's ripeness, not the "Seal Despair" of the midwinter of the soul. This light manifests itself as the nameless hue, out of the range of the Newtonian spectrum, but as clearly perceptible by "Human Nature" as the other colours.<sup>9</sup> Here light is in its role as parent of colour; yet, though it shares with darkness the business of colour's begetting, the poet cannot help feeling that light is the more sympathetic phenomenon, even though she is aware that her preference is an indication of her human weakness rather than of light's greater innate moral value. In other poems she calls light "Gay" (P.473), "A fashionless Delight" (P.297),<sup>10</sup> and "Impregnable" (P.1351) in a quite unashamedly enthusiastic manner; her enthusiasm for darkness is usually expressed more equivocally. In P.1351, she goes so far as to compare light with the soul, speaking of both as equally absolute, immanent and unknowable. Her variants for "Impregnable" include "opulent", "Extravagant", "Abundant", and "Luxurious",<sup>11</sup> all indicating that the poet sees light as a rich and bounteous phenomenon.

None the less, it is not quite so easy to summarise Emily Dickinson's feelings about light and its nature. In P.862, for instance, though light is accessible to all living creatures -- "democratic" might be the Dickinsonian expression -- this very accessibility hints at a slightly chilling indifference:

Light is sufficient to itself --  
If Others want to see

It can be had on Window Panes  
Some Hours in the Day.

But not for Compensation --  
It holds as large a Glow  
To Squirrel in the Himmaleh  
Precisely, as to you. (P.862)

The poet thinks it absurd that men can think of something as commonplace and indiscriminate as light as an Emersonian "Compensation"<sup>12</sup> for any human plight. For like God, indeed, light can be imperious and peremptory in a manner transcending arrogance or the need to use undue emphasis to assert its sovereignty:

The Fingers of the Light  
Tapped soft upon the Town  
With "I am great and cannot wait  
So therefore let me in." (P.1000)

Like a divinity, light stands quite aloof from any human attempts to manipulate it. The poet goes further: light's paradoxical character -- both "democratic" and autocratic -- attests to a Creator who presides over a universe certainly incoherent to the human observer, and probably ultimately impenetrable:

All Circumstances are the Frame  
In which His Face is set --  
All Latitudes exist for His  
Sufficient Continent --

The Light His Action, and the Dark  
The Leisure of His Will --  
In Him Existence serve or set  
A Force illegible. (P.820)

The opening metaphor from painting governs this apparently highly abstract poem. The poet reduces the universe to a

chiaroscuro composition in which light is the Deity's will in action, darkness His will at rest. Although she derives her imagery from Genesis,<sup>13</sup> the poet neutralises the moral symbolism of light and darkness by using the words "Action" and "Leisure". It cannot be said that this God rests contented with what He has created; the operations of His will are far beyond the possible scope of any human, rational interpretation.

In other works of Emily Dickinson, however, "Action" and "Leisure" are by no means invariably identified with light and darkness respectively. Two poems about dying envisage that state in active rather than passive terms (though in very different ways). In P.465, the fly interposes

Between the light -- and me --  
And then the Windows failed -- and then  
I could not see to see --.

Here the poet externalises the failure of her vision, so that the onset of death is described as an act of darkening, initiated by the fly and concluded by the windows. In P.692, the dying speaker recalls,

How well I knew the Light before --  
I could not see it now --  
'Tis dying -- I am doing -- but  
I'm not afraid to know --.

Here too, light is blotted out, and with it life, by a more active darkness. This darkness is that of non-being, an obscurity that surrounds humanity and that moves in to claim its members when they are unprepared and defenceless. In a letter, Dickinson speaks of Samuel Bowles's death as "the darkness" (L.537), as if a night had descended on her as well as on

her deceased friend. At the untimely death of her beloved nephew Gilbert, she writes to his mother of the dead "Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness --" (L.871). Finally, of the stroke foreshadowing her own death, she writes: "I was making a loaf of cake with Maggie, when I saw a great darkness coming . . ." (L.907).

Nothing reveals the moral relativity of Emily Dickinson's universe better than her manipulation of the forces of light and darkness. She extracts to the full the ironies of a situation in which light shows its lethal side, or when darkness proves more tolerable than illumination. The poet opens P.583 with the statement, "A Toad, can die of Light --", thereby conveying the idea that light and life are by no means always to be associated symbolically. In P.1450, the light of the lone traveller in the darkness represents the undaunted human spirit; but in P.601, the idea of light in darkness as a beacon is suppressed for a more menacing effect:

A still--Volcano -- Life --  
That flickered in the night --  
When it was dark enough to do  
Without erasing sight --.

Here the poet seems almost to be longing for darkness to erase the volcano<sup>14</sup> altogether, so that it will no longer threaten to erupt with disastrous consequences. In the short P.1233, light actually ruins the comforts of oblivion:

Had I not seen the Sun  
I could have borne the shade

But Light a newer Wilderness  
My Wilderness has made --.

The theme of the painfulness of the light of revelation here anticipates that of a group of poems in which light and love are closely associated.

When light's intensity is unbearable, darkness comes as a relief. "Good Morning -- Midnight --" (P.425) demonstrates this idea half-facetiously, but not as forcefully as "We grow accustomed to the Dark --" (P.419). In "Those Evenings of the Brain" of depression and despair,

Either the Darkness alters --  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight --  
And Life steps almost straight.

In this poem, the problem of adjustment confronts both eye and soul, and once more we can see how closely these two ideas are linked in the poet's mind. She is as much an Augenmensch as Emerson, but far more conscious of and better adapted to darkness than he. Indeed, she will unabashedly express a preference for darkness (rather than merely a stoical acceptance of it) when daylight aggravates the condition of despair:

I shut my eyes -- and groped as well  
'Twas lighter -- to be Blind -- (P.761).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, as light is ultimately morally neutral, the poet finds that a condition of light is a poor metaphor for Heaven,<sup>16</sup> and indeed the glare of a perpetually floodlit Paradise seems to her a far less desirable goal than the obscurity of the grave:

Could that sweet Darkness where they dwell  
 Be once disclosed to us  
 The clamor for their loveliness  
 Would burst the Loneliness -- (P.1493).

Another short poem seems at first glance to contradict this yearning for the shadows, namely P.1145, "In thy long Paradise of Light". However, this poem is certainly not a religious one, and "thy" refers not to a God who is at best a "distant -- stately Lover" (P.357), or at worst a petulant playmate (P.1719), but to the poet's mortal lover. The figure of the lover is often referred to in language that is far more "sacred" than that to be found in the religious poems. The lover is also protean, changing sex from poem to poem, now inspiring feelings of physical, now spiritual love, but usually associated with the phenomenon of light. An early "love" poem to Susan Gilbert expresses the poet's hope that she will not wake up "Some grinning morn --/To find the Sunrise left --" (P.156), and then run home "To find the windows dark --". In P.190, P.611 and P.808, a more indefinite male lover appears as a beacon whereby the poet makes her way through the darkness surrounding her.<sup>17</sup> When the lover departs, darkness is laid upon darkness in a negative version of the Dickinsonian colour-intensification technique:

If He dissolve -- then -- there is nothing -- more --  
Eclipse -- at Midnight --  
It was dark -- before --

Sunset -- at Easter --  
Blindness -- on the Dawn --  
Faint Star of Bethlehem --  
Gone down! (P.236)

This poem, like P.1145, uses what might be called "blasphemous hyperbole" -- "blasphemous" because the poet describes her lover in terms heightened by language properly associated with a divine figure.<sup>18</sup> The only escape from this darkness -- "the awful Vacuum/Your life had left behind --" -- is death.

The poet uses the struggle between light and darkness to dramatise the course of her relationship with her lover. In P.958, for example, the lovers' erotic passion for one another flares up at the instant that circumstances strike them violently asunder, and the pair become like sparks from "Diverging Flints",

Subsisting on the Light We bore  
Before We felt the Dark --.

In P.631, a third figure enters the drama. The poet appears to be addressing a female friend who was married but who died young. The poet speaks of her despair at this loss, but then of how she was

. . . overtaken in the Dark --  
Where You had put me down --  
By Some one carrying a Light --  
I -- too -- received the Sign.

Critics concur only that these guarded lines contain some important, probably autobiographical reference, but not about the nature of this reference.<sup>19</sup> From analysis of similar usages of blasphemous hyperbole already referred to, it seems likely that the "Some one" is a male lover in the guise of Christ as Lux Mundi,<sup>20</sup> who perhaps counselled the poet to find solace through Renunciation. The theme of Renunciation reappears

in another mysterious poem, this time fragmentary, in which there are again three protagonists:

I fit for them --  
I seek the Dark  
Till I am thorough fit. (P.1109)

In this poem, the poet withdraws into the darkness outside the bright aura of a pair of lovers, and by so doing aids their relationship. The measure of love's light is its intensity, and the poet is prepared to quench her own flame if by so doing she might foster the flames of others.

Obscurity for Emily Dickinson has as much literal as metaphorical force. She withdraws from the light of love into the darkness of renunciation, and light and darkness govern too her view of her responsibilities as poet:

The Poets light but Lamps --  
Themselves -- go out --  
The Wicks they stimulate --  
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns --  
Each Age a Lens  
Disseminating their  
Circumference -- (P.883).

The poetic act is one of will, a "transitive act"<sup>21</sup> of kindling which, if "vital Light" is thereby produced, will then continue to run off its own energy like a star, even though the kindler himself is long departed. Once the light burns independently, its light can be disseminated by succeeding generations into an even and pervasive glow -- the light of cultural tradition. P.1362 is a fragment included in an 1876



letter to Higginson (L.470):<sup>22</sup>

Of their peculiar light  
I keep one ray  
To clarify the Sight  
To seek them by --.

It seems that the "peculiar light" is that shed by the poets, and in this poem Dickinson is expressing to her "Preceptor" her feeling of identification with her poetic forebears.

Dickinson sees the poetic act as one of light-kindling, because she feels so keenly the pressure of a vast surrounding darkness. For her, the true poet must somehow incorporate this darkness into his vision of the universe, and the great poet is one who can set enough of his own light against this darkness that a balance is achieved. This she makes clear in a poem about her first encounter with the work of Mrs. Browning:

I think I was enchanted  
When first a sombre Girl --  
I read that Foreign Lady --  
The Dark -- felt beautiful --

And whether it was noon at night --  
Or only Heaven -- at Noon --  
For very Lunacy of Light  
I had not power to tell --

(P.593).

As a "sombre Girl", the poet felt herself inclined towards the serious, gloomy and morbid.<sup>23</sup> What she found so startling in Mrs. Browning was that poet's power to counterbalance darkness with light so that both have equal revelatory force. To extend the metaphor in P.883: if the condition of light were prevalent in the universe, then the poets' lamps would shine but feebly. The importance of the poets is in the way that

their lamps stand out against and give order to the surrounding obscurity.<sup>24</sup>

In her poems about dying or the moment of death, Emily Dickinson finds herself again and again at the interface between light and darkness. The "Vast Dark" (P.793) which encircles the physical and spiritual worlds is the abode of the dead. These dwell both "Under" and "Over the Light" (P.949), in a realm inconceivably remote from earthly perception: "Further than Sunshine could [reach]/Were the Day Year long".<sup>25</sup> The dying, moving into this darkness, impress upon the living how transient and precious is the privilege of light:

By a departing light  
We see acuter, quite,  
Than by a wick that stays.  
There's something in the flight  
That clarifies the sight  
And decks the rays (P.1714).

This idea is dramatised in a poem in which the poet speaks from a woman's deathbed:

We noticed smallest things —  
Things overlooked before  
By this great light upon our Minds  
Italicized — as 'twere. (P.1100)

In this way, darkness may give birth to light, just as the day "Rallies her glow" before she fades into night:

Teazing with glittering Amend —  
Only to aggravate the Dark  
Through an expiring — perfect — look — (P.938).

Here is a clue to an ultimate rationale behind the sunset and Autumn poems of Emily Dickinson, with their glorious

displays of colour: these poems are recitals of the lesson of the dying to the living, exhortations to cherish the world of light and colour, for it is all too brief. P.906, a difficult poem, has as its theme the idea that light, seeming to emanate from the dying, serves as a reminder to the living of what being alive truly means:

'Tis Compound Vision —  
 Light -- enabling Light —  
 The Finite — furnished  
 With the Infinite --.

To the living, the dead are a lens leading the eye "simultaneously forward to the infinite in eternity and backward from the grave to the finite life in time".<sup>26</sup> The poet also dramatises this theme. Meeting with a female friend's repeated refusal to share her heart, the poet dies of grief:

. . . And Lo,  
 A Light, for her, did solemn glow,  
 The larger, as her face withdrew --  
 And could she, further, "No"? (P.446)

Light, the transient condition of the living, is precious, but may prove lethal or blinding when in its full intensity. In such a case, the circumambient darkness provides relief and solace. The immortality of poets resides in their ability to kindle lights that continue to burn even after their own lives are quenched. The greatest poets are those who can suggest that there is a reciprocity between light and darkness, and thus allow both their moments of dominion. One of Dickinson's finest gnomic pieces celebrates this reciprocity:

Presentiment -- is that long Shadow -- on the Lawn --  
 Indicative that Suns go down --

The Notice to the startled Grass  
 That Darkness -- is about to pass -- (P.764).

The dying go into darkness, but in so doing make the living more aware of their privilege of illumination -- in this way, darkness gives birth to light. Finally, the marriage of light and darkness begets colour. Being children of light, colours embody the positive, vital principle, but because half their lineage descends from darkness, they have a tinge of mortality. At their most intense, colours demonstrate the forces of life at their most glorious and defiant before the inevitable onset of darkness. "Night is the morning's Canvas" (P.7), says the poet, hinting even in such an early poem that she views the world in a pictorial way. Emily Dickinson sees each day as a continuing reapplication of colour, in each case moving towards a climax of beauty coming immediately before the final erasure.

## 2. Non-Specific Colour

Between the conflict of the elemental forces of light and darkness, and the play of the named colours, lies the idea of colour itself. This, either left in the abstract or represented by the image of the rainbow, has a small but significant role to play in the work of Emily Dickinson.

Dickinson associates colour unequivocally with the phenomenal world. While the dead dwell in darkness, "All Hue

forgotten —" (P.970), colour is "Time's Affair", like "Caste" and "Denomination" and other concepts by which the inhabitants of the temporal world define themselves.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, while there is life, there is hope, and colour affirms this hope: "All but Death, can be Adjusted —" (P.749), and even "Wastes of Lives" can be renewed by being "resown with Colors/ By Succeeding Springs —". There could be no clearer statement by the poet that, for her, colour is no superficial garment of form, but rather a bodying-forth of the selfhood of person or object.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore no coincidence that when the self, elevated by powerful emotion, moves into a transcendent realm out of time, colours themselves vanish and the idea of colour becomes inconceivable. Paradoxically, such emotion may be aroused by beautiful colours themselves:

An ignorance a Sunset  
 Confer upon the Eye —  
 Of Territory — Color —  
 Circumference — Decay — (P.552).

In P.365, the idea is more vividly expressed by means of the extended metaphor of the smithy. The soul, heated like a piece of iron, passes through the red spectrum until

It quivers from the Forge  
 Without a color, but the light  
 Of unannointed Blaze.

P.1671 contains a related idea. "Honor", or truth to oneself, is the prime requisite for poetic immortality, because otherwise the colours applied by the painter-poet will eventually be burnt away by the focussed "scrutiny" of succeeding gene-

rations. All colours must, then, be made fast by admixtures of the nameless hue beyond the Newtonian spectrum if they are to endure.

Left in the abstract, the idea of colour refers, not so much to the nameless hue beyond colour, but to the hue of the distant sky. This is a colour within the traditional spectrum, but unnameable because its characteristic is an unceasing but barely perceptible variation of tone caused by the drift of clouds, with the result that no one hue prevails long enough to be pinned down with a name. In P.243, for example, "Heaven" (a clear sky, a joyful mood) disappears without trace like a bird into the distance,

. . . as utterly—  
As Bird's far Navigation  
Discloses just a Hue --  
A plash of Oars, a Gaiety --  
Then swallowed up, of View. (P.243)

This "Hue", remote and indefinable, becomes associated by the poet with the tantalising promise of Heaven that she comes to suspect, as early as P.239, is forever beyond her grasp:

The Color, on the Cruising Cloud --  
The interdicted Land --  
Behind the Hill -- the House behind --  
There -- Paradise -- is found!

Occasionally, the idea of colour can stand for all colours, rather than just for an indefinite one. In one poem, where the curious language seems to be the result of the poet's experiments with metaphors taken from the new art of photography, the poet's lover is described as coming, not as light

to darkness, but as colour to monochrome:

Spring comes on the World --  
 I sight the Aprils --  
 Hueless to me until thou come  
 As, till the Bee  
 Blossoms stand negative,  
 Touched to Conditions  
 By a Hum. (P.1042)

In a similar way, the coming of autumn in P.1682 is "inferred" from the "deeper color" on the distant hills; once again, intensification of colour is the harbinger of erasure.

More often, Dickinson prefers to embody the idea of colour in a rainbow-image. She finds this image convenient because the rainbow has a long tradition of symbolic associations, from the story of Noah to the English Romantic poets, that she could invoke and ironically distort. In P.194, for example, the rainbow comes as a token of deliverance to the world of the living (as it did to Noah); it has, however, no power to bestir "The quiet nonchalance of death --". P.496 is a more complex variation on the same theme. Here the intangibility of the rainbow, the scarf of Iris, represents the distance between the quasi-dead speaker and the living world of colour:

How dumb the Dancer lies --  
 While Color's Revelations break --  
 And blaze -- the Butterflies!

P.574 is also concerned with the distance between rainbow and sepulchre, but now the speaker has been saved from her sickness, to emerge delicately into a bright spring world. The invalid's recent confinement has made her unusually sensitive

to the deepening of colour as autumn approaches; in her eyes, Nature has come to seem like a fond mother attempting to distract her child from the inevitable progression of its mortal illness:

A fond -- illusive way --

To cheat Herself, it seemed she tried --  
As if before a child  
To fade -- Tomorrow -- Rainbows held  
The Sepulchre, could hide.

The sense of these last three, difficult lines seems to be: "As if [Nature] thought she were dealing with a child and so could hide from it that today's beautiful rainbow will fade into tomorrow's colourless tomb".

