



Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#1068 (c.1866)

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

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

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

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

#### ANALYSIS

“In [‘Further in Summer than the Birds’], we are shown the essential cleavage between man, as represented by the author-reader, and nature, as represented by the insects in the late summer grass; the subject is the plight of man, the willing and freely moving entity, in a universe in which he is by virtue of his essential qualities a foreigner. The intense nostalgia of the poem is the nostalgia of man for the mode of

being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share. The change described in the last two lines is the change in the appearance of nature and in the feeling of the observer which results from a recognition of the cleavage....

The first two lines of the last stanza are written in the author's personal grammatical shorthand; they are no doubt defective in this respect, but the defect is minor. They mean: There is as yet no diminution of beauty, no mark of change on the brightness. The twelfth line employs a meaningless inversion. On the other hand, the false rhymes are employed with unusually fine modulation: the first rhyme is perfect, the second and third represent successive stages of departure, and the last a return to what is roughly the stage of the second. These effects are complicated by the rhyming, both perfect and imperfect, from stanza to stanza. The intense strangeness of this poem could not have been achieved with standard rhyming. The poem, though not quite one of her most nearly perfect, is probably one of her five or six greatest, and is one of the most deeply moving and most unforgettable poems in my own experience; I have the feeling of having lived in its immediate presence for many years."

Yvor Winters  
*In Defense of Reason*  
(Swallow 1947) 283-99

"I agree with Mr. Yvor Winters that this poem is 'probably one of her five or six greatest,' but question his interpretation of it. Certainly the subject of the poem is the 'cleavage' between 'man, the willing and freely moving entity' and a passive nature. But both the form and the meaning of the poem seem to me to emphasize the kinship of man and nature (however partial and distant), and the value of that kinship: because the cleavage is not 'essential' or 'absolute,' man may 'enlarge' his own nature by recognizing the partial kinship as well as the 'difference.' Consider the structure of the poem: the first words of each stanza are all negative, emphasizing the cleavage or distance between man and nature: 'farther,' 'no,' 'antiquiest,' 'remit.' But by contrast the last lines of each stanza emphasize the kinship, and its value. 'Unobtrusive mass' praises the quiet, quasi-religious aspect of nature, whose 'grace enlarges' the lonely state of man; the wilful, active quest of man is balanced by his 'antiquiest' for this peace and repose of nature; and finally, recognizing that this 'antiquiest' can never wholly succeed in life, he yet discovers that his difference from nature is 'druidic,' and 'enhances' rather than isolates.

I also agree with Mr. Winters that 'the intense strangeness of this poem could not have been achieved with standard rhyming,' but I would call attention to the purposive progression of these strange rhymes. The first stanza uses a conventional rhyme to suggest man's conventional attitude of superiority to nature: the insects seem 'pathetic.' But in the second stanza a gradual 'grace' effects a subtle change, and the imperfect rhyme (grace, loneliness) suggests this new sympathy in man's attitude towards nature. In the third stanza, man's 'antiquiest' for the 'repose' of nature has resulted in an almost complete departure from conventional rhyme (low, typify). In the final stanza, man, recalled to his proper state, yet remembers both his kinship with nature and the 'druidic difference'—a difference which the final imperfect rhyme (glow, now) strangely suggests. This poem suggests by its structure both the cleavage and the kinship between man and nature, and by means of its subtle rhymes makes the reader feel the values of both."

Frederick I. Carpenter  
"Dickinson's 'Further in Summer Than the Birds'"  
*The Explicator* VIII (March 1950) Item 33

"The sense of cosmic loneliness, in which, for the moment, nature herself seems to partake of the loneliness felt by man, is finely conveyed in ["Further in Summer than the Birds"].... We see nature, that is, under its most ancient, truest, and most moving aspect when in a kind of requiem it celebrates the unpassable abyss between itself and the mind and being of man. Our perception of the universe is enhanced, is rendered most exact, by 'difference.' For the moment, nature is not seen as actively hostile. 'No ordinance is seen' appears to mean that in its present mood nature does not display her fundamental decree of law: death. The 'grace'—that is, the coming of death and the immortality it bestows—seems 'so gradual' that the positive thought of nature as death can be briefly suspended. In this moment of poignant loneliness, we need pay no immediate or ostensible homage to death—such may be the purport of the unintelligible: 'Remit as yet no grace.' The idea of nature as death need not blemish—put 'no furrow on the

glow’—the pure contemplation of loneliness. One may easily agree with Mr. Yvor Winters that the ‘intense strangeness’ of this poem makes it one of Emily Dickinson’s most interesting. But the lack of perspicuity in some of its particular phrases and the awkward jingle of sounds one hears in ‘Antiquiest felt at noon’ and ‘Repose to typify’ somewhat injure this poem.”

