



Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#258 (c.1861)

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 –

ANALYSIS

“The three poems which combine [Emily Dickinson’s] greatest power with her finest execution are strangely on much the same theme, both as regards the idea embodied and as regards the allegorical embodiment. They deal with the inexplicable fact of change, of the absolute cleavage between successive states of being, and it is not unnatural that in two of the poems this theme should be related to the theme of death. In each poem, seasonal change is employed as the concrete symbol of the moral change. This is not

the same thing as the so-called pathetic fallacy of the romantics, the imposition of a personal emotion upon a physical object incapable either of feeling such an emotion or of motivating it in a human being, it is rather a legitimate and traditional form of allegory, in which the relationships between the items described resemble exactly the relationships between certain moral ideas or experiences; the identity of relationship evoking simultaneously and identifying with each other the feelings attendant upon both series as they appear separately.

[The three poems are], in the order of the seasons employed, and in the order of increasing complexity both of theme and of technique: ["A Light exists in Spring," "As imperceptibly as Grief," and "There's a certain Slant of light"].... In the seventh, eighth, and twelfth lines of ["A Light exists in Spring"], and it is barely possible, in the seventh and eighth of ["There's a certain Slant of light"], there is a very slight echo of the brisk facility of her poorer work; the last line of ["As imperceptibly as Grief"], perhaps, verges ever so slightly on an easy prettiness of diction, though scarcely of substance. These defects are shadowy, however; had the poems been written by another writer, it is possible that we should not observe them. On the other hand, the directness, dignity, and power with which these major subjects are met, the quality of the phrasing, at once clairvoyant and absolute, raise the poems to the highest level of English lyric poetry.

The meter of these poems is worth careful scrutiny. The basis of all three is the so-called Poulter's Measure, first employed, if I remember aright, by Surrey, and after the time of Sidney in disrepute. It is the measure, however, not only of the great elegy on Sidney commonly attributed to Fulke Greville, but of some of the best poetry between Surrey and Sidney, including the fine poem by Vaux on contentment and the great poem by Gascoigne in praise of a gentlewoman of dark complexion. The English poets commonly though not invariably wrote the poem in two long lines instead of four short ones, and the lines so conceived were the basis of their rhetoric. In ["A Light exists in Spring"], the measure is employed without alteration, but the short line is the basis of the rhetoric; an arrangement which permits of more varied adjustment of sentence to line than if the long line were the basis. In ["As imperceptibly as Grief"], the first stanza is composed not in the basic measure, but in lines of eight, six, eight, and six syllables; the shift into the normal six, six, eight, and six in the second stanza, as in the second stanza of the poem beginning, "Further in summer," results in a subtle and beautiful muting both of meter and of tone. This shift she employs elsewhere, but especially in poems of four stanzas, to which it appears to have a natural relationship; it is a brilliant technical invention.

In ["There's a certain Slant of Light"] she varies her simple base with the ingenuity and mastery of a virtuoso. In the first stanza, the two long lines are reduced to seven syllables each, by the dropping of the initial unaccented syllable; the second short line is reduced to five syllables in the same manner. In the second stanza, the first line, which ought now to be of six syllables, has but five metrical syllables, unless we violate normal usage and count the second and infinitely light syllable of Heaven, with an extrametrical syllable at the end, the syllable dropped being again the initial one; the second line, which ought to have six syllables, has likewise lost its initial syllable, but the extrametrical us of the preceding line, being unaccented, is in rhythmical effect the first syllable of the second line, so that this syllable serves a double and ambiguous function—it maintains the syllable-count of the first line, in spite of an altered rhythm, and it maintains the rhythm of the second line in spite of the altered syllable-count.

The third and fourth lines of the second stanza are shortened to seven and five. In the third stanza the first and second lines are constructed like the third and fourth of the second stanza; the third and fourth lines like the first and second of the second stanza, except that in the third line the initial unaccented position is filled and we have a light anapest; that is, the third stanza repeats the construction of the second, but in reverse order. The final stanza is a triumphant resolution of the three preceding: the first and third lines, like the second and fourth, are metrically identical; the first and third contain seven syllables each, with an additional extrametrical syllable at the end which takes the place of the missing syllable at the beginning of each subsequent short line, at the same time that the extrametrical syllable functions in the line in which it is written as part of a two-syllable rhyme. The elaborate structure of this poem results in the balanced hesitations and rapid resolutions which one hears in reading it. This is metrical artistry at about as high a level as one is likely to find it....