A pair of poems, one early and one late, may be seen as poems of innocence and experience concerned with the rainbow-image. In the first, spring is described in self-consciously high-flown language:

Some Rainbow -- coming from the Fair!  
Some Vision of the World Cashmere --  
I confidently see! (P.64)

In the second, written only two years later, the poet has come to the opinion that the intensity of delight is inversely proportionate to its duration:

"If it would last"  
I asked the East,  
When that Bent Stripe  
Struck up my childish  
Firmament --  
And I for glee,  
Took Rainbows, as the common way,  
And empty Skies  
The Eccentricity -- (P.257).



Here the rainbow trembles on the brink of becoming a symbol of disillusionment, that feeling which its intangibility and inaccessibility only exacerbate, as in P.680. Yet Dickinson, like Wordsworth though in a very different way, never allows this process to be completed. Though inaccessible, the rainbow is "Yet persevered toward", and becomes instead a symbol of the centre towards which each life converges. This is a result of the fact that the rainbow's colours -- of which it contains a whole spectrum -- represent to the human eye an essential, not peripheral phenomenon. To the adult, the rainbow may seem as bright as it does to the child, rather than "take a sober colouring from an eye/That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality".<sup>29</sup>

Dickinson goes as far beyond Keats's rainbow as she goes beyond Wordsworth's. In P.97, there is certainly a reflection of the rainbow that in Lamia is vulnerable to "the mere touch of cold philosophy"<sup>30</sup> -- a rainbow the mute beauty of which speaks volumes to the receptive spirit. In a much later poem, however, the analytic triumphs over the intuitive and the rainbow is unwoven, but with a surprising outcome:

We shall find the Cube of the Rainbow.  
Of that, there is no doubt.  
But the Arc of a Lover's conjecture  
Eludes the finding out. (P.1484)

In the long run, then, the rainbow as phenomenon and the rainbow as symbol are kept distinct. Nevertheless, Dickinson is well aware that it is almost impossible to introduce a rain-

bow into a poem and then ignore all its fixed symbolic associations. As a result, she prefers to concentrate on the separate colours, the emblematic values of which are far more fluid — so that there is very little danger that anyone will ever "find the Cube" of any of them. As far as Newtonians are concerned, the spectrum can be explained by the presence of a prism; Emily Dickinson's spectrum, on the other hand, is never any more than the sum of its individual colours.

### 3. Black

The chief problem concerning Dickinson's use of black is to explain why she used it so infrequently<sup>31</sup> and to such little effect in her poetry. Even in the letters, where the colour appears frequently enough to prove that she had no peculiar inhibitions about referring to it, black has little emotional resonance, appearing in stock phrases or in simple descriptive contexts, and not as subject-in-itself. This is strange when we consider her fascination with darkness; for black is, as it were, darkness made visible, the colour of the absence of colour, as well as a bona fide pigmentary hue with as individual a group of characteristics as any other.<sup>32</sup>

The primary association of the word black for Dickinson is with the garb of mourning, rather than with death itself. The young writer certainly found a curious aesthetic delight in the sight of funeral crape, but this was perhaps not untypical of her time. She asks her friend Abiah Root

whether or not she too finds a common acquaintance "very lovely in her garb of mourning" (L.20). In the earliest poem to mention the word, too, the speaker seems more to take pleasure in the strange glamour of mourning clothes than to concern herself with the grief they are supposed to symbolise:

When I have lost, you'll know by this --  
 A Bonnet black -- A dusk surplice --  
 A little tremor in my voice  
                   Like this! (P.104)

Euphemistic phrases concerned with bereavement -- "households clad in dark attire" (L.181), "sister in sable" (L.182) -- abound in the letters, and the poems too are tainted with an indirectness uncharacteristic of Dickinson when dealing with blackness, so that the word black itself is often replaced by less blunt synonyms. In P.743, for example, the poet contrasts her own loss with that of a personified Summer as she wanes:

She suffered Me, for I had mourned --  
 I offered Her no word --  
 My Witness -- was the Crape I bore --  
 Her -- Witness -- was Her Dead --.

Here, "Crape" is actually preferred to the unquestionably more powerful variant "Black".<sup>33</sup> Other discreet poeticisms include the "Ebon Box" of P.169; the ugly-sounding "mechlin"<sup>34</sup> of P.1423; and the "sable line" (i.e. black-edged mourning-letter) of P.1635.<sup>35</sup> In each case the effect is coy and not a little precious. When Dickinson does use the word black itself, it is often in a purely descriptive context, as in

P.1405, "Bees are Black -- with Gilt Surcingles --", where the effect the poet aims at is that of a charming picture in a children's book, with insects portrayed as little horses.

On occasion, the poet does attempt to bring out some of the nominal force of the colour-word, often in a context with more than a dash of melodrama:

An awful Tempest mashed the air --  
The clouds were gaunt, and few --  
A Black -- as of a Spectre's Cloak  
Hid Heaven and Earth from view. (P.198)

In this poem, the poet's usually acute eye for colour is being overruled by a Gothick impulse. An incomplete worksheet reveals another facet of this melodramatic tendency:

His Heart was darker than the starless night  
For that there is a morn  
But in this black Receptacle  
Can be no Bode of Dawn (P.1378).

We cannot guess the identity of this black-hearted villain, but we do not feel that he and the poet were very close acquaintances.

Paradoxically, in the two most effective uses of black in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the poet in neither case mentions the colour by name, but evokes its negative associations by means of periphrasis while managing to restrain her tendency toward euphemism. One poem is a graveyard piece describing the affinity for old trees of crows

Whose Corporation Coat  
Would decorate Oblivion's  
Remotest Consulate. (P.1514)

Here the Latinate diction has a macabre, fastidious quality worthy of Poe.<sup>36</sup> The technique of periphrasis is much more effectively handled in P.411, a true "colour-poem" in which colour is indisputably subject-in-itself. The "Outer Grave" is green or white, depending upon the season;

The Color of the Grave within --  
 The Duplicate -- I mean --  
 Not all the Snows c'd make it white --  
 Not all the Summers -- Green --

You've seen the Color -- maybe --  
 Upon a Bonnet bound --  
 When that you met with it before --  
 The Ferret -- Cannot Find --.

This simple diction, which does not draw attention to itself, powerfully evokes the full emotional effect of blackness as the colour of the absence of colour, and so the colour farthest removed from the sympathies of the living.

A clue to why Emily Dickinson does not make more use of black, overtly or indirectly, may be found in an early letter. Speaking to Abiah Root of her feelings of spiritual despair, Emily writes:

What shall we do my darling, when trial grows more,  
 and more, when the dim lone light expires, and it's  
 dark, so very dark, and we wander, and know not where,  
 and cannot get out of the forest . . . . (L.36)

In this darkness, Christ the Light of the World<sup>37</sup> has, even for the sixteen-year-old writer, only hypothetical existence. In the next paragraph, speaking now of the religious awakening of another friend, Emily continues:

She talks of herself quite freely, seems to love Lord  
 Christ most dearly, and to wonder, and be bewildered,

at the life she has always led. It all looks black, and distant, and God, and Heaven are near, she is certainly very much changed. (L.36)

This is written in the bemused, half-ironic tone of one who is unrepentant; the newly-saved girl is made to look back at her former state of reprobation in the most clichéd manner — "It all looks black", and so on. In other words, the Dickinsonian spiritual wilderness is dark, not black, for blackness, the conventional colour of death and mourning, has too many hackneyed associations to be the receptacle of sincere feelings. To her brother Austin, employed in a dull teaching position, Dickinson writes: "Duty is black and brown -- home is bright and shining" (L.57). Duty, exacted by social convention, is dull and lifeless compared to the warmth and spontaneity of feeling among kindred spirits. There is no question but that Austin, who also thought in chromatic terms,<sup>38</sup> would have clearly understood this cryptic colour-notation. Black, then, is the colour of polite duty to the dead and to the bereaved, but not the colour of an emotional engagement with grief.

#### 4. Blue

As a hue it is powerful, but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. Its appearance, then, is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose . . . As the upper sky and distant mountains appear blue, so a blue surface seems to recede from us . . . But as we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue, not because<sup>39</sup> it advances to us, but because it draws us after it.

In this passage from Zur Farbenlehre, Goethe distinguishes three aspects of blue: its ambivalence in the psychological sense, its association with distance, and its inwardness. Other writers on colour have generally concurred. Thoreau, for example, ingeniously resolves the paradox implied by the idea that a colour can be both "distant" and "inward" at the same time:

Next to our blood is our prospect of heaven. Does not the blood in fact show blue in the covered veins and arteries, when distance lends enchantment to the view?<sup>40</sup>

Kandinsky has noted blue's "call to the infinite", and its power to arouse "a desire for purity and transcendence".<sup>41</sup> Finally, Adrian Stokes has remarked upon blue's illusion of drawing the observer into it, an effect he explains with the help of his theory of film colour: blue always retains a suggestion of film colour because of its association with the clear sky.<sup>42</sup>

In her use of the word "azure", Emily Dickinson deals with the same paradox that Thoreau resolves. Azure is the tone of blue she most often employs to refer to the clear summer sky,<sup>43</sup> and it is in this context that the colour-word first appears in her poetry:

A something in a summer's noon --  
A depth -- an Azure -- a perfume --  
Transcending extasy. (P.122)

The significant word here is "depth", so much more innerlich than the expected "height". This "something", moreover, has

"perfume" as well as colour, suggesting that the sensation of the "summer's noon" operates synaesthetically. In a poem of the same year, Dickinson echoes Thoreau still more closely:

She bore it till the simple veins  
Traced azure on her hand -- (P.144).

Here the "azure" on the hand of the old woman is the internal reflection of the realm "beyond" toward which her soul departs.<sup>44</sup> But the poet does not spell out the symbolic connection between azure and heaven until a late flower-poem:

The Gentian has a parched Corolla --  
Like azure dried  
'Tis Nature's buoyant juices  
Beatified -- (P.1424).

The colour of the gentian's corolla is at once a token of its parched state and its beatitude; its azure, like that of heaven, simultaneously attracts (in its promise of a clear blue sky for eternity) and negates (one must die and undergo physical dissolution to reach it).<sup>45</sup> This is the ambivalence, the "stimulating negation" of blue.

"Azure" is something of a poeticism, and does not appear in Dickinson's letters. There are, however, many references to blue as a colour of yearning, particularly in the early letters, associated with the beauty of blue eyes,<sup>46</sup> with the blueness of distant hills,<sup>47</sup> or with the sky as symbol of "the blue, blue home beyond" (L.118).<sup>48</sup> In all these cases, the positive connotations of the colour are emphasised, but a phrase in a letter of 1853 -- "things look blue, today" (L.128) -- shows that Dickinson also uses the word to describe feelings of



sadness or depression. Indeed, as doubt begins to undermine her youthful and innocent confidence in the existence of Heaven, Dickinson starts to explore the negative aspects of the colour. The word "depth" in P.122 is a foretaste of future developments, for the sea, with its blue, abysmal depths, comes to replace the sky as a metaphor for the after-life in Dickinson's poetry.

To trace such a movement from innocence to experience, we can begin with the early P.167. Here the "blue -- beloved air!" is a consolation to the exiled spirit because it is one of life's constants; the blue heart's-ease in P.176, bearing the colour of Heaven, is similarly an emblem of immutability. The ecstatic, Emersonian nature-lover in P.214 becomes intoxicated from her sojourn in the "inns of Molten Blue", as though the blue sky itself were heavenly nectar. The "blue havens" of P.78 and the "Blue Sea" of P.162, to which the poet's river runs, are metaphors of constancy and security, for at this stage in the poet's development, blueness has an optimistic quality equivalent to the optimism of the early letters.<sup>49</sup>

One of the first doubtful notes is struck in a love poem:

It might be easier  
To fail -- with Land in Sight --  
Than gain -- My Blue Peninsula --  
To perish -- of Delight -- (P.405).

This is a poem on the characteristic and paradoxical Dickinsonian theme that suffering is easier to endure than joy.

The "Peninsula" -- the "dry land" of love -- has a heavenly coloration as it reaches out towards the poet, lost on the sea. But the Peninsula's blueness indicates, too, that it is remote. We may recall the first "Master" letter, in which Dickinson addresses her unknown recipient in terms leading the reader to believe that they will soon be passionately reunited:

Each Sabbath on the Sea, makes me count the Sabbaths,  
till we meet on shore -- and (will the) whether the  
hills will look as blue as the sailors say. (L.187)

Here the writer barely suppresses her fear lest a lessening of distance lead to disappointment -- all expressed in terms of the intensity of blue. P.405 seems similarly tinged with the same apprehension.

In P.465, "I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died --", the poet allows blue for the first time to bear some of the weight of her loss of faith in Heaven, and for the first time, also, the colour's negative associations preponderate. Whether the circumstances of the speaker involve putrefaction or beatitude is not clear, but the emotional implications of the last stanza of the poem indicate that the reader is to view the world beyond death in a negative light. These two stanzas form the latter half of the poem:

I willed my Keepsakes -- Signed away  
What portion of me be  
Assignable -- and then it was  
There interposed a Fly --

With Blue -- uncertain stumbling Buzz --  
Between the light -- and me --

And then the Windows failed -- and then  
I could not see to see -- (P.465).

In spite of the fame of this poem, no critic has yet examined the implications of the lone colour-word that divides the world of light from that of darkness. It seems to me that the poet chooses the word "Blue" first of all because that is the actual colour of the fly, and because she has a particular antipathy towards blue-flies:

I enjoy much with a precious fly . . . not one of your  
blue monsters, but a timid creature, that hops from  
pane to pane of her white house, so very cheerfully,  
and hums and thrums, a sort of speck piano. (L.206)

She likes the sort of fly that dances in the light, like the "flippant fly upon the pane" of P.140, which acts as a herald of spring. The fly in P.465 is, however, one of those "dull flies" (P.187) that inhabit a house of death, indolent and so monstrous that one of their number has the capacity to blot out the light from the window and cast the final shadow over the consciousness of the person dying. Its blueness<sup>50</sup> brings to mind thoughts of Heaven, but the "uncertain stumbling" quality of its buzz instantly casts these thoughts into doubt, a doubt confirmed as blueness becomes darkened, vision lost. The blueness of the fly, then, has the remote and withdrawn quality of the "Distance/On the look of Death" (P.258). It is a colour symbolic of the divergence of soul and body at the moment of death, when the former travels into unknowable realms, and the latter remains behind on earth, yet at the other side of an unbridgeable gulf from the living.

After P.465, the negative aspects of blue take over almost completely in the poetry. In P.600, for example, the poet, while superficially mocking childhood problems of faith, hints that the coming of maturity has brought along with it no satisfactory resolution of these problems. As a child, the poet could not understand why

The Heavens weighed the most -- by far --  
Yet Blue -- and solid -- stood --,

for it was her expectation that the Heavens should "break away/And tumble -- Blue -- on me --". Yet we are not invited to view such fears as absurd, rather to infer that, when the child grew into adulthood, the Heavens did indeed "tumble" about her head. In this poem, the sky acts like a sea, a sea whose blueness is no consolation for its barrenness and its power to sunder:

I tell you, Mr Bowles, it is a Suffering, to have a  
sea -- no care how Blue -- between your Soul, and you.  
The Hills you used to love when you were in North-  
ampton, miss their old lover, could they speak (L.272)

In this letter to her friend, Dickinson uses blue as a shorthand for a complex of associations, including the beckoning distance of hills, the sky's call to eternity, and the overwhelming destructiveness of the sea, which its placid surface belies.

P.629 and P.737 are both poems about the moon, and both have "Blue" as their concluding word. In P.629, the moon is personified as a great lady, aloof and indifferent. The gap of social class between this lady and the poet becomes

a metaphor for the chasm dividing the ideal world from the mortal one:

And next -- I met her on a Cloud --  
 Myself too far below  
 To follow her superior Road --  
 Or it's advantage -- Blue -- (P.629).

By this syntactical inversion, the poet makes the colour and not the "advantage" bear the weight of the poem; her repetition of this technique in P.737 is another clear demonstration of the crucial importance of colour to Dickinson. In these two poems, blue is the colour of the ideal world as it shades ✓ off into the empyrean, on the one hand too rarefied and elusive ever to be attained by sublunar beings, on the other hand too frigid ever to be truly desirable to them.

We have already seen how the poet uses "azure" to refer to the inner life of the body, close as the veins in the arm, remote nonetheless. In P.632, the appalling power of this inner life to embrace and internalise the cosmos is expressed, no longer by means of the self-consciously "poetic" azure, but through the blunter blue:

The Brain is deeper than the sea --  
 For -- hold them -- Blue to Blue --  
 The one the other will absorb --  
 As Sponges -- Buckets -- do --.

The brain, seat of the subjective view of the external world, is here described with an awe that is a result of the poet having deliberately adopted an artificial standpoint of extreme objectivity. The brain sucks blueness voraciously from sea and sky, because blueness is the colour for which it

most has an affinity, the colour concealing abysmal depths, frightening in their elemental power, uncontrollable by the puny human will.

For the poet, sometimes even the heart, seat of the passions, may evince similar qualities to the brain:

The Heart has narrow Banks  
It measures like the Sea  
In mighty -- unremitting Bass  
And Blue Monotony (P.928).

Fortunately, however, this frigid calm is an illusion that "An instant's Push demolishes", for the physical organ is too vulnerable to disease and the seat of the emotions to trauma, for this blueness to prevail. It is the heart, not of man but of the ocean, that is "too smooth -- too Blue --/To break for You" (P.723).<sup>51</sup>

In L.94 (June, 1852), Emily writes to Sue of violets that will make her "dream of blue-skies, and home, and the "blessed countrie"". By April, 1860, however, Aunt Lavinia's death makes Dickinson write of "those great countries in the blue sky of which we don't know anything" (L.217). By 1882, the death of her own mother makes her write: "I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a Sea" (L.785). All attempts at consolation seem to her now like "writing a Note to the Sky -- yearning and replyless" (L.790). The colour blue, which once seemed to her full of heavenly promise, comes at the end of her life to reveal itself as a cold, indifferent negation. The former "Inebriate of Air"

comes to write:

Icicles upon my soul  
Prickled Blue and Cool — (P.768).