Richard Chase  
*Emily Dickinson*  
(William Sloane 1951) 166-72

“Emily Dickinson’s ‘Farther [*sic*] in summer than the birds’ is, according to Yvor Winters...a poem about ‘the essential cleavage between man...and nature...in a universe in which [man]...is...a foreigner’ and, according to Richard Chase...whose interpretation echoes Winters’s, a poem communicating a ‘sense of cosmic loneliness.’ How Winters and Chase reach their conclusions they do not fully explain, but it is apparent that they reach those conclusions at the expense of part of the poem. Winters finds the inversion of the twelfth line ‘meaningless’; Chase labels the thirteenth line ‘unintelligible.’ It is worth considering, therefore, how the poem in all its parts may be read as meaningful, even if that effort modifies or sacrifices the Winters-Chase conclusion about it.

The first stanza defines the situation that concerns the poet. A ‘minor nation’—doubtless insects, one must agree with Winters—is celebrating a mass. The character of the mass is suggested by the complementary ambiguities of the first line: the insects are both farther along in life than the birds are in summer and farther into the summer of their lives than the birds in theirs. The insects complete a cycle before the birds do; their career is a concentration and intensification of that of other living things. We note in addition that this minor nation is ‘pathetic’ and that its mass is ‘unobtrusive’; the insect ritual, nearly concealed in the grass as it is, serves to create the pathetic effect. Here is something small, confined, claiming no attention, and yet both the fact of the unobtrusiveness and the nature of the ritual are significant. The significance that is concentrated in the effect of pathos is developed by the second stanza. Here the function of line 6 is important. Although the punctuation fails to show whether this line modifies the stanza’s first or its third line, sense clearly demands that the first two lines be taken together to indicate that so gradual is the bestowing of the divine grace sought by the celebrants that no reason or compulsion is seen in the process of its bestowal.

(Chase’s reading of ‘grace’ as ‘the coming of death and the immortality it bestows’ is puzzling.) The entire ritual seems to occur as a matter of course, a custom, but at the same time for the observer-poet is a ‘pensive custom’ in that it expresses sad thoughts—provokes them in the observer, that is—and thereby enlarges loneliness, ‘loneliness’ because the observer becomes aware that the mass is not noticeable and ‘enlarging’ because his noticing of it produces an identification with it. We may remark here that if one were to accept Chase’s notion that the mass is ‘a kind of requiem’ whereby ‘nature...celebrates the unpassable abyss between itself and the mind and being of man,’ then loneliness could scarcely be enlarged, nor indeed could be cosmic.

The third stanza solidifies the relationship between the state of being of the insects and the state of mind of the observer by expanding the effect prepared for in the poem’s first line. The mass is celebrated far along in summer; the rite seems most ancient at noon when late August evokes this spirit-like hymn, signifying ‘repose,’ a word that in the present context suggests eternity, changelessness, the feeling familiar to those who know the hot hum and still air of August ‘burning low.’ It should be noted that Emily Dickinson by her inversion of the twelfth line is preventing ambiguity: she means ‘typifying,’ not ‘in order to typify.’

In the final stanza the poet reconsiders the experience. The questioned thirteenth line depends for its meaning on ‘Remit.’ Winters translates the line, ‘There is as yet no diminution of beauty.’ But there is no need to depart from the poet’s own imperative form. Lines 13 and 14 may be read together as declaring, ‘Do not cast off any grace yet; nothing mars the moment’—an exhortation to bear longer with the blessedness of the moment, to pause, to see the whole unmarred. The ‘Yet’ that follows with line 15 should then be understood to mean ‘even so’ rather than ‘but’: even so (even if there is no marring or interruption of the moment), there is a difference, a ‘druidic difference’ because of its having been thought about philosophically in a primitive religious way and of its having been commemorated, enhanced.