Emily Dickinson differed from every other major New England writer of the nineteenth century, and from every major American writer of the century save Melville, of those affected by New England, in this: that her New England heritage, though it made her life a moral drama, did not leave her life in moral confusion. It impoverished her in one respect, however: of all great poets, she is the most lacking in taste; there are innumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities; her defects more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly at the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems. This stylistic character is the natural product of the New England which produced the barren little meeting houses; of the New England founded by the harsh and intrepid pioneers, who in order to attain salvation trampled brutally through a world which they were too proud and too impatient to understand. In this respect, she differs from Melville, whose taste was rich and cultivated. But except by Melville, she is surpassed by no writer that this country has produced; she is one of the greatest lyric poets of all time."

Yvor Winters

"Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment"

In Defense of Reason

(Alan Swallow 1947) 283-299

"[In "There's a certain Slant of light"] Emily Dickinson...treats an irrational psychological phenomenon akin to those recorded by Wordsworth in "Strange fits of passion have I known"...and by Tennyson in "Mariana"... A certain external condition of nature induces in her a certain feeling or mood. But the feeling is more complex than Wordsworth's or Mariana's.

The chief characteristic of this feeling is its painful oppressiveness. "Oppresses," "weight," "hurt," "despair," and "affliction" convey this aspect. A large component in it is probably consciousness of the fact of death, though this is probably not the whole of its content nor is this consciousness necessarily fully formulated by the mind. Yet here we see the subtle connection between the hour and the mood. For the season is winter, when the year is approaching its end. And the time is late afternoon (winter afternoons are short at best, and the light slants), when the day is failing. The suggestion of death is caught up by the weighty cathedral tunes (funeral music possibly—but hymns are also much concerned with death...and by 'the distance on the look of death.' The stillness of the hour ('the landscape listens, Shadows hold their breath') is also suggestive of the stillness of death.

But besides the oppressiveness of the feeling, it has a certain impressiveness too. It is weighty, solemn, majestic, like organ music. This quality is conveyed by 'weight of cathedral tunes,' 'heavenly,' 'seal' (suggesting the seal on some important official document), and 'imperial.' This quality of the mood may be partly caused by the stillness of the moment, by the richness of the slanting sunlight (soon to be followed by sunset), and by the image of death which it calls up. The mood gives 'heavenly' hurt. 'Heavenly' suggests the immateriality of the hurt, which leaves 'no scar'; the source of the sunlight—the sky; the ultimate source of both sunlight and death—God. The hurt is given internally 'where the meanings are'—that is, in the soul, the psyche, or the mind—that part of one which assigns 'meanings'—consciously or intuitively—to life and to phenomena like this.

'None may teach it anything.' Both the sunlight and the mood it induces are beyond human correction or alleviation; they are final and irrevocable—'sealed.' There is no lifting this seal—this despair. 'When it goes, 'tis like the distance / On the look of death.' The lines call up the image of the stare in the eyes of a dead man, not focused, but fixed on the distance. Also, 'distance' suggests the awful distance between the living and the dead—part of the implicit content of the mood. Notice that the slanted ray and the mood are still with us here, but are also going. The final remarkable image reiterates the components of the hour and the mood—oppressiveness, solemnity, stillness, death. But it hints also at relief—hopes that there will soon be a 'distance' between the poet and her experience."

Laurence Perrine

"Dickinson's 'There's a Certain Slant of Light'"

The Explicator XI (May 1953) Item 50

"One of the very best lyric poems which Emily Dickinson wrote, it seems to me, is ['There's a certain Slant of light'].... This poem is frequently found in anthologies of American poetry but has seldom been

discussed, as far as I know. Perhaps the explanation is to be found in the poem itself, which is unquestionably beautiful in its sound, and striking in its imagery, yet resists definition in terms of a logical, comprehensive statement. This poem, certainly, is one of those rare poems which are experienced, never completely understood. It seems to me impossible to read the lines without feeling a tragic, serene emotion which must be akin to the melancholy about which Keats writes. Emily Dickinson's poem is much less specific than the 'Ode on Melancholy' in describing the nature of the emotion, but her poem captures and transmits the experience itself.