What were once "blue havens" have become an inundation: "How deep this Lifetime is — One guess at the Waters, and we are plunged beneath!" (L.822). As poems of innocence become poems of experience, the poet's use of blue involves a gradual rejection of the colour's positive associations — beauty, hope, Heaven — for the negative ones — coldness, indifference, and negation.

### 5. Brown

Brown for Emily Dickinson is a prosaic colour, useful mainly for pointing up more lively colours by contrast, and interesting usually only when mixed with another colour.<sup>52</sup> Thoreau, who at one point calls brown the characteristic colour of spring,<sup>53</sup> is able to exult in its ordinariness:

Brown is the color for me, the color of our coats  
and our daily lives, the color of the poor man's loaf.<sup>54</sup>  
The bright tints are pies and cakes, good only for  
October feasts, which would make us sick if eaten every  
day.<sup>55</sup>

Emily Dickinson has much more of a stomach for these "pies and cakes". Only on one occasion, in P.1510, is she able to celebrate "elemental Brown", in this case the colour of the little stone which epitomises both self-reliance and self-effacement. The bluebird of P.1465, however, while quite as self-reliant as the stone, has a touch of indigo<sup>56</sup> upon

his brown feathers; this gives him the egotism that enables him to shout for joy, even though he does so "to Nobody/But his Seraphic self --".

Brown is a colour Emily Dickinson sometimes associates with herself. She often calls attention to her brown eyes,<sup>57</sup> in order (rather paradoxically) to show how they reveal an unassertive self; but it is to her (metaphorical) brown garb of Duty<sup>58</sup> and Conformity to which she makes most significant reference. In reply to the gift of a cape sent her by the fashion-conscious Norcross sisters<sup>59</sup> in late 1860, she writes:

The mirth it has occasioned will deter me from future  
exhibitions! Won't you tell "the public" that at  
present I wear a brown dress with a cape if possible  
browner and carry a parasol of the same! (L.228)

This jocularly-expressed desire to blend in with the scenery takes on a more serious aspect a year or so later, in a poem dealing with the poet's reaction to the revelation of love, a reaction taking the form of renunciation:

Never a Gown of Dun<sup>60</sup> -- more --  
Raiment instead -- of Pompadour --  
For Me -- My soul -- to wear -- (P.473).

However, the elected Bride in her gorgeous spiritual dress does not become any more acceptable to wordly society than the Spinster in her self-effacing "Gown of Dun". In P.492, a poem of alienation, the poet tells of how like the leopard she is wild by nature, and is therefore an exile from society because of her inability to be tamed. She describes herself:

Tawny<sup>61</sup> -- her Customs --



She was Conscious --  
 Spotted -- her Dun Gown -- (P.492).

The "Dun Gown" here is the uniform of dull feminine conformity. The poet-leopard's coat is spotted, and so stands out among her peers not as a result of deliberate ostentation, but because the spots are an emblem of her independent spirit.

In P.526, the metaphor of the brown dress has less personal significance. Whether the oriole's song be "a common thing --/Or only a divine" depends upon the listener's receptivity, for

The Fashion of the Ear  
 Attireth that it hear  
 In Dun, or fair --.

This dun attire is the "image" evoked by the ear, an organ hearing only "a common thing". We may note once again the sophistication of Dickinson's synaesthetic imagery as exhibited in this poem: the word "Dun", which falls so heavily on the ear, operates as much aurally as visually. The "Dun, or fair" contrast is carried a stage further in P.970. The clash of emotional opposites, as represented in this case by brownness and whiteness, is characterised by the poet as an experience of the living eye alone: "Death's large -- Democratic fingers" "put away/Chrysalis of Blonde -- or Umber<sup>62</sup> --" with total indifference as to the colour involved.

Brownness, whether dun, tawny or umber, rarely engages ✓ the poet's attention for its own sake. Only in contrast with a livelier colour does brown gain a (still passive) significance.

Otherwise, what is brown tends to be dismissed, like the songless bat, as a "fallow Article" (P.1575). To become brown is to diminish in emotional intensity, as a once white love-letter becomes "Tawny now, with time" (P.169), though of all the tones of brown, "tawny" has what might be called a leonine quality, as in P.492, suggesting a buried strength of feeling. During the drought of August, 1876, Dickinson writes: "The grass is painted brown, and how nature would look in other than the standard colors, we can all infer . . ." (L.473). It is significant that speculations on this theme occupy no more of her attention.

## 6. Green

Although there is good reason to think that green was one of Emily Dickinson's favourite colours,<sup>63</sup> it is a hue which appears neither often<sup>64</sup> nor, with one or two exceptions, memorably in her writings. This is not necessarily contradictory: as we shall see, writers on colour are generally agreed that green represents a stasis or balance, and suggests qualities of repose, passivity, and even complacency. The colour's undramatic appearance and its easy profusion in nature make it too commonplace a visual experience to express the emotional exigencies of the poet at the creative "white heat".

"The eye experiences a distinctly grateful impression from this color",<sup>65</sup> writes Goethe, who uses the colour himself

most effectively in passages of calm meditation upon Nature's bounty.<sup>66</sup> Baudelaire's eye, so sympathetic to the problems of the painter, informs him that "green is nature's basic colour, because green marries easily with all the other colours".<sup>67</sup> Thoreau, who calls green "the most refreshing of colors",<sup>68</sup> is one of the few writers who has anything very refreshing to say about it. For him, green is a harmonious blend of the yellow of earth with the blue of sky:

[The earth shows greenness] in its russet cheeks . . .  
a precious emerald-green tinge . . . a green blush  
suffusing her cheek.<sup>69</sup>

Goethe also resorts to "emerald" to describe the vitality of spring greenness,<sup>70</sup> and as Rebecca Patterson has pointed out, Emily Dickinson does the same,<sup>71</sup> at least when she needs a green that is more than "a saturated and calm neutrality".<sup>72</sup> We may recall P.1463, the hummingbird poem, in which emerald is used most successfully to describe a greenness that is brilliant and dynamic.<sup>73</sup>

Dickinson's early letters are full of hackneyed phrases containing a green element: we read of the memory of the dead being kept green,<sup>74</sup> of green springhues after dull wintry tones,<sup>75</sup> of a "jacket of green" (L.58) as suitable attire for those close to nature, and of the "dear little grasses" which seem "not quite so glad and green" as when the poet and her childhood friend used to sit among them (L.85). Similar clichés appear in the early poetry, and it is not till P.314 that a striking phrase containing the colour -- Nature's "Green

People" -- appears. Even so, there is little evidence that the poet is consciously manipulating the etymological connection between "green" and the verb "to grow", a surprising failure for one so sensitive to the sound of language.<sup>76</sup>

The opening lines of P.333 provide one of the few examples of a painter-poet at work with green as her medium:

The Grass so little has to do --  
A Sphere of simple Green --.

Here the poet, mindful of pictorial composition, expresses the sensation of being entirely surrounded by grass. She does so by reducing the circumambient greenness to a coloured shape -- a sphere -- that reflects its utter simplicity and self-containedness. The sphere is a shape that is feminine, replete, and passive; the grass needs only "hold the Sunshine in it's lap/And bow to everything". This placid self-effacement appeals to the poet, who concludes P.333 by wishing that she were "a Hay". A passage from an earlier letter may be recalled:

. . . I am but a simple child, and frightened at myself. I often wish I was a grass, or a toddling daisy, whom all these problems of the dust might not terrify. . . (L.182).

We might conclude that the writer's desire for the neutrality of green reflects her occasional wish to shed painful burdens of responsibility -- in this case, the knowledge of mortality<sup>77</sup> -- and we might note, too, the echo of the lines from Marvell's poem "The Garden", in which the poet also seeks self-obliteration by absorption in the surrounding greenery.<sup>78</sup> But the

colour-word "green" has little of these resonances in the remainder of Dickinson's poetry. The only comparable image may be found in P.1333, in which spring is referred to as "This whole Experiment of Green --". A worksheet draft of this same poem provides numerous variants for the words "whole" and "Experiment", as though the poet had enormous difficulty finding words to describe a colour "in action" when that colour seems by its nature so passive.<sup>79</sup>

Dickinson's liveliest use of green exhibits a metaphorical vigour similar to that found in the passage by Thoreau cited earlier:<sup>80</sup>

In Ovens green our Mother bakes,  
By Fires of the Sun. (P.1143)

This image, like Thoreau's "green blush", manipulates the complementary qualities of green and red.<sup>81</sup> It is the contrast between the verdure of vegetation and the blanched landscape of winter, however, which has more emotional significance for the poet. The cycle of the seasons in P.411 is represented by the grave's covering changing from green to white and back again, an endless alternation. P.995 opens,

This was in the White of the Year --  
That -- was in the Green --,

and here the poet, in winter, shows how almost inconceivable it is to the rational mind that what was once so green could now be so bleakly white. The poet as expressionistic painter seems once again to be a child of the New England climate, in which seasonal change, far from being a subtle variation

of half-tones, paints in bold slashes of colour.<sup>82</sup> The poet often seems awed and bewildered by these sudden overlays of paint, as here in P.995 and especially in P.130, where Indian summer, that late resumption of fine weather after the first snowfall, seems to her a "blue and gold mistake".

Green like most of the other colours, has a traditional range of negative associations,<sup>83</sup> but only on two occasions does the poet exploit this. P.648 is a love-poem in which the poet aims to extract her lover's promise that she will be the last to see him alive. After his death, she hopes that she will be able to persuade the "Largest Dews of Morn" to settle on his grave,

Lest the Jealous Grass  
Greener lean -- or fonder cluster  
Round some other face --.

In this poem, the greenness of jealousy still has a healthy tinge; in a late poem describing a storm, however, the colour's associations with sickness are exploited strikingly:

There came a Wind like a Bugle --  
It quivered through the Grass  
And a Green Chill upon the Heat  
So ominous did pass  
We barred the Windows and the Doors  
As from an Emerald Ghost -- (P.1593).

Significantly, this "Green Chill" -- a synaesthetic image related to the one of the icicles in P.768 -- is qualified three lines later by the phrase "Emerald Ghost". Emily Dickinson uses "emerald", a colour-word derived from the name of the gem but remoter from its physical source than any other of

the poet's jewel-usages,<sup>84</sup> to represent any greenness having an emotional charge of magnitude.

"Emerald" is an early favourite of the poet. In P.138, a riddle-poem about a rose, the word is used in a context suggesting tension, as though the vibrant greenness of the rose's foliage somehow restrains the vivid damask of its petals:

Paris could not lay the fold  
Belted down with Emerald --.

Emerald, unlike green, is not a neutral colour, but one that suggests the brilliant play of light in the jewel itself. The poet, indeed, at first has problems divorcing colour and gem, so that in P.161, the image of the whippoorwill's "Emerald Nest" is startlingly unsuccessful. The effect of the phrase, like that of the "Beryl Egg" later in the poem, is to freeze the natural world into a rigid, bejewelled tableau, an effect shattered by the whimsical portrait of the schoolboys at the end of the poem. The "Duds of Emerald" of P.219 are similarly unfortunate, for the jewel's qualities of hardness and brilliance work against the scattered softness suggested by the word "Duds". In these two poems, "emerald" is an impure colour-word, and in later poems the poet works hard to purify it so that it can become a true member of the green-spectrum.

The "Emerald Bough" of P.375, which the poet sees through her window, is a little more successful, but only because the poet continues with jewel-metaphor and replaces the emerald with diamonds when the snow comes. In this poem,

the jewels, embedded in a scene hard-edged, formal and compositionally-treated, give a suitably sharp and heraldic quality to the season's transitions. In P.460, another riddle-poem, diamonds and emeralds are mixed once more, and the obscurity of this poem has the mysterious, vatic flavour of the Book of Revelation, in which emeralds feature prominently.<sup>85</sup> In P.460, the poet claims knowledge of the whereabouts of "Droughtless Wells", one of which is constructed as follows:

It's made of Fathoms -- and a Belt --  
A Belt of jagged Stone --  
Inlaid with Emerald -- half way down --  
And Diamonds -- jumbled on --.

The fact that the Emerald here, as in P.138, is in the form of a belt, suggests that these "Wells" may be roses, so much more comfortably understood than the "Droughtless Wells" of Heaven.<sup>86</sup> Further discussion of this poem must remain highly speculative, but there seems to be a private erotic element common to P.460, to P.558, and to P.1183, the last of which has a breast enclosed by "Emerald Seams", a phrase referring both to the garb of a dead girl and to the green mound above her grave.<sup>87</sup>

Things that are emerald in colour, such as the jewelweed in P.697 on his "Emerald Swing", partake of the qualities of the hard, glittering, ideal greenness remaining in the memory as a symbol of nature's perpetual renewal -- remaining long after the mild greenness of real vegetation has faded



and winter has dominion over the earth. Two extracts from late letters make this idea clearer. The first is from a letter to Maria Whitney of 1884:

Changelessness is Nature's change.  
The plants went into camp last night, their tender  
armor insufficient for the crafty nights.  
That is one of the parting acts of the year, and has  
an emerald pathos -- (L.948).

The clear colours of gems have for the poet a pure, fiery, refined, enduring quality; they suggest the ideal and eternal better than the simple hues. Here the pathos of flowers' vulnerability to frost is redeemed by the persistence of their greenness at its most intense in the memory, an ideal emerald which has the power to sustain the spirit until springtime, remaining unfaded throughout the winter. In a letter to Mrs. Sweetser of the same year, Dickinson alludes to the first anniversary of her nephew Gilbert's death, and then refers to her correspondent's own illness: "More beating that brave heart has to do before the emerald recess" (L.952). "Recess", which in P.161 refers to the schoolboy's school break, comes together once more with emerald in a phrase containing the idea of a body "recessed" in its covering of grass, a grass coloured emerald-green as a symbol of eternal regeneration.

### 7. Grey

Grey, the extreme of low colour-saturation, does not figure very prominently in Emily Dickinson's writings. When it does appear, it tends to act in a similar way to brown:

that is, to point up another colour by contrast. Although in the early writings, grey has generally negative connotations -- "I do feel gray and grim, this morning . . . " (L.73) -- in later works, the poet does discover a certain muted aesthetic appeal in the colour.

On its own, greyiness in the poetry tends to denote a state of departed colour, and thus commands a certain respect from the beholder for the sake of what has gone before:

Ashes denote that Fire was --  
 Revere the Grayest Pile  
 For the Departed Creature's sake  
 That hovered there awhile -- (P.1063).

In the same way, the grey hairs of old age are to be revered as the ashes of the fire of youth; but in the word "hoar", usually associated with old men's beards, the poet contrives to celebrate the astringent qualities of winter, a frosty greyiness that cleanses the cloyed palate:

Winter is good -- his Hoar Delights  
 Italic flavor yield --  
 To intellects inebriate  
 With Summer, or the World -- (P.1316).

In a similar way, the hemlock on its "Marge of Snow" (P.525) becomes a symbol for man's "instinct for the Hoar, the Bald", which perpetual summer could never satisfy.

In two poems, grey is the last colour perceived before night descends, and has a dignified, elegiac quality which the poet exploits by means of personification:

The Guest is gold and crimson --

An Opal guest and gray --  
 Of Ermine is his doublet --  
 His Capuchin gay -- (P.15).

The figure of the grey friar emerges from this colour-sequence, but not menacingly; so, in P.318, the purple and yellow "children" (the last clouds visible in the sunset) are gently led away by "A Dominie in Gray". In the low-intensity blue-grey contrast in P.15 ("Opal" here functions as a dull blue), in P.204, and particularly in P.1710, the poet finds a special aesthetic fascination. She is led to remark of the "curious Cloud" that disappears in P.1710, that

A Queen adown a satin aisle,  
 Had not the majesty.

While the blue-grey metal lead has an oppressive quality for the poet, probably because of the heaviness associated with it,<sup>88</sup> when blue and grey are kept apart and contrasted, or even when grey appears in a disembodied manner on its own, there are not the same negative associations to be found. In P.721, indeed, the poet casts her eye over the precarious equilibrium characterising her own earthly lot with an equanimity rarely equalled in her poetry:

Behind Me -- dips Eternity --  
 Before Me -- Immortality --  
 Myself -- the Term between --  
 Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,  
 Dissolving into Dawn away,  
 Before the West begin --.

It could never be said, however, that Dickinson feels a genuine affinity for grey, respect it though she does. In P.721, grey is only an optimistic colour because it heralds

the glories of dawn. In P.339, the poet opts for grey for a special reason: standing amid the profusion of colour and perfume of her summer garden, she explains this reason to her absent lover:

Thy flower -- be gay --  
 Her Lord --away!  
 It ill becometh me --  
 I'll dwell in Calyx -- Gray --  
 How modestly -- alway --  
 Thy Daisy --  
 Draped for thee!

The appeal of grey to the poet is therefore limited. She occasionally respects its purifying qualities, and from time to time is prepared to make a temporary renunciation of the more lively colours, should her emotional life require it. But if grey has any delight for her, it is its silent witness to extinguished passion or, better still, its promise of colour to come. This passage from a late letter, showing clearly how Dickinson thinks in chromatic terms, explains with what unexpected and delightful intensity colours stand out against a grey backcloth:

The Gray Afternoon -- the sweet knock, and the ebbing voice of the Boys are a pictorial Memory -- and then the Little Bins and the Purple Kernels -- 'twas like the Larder of a Doll -- (L.745).

What these "Purple Kernels" are, we can only guess, for the writer neglects to tell us; for what remains vivid in her mind is the sudden rush of colour against the unpromising grey canvas of the afternoon.

8. Purple

The ubiquity of the colour-word "purple" in Dickinson's poetry has ensured that several critics have noticed and have attempted to give the rationale behind her repeated use of this colour.<sup>89</sup> They have concerned themselves with why this apparently minor colour should occur more often than all the major ones, and have usually openly or tacitly agreed with Blackmur's conclusion, quoted earlier.<sup>90</sup> Of the other examples that Blackmur gives of Dickinson's "habit of so employing certain favourite words" indiscriminately, only the word "immortality", with forty-four occurrences, nearly approaches the fifty-three of "purple",<sup>91</sup> -- and "immortality" represents one of the most important Dickinsonian themes. Even if purple were a "theme" unto itself, it can hardly lay claim to the same importance as the idea of immortality for the poet, for while there are numerous poems on the subject of immortality, there is only one poem strictly "about" purple. How, then, can Blackmur's accusations best be answered?