In fine, Emily Dickinson, dwelling upon the paradoxical noticing of the seldom noticed, enlarging of loneliness, and enhancing of the unmarred, is noting that here is a moment that induces loneliness and leads one, through an experience of identification, to a feeling of eternity. This moment is perfect, flawless, but at the same time changes because of its having been observed and by observation recorded. The cosmic loneliness that Chase finds is then not the result of the cleavage that Winters speaks of, but the result of an experience that ends cleavage.”

Robert H. Elias and Helen L. Elias  
“Dickinson’s ‘Further in Summer Than the Birds’”  
*The Explicator* XI (October 1952) Item 5

“This, one of her most puzzling and most suggestive poems, has been interpreted by Yvor Winters...by Richard Chase...and by F. I. Carpenter...as, to quote the first-named writer, with whom the other two are in substantial agreement, a poem about ‘the essential cleaving between man, as represented by the author-reader, and nature, as represented by the insects in the late summer grass,’ the actual subject of the poem being, to quote again Mr. Winters, ‘the plight of man, the willing and freely moving entity, in a universe in which he is by virtue of his essential qualities a foreigner.’

This metaphysical approach to, and interpretation of, the poem seems to me a good example of how *not* to deal with a poem—any poem, but more especially one by such an individual, and original, personality as Emily Dickinson. The very use of such abstract words as ‘man’ and ‘entity’ betrays a lack of regard for, and insensibility to, the individual quality of the poem which seems singular in critics one of whom at least is himself a poet.

Instead of approaching the poem with philosophical preconceptions...Winters, Chase, and Carpenter would, I think, have been well advised to read it as one of a natural group (XLIV, this poem, XLV, ‘As Imperceptibly as Grief,’ XLVI, ‘It Can’t Be Summer,’ and XLVII, the ‘Gentian Weaves Her Fringes,’ in Mrs. Bianchi’s standard edition of *The Poems*) [#1540, #221, #18], conveying the peculiar fascination which the transition period between summer and fall had for this supersensitive woman poet.

Like the other poems in this group, or in the equally important and even more characteristic group dealing with the fall, ‘Farther [*sic*] in Summer Than the Birds’ describes the author’s feeling as, listening to the insects’ subdued chirping on a late August day [“Noon”], her loneliness, and the instinctive melancholy and consequent premonition of decline and death she feels at the diminution of light and heat, are accentuated by the ‘spectral’ and ‘pathetic’ quality of the doomed insects’ ‘unobtrusive mass.’

In this way only can the poem be regarded, as Mr. Winters would have us regard it, as an expression of ‘nostalgia’—but not, certainly, as he puts it, ‘the nostalgia of man’ (‘man’ again, the abstraction!) ‘for the mode of being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share,’ but rather, the *poet’s* nostalgia (the lonely individual’s, *Emily’s*) for a perfection, a stability, a permanence which she sadly knows *not* to be of this world. Where, therefore, is there any ‘recognition,’ in this poem, of a ‘cleavage’ between man and nature? [The title ‘Further in Summer than the Birds’ suggests that the *distance* between the human and the insects (nature) is greater than the distance traveled by migratory birds. This is what makes her feel lonely. Compare “These are the days when Birds come back” #130. M.H.]

Robert H. and Helen L. Elias’ explication of the poem...unvitiated by an metaphysical preconception, is much nearer, it seems to me, to Emily Dickinson, and to the mood which inspired her poem and which it, in its turn, tried to convey. Though I agree with their general interpretation of the poem, and with most of their detailed explication of it, I beg to differ from them on two not unimportant points:

In stanza 2, instead of taking the first two lines together, I would read the stanza as if there were a semicolon and not a comma at the end of the first line, and one the contrary would link lines 2, 3, and 4 together. The stanza would thus read (the words between brackets being offered, of course, not as parts of the actual text, but as linkwords to be mentally added by the reader): ‘No ordinance is seen; / So gradual [is] the grace [that] ‘ A pensive custom it becomes, / Enlarging loneliness.’ [This critic omits Dickinson’s capitalization of abstractions, losing many implications—especially those of “Grace.”] This, I cannot help

thinking, provides a better reading than the Eliases', since it brings out the, it seems to me, necessary connection between the 'gradual' character of the 'grace' and its now becoming a 'custom.'