In regard to the poem's meaning, one finds himself perplexed at first. The poet experiences a profound affliction in the presence of something normally regarded as cheerful—a ray of light. If, however, one remembers the mystical approach which characterizes much of Emily Dickinson's writing, the poem assumes a new meaning. This is not a mystical poem, but it derives its ethereal quality from the influence of the mystical aspect of Emily Dickinson's viewpoint. Light, itself a characteristic mystical symbol of the Divine, and perhaps also the natural splendor of the world which the light reveals and enhances in its afternoon fading glow, strikes Emily Dickinson with the irresistible force of an Eternal Power. Not mere speculation is stimulated; an emotional ecstasy of such intensity that it is an affliction possesses her. Furthermore, it is an imperial affliction sent us of the air.

It is again the mystical concept of the worthiness of painful ecstasy to promote the complete fulfillment of one's nature. No other education is comparable; only the experiencing of 'despair' sets the enduring 'seal' upon the soul. One recalls that beauty and truth, alike in their effect, are for her the agents of supreme human fulfillment and are accompanied by the complex sensations indescribable except in such paradoxical terms as rapturous pain. The slant of light, its illumination epitomizing the glorious sublimity of nature, would symbolize for Emily Dickinson the ultimate realization of truth and beauty. The immensity of light's compass, the intangibility of its substance, the mystery of its origin, the all-pervasive immediacy of its presence would create in her the sudden awareness of her own relationship to the natural world and yet of the inevitable change of this relationship at death. The awareness that she must cease to see the light gives her present vision its searing acuteness. . . .

An examination of the images in 'There's a certain Slant of light' reveals their extraordinary degree of consistency and appropriateness. The light is presented in its most effective form. The slant indicates that the light is refracted so that one may see the beam or ray itself and not just an illuminated surface. The slant is explained by afternoons. Sunset is near, for 'winter afternoons' are short. The terms winter and afternoon both are suggestive of the end of life. The lustre and yellow warmth of the light stand out in striking relief in austere winter. Light compared with cathedral tunes demonstrates a consummate use of imagery in which the profoundest impressions of one sense are called forth to describe equally profound impressions of another sense. The senses of sight and hearing, as well as an emotional tone and a feeling of muscular tenseness in opposing weight, are all involved in the brief stanza. The nature of the paradoxical 'Heavenly hurt' is made evident by the image of cathedral tunes. Most people are sensible of the sober disquietude that may be stimulated by great, solemn music, if not by the beauty of nature. The 'internal difference' is, of course, the essential difference for Emily Dickinson rather than any outward change....

[The] significance of the slant of light is also within. The sudden, inward change is so thorough that the poet, holding her breath and listening, sees her own emotional state reflected in the very landscape and shadows. The emotion, too intense to last, subsides as the slant of light lengthens and lowers into the gray of twilight. Then 'tis like the distance / On the look of death.' The feeling of softened, lengthened distances as seen at dusk, the poignancy in the departure of something precious, the resigned awareness of death—not felt with the acute sensations of before but contemplated dispassionately—all are included in this solemn final image.

The mechanical details of the poem are, to my mind, flawless. The second and fourth lines of each stanza end in perfect rhyme, and the first and third lines of each stanza exhibit the incomplete sound-rhymes for which Emily Dickinson has been alternatively praised and damned for something over fifty years. The recurrence of sounds in the complete and incomplete rhymes is not obvious and blatant; it has the effect of music lightly assuring the listener of its key by sometimes stating the tonic, but frequently only pausing on the dominant. The key or tone of the poem is maintained throughout by the preponderance of 's'

sounds. The poem seems to demand to be read in a subdued tone ending with the whispered last two lines. There is not a jarring sound present; the liquid 'I's and the vowels add to the hushed, lyric quality. The trochaic meter in this poem is much more skillfully handled than the majority of Emily Dickinson's meters. Even in the terse seven-syllable, five-syllable lines there is present much subtle metric variation, as reading the poem aloud will verify.