It is true that, compared to red, purple is a colour-name lacking in synonyms.<sup>92</sup> This does not explain, however, why the poet did not have an equal fascination for another secondary colour similarly lacking in synonyms, orange for example.<sup>93</sup> Clearly, then, it is to some extent true that purple is a favourite of Dickinson, and if not a colour of personal predilection,<sup>94</sup> then certainly a "favorite sound" in Blackmur's sense of the phrase.<sup>95</sup> As such, there is some reason

to explain the frequent occurrence of purple by recalling Dickinson's passion for the poetry of Mrs. Browning,<sup>96</sup> and a critic such as Walsh would probably leave the matter there.<sup>97</sup> There is, however, another way of looking at the problem. I suggest that Emily Dickinson explores this "favorite sound" -- let us call it an obsession -- in a manner similar to Mallarmé, for example, in his poem on a colour with a name the sound of which obsessed him -- "L'Azur":

Il roule par la brume, ancien et traverse  
Ta native agonie ainsi qu'un glaive sûr;  
Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse?  
Je suis hanté. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!<sup>98</sup>

Dickinson, though never so languidly passive as Mallarmé is in the grip of his obsession, is nevertheless equally haunted.

It is significant that of only three poems to bear titles in the packets arranged by Dickinson herself, one has the superscription "Purple --":

The Color of a Queen, is this --  
The Color of A Sun  
At setting -- this and Amber --  
Beryl -- and this, at Noon --  
  
And when at night -- Auroran widths  
Fling suddenly on men --  
'Tis this -- and Witchcraft -- nature keeps  
A Rank -- for Iodine -- (P.776).

Here is the distillation of the meaning of purple for the poet, and at the same time another token of how important colour is for her as a means of embracing and comprehending a whole complex of emotions. P.776 is a key to the complex of emotions of which "purple" is a kind of shorthand. In the

first place, purple is an image -- that is, an abstraction made visual -- of the twin ideas of sovereignty and magnificence in their feminine sense ("The Color of a Queen"). This is what might be called "primary" purple. "Secondary" purple, or purple along with another colour, has a significance dependent upon context and the effect of contrast, but always retains an underlay of "primary" meaning. So, purple with amber<sup>99</sup> gives the idea of magnificence in dying ("The Color of A Sun/At setting"). With beryl,<sup>100</sup> there is the idea of sovereignty at its zenith ("at Noon"). When the purple appears as the violet ("Iodine")<sup>101</sup> of morning after the darkness of night, then it comes as a glorious revelation. By the word "purple", then, the poet means (depending upon context), one or more of such diverse abstract concepts as sovereignty, magnificence, culmination, revelation and, ultimately, transcendence. The Queen, in her purple robes, is an embodiment of all these concepts combined, and when purple appears in a poem, it is as if we are vouchsafed a glimpse of this Queen in her royal passage.

Perhaps Dickinson found that the possibilities of shifting the symbolic value of purple were greater than with any other colour, because the traditional connotations of the colour are all positive. While red, for example, can evoke love or danger, and green, vitality or envy, purple, by virtue of its scarcity in nature and consequent costliness to produce, has had a long association with the higher echelons of

society, and consequently with the virtues supposed to be a particular feature of those elevated spheres.<sup>102</sup> In her early poems, Emily Dickinson uses purple most often as a sunset-colour, often in combination with an impure colour-word also noted for its richness, such as "gold". Then there is a group of poems in which purple is a sunrise-colour, only for the poet to return to purple sunsets in her later poems. This is, however, by no means a rigid pattern.

In the early poems, purple is the dark, opulent colour of oncoming night, and forms a rich backcloth to the more brilliant hues produced by the sun at setting. In these poems the poet aims at little more than sumptuous visual description, aided by the sonority of her chosen colour-words: "Purple and Cochineal" (P.60); purple, amber and emerald (P.219); "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple" (P.228); "Ships of Purple" tossing on "Seas of Daffodil" (P.265); and the "purple stile" climbed by the "Yellow boys and girls"(P.318). In each of these cases, the purple of nightfall does not threaten the world of light, but provides chromatic contrast, as a robe of imperial purple might make the gold and jewels adorning it seem the more dazzling. This is a most unassertive purple, however: in P.204, that most pictorial of sunset-poems, night is merely "A little purple -- slipped between" the glories of sunset and sunrise.

When the poet shifts purple to sunrise, she also allows it to acquire a greater imperial authority, simultaneously



becoming herself something of a revolutionary democrat. In P.304, the sun comes up like "A Sudden Musket", and the purple autocrat of night loses his dominion over the east. The tendency of imperial purple to attempt to restrain -- it is after all the most conservative of colours -- reappears in P.323, when the power of love is great enough to lift the "purple Dikes" of night, and daylight comes to the poet with the force of a revelation. Yet love's power is great enough to "shatter" too, so that the more reactionary imperial purple is seen on occasion by the poet as less of a radical threat, more generally dependable. So, in P.839, the East has a "Purple Programme" which, like the "Purple Troth" of P.710, has the consolatory force of regularity when religiously kept to; like the North Star, the "Purple in the East" (P.1077) is one of the sureties of Nature's "staunch Estate".

In the late poems P.1622<sup>103</sup> and P.1642, however, purple reverts to being the sunset-colour. These poems, with their metaphors drawn from ships and sailing, perhaps derive in some measure from "Locksley Hall", like P.266.<sup>104</sup> But here too purple has chiefly a decorative function, and the poet extracts only very limited irony from the idea that the same colour can equally betoken the onset or departure of darkness. In short, in the poems of sunrise and sunset, purple is used far more expressionistically than symbolically, as the following poem, perhaps written in response to a child's query, demonstrates:

Who is the East?  
 The Yellow Man  
 Who may be Purple if He can  
 That carries in the Sun.

Who is the West?  
 The Purple Man  
 Who may be Yellow if He can  
 That lets him out again. (P.1032)

If this poem has a childlike whimsicality, Dickinson is able to neutralise the traditional positive or negative charge of colour-symbolism to a more serious end:

Some say goodnight -- at night --  
 I say goodnight by day --  
 Good-bye -- the Going utter me --  
 Goodnight, I still reply --

For parting, that is night,  
 And presence, simply dawn --  
 Itself, the purple on the hight  
 Denominated morn. (P.1739)

This purple could as easily be "denominated" night, for what it symbolises here depends entirely on the circumstances and the mood of the poet, not on a fixed value of purple. This symbolic relativity forbids allegory; by analogy, the colours of the expressionist painter have a value deriving solely from their relation to other colours in the composition.

The poet's breaking-down of a hierarchy of acquired cultural values by manipulating colour-symbolism has an especially revolutionary flavour when purple, most imperial of hues, is the colour being manipulated. Her identification with the Queen of P.776 is tempered by her "democratic" American cultural background. However, the political ideas of

monarchy and democracy for the poet have chiefly a symbolic meaning when applied to the self. That death is democratic<sup>105</sup> in its indifference to rank, but at the same time a sovereign over the mortal world, is a paradox that she finds continually fascinating. She uses the colour purple often as a shorthand for the different emotions that this paradox arouses in her -- a poetic shorthand, that is, for it is in her poetry, rather than in her letters, that she engages the problem. In P.171, for example, death invests the dying one with majesty, and the mortal "democrat", transfigured thus, joins the purple state of death and is referred to as "My Lord". In P.144, the "purple Crayons" -- the marks of age around the old woman's eyes -- prefigure by their colour the world of crowns and courtiers to which death will accustom her. In P.380, the "Purple Democrat", itself a paradoxical phrase, is a lowly flower<sup>106</sup> which is nonetheless aspired to by bee, butterfly and hummingbird. The flower's sovereignty resides in its capacity for endurance, and its purple colour is a token of this. Death's coldness ("the Frost") can deprive the flower of its colour, but not of its dignity. This same, or a similar flower, is transmuted in a later poem into a symbol of aspiration of the order of die blaue Blume of Heinrich von Ofterdingen.<sup>107</sup> The poet recalls straying as a child,

To where a Brook that seemed a Sea  
 Withheld us by it's roaring  
 From just a Purple Flower beyond  
 Until constrained to clutch it

If Doom itself were the result,  
The boldest leaped, and clutched it -- (P.1558).

Here purple is the colour of the sovereignty which all mortals may attain, if only through dying. For death confers such dignity, that gaining the purple is inevitable for the lowliest of men. Death's kingdom is truly democratic:

One dignity delays for all --  
One mitred Afternoon --  
None can avoid this purple --  
None evade this Crown! (P.98)

Purple can "denominate" opposite times not only of the day but also of the year. As an autumnal colour, it suggests the approach of death's kingdom and of the sovereignty that kingdom promises to the soul:

Purple -- is fashionable twice --  
This season of the year,  
And when the soul perceives itself  
To be an Emperor. (P.980)

Fall is also the season when the purple gentian, one of the poet's favourite flowers, appears. Like the purple clover, the gentian is sturdily independent, but its quality of hardness is unmatched. It is the gentian that is the "Purple Creature -- /That ravished all the Hill --" in P.442, an act it performs in spite of the prevailing frostiness of the season, and for which it earns the glorious adjective "Tyrian".<sup>108</sup> The poet's strong affinity for this flower, which seems to bloom only in adversity, is made clear in the last line of the poem: "Creator -- Shall I -- bloom?"

In P.140, however, the "Tyrian light" and the "purple

finger" on the distant hills are springtime phenomena, and betoken the regeneration of Nature. "We like March./ His Shoes are Purple", writes the poet in P.1213, and in P.1320, adding to our impression that she associates the colour strongly with the month, she begs:

But March, forgive me -- and  
All those Hills you left for me to Hue --  
There was no Purple suitable --  
You took it all with you --.

Here the poet readopts her role of rival painter to Nature. The "Purple" is that of the distant hills immediately after the winter snow has melted from them. These hills "erect their Purple Heads" in P.1688, but perform this action most often in the letters, where purple has otherwise very few occurrences. This extract from a letter of March, 1866 forms a counterpart to P.140:

I tell you what I see. The Landscape of the Spirit  
requires a Lung, but no Tongue. I hold you few I  
love, till my heart is as red as Febuary<sup>109</sup> and  
purple as March. (L315)

The writer here describes the effect of spring upon her spirit, and is as if the purple of the hills becomes absorbed into her heart's blood, richly aerated and renewed by the season.

Purple is one of the most important colours of the landscape of Dickinson's spirit, even though it rarely tints the natural landscape. As the hue of self-sovereignty, it can as equally be borne by the humble gentian as by the mountains of P.757, the effortless capacity of which to exist with

dignity but without self-assertion arouses the poet's admiration:

The Mountains -- grow unnoticed --  
 Their Purple figures rise  
 Without attempt -- Exhaustion --  
 Assistance -- or Applause --.

It is this quality, too, that the poet most admires in her friends. In early 1878, shortly after Samuel Bowles's death, she writes to his wife:

Dear "Mr. Sam" is very near, these midwinter days.  
 When purples come on Pelham,<sup>110</sup> in the afternoon we  
 say, "Mr. Bowles's colors." I spoke to him once of  
 his Gem chapter, and the beautiful eyes rose till they  
 were out of reach of mine, in some hallowed fathom.  
 (L.536)

Purple is Samuel Bowles's colour because he had the capacity to evoke in Dickinson's mind a spiritualised reality, especially during moments when, as here in response to her once mentioning the "Gem chapter" of Revelation,<sup>111</sup> his eyes took on the remote and transcendent look of the hills in March.

In only two instances does the poet attempt to invest the colour purple with negative qualities. The first, significantly, is in a letter to Bowles of 1862, in which, after telling her friend how fearful she has been for him on his European trip, she launches into a homily upon the sanctity of friendship:

How extraordinary that Life's Large Population contain so few of power to us -- and those -- a vivid species -- who leave no mode -- like Tyrian Dye.<sup>112</sup> Remembering these Minorities -- permit our gratitude for you -- We ask that you be cautious -- for many sakes -- excelling Our's. To recapitulate the Stars -- were useless as supreme. Yourself is Your's -- dear friend -- but ceded -- is it not -- to here and there

a minor Life? Do not defraud These -- for Gold --  
 may be bought -- and Purple -- may be bought, <sup>113</sup> but  
 the sale of the Spirit -- never did occur. (L.275)

These pious exhortations to cherish spiritual over materialistic values are not, I think, to be taken quite seriously. Dickinson is adopting a mock-sententious tone to mask the staggering relief she feels at having her friend back in the vicinity -- so staggering that her next note (L.276) informs him that she is unable to see him. In short, L.275 cannot be read as a dismissal of purple and gold as symbols of true worth. In the second instance, moreover, vanished purple, not the colour as it is manifest in Nature, represents a negative emotion -- in this case the complacency that may accompany times of ripeness and fruition. P.1082, "Revolution is the Pod", is Dickinson's most political poem; lest Liberty be "Entomber of itself", the poet claims, it must occasionally be shaken:

Left inactive on the Stalk  
 All it's Purple fled  
 Revolution shakes it for  
 Test if it be dead.

Summer's purple is imperial, the sign of triumph. But as in P.67, victory cannot be taken for granted: the "purple Host" may know a lesser triumph than the defeated. In P.1082, victory has bred stagnation, and the revolutionary winds of autumn are needed to shake the seed-pod to the ground, where it may lie until it is time to regain its purple once winter is over.

## 9. Red

Newton relegated red to an extremity of his spectrum, but few writers on colour have attempted to dethrone the colour from its pre-eminent place in the emotional spectrum. Shakespeare would probably have agreed with Leonardo's statement that colour itself is a problem of motion from white to red.<sup>114</sup> Emily Dickinson would certainly have agreed with Goethe that, as a pigment, red "presents itself to us already formed, and is most perfect as a hue in cochineal".<sup>115</sup> In the hierarchy of the post-Newtonian spectrum, red is king, notwithstanding Goethe's belief that blue and yellow are the only true primaries.<sup>116</sup> Hegel resolves the problem in this way:

. . . pure red is the effective regal and concrete colour in which blue and yellow, contraries against themselves, are fused together . . . Red is masculine, dominant, regal . . . .<sup>117</sup>

Red has usually been seen as a positive colour, its glow powerful but beneficent. The anthropologist W. G. Black claims that, in primitive cultures, red, "regarded as representing heat, was therefore itself in a manner heat", and so red, like heat, is life-giving and "obnoxious to evil spirits".<sup>118</sup> Baudelaire sees the affirmative power of red in synaesthetic terms, terms that Emily Dickinson would easily have understood:

When the red ball of fire sinks into the waters, red fanfares fly in all directions, a blood-red harmony spreads over the horizon . . . .<sup>119</sup>



Kandinsky, too, resorts to musical terminology: red, unlike that other radiant colour yellow, is not "irresponsible", but "rings inwardly with a determined and powerful intensity".<sup>120</sup> Red, as colour of blood and fire, is at the symbolic heart of human life and civilisation, as Thoreau realises:

Any redness is . . . rare and precious. It is the color of our blood. The rose owes its preëminence in great measure to its color. It is said to be from the Celtic rhos, red.<sup>121</sup>

Emily Dickinson also exploits this symbolic pre-eminence of the rose, being probably aware, too, of the word's etymological links with "red".<sup>122</sup> She is also aware how redness grasps the attention of the perceiver as no other colour can. "Red . . . bores into us", says Adriàn Stokes. "It is the most truculent, the most characteristic, surface colour".<sup>123</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that redness stains Dickinson's work with a deeper tinge than any other colour. As she does with the other colours, though, she shifts the symbolic values of red assiduously and exploits its ambiguities for irony; red is, after all, at once the colour of redemptive blood and of hell-fire. In general, however, redness in high intensity is for the poet the colour par excellence of life, the colour that speaks, and not always with restraint, to the living blood:

Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house -- still I feel the red in my mind though the drums are out. (L.318)

This synaesthetic language, involving four of the five senses,

bespeaks the overwhelming effect of red upon the observer. It may be assumed that not all the circus was red in colour, but Dickinson reduces all its garish, brash hullaballoo to this dominant note. It is a note that dominates the other senses with ease: "To the Bugle every color is Red --" (L.985). Yet the poet distinguishes carefully the different shades and qualities of redness -- scarlet, vermilion, pink, cochineal, and so on -- and allots each a specific role.

She uses simple red most often to refer to sky-colour. The red of daybreak is a lightening of purple, and makes a passionate appeal to the observer. In two early poems, P.13 and P.30, the red of dawn is an angelic colour, promising a safe harbour to the soul. By P.425, "Good Morning -- Midnight --", however, this dawn redness is already ambiguous, and for the dying speaker, dawn and dusk change their places. In P.728, the "Reds of Morning" are "Cunning" because, like dreams, they promise a Heaven which is illusory (even though the promise is seductive). Gone now is the innocent certainty of a heavenly sunrise formerly expressed in this way:

The world is just a little place, just the red in  
the sky, before the sun rises, so let us keep fast  
hold of hands, that when the birds begin, none of us  
be missing. (L.225)

With her faith now departed, the poet anticipates a "blaze" -- a meridian or highest intensity of illumination -- during her lifetime itself. This idea is implicit in the colour-sequence in P.469, in which morning red is succeeded first by

violet, then by yellow, until, with all life extinguished, nothing but "Sparks" are left. In P.365, "Red -- is the Fire's common tint --"; that is to say, like a fire, the red of life can be fanned into the transcendent intensity of "unannointed Blaze". At this point, however, it ceases to be life, and must "Repudiate the Forge".<sup>124</sup>

The poet makes her closest equation of red with vital, but not transcendent, heat in P.689. In this poem, red/heat is juxtaposed with white/cold, and the poet seems to be drawing up a list in the Goethean style:<sup>125</sup>

White	Red
Zeroes	Phosphorus
Glaciers	Fire
Paralysis	Vitality.

A less successful exercise in colour-contrast is P.1677, in which the poet uses her characteristic volcano-motif<sup>126</sup> to represent a placid exterior concealing inner turmoil. Here the redness of the suppressed volcanic fires are masked by their complementary colour, the greenness of the "insecure" grass covering the slopes of the volcano.