My second, and most important, disagreement is about the function of 'remit,' the first word in the last stanza. To take it, as the Eliases do, and as ordinary grammar would have us, as an *imperative* form, exhorting 'us' (Mr. Winters' 'author-reader,' I suppose), not to 'cast off any grace yet,' seems to me to be incompatible with the whole tone of the poem. There is indeed nothing hortatory, nothing in the least oratorical or dramatic about it. It is, on the contrary, entirely elegiac, meditative, 'pensive.' A sudden, unprepared for, unsupported imperative would be a *fausse note* in such a poem. 'Remit' therefore can only be a *participial adjective*. No dictionary or grammar, it is true, lists such a form for this verb. Let us remember however that, as Professor Whicher was, I think, first to note (in *This Was a Poet*, p. 235), Emily Dickinson has an instinctive [?] preference for clipped, condensed forms of verbs and that she even 'sometimes contrived to shorten them' when they 'did not come short by nature.' This was particularly the case, Professor Whicher further notes, with participial adjectives, of which he lists such forms as 'glid' for 'glided,' 'create' for 'created,' 'exert' for 'exerted,' and 'complicate' for 'complicated.'

'Remit,' in this poem, can thus be safely taken as short for 'remitted,' and the line would thus mean (as Winters, with whom I am—for once—in agreement, rightly interprets it): 'There is as yet no diminution of beauty.' This interpretation of the line appears inevitable as it not only consorts [*sic*] with the tone of the whole poem, but has the further advantages of making it apparent that the *next* line ('No furrow on the glow') is the first one's necessary and, indeed, most natural complement....

As to the (somewhat academic) question whether a poem provoking such controversies and requiring so much elucidation is, as Mr. Winters contends, 'probably' (notice the careful adverb!) 'one of her five or six greatest,' I, for one, would not care to commit myself. Suffice it to say that, however obscure in some of its detail, the poem *as a whole*, however quaintly worded, is a sufficiently clear and apposite, though by no means *easy* rendering of one of 'Emily's' most characteristic and delicate moods."

Rene Rapin

"Dickinson's 'Further in Summer Than the Birds'"  
*The Explicator* XII (February 1954) Item 24

"Certainly few critics would argue with Rene Rapin's dictum...that poems should not be approached with 'philosophical preconceptions.' But it does not follow that 'philosophical' statements may not inhere in particular poems. Nor does an abstract summary of a poem's content automatically convict the critic of a 'metaphysical approach' or the 'insensibility' Mr. Rapin finds in the comments on this poem by Yvor Winters...Richard Chase...and F. I. Carpenter....

It seems to me that Miss Dickinson's poem is essentially philosophic and that the key to its meaning is its use of a religious vocabulary drawn largely from the mass. An empirical account of the poem should surely be sensitive to the connotations (and denotations) of such words as 'celebrates,' 'mass,' 'ordinance,' 'gradual,' 'grave,' 'canticle,' 'remit,' and 'druidic.' M. Rapin's conclusion that the poem is a 'clear and apposite...rendering of one of 'Emily's' most characteristic and delicate moods'—'her loneliness and the instinctive melancholy and consequent premonition of decline and death she feels at the diminution of light and heat'—is, I think, only a partial truth, because it does not sufficiently emphasize the central figure of the poem. And much more is involved in this figure than 'mood.'

Robert H. and Helen L. Elias' interpretation...which Rapin praises, makes the religious ceremony an observed fact, a shared experience, and a judgment of that experience. Furthermore, the Eliases' failure to explain *why* Emily should identify herself with the celebrants of the mass (and so experience a 'feeling of eternity') requires the reader to supply psychological transitions of mood, which I think, damage the objective integrity of the poet's statement. Finally, the Elias interpretation is very vague in explaining exactly what the 'difference' is that 'enhances nature' at the end of the poem. Again, I think that an awareness of the technical reference of the diction (especially in lines 5 and 15) will enable the reader to avoid all these difficulties and to understand the intellectual occasion for the poem's mood.