The simplicity of the organization of this poem is art which conceals art. The stanzas are self-contained, precise units, each one an extension of the basic meaning. The poem ends with the symmetrically balanced phrases 'when it comes...when it goes...' and the final images of sound and sight complete in reverse the pattern created by the sight and sound imagery of the first stanza. This poem exhibits none of the childishness, the self-conscious mannerisms, which mar some of her poetry. The characteristics which are present—the introspective analysis of the second stanza, the mystical implications of the third, and the supreme mastery of words and imagery throughout—contribute to make this poem one of the best products of Emily Dickinson's unique poetic genius."

Donald E. Thackrey
Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry, New Series 13
(U Nebraska 1954) 76-80

"[Emily Dickinson's] dread of winter [is] expressed in one of her remarkable verses, written about 1861 ['There's a certain Slant of light']. It is, like the somewhat later 'Further in Summer than the Birds,' an attempt to give permanence through her art to the impermanent; to catch that fleeting moment of anxiety which, having passed, leaves the beholder changed. Such moods she could catch most readily in the changing seasons themselves.... Winter to her is at moments intolerably dreary, and she here re-creates the actual emotion implicit in the Persephone-Pluto myth. Will spring never come?

Sometimes, winter afternoons, she perceives an atmospheric quality of light that is intensely oppressive. The colloquial expression 'heft' is especially appropriate in suggesting a heavy weight, which she associates with the weight of great bells or the heavy sound that great bells create. This might be the depressing chill and quiet preceding a snowfall. Whatever it is, it puts the seal on wintriness. Coming as it does from heavens, it is an imperial affliction to be endured ('None may teach it -- Any'). Even the landscape itself is depressed. When it leaves, she feels that whole body. The strong provincialism, 'Heft' (smoothed away to 'Weight' by former editors), carries both the meaning of ponderousness and the great effort of heaving in order to test it, according to her Lexicon. This homely word also clashes effectively with the grand ring of 'Cathedral Tunes,' those produced by carillon offering the richest possibilities of meaning. Since this music 'oppresses,' the connotation of funereal is added to the heavy resonance of all pealing bells. And since the double meaning of 'Heft' carries through, despair is likened to both the weight of these sounds on the spirit and the straining to lift the imponderable tonnage of cast bronze.

The religious note on which the prelude ends, 'Cathedral Tunes,' is echoed in the language of the central stanzas. In its ambiguousness 'Heavenly Hurt' could refer to the pain of paradisiac ecstasy, but more immediately this seems to be an adjective of agency, from heaven, rather than an attributive one. The hurt is inflicted from above, 'Sent us of the Air,' like the 'Slant of light' that is its antecedent. In this context that natural image takes on a new meaning, again with the aid of her Lexicon which gives only one meaning for 'slant' as a noun, 'an oblique reflection or gibe.' It is then a mocking light, like the heavenly hurt that comes from the sudden instinctive awareness of man's lot since the Fall, doomed to mortality and irremediable suffering. This is indeed despair, though not in the theological sense unless Redemption is denied also. As Gerard Manley Hopkins phrases it in 'Spring and Fall,' for the young life there coming to a similar realization, 'It is the blight man was born for.'

Because of this it is beyond human correction, 'None may teach it -- Any.' Though it penetrates it leaves 'no scar' as an outward sign of healing, nor any internal wound that can be located and alleviated. What it leaves is 'internal difference,' the mark of all significant 'Meanings.' When the psyche is once stricken with the pain of such knowledge it can never be the same again. The change is final and irrevocable, sealed. The Biblical sign by which God claims man for his own has been shown in the poems of heavenly bridal to be a 'Seal,' the ring by which the beloved is married into immortal life. But to be redeemed one must first be mortal, and be made conscious of one's mortality. The initial and overwhelming impact of this can lead

to a state of hopelessness, unaware that the 'Seal Despair' might be the reverse side of the seal of ecstasy. So, when first stamped on the consciousness it is an 'affliction.' But it is also 'imperial... Sent us of the Air,' the heavenly kingdom where God sits enthroned, and from the same source can come Redemption, though not in this poem.