From volcanic fires it is a short step to the blood at the hot and passionate heart of life, the sacrificial and redemptive "red drops" of L.194.<sup>127</sup> Yet in the poems, only occasionally is the actual redness of blood called attention to, as in the cry from the heart in P.236,

Say -- that a little life -- for His --  
Is leaking -- red --,

or again in the red-saturated love-poem, P.1059. More often,

the poet has blood suffuse the cheek, rather than leak from a wound. The very literal colour-transformation of white to red in the blush nonetheless has metaphorical power, in that inner emotions become, so to speak, legible as a result of chromatic change. Sometimes the poet has the blood come to the cheek as an act of defiance against the forces of death, as in P.165, "A Wounded Deer -- leaps highest --":

A Cheek is always redder  
Just where the Hectic stings!

Even the reddened cheek of P.430, coming at a moment of consummate joy, betokens life, enriched by love, soon to be assailed by desolating forces. The "ruddy face" (L.245) of the doomed Frazer Stearns<sup>128</sup> is a poignant image, as is the recollection of a dead friend's cheeks reddened by a parsonage fire, compared to their present pallor in "that low sleep -- she takes --" (L.243).

Dickinson also uses the kinetic colour-image of the blush for the purposes of personification. In P.574, the sick poet views the autumnal reddening of Nature as a consolatory performance for the benefit of a mortal world faced with wintry bleakness. Nature herself has an affinity for redness that shows her at her least introverted; in the delightful P.841, about an unspecified red flower, Nature's preference for this hue is slightly vulgar but nevertheless endearing:

A Moth the hue of this  
Haunts Candles in Brazil.

Nature's Experience would make  
Our Reddest Second pale.

Nature is fond, I sometimes think,  
Of Trinkets, as a Girl.

Such fondness shows at least that Nature is on the side of life. Another extension of the blush-image occurs in P.1320, when the sterile whiteness of winter is embarrassed, as it were, at the regenerative powers of springtime: "I declare -- how Red their Faces grew --", says the poet of the maples in March.

Yet in P.342, the reddening wild rose is the first sign of Fall, and red has, indeed, a great deal of significance for the poet as a valedictory hue. It is a colour that can even make "fading" seem desirable:

If this is "dying"  
Bury me, in such a shroud of red! (P.120)

In Amherst, it seems that red sky-effects occur most spectacularly in winter, coming as a striking contrast to the whiteness of the earth. The poet often writes nostalgically of the "winter red" (L.222), even in the midst of summer. A short poem shows the poet revelling in the contrast between earth and sky, until her heart is "red as February":

White as an Indian Pipe<sup>129</sup>  
Red as a Cardinal Flower  
Fabulous as a Moon at Noon  
February Hour -- (P.1250)

Like Thoreau, Dickinson sees redness in Nature as something rare and precious.

Red for the poet is the colour of life above all, yet

she feels at the same time there is a divine quality about it. Redness speaks of a God, not bloodless as He too often seems, but as He should be — in Hegel's words, "masculine, dominant, regal":<sup>130</sup>

The Red upon the Hill  
 Taketh away my will --  
 If anybody sneer --  
 Take care -- for God -- is here --  
 That's all. (P.155)

Once again, this is not God as "distant — stately Lover" (P.357), but as the "Artist — who drew me so —". The reason for the appearance of redness — spring or autumn, dawn or dusk — is hardly important. It is sufficient that whenever it does appear, it is capable of giving the poet a feeling of abandonment to a higher will. If redness is divine, then God, for the poet, lies at the heart of life. He may be personified as the pictorial Artist whose tints are matchless, and take away the breath of rival artists with admiration. Revelations of this divine, masculine life-force (there are certainly hints by the poet that He arouses feelings of erotic submission in her) may come as the brief blossoming of a red flower,<sup>131</sup> as in P.978, or as the "accidental Red/A Strolling Hue" that strays into the sunset sky, giving no forewarning of its apocalyptic significance:

But when the Earth began to jar  
 And Houses vanished with a roar  
 And Human Nature hid  
 We comprehended by the Awe  
 As those that Dissolution saw  
 The Poppy in the Cloud (P.1419).

Twice, when I had Red Flowers out, Gilbert knocked, raised his sweet Hat, and asked if he might touch them -- Yes, and take them too, I said, but Chivalry forbade him -- Besides, he gathered Hearts, not Flowers -- (L.938).

Here, the aunt perceives her nephew's refusal to pluck red flowers as symbolic of his "chivalrous" unwillingness to hold on to his own life with more than the most tenuous grasp. The idea expressed here is closely related to her belief that when the life-force wanes in a person, so does the intensity of the red aura surrounding him: "Vinnie is sick to-night, which gives the world a russet tinge, usually so red" (L.207).<sup>133</sup>

Scarlet is the particular tone of red which appears most frequently in Dickinson's poetry. As an adjective, scarlet is often attached to a noun that is either abstract or not commonly thought of as having a colour. Examples of what is almost a poetic mannerism include "Scarlet Freight" (P.404), "Scarlet way" (P.527), "Scarlet prison" (P.528), "Scarlet Maryland" (P.596, variant), "Scarlet Rain" (P.656), "Scarlet Experiment" (P.861), "Scarlet shelf" (P.1136), "scarlet log" (P.1693), "scarlet expectations" (PF.43), and "scarlet experience" (L.388).<sup>134</sup> In all these instances, scarlet has a primary association with blood, and the writer seems to be attempting to stain, as it were, the world of ideas with heart's blood, to tinge the abstract world with the colour of painful sacrifice and abnegation. The poet alludes to Christ's blood, that symbol of love, suffering and redemption. As painter-poet, she uses scarlet, that beautiful and brilliant tone of the most dominant colour of all, as an all-pervasive dye. The young Emily writes to Sue during a period of emotional rift between the two girls:

You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone,  
for I often part with things I fancy I have loved, --  
sometimes to the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion  
rather bitterer than death -- thus my heart bleeds so  
frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage, and I  
only add an agony to several previous ones . . . (L.173).

Here the writer sees herself in the role of suffering Christ,<sup>135</sup> and though scarlet is not mentioned, this passage contains the key to its significance.



Christ-metaphor, applied to herself, hovers at the back of many of the poet's uses of scarlet. The "Scarlet way" (P.527) requiring "possibly Agony", is that of renunciation, and all the "faint Confederates" of Christ must tread this bloody road as He did. The "Scarlet prison" (P.528) is probably an allusion to the prison in which Christ was kept before His crucifixion, conflated with the scarlet robe He wore when released to the mockery in the common hall.<sup>136</sup> The "Sign" in this prison informs the poet that eternal grace may be obtained through the agony of renunciation: "Mine — long as Ages steal!". The same scarlet thread runs through P.861. The lark's agony during its dissection alone proves that its music rings true; the implicit analogy made by the poet is with her own situation, in that she too offers herself as sacrificial victim to prove the truth of her poetry in the face of disbelief:

Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!  
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true? (P.861)

Before she learns to exploit the biblical resonances of scarlet, the poet in many of her early writings delights in the sonority of the colour-word itself.<sup>137</sup> It is only when she first associates the colour with evening<sup>138</sup> that the word begins to resound with a special timbre, and only when she associates it at once with evening and with blood — the "drops — of vital scarlet" of P.269 — that the word starts to suggest a religious wounding. By P.404, a poem on the sur-

face little more than a variation on the theme of the flower born to blush unseen, the colour-image in the last stanza is used to (almost literally) add weight to the poem's import:

How many cast a nameless Pod  
Upon the nearest Breeze --  
Unconscious of the Scarlet Freight --  
It bear to Other Eyes --.

Only this scarlet-image here hints that the real subject is a poet self-condemned to a lifetime in oblivion, yet hoping through this act of renunciation to produce offspring that will continue to bloom, tinged with the colour of her pain and glory. From this point on, scarlet is the hue of sacrifice for the poet, a colour that in all its manifestations cries out with the urgency of spilled blood:<sup>139</sup>

The Veins of Other Flowers  
The Scarlet Flowers are . . . (P.811).

For even Nature, most prodigal of mothers, seems at times painfully eager to spill the lifeblood of her children, as she goes about "Spending Scarlet, like a Woman" (P.1045).

The complex of emotions that scarlet comes to represent for Emily Dickinson can be synthesised by tracing the word's gradual accumulation of associations in her writings. To her poetry we come prepared for complex allusiveness; in her letters she maintains that same allusive quality, and we must be prepared for this too, even if we are curious to know whether or not her correspondents ever grasped more than a fraction of what she was trying to tell them. To her Norcross cousins, she writes,

It is not recorded of any rose that it failed of its  
 bee, though obtained in specific instances through  
 scarlet experience. The career of flowers differs  
 from ours only in inaudibleness. I feel more reverence  
 as I grow for these mute creatures whose suspense or  
 transport may surpass my own. (L.388)

The tenor of this passage is important as a statement of the  
 writer's attitude towards colour. Flowers, she claims, may  
 be as expressive (and therefore as sentient) as people, but  
 show their agonies and ecstasies through the medium of colour,  
 not orally. The scarlet of a rose is a badge of its "exper-  
 ience" -- for it has bled silently and therefore has gained  
 the "skill of life".<sup>140</sup> Yet this is only to skim the surface  
 of the meanings condensed in the phrase "scarlet experience",  
 as we (who have the benefit of the whole corpus of the poet's  
 writings available to us, in which to make cross-references) have  
 seen.<sup>141</sup> We can only guess at the extent of the Norcrosses'  
 bafflement.

As the painter-poet continues to search for ways to  
 describe the different nuances of the emotions arising from  
 her exposure to forces at the heart of life, other colour-  
 words from the red-spectrum make their appearances in her  
 writings. Vermilion, for example, (always spelt with a double  
 "l" by the poet), occurs frequently for so exotic a tint, usu-  
 ally associated with the blushing cheek.<sup>142</sup> Indian summer,  
 "tenderer" than true summer, appears thus:

As should a Face supposed the Grave's  
 Emerge a single Noon  
 In the Vermillion that it wore  
 Affect us, and return -- (P.930).

As we have seen, scarlet is associated with wounding, and usually appears as the "visual" element in an abstract phrase; vermilion is less weighty, and has pictorial associations that suggest that the poet might have found the word, so to speak, in her paintbox:

On the World you colored  
Morning painted rose --  
Idle his Vermillion  
Aimless crept the Glows . . . 143 (P.1171).

Vermilion also appears in the poetry as an intensifier, of red in P.1059 and P.656, and of yellow in P.1676, while in P.156 vermilion is itself darkened into purple.

Crimson, too, has one association with blushing (P. 142),<sup>144</sup> but more often is a favourite colour-tone of the young poet when she is luxuriating in colour-effects for their own sake. In P.23, for example, it seems certain that the colour-harmonisation of two crimsons is the real theme of these lines:

I had a crimson Robin --  
Who sang full many a day  
But when the woods were painted,  
He, too, did fly away --.

This robin clearly felt diminished by the colour of the autumn foliage. With gold, scarlet is the colour of sunset's most glorious stage in P.15, a colour that is soon to be toned down to opal and grey. In P.339, the intense crimson of the globe roses seems indecent to a poet faced with her lover's absence, and this is what makes her promise to dwell

"in Calyx -- Gray --". Crimson can also be associated with heart's blood, as in the fragmentary P.1582, but more often it is a colour which, like vermilion, has a "paintbox" quality:

. . . high in a crimson tree a belated bird is singing -- a thousand little painters are ting[e]ling hill and dale. (L.57).

Only crimson, an "artificial" red dye,<sup>145</sup> seems to the dazzled young girl sufficiently intense to describe the colour of the New England foliage in the Fall.<sup>146</sup>

Dickinson's use of cochineal (five times in the poetry) is perhaps the most extreme instance of her experimentation with exotic colour-words. Her purpose is hyperbolic: on one occasion, not even the matchless brilliance of this tone of red is adequate to express the intensity of her thought:

Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal --  
Or Noon -- in Mazarin? (P.581)<sup>147</sup>

Ransacking the dictionary for the most unusual and sonorous colour-words will never enable the poet to portray the Ineffable, for it is tinged with the colour beyond colour. Yet cochineal is certainly the colour most "resembling" the poet's lover:

Cochineal -- I chose -- for deeming  
It resemble Thee --  
And the little Border -- Dusker --  
For resembling Me -- (P.748).<sup>148</sup>

Cochineal is used in dyeing; its equivalent for the painter

is carmine,<sup>149</sup> a colour-word which makes its most notable appearance in Dickinson's work as the colour of arterial blood in P.470, in contrast to the "Morning Glory"<sup>150</sup> of the veins beneath the skin. "Rouge" (P.221) and the coined "Burgund" (P.230) show the fertility of the poet's imagination in discovering synonyms for light and dark tones of red.

Like "emerald", "ruby" is as much a colour-word for Emily Dickinson as a jewel-name, evoking the deep redness of wine (P.334)<sup>151</sup> as well as that of the gem itself. In her use of ruby, the poet demonstrates an almost baroque pictorialism derived perhaps from her reading of the "Gem chapter":

I went to Heaven --  
 'Twas a small Town --  
 Lit -- with a Ruby --  
 Lathed -- with Down --  
  
 Stiller -- than the fields  
 At the full Dew --  
 Beautiful -- as Pictures --  
 No Man drew. (P.374)

In this scene suffused with redness of the least extraverted kind, the poet strains her pictorial imagination to the utmost. In P.400 and P.466, however, and even in P.223 where the rubies refer to the evening sky, it is to the gem rather than to its colour alone that the poet is alluding.<sup>152</sup>

When she wishes to use a red that is weakened or tainted in some way -- a red with the vitality sapped from it -- the poet resorts occasionally to russet,<sup>153</sup> most

often to pink. Only in two very early poems, P.6 and P.22, is pink used without this pejorative connotation. In P.885, a poem of her maturity, the poet speaks of the "Pink and Pulpy multitude" of worms, a manifestation of apparently "needless life" on the "tepid Ground". Only when it is eaten by a bird is the purpose of this lowly life-form's existence made clear to the poet. Pink is also the colour of the unassertive arbutus (P.1332, L.339, L.1034<sup>154</sup>), and only in this context does this diminished colour-tone have a more positive connotation -- the arbutus is a harbinger of spring, and its pinkness demonstrates a potential for the fuller vigour of redness. But P.1412, in which pink is the colour of human flesh, exploits the deeper significance of the weakest tone of red:

Shame is the shawl of Pink  
 In which we wrap the Soul  
 To keep it from infesting Eyes --  
 The elemental Veil  
 Which helpless Nature drops  
 When pushed upon a scene  
 Repugnant to her probity --  
 Shame is the tint divine. (P.1412)

The dominant idea of this poem is that humanity is perpetually clothed in shame, and the idea gets its force from the position of pink at an extremity of the red-spectrum, where the vital force of redness is most diminished. The deeply ironic last line might be expected to read, "Pink is the tint divine", for man, bearing that particular flesh-colour, believes himself created in God's image. Instead,

the poet emphasises that the condition of the flesh is a drained redness, a reflection of the shock "helpless Nature" feels as she recoils shamefacedly from the repugnant scene life on earth presents to her. In P.1527, the poet, contemplating a corpse, makes this consciously futile plea:

Affiance it again  
To that Pink stranger we call Dust --.

All flesh is dust, but when alive it assumes a colour testifying, albeit feebly, to its animated state: pinkness, rather than the white pallor of death.

Most curiously, pink is also associated with the lusts of the flesh, which the poet has long renounced but has been unable entirely to suppress. In P.1748, the volcano confides to no-one his "projects pink". These "projects" are probably incarnations of the soul, the volcano having, as it were, replaced Jehovah as the poet's presiding deity.<sup>155</sup> The purpose of these embodied souls remains obscure, but their colour, pink, attests to their frailty. A related idea appears in P.1578, in which the image of pink cake-icing is a Dickinsonian parable masking a less trivial concern:

Blossoms will run away,  
Cakes reign but a Day  
But Memory like Melody  
Is pink Eternally.

No doubt this poem originally accompanied the gift of a cake, and "pink" has an initial meaning of "fresh", as in the phrase "in the pink". In her gnomic way, however, the



poet is reasserting that it is to the flesh that the memory returns. A late poem recalls a love affair long past. The poet speaks of the "Massacre . . ./So modest and so vain" that the lovers are condemned to repeat because of the unrequited nature of their relationship. The poem (P.1529) ends abruptly with the line, "Each was to each the Pink Redoubt --", whereby it becomes clear that to each of the lovers, the other's flesh was an impregnable fortress which neither would yield. Because of the eternal call of the flesh, however, the "Dimpled War" can never be truly be over for them.

The most extraordinary use of pink in a similar vein to that just explored, is in P.1670, "In Winter in my Room", a poem uncannily prefiguring Freudian motifs. Here the poet has reduced the "Pink and Pulpy multitude" of P.885 to a single "Worm/Pink lank and warm". In her dream, she finds this worm in her room, and tethers it, only to find that the tame creature has now become a mottled<sup>156</sup> snake "ringed with power". The snake then proceeds to assault her and "fathom" her, until she manages to make her escape.<sup>157</sup> It is for the psychoanalytic critic to explore the biographical significance of this poem; here I mean only to show how once again the poet associates pinkness with fleshly weakness, both literally, in the case of the worm, and metaphorically (that is, the weakness of carnality) in the case of the snake.

Each of the different tones of red enables the poet to work a variation upon the theme represented by basic redness, the colour of the forces at the heart of life. In the case of pink, the colour-word as shorthand for a complex of emotions seems barely to have emerged from the subconscious mind of the poet, and the reader will inevitably suspect that she is keeping some volatile material, probably sexual in nature, under close guard. Yet from time to time she allows certain intriguing clues as to the nature of this material to appear in her writings. We wonder if Higginson grasped anything of her meaning when she wrote to him,

It wont be ripe till April -- How luscious is the  
dripping of the Febuary eaves! It makes our  
thinking Pink -- (L.450).

Is she thinking here of the arbutus "making pink clothes" (L.339) in the spring? Or of the pink spring pear she ate in late 1869 (L.337)? Or of pink August peaches which (she will later write) seem like ambassadors of the heart that sends them (L.654)?<sup>158</sup> In each case, the writer suggests a lusciousness of forbidden fruit, which it is not necessary to taste in order to make the "thinking Pink". Yet surely her correspondent would have understood little of this; and we become aware that, even in her letters, Emily Dickinson is often a poet soliloquising, daring to hope that her utterances prove immortal, and therefore casting them in the form of riddles that only posterity will be able to solve.