In the opening stanza, Miss Dickinson, through the obvious contrast between the birds and the insects, concentrates her attention on a mass being celebrated deep in nature. The mass is apparently an autumnal ritual of sacrifice commemorating the dying year. But the opening lines of the next stanza make it clear that this mass is different from the mass celebrated by human beings; for here no 'ordinance' (the 'established rite for the administration of the sacrament,' especially the eucharist) 'is seen. The word 'ordinance' is so carefully placed that its exact ecclesiastical significance cannot be avoided (even if one chooses to ignore its suggestions of the *ordo missae* and the 'ordinary of the mass'). Miss Dickinson is careful not to deny an ordinance to the insects' mass, but she notes that she, as a human being, cannot *see* it. Consequently, the 'grace' that flows from such a mass becomes only a 'pensive custom' and not a symbol of the communion of saints in the mystical body of the Church. She cannot assist at this mass. She is cut off from nature (not merged with it, as the Eliases suggest), and her 'loneliness' is the result of this 'cleavage.'

In the third stanza, the poet notes that her predicament is felt to be most antique 'at noon When August, burning low, Calls forth this spectral canticle.' Surely 'spectral' fits both the poet's mood and the concrete occasion for it. And so does 'canticle,' especially if one remembers the association of the canticles with the canonical hours. The phrase, 'burning low' suggests not only the oppressive heat of the late summer day and the poet's sense of estrangement, but also the sanctuary lamp, the votive lights, and the candles in a church. In such a context, 'Repose' is not so much a synonym for *peace* as an echo of 'loneliness'—an echo reinforced by the respective positions of the two words at the ends of two adjacent stanzas.

But in this poem, Emily Dickinson does not (as she does, for example, in the similar, but very confused, 'These are the days when the birds come back') lose her grip on the concrete object of her attention. Her sense of isolation is not the same thing as psychological dissociation. In the opening lines of the last stanza, she insists that the natural scene has not lost its beauty as a result of her reflections on it. And yet these reflections have affected her perception of the scene. Its nature is foreign to hers. The word 'druidic,' registering just the right degree of shock in the Christian context of the poem and in the metrical scheme, is surely the right word for enforcing this ominous sense of strangeness and difference.

It may also be noted that the word 'nation' in the opening stanza is rich with Biblical associations and that 'gradual,' although used here as an adjective, has also a substantive significance ('an antiphon sung or recited with the Alleluia or the Tract between the Epistle and Gospel') which prepares the way for 'canticle.' Likewise, 'remit' is a word associated with the mass. Perhaps the associations surrounding 'remit' are unimportant, and the second use of 'grace' may be strained. But the cumulative effect of the technical diction, for the most part used with great precision, changes this lyric from a descriptive 'mood' poem to a philosophical statement of considerable intellectual power."

Marshall Van Deusen  
"Dickinson's 'Further in Summer Than the Birds'"  
*The Explicator* XIII (March 1955) Item 33

"One of the finest of the nature lyrics was written about 1866. It is not a meditation on death, as it sometimes has been thought to be. It attempts to conjure up that moment in late summer when the beholder is given a premonitory warning that summer is slipping away. The sudden realization of the fact—the first indeed that the beholder has had—comes as a dispiriting surprise. Nothing in nature yet is visibly altered, but the poet, because she now apprehends the truth, is changed....

Crickets arrive later in the summer than the birds do, and their song, warning us of summer's departure, is afflictive. Together and as a group they offer a High Mass to their Mother [or Low Mass]. We hear but cannot see them at their communion. The change of season (Grace) from summer to autumn is so gradual that only such a sign as the chirping of crickets brings the change to our notice. We muse upon the fact sadly, for each year that passes increases the loneliness that we feel for things irrevocably gone. These long, long thoughts (Antiquiest) seem to tie the present to all pasts at the very moment (Noon) when the day seems most golden. The cricket songs remind us of, indeed they typify, the repose that Nature will take in her long winter sleep. Yet August is still at full, and glancing about we see no sign that the season is changing (Remit as yet no Grace). No furrow yet crosses the glow of summer. Yet by an occult signal (for how do crickets know when their predestined moment to chirp has arrived?) we are warned that summer is passing. Thus our enjoyment of nature at the full is enlarged.