By an easy transition from one insubstantial image to another, 'Air' back to 'a certain Slant of light,' the concluding stanza returns to the surface level of the winter afternoon. As the sun drops toward the horizon just before setting, 'the Landscape listens' in apprehension that the very light which makes it exist as a landscape is about to be extinguished; 'Shadows,' which are about to run out to infinity in length and merge with each other in breadth until all is shadow, 'hold their breath.' This is the effect created by the slanting light 'When it comes.' Of course no such things happen in nature, and it would be pathetic fallacy to pretend they did. The light does not inflict this suffering nor is the landscape the victim. Instead, these are just images of despair."

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Harvard 1955) 189-9

"The ultimate problem [for Emily Dickinson] was not to master despair, which she presumably succeeded in doing as a woman when she took the artist's path to peace, but to manage the images evoked by her sensibility so as to transform the experience into great poetry.... For more than a century ['There's a certain Slant of light'] was placed by her editors under the category of nature. But winter sunlight is simply the over-image of despair, inclosing the center of suffering that is her concern. Grammatically, the antecedent of the neutral 'it' whose transformations make up the action of the poem is this 'certain Slant of light, but in figurative meaning 'it' is the 'Heavenly Hurt.' This is a true metaphor, sensation and abstraction fused into one, separable in logic but indistinguishable and even reversible in a poetic sense. The internal experience is not talked about but is realized in a web of images that constitutes the poem's statement, beginning with one drawn from nature, or rather from the firmament above it, and returning to it in the end with a significant change of meaning.

These multiple images exemplifying the protean condition of despair are vividly discrete, but they grow out of each other and into each other with a fitness that creates the intended meaning in shock after shock of recognition. Its amorphous quality is embodied at the outset in 'light,' a diffused substance that can be apprehended but not grasped. Further, this is a slanting light, as uncertain of source and indirect in impact as the feeling of despair often is. Finally, it is that pale light of 'Winter Afternoons,' when both the day and the year seem to be going down to death, the seasonal opposite of summer which symbolized for her the fullness and joy of living. It is when he feels winter in his soul, one remembers, that Melville's Ishmael begins his exploration of the meaning of despair. Next, by the shift of simile, this desolation becomes 'like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes.' The nebulous has now been made palpable, by converting light waves into sound waves whose weight can be felt by the whole body.

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Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 215-18

"What are the generative fusions of the poem and why is the grammar of its concluding lines itself so confusing? We note that light is a 'Seal' or sign of despair and we remember that Dickinson was much too conscientious a reader of the Bible and particularly of the Book of Revelation not to have intended 'the Seal Despair --' to point to an experience that was, if a secular experience can be so, both visionary and apocalyptic. In the Bible, however, while the self is 'not worthy to open the scroll and break the seals' that will reveal divine agency, in the speaker's world meaning must be deduced within the privacy of a solitary consciousness. Thus 'None may teach it [to] any [one else]'; 'None may teach it any [thing]' (it is not subject to alteration)... But the 'Meanings' of the event are not self-generated; if this is a poem about the solipsistic labor of experience, it is not about autism. To be credited as vision, despair must also seek its connection to the generative source outside itself. For light may seal despair in, make it internal and irrevocable, but the irrevocability, by a line of association that runs just under the poem's surface, prompts the larger thought of death.

In fact, the poem is about correlatives, about how interior transformations that are both invisible and immune to alteration from the outside world are at the same time generated by that world. The relationship between the 'Slant of light' in the landscape and the 'Seal Despair --' within may be clarified by an analogy to Erich Auerbach's distinction between figure and its fulfillment, for the 'Slant of light' and the 'Seal Despair --' are not in this poem merely premonitions of death, but are, in fact, kinds or types of death. Indeed it could be asserted that in the entire Dickinson canon, despair is often a figura for death, not as Auerbach uses the word to specify related historical events, but rather as he indicates the word to denote an event that prefigures an ultimate occurrence and at the same time is already imbued with its essence.... The 'Slant of light,' recognized only at a distance—its meaning comprehended at the moment of its disappearance—is revelatory of 'Death --', is Death['s] prefiguration. Figure fuses with fact, interprets it, and what we initially called the confusion of the two now makes sense in the context of divination.