10. White

The famous white dress has seemed to most critics to be clear evidence that this colour had an important personal significance for Emily Dickinson.<sup>159</sup> It has proved more difficult to define the precise nature of this significance, however. Anderson sums up critical frustration thus:

To pin down the exact significance of "White" for Dickinson is impossible. It permeates her writings, with many shades of meaning. She used it for example as the characteristic color of death, "the White Exploit," and of God, "the White Creator." That she chose to dress in white exclusively for the last fifteen or twenty years of her life, probably beginning about the time she composed her poem on the "White Election," offers a fascinating field for conjecture. But she never gave an explanation for it.<sup>160</sup>

Anderson allows his own conjectures to peter out with warnings: not to take the "White Election" poem (P.528) as "evidence that she finally attained pure spiritual dedication";<sup>161</sup> and "to avoid generalizing about the terminology of love in her writings".<sup>162</sup>

Ruth Flanders McNaughton seems willing to push a little further than Anderson into the thickets of ambiguity covering this "fascinating field":

White has a varied symbolism for Emily Dickinson. After she renounced her love and became a recluse, she wore only white, which fact seems to indicate that she identified it with love and especially with love's renunciation. At other times it is associated with death. This use of white to symbolize both love and death seems on the surface to be one of Emily

Dickinson's paradoxes which it is difficult to reconcile; and yet, since she was denied love's fulfillment in life, it is natural that she should associate it with death and death's promise of immortality.<sup>163</sup>

It may seem at first a little facile to suggest that white can symbolise at once three very different emotions: love itself, the renunciation of love, and the hope for immortality. Yet in Dickinson's mind, these three emotions are inextricably linked. White, rather than "symbolising" three separate concepts, comes instead to stand as a shorthand for the single emotion produced by the three elements operating simultaneously on the mind of woman and poet. The white dress was probably one of the poet's ways of articulating the very personal predicament of having love, renunciation and immortality as tripartite and indivisible presiding deity. Yet as with the other colours, white comes to bear its huge burden of meaning for the poet only gradually, and through a process of accumulation. Once again, we must trace the transition of the colour-word from a purely descriptive epithet to a cryptogram concealing confessions at once profoundly personal and universal in their significance.

Perceptive critics have shown some understanding of the shifting symbolic values of white: that is to say, the way it is manipulated by the poet so that it can carry any charge of meaning between the low-intensity adjectival extreme, and that of the high-intensity expressionistic. Sherwood, for example, remarks:

This color . . . was no less important to her than to Melville, though it reflected in her case the Christian mystery and not a Christian enigma, and her practice of dressing in white was a product not of willful or hysterical eccentricity but of a decision to announce (ironically in the midst of the Civil War) ~~her~~ private secession from society through the assumption of a worldly death that paradoxically involved regeneration.<sup>164</sup>

In his convoluted way, Sherwood (though he does not mention love) seems to grasp that Dickinson's response to the colour was governed by her perception that there was a pre-existing paradoxical side to the colour white that she could use to represent her own paradoxical predicament. Gelpi, who seizes upon the analogy with Melville, is astuter yet:

A check of the associations of the color "white" . . . link[s] "white" with matrimony, death, winter, the lily, the individual consciousness, the Soul, God, despair, heaven. So, for Emily, as for Melville and for Poe, whiteness itself expressed or veiled the final and ambiguous mystery.<sup>165</sup>

For Emily Dickinson, then, white is primarily a subject-in-itself, and secondarily a repository of associations, personal and traditional, which can be evoked or suspended at will. To extend the analogy with Melville: Moby-Dick is distinguished from all other whales by its colour, a whiteness which can never be dismissed as an accidental aberration, but on the contrary lies at the heart of the mystery the whale represents. For Dickinson, her white dress came to represent the mystery of her own predicament. Waggoner sums it up thus:

She herself in the end chose to wear only white, a color that contained as many ambiguities for her

as it had for Melville in his explication of "The Whiteness of the Whale."<sup>166</sup>

Critical attention to the problem of Dickinson's use of white comes to a focus in J. S. Wheatcroft's article, "Emily Dickinson's White Robes".<sup>167</sup> Wheatcroft's initial position is that Dickinson's best poetry is the result of the interaction between the "private imagination of the poet and the collective imagination of the tradition she inherited".<sup>168</sup> Her use of white reflects this interaction in microcosm. For Wheatcroft, her poetry is in a sense "an emanation from New England Orthodoxy", and "In Puritan eschatology the white robe in which the bride of Christ will be garbed is a persistently used figure".<sup>169</sup> However, being a child of her age, Dickinson modifies "the orthodox conception of a white-robed resurrection of the body" into "a nineteenth century Romantic notion of dying into nature".<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, "the color and the texture of the robe of immortality are suggested to her by natural phenomena".<sup>171</sup> That is to say, she invests the whiteness of the snowy climate in which she lives with both personal and traditional associations. The snow, like the colours of New England Falls and sunsets, is part of her mental landscape. Wheatcroft summarises his conclusions thus:

On the one hand, by virtue of its association with winter, and also by virtue of its being the color of the dead elect, it [i.e. white] is the color of death. On the other hand, because of its conventional use as the color of the gowns of brides in order to denote innocence or because of the eschatological idea of the souls of the elect, apparelled

in white robes, consummating their love for deity in their marriage to the Lamb in eternity, it is the color of marriage, both earthly and divine.<sup>172</sup>

Therefore white, in contexts in which it carries its greatest charge of meaning, stands for a complex of emotions comprising, among other things: frigidity and blankness (of snow), unfulfilled love with an earthly lover, renunciation, (the pallor of) death, and love consummated with a divine lover (who is not necessarily God).

Yet even Wheatcroft does not go far enough. He is dealing with a single colour, but Emily Dickinson has a spectrum of them. White must also be examined in its role as a medium of the painter-poet, a colour against which she juxtaposed others to vary her compositional effects. Notwithstanding her white dress, she would have agreed with Ruskin's statement about detractors of colour in painting: " . . . if they could but see, for an instant, white human creatures living in a white world, -- they would soon feel what they owe to colour".<sup>173</sup>

The snow, cold fact of life in Amherst, seems to underlie Dickinson's use of white. As early as 1850 she associates, half-unconsciously, the "wicked snow-storm" (L.32) with her mood of depression, a gloom she describes as an "empty blank". Yet as both Emerson and Whittier found considerable aesthetic pleasure in the unfamiliarity with which a new snowfall clothes the world,<sup>174</sup> so does Dickinson. In one letter she remarks upon the sculptural

powers of snow (L.86), in another upon the Gothick spectacle of an advancing snowstorm (L.176), and in another she lapses into the sentimental-baroque:

I come in flakes, dear Dr. Holland, for verily it  
snows, and as descending swans, here a pinion and  
there a pinion, and anon a plume, come the bright  
inhabitants of the white home. (L.181)

In this passage, whiteness connects the snow with the heavenly elect. It is a connection going back as early as 1852:

The other day I tried to think how I should look  
with my eyes shut, and a little white gown on, and  
a snow-drop on my breast. (L.86)

Here is at once the white shroud of death and the white robe of resurrection, the latter suggested by the snow-drop, symbol of the regenerative year. As can be seen, the paradoxes in traditional white-symbolism fascinate Dickinson from the beginning.

The first poem to exploit the ironies of white-symbolism is P.221. The poet asks herself what the intense colours of a sunset foretell, and concludes that they cannot herald a milder season because winter, "that long town of White", must be crossed first. On the other hand, the sunset cannot forebode death, for the colour is "too Rouge", while the dead "shall go in White". The presence of death shuns this vigorous display of redness, and, moreover, the dead depart "in White" (raiment, or at the snowy time of the year).



The white robe as a garment suited to the poetic persona first makes its appearance in P.147. Here the nameless soldier in Heaven wears "epaulettes white", and is a figure one glimpse of whom the poet feels might allay her spiritual doubts. The "Gentleman" guarding Heaven's gate in P.248 is clad in a white robe, which invests him with the authority to exclude the poet. In P.271, the poet assumes the white robe for the first time herself, speaking of it as if she were a bride testing her gown, or a nun her veil, for its fit:

A solemn thing -- it was -- I said --  
 A Woman -- white -- to be --  
 And wear -- if God should count me fit --  
 Her blameless mystery --.

This poem has a counterpart in the second "Master" letter (L233) of about the same time. After pleading with the (intended) recipient to come to her, she asks, half-defiantly, "What would you do with me if I came "in white"?" The letter concludes with this paragraph:

I didn't think to tell you, you didn't come to me  
 "in white," nor ever told me why,  
     No Rose, yet felt myself a'bloom,  
     No Bird -- yet rode in Ether.

What she "didn't think" to tell her correspondent was, perhaps, the depth of her love for him, an emotion she intends to keep until he comes to her in the white of his shroud, or they both meet in the white of heavenly garb.

In P.325, the poet comes to the conclusion that those who come "in white" have gained an ultimate victory,

but leaves it ambiguous whether this whiteness is that of death-pallor or that of the badge of election:

Of Tribulation — these are They,  
Denoted by the White.  
The Spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank  
Of Victors, designate —

All these — did conquer —  
But the Ones who overcame most times —  
Wear nothing commoner than Snow —  
No Ornament — but Palms —.

The unadorned purity of whiteness denotes a superior caste to the "Spangled Gowns", and signifies that "Tribulation" — surrender, defeat, anguish — has been utterly transcended. Significantly, "White" and "Snow" are here synonymous, for the hallmark of this victory is a cold unworldliness. In aspiring to the white, we are condemned to enter a frigid realm. Kandinsky's remarks upon the colour are apposite here:

[It] is a symbol of a world from which all colours as material attributes have disappeared. This world is too far above us . . . to touch our souls. There comes a great silence which materially represented is like a cold, indestructible wall going on into the infinite . . . White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age.<sup>175</sup>

Dickinson would certainly have agreed with this painter's view of the effect of white upon the living eye.

As the poet's faith in Heaven dwindles, whiteness comes to represent for her the pallor of a death which no resurrection follows. In P.388, a dead body is described as

. . . this Sufferer polite —  
Dressed to meet You —  
See — in White!

The poet, whose "See" is an appeal to the eye of the living, is at pains to point out that this Sufferer inhabits a realm remote from the mortal world, as she quenches the hopes of the first two lines of the poem by repeated metaphors of unattainability. By P.411, the whiteness of snow is part of the spectrum of colour-change that characterises the mortal world, while the realm of death is represented by the unmentionable black of mourning crape.

An increasingly ironic tone accompanies the transition from white gown to white shroud or pallor. The missing term in P.528, "Mine — by the Right of the White Election!", is probably Immortality. This "Election" is white not only because it involves assuming the robe of immortality, but also because death and its pallor intervene between the mortal and immortal state: "that long town of White" (P.221) must be crossed. P.709, "Publication — is the Auction", reinforces the idea that the Immortality suggested at in P.528 is of the literary kind, and is a goal to be attained only by rigorous adherence to the doctrine of truth to self:

. . . We -- would rather  
From Our Garret go  
White -- Unto the White Creator --  
Than invest -- Our Snow --.

The purity of the art, seen here in terms of the cold whiteness of snow, must not be tainted by lesser preoccupations, represented by the contemptuous "Auction" and "invest" borrowed from the world of buying and selling. The poet's deity is

"the White Creator", the fountainhead and archetype of whiteness as purity, truth to self, and renunciation of worldly values. The white-robed anchoress-poet aspires to the Whiteness whose badge she wears, and aims to become its Bride:

Fashion My Spirit quaint -- white --  
Quick -- like a Liquor --  
Gay -- like Light -- (P.473).

This is the poet's prayer to her White Creator, which she is entitled to utter only when she has renounced the more conventional adornments with the help of which other girls become brides.

In other poems, however, the poet's assurance that election is hers wavers. Instead of being the distinctive mark of an elite, the whiteness of death comes to seem to her a more "democratic" sign:

Too little way the House must lie  
From every Human Heart  
That holds in undisputed Lease  
A white inhabitant -- (P.911).

This "white inhabitant" is the corpse, not the immortal soul, that lies latent within the living tissue; otherwise the living would not need to feel such a sense of personal loss when their beloved ones die. In P.922, the irony of unrestrained bitterness replaces what is left of the ambiguity of whiteness. Death is now "the White Exploit" which needs no special qualifications to be undertaken, and which once completed "annuls the power/Once to communicate --".

Whiteness is such an important image in Dickinson's poetry because it expresses the ambivalence she feels towards her own poetic vocation. On the one hand, the White Creator<sup>176</sup> is the source of all colour, and hence the presiding spirit to whom as painter-poet she pays perpetual homage. On the other, whiteness is the corpse-colour, the hue of the blank and frigid snow, and the artist wonders, as she beholds it, whether her renunciation is not rather an act of death than of life. Descriptions of snow and its power to sunder and annul are frequent in the letters,<sup>177</sup> and even in later life the poet can be shocked and disorientated by a sudden snowfall:

The Snow is so white and sudden it seems almost  
like a Change of Heart -- though I dont mean a  
"Conversion" -- I mean a Revolution. (L.678)

Of her own mother's death, she writes that Mrs. Dickinson "slipped from our fingers like a flake gathered by the wind, and is now part of the drift called 'the infinite'" (L.785). In this wintry image of death, the individual consciousness, deprived of vital heat, is absorbed into a cold, circum-ambient oblivion. In a letter to Mrs. Holland of 1883, Dickinson makes a diagnosis of her friend's visual problem:

May it not be the glazed Light which the Snows make,  
for with us they are falling always now, and the last  
is faithful for three Days, an inclement constancy --  
(L.801).

"With us they are falling always now": with these words the poet envisions her own life slipping away in a terminal snow-

storm, and prepares also to join the "drift called 'the infinite'".

In the poems, too, whiteness comes increasingly to represent a snowy coldness as the poet matures, as has already been seen in P.689.<sup>178</sup> The most notable image expressing this theme occurs in the last stanza of P.640, "I cannot live with You —", that great poem of renunciation:

So We must meet apart —  
 You there — I — here —  
 With just the Door ajar  
 That Oceans are — and Prayer —  
 And that White Sustenance —  
 Despair —.

This "White Sustenance" is an ironic allusion to the manna found by the Israelites in the wilderness.<sup>179</sup> As nourishment, it is a cold comfort, for within this colour-word "White" is compressed the whole weight of the colour's accumulated associations for the poet: coldness, frigidity, renunciation, purity maintained, pallor and death. Like the Israelites, the poet has been "chosen", but her election has limited her wardrobe to a virgin's white gown. She is condemned for ever to suffer agonies of doubt as to whether her chosen way — Immortality through Renunciation — is worth the torments she must undergo, isolated and imprisoned within the self.

Metaphorically as well as literally, white is the colour of Emily Dickinson's poetic mantle. It is the colour both of her aspiration to immortality and of her intuition that, like all mortals, she is doomed to fall woefully short

of her goal and find herself, lonely, frustrated, and in despair:

Unworthy of her Breast  
 Though by that scathing test  
 What Soul survive?  
 By her exacting light  
 How counterfeit the white  
 We chiefly have! (P.1414).

The white, symbol of her great goal of truth to self, is at the same time "counterfeit" by the same exacting standards. It is no coincidence that Emily Dickinson's "preferred flower of life" (L.769) is the Indian Pipe, "this exquisitely delicate, almost translucently white plant which grows only in the shadow of the forest and lives from decaying roots".<sup>180</sup> The purity and virginal shyness of the plant are thus fittingly accompanied by the smell of decay. To Mabel Loomis Todd, who had sent her a gift of a painting of this plant, Dickinson writes, "I cannot make an Indian Pipe but please accept a Humming Bird" (L.770), sending her correspondent P.1463. This act may be taken as a final acknowledgement by the poet that her poetic capacity is unable to do justice to whiteness; for she sends, not an Indian Pipe, but her masterpiece of colour in motion, the "Humming Bird", that vibrant affirmation of life.

For all its beauty, the Indian Pipe, Dickinson's "preferred flower of life", is on the side of negation:

'Tis whiter than an Indian Pipe —  
 'Tis dimmer than a Lace —  
 No stature has it, like a Fog  
 When you approach the place --

Not any voice imply it here  
Or intimate it there . . . (P.1482).

"This limitless Hyperbole" is democratic: it is death, too nebulous to be described except by what it is not. As that last whiteness begins to cancel the colour from the living cheek, words, feelings, and finally sight fail. Like the person freezing to death in the snow, there is "First -- Chill -- then Stupor -- then the letting go --" (P.341).

### 11. Yellow

According to Havelock Ellis, Poe is one of the great champions of yellow, closely followed by Whitman, who uses the colour as a means of avoiding the poeticism "golden".<sup>181</sup> Thoreau, too, finds yellow particularly striking, as is evident from this description of water-meadows:

. . . a brilliant and cheerful yellow, intensely, incredibly bright . . . in the lowest and sedgiest parts deepening to so much color as if gamboge had been rubbed into the meadow there; the most cheering color in all the landscape.<sup>182</sup>

"Gamboge" is an exotic colour-word that Emily Dickinson, who might be said to continue this American "yellow-tradition", also uses.<sup>183</sup> For Dickinson is a conscious celebrant of yellow -- at times, indeed, a philosopher of the colour.

More wildly than any other colour, yellow can oscillate between two emotional extremes. "In its highest purity it always carries with it the nature of brightness, and has a serene, gay, softly exciting character",<sup>184</sup> writes Goethe,



who continues by showing how this purity is seldom found in an uncontaminated state, and how sulphurous yellow has traditionally had very negative connotations.<sup>185</sup> Thoreau too observes that yellow has a dual nature:

The spring yellows are faint, cool, innocent as the saffron of the morning compared with the blaze of noon. The autumnal, methinks, are the fruit of the dog-days, heats of manhood or age, not of youth.<sup>186</sup>

Goethe's duality of yellow might be expressed as "pure/contaminated", Thoreau's as "springtime/autumnal". Emily Dickinson, however, has a double duality, which might be expressed as "masculine-piercing/feminine-falling", with her "masculine" yellows usually, but not always "piercing", and the "feminine" yellows usually, but not always "falling".