The idea, in all its complex subtlety, is encompassed in fewer than seventy words. The rhyme is exact in the beginning, becomes irregular in the second stanza, where the loneliness is emphasized, disappears in the third, where the thought is projected into both past and future, and reappears at the end, linking the two final stanzas, the fourth contrasting with the third by dealing solely with the present. The Common Meter of the first stanza is thereafter abandoned for the more spare Short Meter. One word in each stanza ties all stanzas together in a mood of anxiety: *pathetic, pensive, spectral, enhances*. The long, long thoughts are borne by *antiquiest* and *Druidic*, words suggesting things in a dim past. The awe is made solemn by the act of communion, the word *canticle*, and the phrase 'Druidic Difference.' In such poems as this Emily Dickinson shows a mastery not only in form but in the utterance itself. She does not make her emotional experience the end in view. Her intuition takes her below the surface of the experience into the heart of all such moments of sensation. The poet's growth as an artist is strikingly apparent when the poem above is examined beside one written about 1859 on the theme of Indian summer ["These are the days when Birds come back"]."

Thomas H. Johnson  
*Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*  
(Harvard 1955) 185-88

"The initial obscurity in ["Further in Summer than the Birds"] is clarified by the title she herself supplied when inclosing a copy of it in a letter, 'My Cricket'.... This is her finest poem on the theme of the year going down to death and the relation of this to a belief in immortality. It is also the climactic poem in a series dealing with the relationship of man and nature, ranging from cordiality to alienation. Though it will never have the wide appeal of her more spontaneous lyrics, its difficulty is not that of an intellectual game. The obscurity is justified because it inheres in the poetic idea, and the poem deserves serious study as one central to her vision. This is a deeper probing into the secret meaning of nature than any yet, and the discrimination of a more complex reaction to nature by the poet-observer. Because of all this and because of the poem's intense strangeness, there will probably be no end to the readings of its riddle.

The moment of seasonal transition, as the surface theme, links this with ["As Imperceptibly as Grief" #1540] in several ways. There the summer lapsed away 'imperceptibly.' Here the cricket's warning signal is 'unobtrusive' and its ritual not actually seen but felt. The 'sequestered afternoon' of the former is echoed in the 'repose' typified by late August. 'The Morning foreign shone' is answered by 'Antiquiest,' 'Spectral,' 'Druidic' in the second stanza; and 'A courteous, yet harrowing Grace' by the loneliness and 'gradual Grace' of the first stanza. Though the previous poem ends on a clearer note of triumph, with the summer escaping into heaven, there seems good grounds for a religious interpretation of this one too.

The dominant metaphor of the mass in the opening lines, sustained by a pervasive liturgical language throughout, sets up an unmistakable frame of reference. In addition to the suggestive language of 'celebrates,' 'burning low,' 'typify,' and 'remit' there are several specific terms. 'Ordinance' is an established ceremony of the church such as the Lord's Supper, 'Canticle' a sacred song sung at a solemn vespers in honor of the mystery of the Incarnation; and one is tempted to add 'the Gradual,' the oldest and most important chant by the choir during the Proper of the Mass, though it appears in the poem as an adjective rather than a noun. Since the mass is both a memorial ritual of the sacrificial death of Christ and a sacrament promising his resurrection, it might well symbolize the traditional moment of the year, looking back on the lost life of summer and forward to the cyclical renewal after the year's death.

In this sense the mass is a '*pensive Custom*' (as a variant reads) in memory of the former divine presence, 'enlarging [man's] loneliness' through awareness of Christ's absence now. On the other hand the promise of 'Grace' in its sacramental aspect 'enhances' nature, however 'gradual' man's realization of the second coming may be. Since the final grace comes only in the life-after-death, the cricket's canticle does not yet 'remit' this future promise, the 'furrows' that forecast the fruitfulness of recurrent spring have not yet appeared. The grace that emerges now is primarily one of 'repose,' but in the contest of the whole poem it is just possible to read this as the pledge of immortality that death bestows.