What Dickinson achieves in the poem is truly remarkable, for she takes a traditional symbol and scours it so thoroughly of its traditional associations with life that before we get to the poem's conclusion the image leans in the direction of mystery, dread, and darkness. By the time we arrive at the final simile and at the direct association of light and death we are not so much surprised as relieved at the explicitness of the revelation. It is the indirect association of 'light' and 'Death --' (the 'Slant' that pulls them together at first seemingly without purpose) that prompts 'Despair --.' We feel it indirectly, internally, obliquely. Were we

to know it, it would be death. For Dickinson, death is the apocalyptic vision, the straightening of premonition into fact, figure into fulfillment.

The fusions I have been discussing either between literal reality and its metaphoric representation (where literal reality permanently assumes those metaphoric characteristics that seemed initially intended only to illuminate it) or between the more formal figura and its fulfillment (where events contain in a predictive relationship the essence as well as the form of each other) raise the question of whether we can ever know anything in its own terms, and suggest perhaps that knowledge is not, as we might have thought, absolute, but is rather always relational. If these fusions link the historical or natural world with the divine one, the analogue with the real thing, they are predicated on a structure of simultaneous correspondence rather than of linear progression.

The truth that is 'Bald, and Cold --' is death, it does not lead to it. The 'certain Slant of light,' although it prefigures death, also already contains its essence. The thing in other words is saturated in the terms of its own figuration. Given the synchrony of this relationship, we are not very far from those poems that strain to annihilate the boundaries of time itself and to treat death as if its very reality could be cast into the present tense, experienced, and somehow survived. The effort to know what cannot be known, to survive it, is thus carried one step further in those poems in which the speaker travels over the boundary from life to death to meet death on its own ground. Given the presumption of the quest, figural structure often gives way to allegory or at any rate to the acknowledgment of the inadequacy of simple analogue, for on the other side of death true knowledge can find no correspondences."

Sharon Cameron
Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre
(Johns Hopkins 1979)

"Dickinson comes closest to Wordsworth when she tries to read the meaning of light falling upon the land... Light, the element that bathes Wordsworth's landscapes, casts its shadow on this poem. The 'certain slant' pierces the self, oppresses the spirit--it is not a seal of affirmation, but an 'imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air.' True to Wordsworthian dicta, Dickinson has responded to what she witnesses, but the light she finds is the type of doom she most fears. The 'internal difference' filters down from Heaven through the landscape into the poet, and what for Wordsworth would be a reflective if sober moment becomes the 'seal' of despair."

Joanne Feit Diehl
Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination
(Princeton 1981)

"What slant of light is this? How low must the sun sink on the horizon to project its pink, or gold, or silver ray across the snowy fields? The poet makes no attempt to describe the sense impressions but only to register their emotional resonance. This is done by the oxymoronic phrases 'Heavenly Hurt' and 'imperial affliction' that link exultation with anguish. And the speaker, generalizing from her reaction to that of a universal 'we,' personifies nature itself as attentive to these promptings from beyond circumference. Here, too, definition comes by negation. There is 'no scar, 'None may teach it.'

When the speaker strains for an analogy to clarify her experience, she characteristically hits upon one outside Emily Dickinson's experience. Those 'Cathedral Tunes' stimulate the imagination with their 'Heft,' presumably that 'weight of glory' Dickinson cited once from 2 Corinthians 4:17 when telling a friend about a morning landscape that awakened painful awareness of her mother's recent death. Never having been in a cathedral, except imaginatively in 'I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes --,' Dickinson probably relied on the memoirs of American Protestant travelers in Europe to discover how it would feel to hear grandly complex vocal and instrumental music in a Gothic or Romanesque setting from whose spell the visitor would constantly struggle to free himself. Perhaps she recalled...Marvel's report of Holy Week services in the Sistine Chapel when 'the sweet, mournful flow of the Miserere begins again, growing in force and depth till the whole chapel rings, and the balcony of the choir trembles; then it subsides again into the low, soft wall of a single voice, so prolonged, so tremulous, and so real, that the heart aches-for Christ is dead!' The death of God, the death of a loved one, her own death: All these things registered on Dickinson through this visual emblem of the dying day. And it was fitting that she should reveal these awarenesses