Kandinsky has remarked that in a painting, yellow seems often to move towards the observer in a furious outburst of energy: "Keen lemon-yellow hurts the eye as does a prolonged shrill bugle note the ear".<sup>187</sup> This is Dickinson's masculine-piercing yellow which, when associated with the sun, can operate synaesthetically as it does for Kandinsky:

Let no Sunrise' yellow noise  
Interrupt this Ground -- (P.829).

In P.1190, the sun plays the role of male autocrat, and there ✓  
is something of both politics and carriage-driving in this violent image:

The Sun and Fog contested  
The Government of Day --  
The Sun took down his Yellow Whip  
And drove the Fog away --.

In P.1415, however, the tyrannical sun is deposed by the "democratic" winds, and he is reduced to crouching like a fugitive behind his "Yellow Door". But the sun has a gentler side, too. His "Yellow Plan" (P.591) consists both of sunrays that penetrate "Caprices of the Atmosphere" to stimulate organic growth, and of gravitational forces that regulate the tides and the movements of the planets. Yet the poet remains uncowed by the might of the sun, whether he be tyrant or benevolent despot. In P.766, the sun's "Golden Will" -- a phrase resounding with dignity and authority -- becomes subject to the poet's faith as the only force that can sustain it. Otherwise, the sun's "Yellow feet" -- a bathetic counterpart to the earlier colour-image -- might well trip up.

Masculine-piercing yellow is associated with light-✓ning and with weaponry as it is with the sun. So, in P.824, the lightning shows a "Yellow Beak" in the second version of the poem, a much more effective and "piercing" image than the "Yellow Head" it shows in the poem's first version. It is more effective, too, than the image in P.1173:

The Lightning is a yellow Fork  
From Tables in the sky : . . .

Here the impression is of domestic cutlery dropping from the clouds; what should be "piercing" is merely "falling". The poet is far more successful when she brings lightning together with the volcano-metaphor to produce a powerful impression of barely-suppressed emotion:

Through fissures in  
 Volcanic cloud  
 The yellow lightning shone -- (P.1694).

In this poem, the brooding atmosphere preceded the general self-immolation of Nature in a thunderstorm. In P.590, the cannon's eye portends a more particularised assault:

Did you ever look in a Cannon's face --  
 Between whose Yellow eye --  
 And your's -- the Judgment intervened --  
 The Question of "To die" --

Extemporizing in your ear  
 As cool as Satyr's Drums -- (P.590).

The pounding of the "Satyr's Drums" here suggests that with "The Question of "To die"", the poet is confronted with a sexual problem. For this "Yellow eye" certainly suggests the accumulated ideas of piercing or penetration, an idea taken up in another poem which forms the Poem of Experience counterpart to P.590's Poem of Innocence. This poem is the extraordinary P.754, "My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --", in which we find the poet in a state of erotic servitude to her lover, a state she finds intensely pleasurable. She feels as if a "Vesuvian face"<sup>188</sup> has finally been able to erupt in a passionate outburst, but that her self-liberation from repression has rendered her totally destructive to outsiders. She, the once fearful beholder of the "Cannon's face", now wears the "Yellow Eye" of the jealous and volatile lover:

To foe of His -- I'm deadly foe --  
 None stir the second time--

On whom I lay a Yellow Eye --  
Or an emphatic Thumb --

Though I than He -- may longer live  
He longer must -- than I --  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without -- the power to die -- (P.754).

Here the female speaker has appropriated masculine-piercing yellow for herself.

"Feminine-falling" yellow derives, perhaps, from the young Dickinson's fascination with the lines from Macbeth that she alludes to frequently in her early letters.<sup>189</sup> In her poetry, however, it appears chiefly as a crepuscular, not an autumnal, colour:

.       The Red -- Blaze -- is the Morning --  
          The Violet -- is Noon --  
          The Yellow -- Day -- is falling -- (P.469).

To this elegiac note, the poet also adds an element of personification, so that the yellow of the evening sky is seen as "boys and girls" in P.318, and (in spite of the "feminine" designation) a "Man" in P.1032. The most complete expression of this kind of yellow is the "colour-poem" P.1045:

Nature rarer uses Yellow  
Than another Hue.  
Saves she all of that for Sunsets  
Prodigal of Blue

Spending Scarlet, like a Woman  
Yellow she affords  
Only scanty and selectly  
Like a Lover's Words. (P.1045)

This yellow may be described as "true" yellow, being neither too intense nor too sulphurous. It is precious because it

is both rare and ephemeral, like that "Yellower Yellow" tinge of the sunset sky in P.1676, which no sooner exists but is darkened into vermillion. Yet while it exists, it has power to move the soul "like a Lover's words": this lover has the feminine qualities of gentleness and tenderness, quite a different figure from the brooding lightning or the whip-wielding sun.

One interpretation of an enigmatic poem suggests that the poet may well associate the colour yellow with a female lover:

The Lady feeds Her little Bird  
At rarer intervals --  
The little Bird would not dissent  
But meekly recognize

The Gulf between the Hand and Her  
And crumbless and afar  
And fainting, on Her Yellow Knee  
Fall softly, and adore -- (P.941).

If the possessor of the "Yellow knee" is the bird -- who would then be making an obeisance before the lady -- then the bird is female and quite possibly a surrogate of the poet herself, lamenting the indifference of her beloved Lady. If the "Yellow Knee" belongs to the lady, then the bird's gesture is rather that of neglected child than of unrequited lover, and the "afar" of line six becomes difficult to account for. The yellowness of the bird's knee may be based on fact (some birds do have yellow legs) but be emphasised to stress the precious and rare quality of the bird's devotion: that is to say, in this case this is a feminine-

falling yellow (the bird does "Fall softly" in the last line). If it is the lady's knee that is yellow -- she is wearing a yellow gown -- then the poet is attributing to her the masculine-piercing yellow, emblem of her cruelty. In this last case, there is a poetic precedent. In P.348, the poet, having suffered an unspecified trauma during winter, reviews her apprehensions of the spring that followed:

I dared not meet the Daffodils --  
 For fear their Yellow Gown  
 Would pierce me with a fashion  
 So foreign to my own --.

Here the daffodils are certainly personified as women, even though their yellowness has become cruelly piercing. Yet as far as P.941 is concerned, this does not absolutely tip the balance in favour of the latter interpretation. We can only conclude that this poem is enigmatic because the poet wanted it so; perhaps she simply wanted to use yellow in a context in which its dualities would be temporarily resolved.

In summary: unlike all of the other major colours represented by a single, main colour-word, yellow has associations for the poet that are not connected to a central emotional complex, but that coalesce around two separate poles with little linkage between them. The yellow of P. 754 -- masculine, penetrating, assertive -- is a world apart from the yellow of P.1045 -- feminine, tender, withdrawn. Yellow, of all the colours in Emily Dickinson's spectrum,

best exhibits the poet's ability to manipulate symbolic values.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

<sup>1</sup>Goethe, Contributions to Optics, in Matthaei, ed., op. cit., p.20.

<sup>2</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.88-89.

<sup>3</sup>See Chapter Two, p.88.

<sup>4</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.84ff.

<sup>5</sup>Sewall, Life, II, p.611.

<sup>6</sup>Ernest Sandeen, "Delight Deterred by Retrospect: Emily Dickinson's Late Summer Poems", New England Quarterly, XL (December, 1967), p.497.

<sup>7</sup>The source of the idea of a transforming light is probably the description of Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus (Acts, 9: 3). Emily Dickinson saw her own poetic inspiration as visiting her in a similar way: "And when far afterward -- a sudden light on Orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention -- I felt a palsy, here -- the Verses just relieve --" (L.265).

<sup>8</sup>"Slant of Light" is visual, "Cathedral Tunes" aural, "Heavenly Hurt" tactile.

<sup>9</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.113ff.

<sup>10</sup>There is a quibble on "fashionless": "unable to be fashioned" (i.e. intangible, immaterial) and "beyond the sway of fashion" (i.e. immortal, unchanging).

<sup>11</sup>See Poems, III, p.933.

<sup>12</sup>She is perhaps answering Emerson in his poem "Compensation" (1841), with its imagery of light and darkness keeping "Trembling balance". Emerson sees the earth as a "compensatory spark" that "Shoots across the neutral dark" (13-14).



<sup>13</sup>See Genesis 1: 2-5.

<sup>14</sup>The volcano-motif is used by the poet as a personal symbol of repressed emotion threatening to destroy if allowed to erupt. See P.754, P.1677, P.1705, P.1748, and Chapter One, n.108 and n.109.

<sup>15</sup>There is a quibble here on "lighter": "clearer" and "easier".

<sup>16</sup>Possible exceptions are P.295 and P.1564.

<sup>17</sup>See Chapter One, p.15. Related are P.850 and P.1218.

<sup>18</sup>See also P.1145 and especially P.405, where "The Sacrament — of Him —" is too large to be contained in the poet's dark "little Room".

<sup>19</sup>Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson, p.126, guesses that "the 'sign' refers to the stigmata and . . . the person carrying the light is Christ". Walsh, op. cit., pp. 71-72, inevitably assumes that the light has something to do with Aurora Leigh.

<sup>20</sup>See John 8: 12.

<sup>21</sup>Anderson, op. cit., p.58. But Anderson lays the emphasis on the inflammability of the Wick, rather than the light-bearing power of the poet: "This light is not made by touching the words with a magical taper, but is kindled by a generative power within the artefact, as in the case of the lamps of heaven".

<sup>22</sup>A variant appears in PF.47. Here the owner of the "peculiar light" is singular, presumably the particular author of the book which Dickinson has received as a gift and for which she is here thanking the giver.

<sup>23</sup>See n.2 above.

<sup>24</sup>There is a related idea in Wallace Stevens's "Idea of Order at Key West" (1934), 47-52.

<sup>25</sup>The allusion here is to the light-year, another example of Hitchcockian influence on the poet.

<sup>26</sup>Sherwood, op. cit., pp.187-188. See also Ford, op. cit., pp.106-107.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Stokes, op. cit., p.16: "Colour . . . emphasizes for us the outward and simultaneous otherness of space".

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.20: ". . . colour is the concrete expression of a maximum difference within identity".

<sup>29</sup>William Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood (1807), 201-202.

<sup>30</sup>John Keats, Lamia (1820), II, 230-237.

<sup>31</sup>Not including such compounds as "Black Bird" and "Black Berry", "black" occurs a mere four times in the poetry, and once more as a variant for "crape" in P.743.

<sup>32</sup>Leonardo, op. cit., p.226 noticed that the "light of bright black", far from being a colourless negation, was actually "bluish".

<sup>33</sup>See Poems, II, p.567.

<sup>34</sup>Mechlin is a lace made at Mechelen (Malines) in Belgium. It is usually, but not necessarily, black.

<sup>35</sup>This poor late poem uses the phrase "Swarthy Days" to describe late autumn. It is, according to the editor, "a very unfinished worksheet draft" (Poems, III, p.1121).

<sup>36</sup>In The Raven (1845), for example, Poe uses the simple colour-word "black" only once (line 99). The raven is described as an "ebony bird" (42) and ordered to return to "Night's Plutonian shore" (47).

<sup>37</sup>See n.20 above.

<sup>38</sup>As can be seen in this passage from his letter to Martha Gilbert: "For the shadows of life, with me, are so constantly changing from light to dark, from dark to light, sometimes as bright as bright can be, & at others, dark as a starless night . . .". Quoted in Sewall, Life, I, p.104.

<sup>39</sup>Goethe, The Color Theory, in Matthaei, ed., op. cit., p.170.

<sup>40</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., IV, p.284.

<sup>41</sup>Kandinsky, op. cit., p.58.

<sup>42</sup>Stokes, op. cit., p.7. Stokes also remarks that "Blue is the easiest focus for longsighted persons" (ibid., p.63).

<sup>43</sup>Webster defines "Azure" as "The fine blue color of the sky".

<sup>44</sup>An even more glorious blue-image of a related type occurs in P.470:

I am alive -- I guess --  
The Branches on my Hand  
Are full of Morning Glory --.  
The Morning Glory is a bright blue flower.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. the well-known poem by Arthur Cullen Bryant, "To the Fringed Gentian" (1832), in which the flower is described as being "colored with heaven's own blue":

Blue -- blue -- as if that sky let fall  
A flower from its cerulean wall (lines 2, 15-16).

<sup>46</sup>See L.46, L.52, L.184, L.259, etc.

<sup>47</sup>See L.58, L.63, L.187, etc.

<sup>48</sup>See L.63, L.80, L.94, L.118, L.185, L.217, etc.

<sup>49</sup>See the references in n.48 above. But even in 1854, the idea of the blue sea evoked a certain negative response in the mind of the young writer: "I simply murmur gone, and the billow dies away into the boundless blue, and no one knows but me, that one went down today" (L.173).

<sup>50</sup>Though the fly is blue, it is its buzz which is described as having that colour -- the touch of a master synaesthetician. The technique, but not the effect, is similar to that used in P.1463, especially in the line "A Resonance of Emerald --".

<sup>51</sup>But on occasion, indifference can turn into savage mockery, as in P.598:

Three Times -- the Billows threw me --

Then caught me — like a Ball —  
Then made Blue faces in my face —.

<sup>52</sup>It is mixed with pink in P.6, with orange in P.643, and with indigo in P.1465. Indigo and orange are exotic colours for Dickinson, occurring only on these occasions in her writings.

<sup>53</sup>See Thoreau, op. cit., XVI, p.129: "Spring is brown; summer, green; autumn, yellow; winter, white; November, gray".

<sup>54</sup>Not just the poor man's loaf: brown is the colour of Austin Dickinson's favourite bread also. See L.58.

<sup>55</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., XVIII, pp.97-98.

<sup>56</sup>Webster says of indigo, "It is used for dyeing a deep blue".

<sup>57</sup>See P.196, L.248, L.259, L.268, etc. See also Chapter Three, n.104.

<sup>58</sup>See p.226 above.

<sup>59</sup>See L.225 for Dickinson's original thanks to the Norcrosses for this cape. It was apparently Louise Norcross who made it, and L.228, addressed to her alone, begins, "Dear Peacock". Later, Louise is reproached for "taking a smiling view of my finery", though Dickinson does admit that "My sphere is doubtless calicoes". She was evidently already well-known as a dowdy dresser.

<sup>60</sup>Dun, "a dull brown color" (Webster) occurs seven times in the poetry. To the poet, it is the gloomiest shade of brown, but one which can be transfigured by Nature's touch, as in P.173 and P.291.

<sup>61</sup>Tawny: "Of a yellowish-dull color like things tanned . . . the tawny lion" (Webster).

<sup>62</sup>Umber: ". . . an ocherous ore of iron, of a brown, yellowish or blackish brown color, so called from Umbria in Italy . . . It is used in painting" (Webster). Like gamboge, indigo and cochineal, it is one of the poet's most pictorial colour-words (see also P.1371).

<sup>63</sup>That is to say, a personal favourite. Thanking Mrs. Bowles for the gift of a book, the poet wrote: "Why did

you bind it in green and gold? The immortal colors" (L.213). In L.901, she told Mrs. Holland that the flower she wanted on her own grave was a buttercup — a green and gold flower is thus chosen as her personal emblem of immortality. These are perhaps the two most overt statements of Dickinson's (as opposed to the poet's) colour-preference.

<sup>64</sup>"Green/er" appears nineteen times in the poetry.

<sup>65</sup>Goethe, The Color Theory, p.174.

<sup>66</sup>E.g. in "Herbstgefühl" (1775): "Fetter grüne, du Laub . . ." (line 1).

<sup>67</sup>Baudelaire, Selected Writings on Art and Artists, p.54.

<sup>68</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., IX, p.379.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., XIV, p.243.

<sup>70</sup>In "Frühling übers Jahr" (1820):  
Safran entfaltet  
Gewaltge Glut,  
Smaragden keimt es  
Und keimt wie Blut (5-8).

<sup>71</sup>See Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (1)", p.281.

<sup>72</sup>Hegel, op. cit., p.842.

<sup>73</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.102-103.

<sup>74</sup>See L.31, L.54.

<sup>75</sup>See L.35, L.85.

<sup>76</sup>Webster derives green from words meaning "to grow, to flourish", and has as his primary definition of green, "Properly, growing, flourishing, as plants . . .".

<sup>77</sup>Her mother was ill at the time. See Letters, II, p.324.

<sup>78</sup>See Marvell, op. cit., 47-48:  
 Annihilating all that's made  
 To a green thought in a green shade.

<sup>79</sup>For the variants, see Poems, III, p.922. The variants for "Experiment" include "legacy", "Apocalypse", "experience", "Astonishment" and "Periphery". "Apocalypse" reveals the poet's saturation in the "Gem chapter": in Revelation 4: 3, God appears "with a rainbow about the throne, in like unto an emerald".

<sup>80</sup>See p.239 above.

<sup>81</sup>The colours are complementaries in the literal sense and, as emblems of activity and passivity, in the metaphorical sense also. Like all complementaries, there is no real hostility between them. Baudelaire, op. cit., p.54, speaks of red as being like "a hymn to the glory of the green" of Nature. In L.520, Dickinson describes the transition of summer into autumn thus: "The Red Leaves take the Green Leaves place, and the Landscape yields".

<sup>82</sup>See Chapter Three, pp. 180ff; also n.53 above.

<sup>83</sup>W. G. Black, Folk Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture (Nedeln, Liechtenstein, 1967) quotes the proverb, "green's forsaken and yellow's forsworn, and blue is the colour that must be worn" (by girls to get a husband). S. G. J. Ouseley, Colour Meditations (London, 1949), equates dark green with deceit, olive green with treachery and double-nature, and greyish-green with duplicity. "The dark shades are the more sinister", he claims (pp.24-25).

<sup>84</sup>See Patterson, "Emily Dickinson's Palette (I)", p.281: the hues of green jewels are "not so conspicuous a value as their poetic names. . . Clearly an exception is emerald, a recognizable color word in popular use . . .".

<sup>85</sup>See n.75 above.

<sup>86</sup>See also P.558, also about a flower:  
 But little Carmine hath her face --  
 Of Emerald scant -- her Gown --.

<sup>87</sup>A variant replaces "Breast" with "Heart", as if the poet wished to remove all traces of an erotic undertone. The scant gown in n.86 above can be read as a mark of hum-

ity, rather than of seductiveness.