Here, however, the old ambiguity raises its head again, as always when one seeks to force a dogmatic answer from her profoundest poems. Is this 'repose' the changelessness of eternity or the long sleep of

winter? The latter seems indicated by her characterization of this poem in an accompanying letter as 'a chill Gift.' It all depends on how one interprets the 'Difference' that heightens nature at this moment of transition. The Christian ceremony of the mass when carried through to completion produces a change, it is true, the reincarnation in which mortals symbolically share. But this is after all a ritual of crickets, not men; their canticle is a 'Spectral' one, producing a 'Druidic Difference'—all suggestive of a pre-Christian nature rite whose meaning is lost in the dim past ('Antiquiest'). Perhaps they are celebrating, not the promise of immortality man yearns for, but the principle of mortality in nature, the process of the year going down to death....

The poet hears the earth-song of the insects, unspecified except as a 'minor Nation.' They are minor both in the scale of creation, as compared to the major nations more visibly dominating the life of the earth (*birds* are mentioned, *man* is implied in the poet's presence), and in the fact that they chirp in a diminished key, as compared with those who are still singing buoyantly as though summer will never cease. Thus their song does not obtrude on the surface life of nature but comes up 'pathetic' from the grass, moving the tender emotions of sorrow and grief in the poet rather than her pity for them, so that she gradually becomes aware of them celebrating their mass for the dying year. For they are 'Further in Summer' than the birds, not only symbolic of the later phase of the calendar year and so able to prophesy like Druids the coming seasonal change, but deeper into the secret meaning of nature and so not deceived by the surface illusion of eternal summer.

The poet, belonging likewise to one of the major nations, stands aloof above the grass, unable to participate in the phantom ceremony that comes up to her. She is so far removed it is not visible, scarcely even audible; she can only feel it, 'pathetic' being used in its root sense. The sixth line, 'So gradual the Grace,' is clearly central to her meaning, but it is also one of the most cryptic passages in the poem. 'Grace' can have the mere generalized meaning of reconciliation to God's ways, instead of the more specific Christian promise of eternal life. It can also mean simply beauty, as deified in pagan mythology. Whatever the message it reaches her only gradually, inspiring a sad meditative mood, 'pensive' (variant for 'gentle') at the end of the stanza echoing 'pathetic' at the beginning.

Since the antecedent of 'it' in line 7 remains ambiguous, one may hazard the guess that both the ancient ritual itself and the poet's fascination by it have become 'a pensive Custom,' brooding on a meaning lost to the insects through habitual repetition and not yet found by the poet through intuition. Perhaps this is just what the poem does mean: that nature's meaning in her secret processes has come to be hidden from man as he developed consciousness, and the most he can know is this sense of loss....

If the first stanza can be read plausibly as the plight of man in a natural universe where he is a foreigner, feeling nostalgia for a mode of being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share, the second may be her impressionistic attempt to record the quality of that 'Difference'..... The collapse of syntax in these lines [9-16] makes everything dreamlike and unreal, a confession that cryptic notations are all she can offer by way of interpretation. One can merely conjecture how to clear up the obscurities and fill in the ellipses. From its use in numerous other poems the meaning of 'Noon' can be fixed with reasonable certainty as that moment between the completion of one clock-cycle and the beginning of another when time escapes out of numerals into timelessness—the beginning of eternity, or merely the death of human time. In pagan myth it was the hour of Pan's sleep. But does 'Antiquiest' modify her loneliness, which is felt to be most primeval during the hot hum and stillness of late August, when life seems at its peak but is actually beginning to decline, at the very moment of noon?

Or should it attach to the mass, which though celebrated continuously is felt to be most archetypal when it is the last communion for the dying year? Possibly both. At any rate, as summer burns low the insects' song rises, sacred but ghostly, the very emblem of that ambiguous state called 'Repose.' (To secure the emphatic meaning of *typifying*, rather than *in order to typify*, she resorted to the apparently awkward inversion 'Repose to typify.') The concluding lines picture the poet looking back to the earth's surface, still at summer's full. The whole tone of the poem being elegiac rather than hortatory, 'remit' should not be read as an imperative but as an elliptical form of the participle 'remitted'.... [There is] no 'furrow' on the golden glow of Indian Summer which has not yet been plowed under....



There is an essential cleavage between nature and man. Imprisoned in time he cannot see through the illusions...to whatever meaning lies beyond. Nature's processes are inscrutable, just as its forms are evanescent."

Charles R. Anderson  
*Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*  
(Holt 1960) 150-56

Michael Hollister (2014)