only gradually and by indirection--foregoing natural exactitude for depth of psychological response to intuited absence.”

Jane Donahue Eberwein
Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation
(U Massachusetts 1985)

“We might first note that, beautiful as the poem is, the satisfactions which it affords us are not primarily visual. Even though it is focused outward on a natural scene, it does not mention a single color or describe a single form. Are we looking at woods, a lawn, a grove, fields, hills? Is there snow on the ground? We are not sure. What is the weather? Is it a bleakly clear, hard, dry afternoon? Or does the sun break through the clouds in one brief, poignant slant? Is it early to mid afternoon, or later? Does the sunlight fade because of sunset or because of cloud cover? My guess--which is only intuitive and based upon my memories of growing up in northern New Jersey--is that it is not sunset, that the day is mostly cloudy, very forlorn, that around three in the afternoon the sun appears through a rift in the stratus, infinitely tantalizing, melancholy, like the reminder of some other life, some other season, some other realm (perhaps heavenly) than the claustral, futureless gray of winter. But this is pure guesswork, without a shred of textual backing.

Despite its visual vagueness, however, the poem does in many ways resemble a painting. Its attention is directed outward at a landscape, not at the author/speaker herself or some other human protagonist. It is true that the implied author constitutes a definite presence in this poem--a more pronounced presence than we feel a painter has in a typical landscape painting--but she never refers to herself as taking action. She does not walk to a window. She does not pour a cup of tea. She does not sigh or weep. She simply looks.

Where, then, is that action which distinguishes literature from painting and without which neither this nor any poem can successfully compete with a good painting? Obviously it is in the scene itself, and it is made possible by the fact that, although the poem has the feel of a painting, the duration over which it scans its landscape is longer than the instantaneous ‘duration’ captured in a painting. Within this duration, ‘When it comes... When it goes,’ different events take place, events whose source is not human. Indeed, the protagonist of the poem is the landscape itself, whose ‘Slant of light’ does things (‘oppresses,’ ‘comes,’ ‘goes’), a landscape which ‘listens’ and whose ‘Shadows--hold their breath.’ The poem, then, is, in addition to its other implications, very much about time. It presents, to borrow Wordsworth’s expression, a ‘spot of time’.”

Jonathan Holden
Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry
(U Missouri 1986)

“With its exquisite use of sound, its disjunctive grammar, and mixed levels of diction, ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ is a formidable performance. But the reason for the poem’s extraordinary popularity (it is among Dickinson’s most consistently reprinted and explicated works) does not lie in technique alone. It also lies in our familiarity with the experience Dickinson describes. Not only has the poet captured the oddness of winter light (its thin, estranging quality), but she has also caught the depressed or sorrowful state of mind which this light biochemically induces. Despite the poet’s use of terms like ‘Seal’ and ‘imperial affliction,’ that key into her private mythology of self--her self-designated role as ‘Queen of Calvary’—‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ engages its readers directly.

Yet at the same time, ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ is, obviously, a highly subjective poem, dealing with an intensely personal state of mind. In it, the speaker’s mood takes over from the light, the presumptive focus of the text, and is generalized to the entire landscape. The world becomes a partner in the poet’s depression. The depression becomes the lens through which the world is seen--and, even more important, through which its ‘meanings’ (whatever they might be) are understood.