<sup>88</sup>See P.280, P.311, P.341, P.364, P.1649.

<sup>89</sup>See, for example, Cody, op. cit., p.490: "here Tyrian (the precious royal purple dye) stands for the poetry" (of P.442); Sewall, Life, II, p.494: in L.275, Dickinson offers Bowles a friendship worth more than "the Purple of worldly power". See also Lindberg-Seyersted, op. cit., p.83n.

<sup>90</sup>See Chapter Two, pp.82-83.

<sup>91</sup>Here are the words Blackmur gives (op. cit., p. 135) as examples of Dickinson's "favorite sound[s]", with their number of occurrences in the poetry in parentheses: "dateless" (3); "pattern" (7); "compass" (4); "circumference" (17); "ecstasy" (27); "immortality" (44); "white" (27); "ruby" (3); "crescent" (11); "peninsula" (7); "spice" (7). Blackmur cannot be as unprejudiced as he claims: how can a word occurring only three times, such as "dateless" or "ruby", ever be considered a "favorite sound"?

<sup>92</sup>The only true synonym is "Tyrian"; "violet" and "iodine" come close. But see Chapter Three, n.14.

<sup>93</sup>Orange occurs only once, in P.634.

<sup>94</sup>See Chapter Three, p.135.

<sup>95</sup>See Chapter Two, p.82.

<sup>96</sup>See Chapter Three, p.147.

<sup>97</sup>See Chapter Three, pp.142 ff.

<sup>98</sup>Stéphane Mallarmé, "L'Azur" (1887), 33-36.

<sup>99</sup>Amber: "Its color usually presents some tinge of yellow" (Webster).

<sup>100</sup>Beryl: "A mineral . . . occurring in green or bluish-green six sided prisms" (Webster).

<sup>101</sup>Iodine: "Its color is bluish-black or grayish-black . . . The color of its vapor is a beautiful violet,

whence its name" (Webster). Its name comes from Greek *ιωδης* , "resembling a violet".

<sup>102</sup>Meyer Reinhold, History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity (Brussels, 1970), notes that of all status symbols, the one "that proved the most durable and commanded the widest international currency was the colour purple, whose establishment as a token of prestige reaches back at least as far as the Second Millenium B.C." (p.8). Emily Dickinson, a connoisseur of colour, was very well aware that this colour had a long tradition of rarity and costliness: "Tis Costly — So are purples!" (P.234). See also L.275.

<sup>103</sup>On one of the manuscripts of this poem, the poet has written to its intended recipient, "Please accept a Sunset" (Poems, III, p.1113). This is further evidence of her idea of herself as painter-poet, tossing off sunsets in order to keep her hand in as artist.

<sup>104</sup>See Chapter Three, p.148 ; Cf. L.189: ". . . the skies are gay and yellow, and there's a purple craft or so, in which a friend could sail".

<sup>105</sup>Cf. L.195: "Ah! democratic Death! Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden . . .".

<sup>106</sup>In Poems (1890), this poem was entitled "Purple Clover". See Poems, I, p.302.

<sup>107</sup>This was the mystic Blue Flower sought by the eponymous hero of Novalis's novel (1800). There is no evidence that Dickinson read Novalis, but the Blue Flower did become an international symbol of Romantic yearning.

<sup>108</sup>Tyrian was the costliest of the purples of the ancient world, made from a vast quantity of sea molluscs (Murex), presumably at first in the vicinity of the Phoenician city of Tyre.

<sup>109</sup>She is alluding to the red skies of February. See p.265 below.

<sup>110</sup>Pelham is to the east of Amherst.

<sup>111</sup>The fact that Dickinson refers to "his Gem chapter" in this letter implies that Bowles's love of this passage from Revelation was even stronger than her own.



<sup>112</sup>Here Dickinson indicates her awareness of the fact that, as Reinhold, op. cit., p.11, remarks, Tyrian "was the only colour-fast dye in the ancient world".

<sup>113</sup>See n.102 above.

<sup>114</sup>Leonardo, op. cit., p.112.

<sup>115</sup>Goethe, The Color Theory, p.172.

<sup>116</sup>See Chapter One, p.32. Goethe said of red: "It conveys an impression of gravity and dignity, and at the same time of grace and attractiveness" (The Color Theory, p.172).

<sup>117</sup>Hegel, op. cit., p.842.

<sup>118</sup>Black, op. cit., pp.111-112.

<sup>119</sup>Baudelaire, op. cit., p.55.

<sup>120</sup>Kandinsky, op. cit., p.61.

<sup>121</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., IV, pp.217-218. Thoreau's etymological note implies, correctly it seems, that the colour-name predates that of the flower. See Richard Findeis, "Über das Alter und die Entstehung der indogermanischen Farbensamen", Jahresbericht des k.k. Staats-Gymnasiums in Triest über das Schuljahr 1907-1908, LVIII (Trieste, 1908), p.27: "... wir in der Gleichung "rot", "ruber", u.s.f. wahrscheinlich den ältesten Ausdruck für ein Farbenqualität als solche besitzen. Es ist wohl möglich, daß dieses Adjektiv schon in idg. Zeit ein reiner Farbennamen war". The reason for this, Findeis guesses, is because red has always spoken for something touching closely upon humanity, namely blood. Some cultures have failed to distinguish between, say, blue and green until recent times, but none has ever been found lacking a word for red. Blood, then, is the key to red's pre-eminence.

<sup>122</sup>Webster, in his entry "Rose", gives as a cognate of the Welsh rhôs ("rose"), rhûz meaning "red, ruddy".

<sup>123</sup>Stokes, op. cit., p.17.

<sup>124</sup>As life ceases, so does colour. Red passes through

white to reach the colour "Without a color".

<sup>125</sup>See Chapter One, p.32.

<sup>126</sup>See n.14 above.

<sup>127</sup>There is more blasphemous hyperbole in this letter: "I will never sell you for a piece of silver. I'll buy you back with red drops, when you go away".

<sup>128</sup>Stearns, son of President Stearns of Amherst College, was killed (two and a half months after this letter was written) in North Carolina fighting for the Union army. See Letters, II, p.385.

<sup>129</sup>See p.291 below.

<sup>130</sup>Hegel, op. cit., p.842.

<sup>131</sup>This flower, not the introspective blue of Novalis's, reflects the vital and radiant red of "Great Nature's Face".

<sup>132</sup>The poppy, being a source of soporifics, is a traditional symbol of oblivion.

<sup>133</sup>Russet, a reddish-brown colour, here plays the part of a red diminished in intensity by being darkened (as opposed to lightened, as in pink). In P.188 and P.1082, russet stands for the tarnished redness of late autumnal foliage. The colour's most memorable appearance in the poetry is in an adverbial form:

And Kingdoms, like the Orchard

Flit Russetly away (P.946).

Russet has an elegiac quality, in that fiery red is tempered with elemental brown. In P.946, the sound of the word, suggesting the rustling of dead leaves in the autumn wind, must have appealed to the poet as much as the visual quality of the colour. See also P.1471.

<sup>134</sup>See also the quasi-adverbial "fasts Scarlet" (P.872) and the quasi-nominal "spending Scarlet" (P.1045).

<sup>135</sup>Here the roles in L.194 have been reversed. See n.127 above.

<sup>136</sup>Matthew 27: 28. Mark and John describe Christ's robe as being purple, but to a certain extent, red and purple have always been interchangeable, even during the present in the phrase "cardinal's purple". See, however, Anderson, op. cit., pp.184-185.

<sup>137</sup>See P.12, P.66, L.180.

<sup>138</sup>The first time is in P.204. See Chapter One, p.98.

<sup>139</sup>The last line of P.596 is "In Yonder Maryland", alluding to a Civil War battle. It has a variant, "In Scarlet Maryland" (See Poems, II, p.457), a far more powerful alternative, but perhaps there were too many Papist undertones in the phrase for the poet, even though it imagines the state, in true Shakespearean fashion, reddened with the blood of soldiers. See Introduction, p.3.

<sup>140</sup>A phrase earlier in L.388.

<sup>141</sup>There is possibly an allusion here to female maturity as symbolised by either menstrual blood or that accompanying loss of virginity.

<sup>142</sup>Vermilion: "Any beautiful red color. In blushing, the delicate cheek is covered with vermilion" (Webster).

<sup>143</sup>There is a quibble in this poem on "rose": "arose" or "rose-coloured".

<sup>144</sup>Crimson: "Of a beautiful deep red; as, the crimson blush of modesty" (Webster).

<sup>145</sup>As Webster notes, the word derives from the kermes insect, from which cochineal is obtained.

<sup>146</sup>There is crimson foliage in L.136, written in the fall of 1853.

<sup>147</sup>Mazarin[e]: "A deep blue color" (Webster). It is another of Dickinson's "paintbox" colours, used here as the name for the most intense blue the pictorial artist is capable of achieving.

<sup>148</sup>Dickinson uses "dusk" and "dusky" almost inter-

changeably, meaning "tending to gloominess or morbidity". It is not necessarily a derogatory epithet: in L.776, she describes Charles Wadsworth as "a Dusk Gem, born of troubled Waters . . .".

<sup>149</sup>Carmine: "A powder or pigment, of a beautiful red or crimson color, bordering on purple, and used by painters in miniature, though rarely, on account of its great price" (Webster). It is therefore another "paintbox" colour.

<sup>150</sup>See n.44 above.

<sup>151</sup>The "Depths of Ruby — undrained" of P.334 actually refers to a flower. The imagery is related to Emersonian ideas of the poet intoxicated by Nature's Bacchanal. See P.214.

<sup>152</sup>But see L.841: "We shared the molten Rubies with Austin, who pronounced them dazzling, and desire if not presumptuous to know if you dine every day on Gems". These "Rubies" were some "graphic Cardinal Flowers". See Letters, III, pp.785-786.

<sup>153</sup>See n.133 above.

<sup>154</sup>In this very late letter, the bed-ridden poet hopes that the March arbutus will stir "a pink and russet hope" — a hope which is far from a vigorous redness in both directions.

<sup>155</sup>See n.14 above.

<sup>156</sup>Mottles, like freckles, tend to suggest to the poet that what lies beneath is impure, salacious even: "This dirty — little — Heart" (P.1311) is described as a "Freckled shrine". See also P.275, P.401, P.1094, etc. See also L.566: ". . . the Summer's Picture, which is not yet mottled by the Snow".

<sup>157</sup>Is Dickinson aware of the etymological connections (some fanciful) Webster draws between "pink" (the colour), and the words "pink" (to cut as with pinking shears), "pen", "pin", "peck", "pinch", "pick", "beak", "pike", etc?

<sup>158</sup>As well as having erotic undertones, pink has sentimental overtones as a child's favourite colour for the poet. It is the colour of the hearts of friends in L.645

and L.845, and a sentence in L.723 links the erotic and the childish: "Cupid still drives the Pink Coupe he did when we were Children, though I fear his affecting toils are not what Mrs Micawber would call "remunerative"--".

<sup>159</sup>See especially Mudge, op. cit., p.177: "The masculine element, an imperious aloofness not unlike her father's, in Emily's essentially feminine coronation and marriage, reappears in the meaning of the white dress which she chose to wear exclusively about this time [1861]. It symbolized at once her unpublicized, secret trial, her betrothal (self to self, the second self assuming Christ's robes), her virginity, her royalty, and, possibly, her immortality". Moreover, the white dress is "an essentially androgynous costume, suggested by its probable symbolism (in part, self-marriage) and by its material" (ibid., p.177). Mudge goes on to describe an actual dress of the poet's in some detail. See also Sewall, The Lyman Letters, p.69 for Lyman's account of Emily in her white dress.

<sup>160</sup>Anderson, op. cit., p.185.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid., p.186.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., p.187.

<sup>163</sup>McNaughton, op. cit., pp.20-21.

<sup>164</sup>Sherwood, op. cit., p.152.

<sup>165</sup>Gelpi, op. cit., p.115n.

<sup>166</sup>Waggoner, "Proud Ephemeral", p.182.

<sup>167</sup>J. S. Wheatcroft, "Emily Dickinson's White Robes", Criticism, V (Spring, 1963), pp.135-147.

<sup>168</sup>Ibid., p.136.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., p.135.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., p.137.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., p.137.

<sup>172</sup>Ibid., pp.141-142.

<sup>173</sup>Clark, ed., op. cit., p.156 [Stones of Venice, II, v, 30].

<sup>174</sup>See John Greenleaf Whittier, Snow-Bound (1866), 47ff; Emerson, "The Snow Storm" (1841), 10ff.

<sup>175</sup>Kandinsky, op. cit., pp.59-60.

<sup>176</sup>See P.709. See also L.142 (about a sermon she has heard): "I never heard anything like it, and dont expect to again, till we stand at the great white throne . . .".

<sup>177</sup>See L.98, L.213, etc.

<sup>178</sup>See p. 263 below.

<sup>179</sup>" . . . and it was like the coriander seed, white" (Exodus 16: 31).

<sup>180</sup>Mudge, op. cit., p.257.

<sup>181</sup>Ellis, op. cit., pp.19, 22. "Gold" and "golden" are impure colour-words used frequently by Dickinson, but rarely for their colour-value alone. But see P.130, P.204, and n.63 above.

<sup>182</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., XX, p.5.

<sup>183</sup>See P.634, L.690.

<sup>184</sup>Goethe, The Color Theory, p.169.

<sup>185</sup>"To this impression the yellow hats of bankrupts and the yellow circles on the mantles of ghetto Jews may have owed their origin. Cuckold yellow is really nothing but a dirty yellow" (ibid., p.169).

<sup>186</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., X, p.108. Only in P.1676 does Dickinson use saffron, and then as a late afternoon colour, not as that of rosy-fingered Dawn's bed. With characteristic perversity, she changes Eos's sex too, so that we are left with a fastidious Twilight who, in L.392, "touches

Amherst with his yellow Glove".

<sup>187</sup>Kandinsky, op. cit., p.44.

<sup>188</sup>See n.14 above.

<sup>189</sup>See Chapter Three, p.139.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps more than any other poet, Emily Dickinson may be said to have a spectrum of her own. Her motive for setting up this personal spectrum was at bottom also personal. She -- the woman as much as the poet -- was highly sensitive to colour, so sensitive that she considered the phenomenon one of the chief glories of earthly existence. For Dickinson, colour belonged to this world, and therefore it is not surprising that in her writings, dying involves a loss of colour in the literal and metaphorical sense of the phrase. Her problem was to articulate this extreme sensitivity, this passion for the chromatic.

However, just as received religion meant little to her until she had forced it into her own ironic mould, so it was with the received, Newtonian spectrum. For one thing, this spectrum's colours were too few and too exclusive. Here was red, but where was scarlet, crimson and vermillion? Where, indeed, were purple, black and brown? For another thing, Newton's arrangement of his colours on the colour-wheel, from red all the way round to violet, struck her as artificial, for it was the qualities separating red from violet that interested her most of all. Then again, though she never attempted to set up a rival schema to Newton's, as Goethe had done, she felt sure that red was



the pre-eminent colour, while green and blue, for example, occupied important but unquestionably lesser ranks. Finally, she could not accept the Newtonian mythos of white as the progenitor of colours; for white to her had a certain barren, frigid quality that made it unsuitable for the role of colour-matrix. Therefore she had to set up an alternative spectrum, one that corresponded more closely to her own responses to colour.

Her achievement was to create a spectrum that adequately fulfilled her aims. It was a spectrum as all-inclusive as possible, yet based on the simplest colour-words which came accompanied each with a set of traditional associations. Gradually she learnt how to manipulate these associations and their relationships to the individual colours, so that she was able to express her own very untraditional emotional predicament in a way that had universal significance. Her poetic concision, chosen by critics as the chief characteristic of her style, owes a great deal to her slowly-acquired ability to alter the symbolic values of colour-words, thereby to confound the preconceptions of the reader.

Her achievement seems the greater when it is discovered how few were her guidelines on how to proceed in her experimentation with colour-imagery. Even Hitchcock offered little help when it came to trying to give her ideas literary expression, and she received her Goethe (the

heresiarch of anti-Newtonianism) at second- or third-hand. Nor was she ever in contact with the advance guard of the colour-revolution that took the pictorial and literary arts by storm during her lifetime and continued to consolidate its gains well into this century. Cloistered as she was by her own desire, she had guidance only from her reading. In the Bible, in Shakespeare, in Mrs. Browning and in Thoreau, she discovered kindred spirits in the realm of colour. From them she borrowed freely colour-terminology and advice in the practical business of using colour-imagery. She was continually inspired to persist with her experiments by environmental factors. There were colours in the February sky over Amherst which, intensified by their contrast to the whiteness of the landscape, cried out for a poet who could capture their particular brilliance. There were colours, too, in the autumn foliage that spoke urgently to her blood, and perhaps made her regret that she was not born a painter -- until she came fully to appreciate the advantages of words over paint as a medium for describing intense colour-effects and expressing their impact upon the beholder.

Emily Dickinson knew from the beginning that her spectrum did not need to have a schematic arrangement. By the time she had reached maturity, each colour had come to stand in her eyes at the centre of an emotional complex, a complex for which the colour-name was a shorthand, and of which it was the only convenient and concise means of expression. Each colour was separate from the others,

but related to them through its own spectrum, a spectrum consisting of that colour's ascending and descending colour-tones, produced by the addition of white/light and black/darkness respectively. She found that the colours could not be ranked in a hierarchy of intensity of a fixed kind, because the most intense colours, red and yellow, were the most subject to dilution and the most ephemeral. Therefore each colour stood alone, and it is for this reason that they have been dealt with in neutral, alphabetical order in Chapter Four.

Emily Dickinson's act in creating a spectrum of her own was a radical one, but at the same time one informed with an irony characteristic of the poet. It was a radical act in a sense typical of the Romantic movement, in that a received doctrine was rejected for one derived from personal experience. It was radical, too, in a specifically American way, in that by it the poet asserted her self-reliance. Yet she acknowledged and exploited the tension as her scientific background and analytic temperament drew her one way, and her urge to replace an empirically-based approach to colour for an emotionally-based one drew her the other. This ironic standpoint sets her aside from typical Romanticism, and renders her act nothing less than typically Dickinsonian.

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