When Dickinson uses nature imagery in this way, she is appropriating it, as Joanne Feit Diehl says, for the aggrandizement of the mind. In such poems, the natural phenomenon ‘becomes the self as the division between identity and scene dissolves.’ To that extent, ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ may be said to be solipsistic. That is, unlike the nature poems discussed in the preceding chapter, it is explicitly a projection of the poet’s inner life, a massive transference to the landscape of her inner state of being. Dickinson

reveals the nature of this state through her comparisons, but its meaning is one she refuses to disclose. For all its apparent familiarity, what happens in this poem is, finally, as fragmented and inconclusive (as unknowable) as the light to which Dickinson refers--or the grammar she uses.

The evasiveness of 'There's a certain Slant of light'--its multiple ambiguities and its refusal to reach a firm conclusion--is typical of Dickinson's psychological poems and the source of much of their difficulty (as well as their fascination). Reading Dickinson's poetry, Adrienne Rich declares, one gets the sense 'of a mind engaged in a lifetime's musing on essential problems of language, identity, separation, relationship, the integrity of the self; a mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shakespeare.' No poet seems closer to her readers as a result. It is as if Dickinson laid out her most private thoughts and feelings before us.

But unlike the accessibility of Dickinson's nature poetry, which is supported by the external world to which the poems refer, the accessibility of Dickinson's psychological poetry is in many ways deceiving. Not only is the relationship between the voice which speaks these poems and Dickinson herself problematic, but so, as a rule, is the relationship between the poetry's manifest content and the meaning which this content presumably encodes. Thus, on the most basic level, it is unclear whether Dickinson addresses her own feelings in 'There's a certain Slant of light,' or those she believes are people's in general, and we may query whether the poem is about light or about the depression which the light evokes. Finally, we may ask what 'meaning' this light (or this depression) has, especially given its status as an 'imperial affliction / Sent us,' we are told, 'of the Air'.... Like other nineteenth-century women poets, Dickinson used her poetry to inscribe her 'heart's record,' but the ambiguities of her technique and the complexity and richness of her inscription make the interpretation of this record a subject of intense (and at times, perhaps, futile) critical debate."

Paula Bennett
(*Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* 1990)

"Diminishing the authority of intentionality helps ward off the author's dominion, but to the extent that conveyed meaning is itself a threat the author is not the only enemy of responsiveness. No authorial master appears in 'There's a certain slant of light,' for instance, but the scene certainly imposes 'Heavenly Hurt' as it inscribes upon the soul 'internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are.' Typically such moments are spurned as painful, perhaps overwhelming, and also craved as an intensity beyond the quotidian. In other words, they belong to an esthetics of the sublime. And a chief issue, particularly in the wonderfully multivalent line 'None may teach it -- Any,' is the authority or legitimacy of the meanings written within. If, as the tone of the poem suggests, the meanings manifest some natural or supernatural order, then the self can only accede to them. If, however, as in other instances where response is prolonged, the slant of light only marks or rearranges the internal differences, which the self then as a separate act gives meaning to, a crucial freedom to determine meaning is maintained. Indeed, we once again have a three-part process: the stimulus of the light, the inscription of the internal differences, and the interpretation of these signifiers by the no longer helpless soul."

Gary Lee Stonum
The Dickinson Sublime
(U Wisconsin 1990)

"The personification of the landscape is an alternative, as it were, to the naturalization of the self.... This rejection of its terms is apparent in the fact that light waves become sound waves, which become waves of heaviness and pain. Thus everything is personalized, translated to the person, and then confined or trapped there.... Yet whatever invades the speaker is also perceived as alien to her even as it is seen to penetrate her.... Light is cast down and codified as the 'Seal Despair,' which itself hardens further into 'the look of Death.' One way to understand such causality is to say that the light, internalized, registers as despair and is understood as death. Another way to understand it is to see that this figure in the poem--this making of death into a figure that cannot be dispelled--is what death looks like when it is personified, when it is made to have a meaning as small as a person's meaning. In line with the trivialization, 'the look of Death' does not quite displace the anthropomorphic 'face' of death... For death in 'There's a certain Slant of light,' reduced to human size, is almost given a countenance. Thus 'the Distance' from death or from the 'look of

Death' (from how death appears when it has a 'look,' almost a demeanor or expression) is no distance at all."

Sharon Cameron
Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles
(U Chicago 1992)

Michael Hollister (2014)