

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#1601 (c.1884)

Of God we ask one favor,  
That we may be forgiven –  
For what, he is presumed to know –  
The Crime, from us, is hidden –  
Immured the whole of Life  
Within a magic Prison  
We reprimand the Happiness  
That too competes with Heaven.

#### ANALYSIS

“In contrast with the orthodoxy of her own day [her] approach could only seem heretical...which explains her tendency to discountenance herself as a religious person, as in her terse self-portrait late in life, ‘I am but a Pagan.’ The letter containing this phrase encloses ‘Of God we ask one favor.’

Her personal sense of estrangement from the religion of her fathers lingered to the end, but so did the integrity that gave her courage to go her own way, to continue her search for heaven through poetry rather than through a theology she could not accept. This debate frames her perfect image for the earthly paradise where she wrestled with her angel. The mind and heart, the consciousness, the self, the soul—whatever word one wishes—this was the ‘Magic Prison’ she always explored in her poetry. ‘Immured the whole of Life’ within its walls she accepted the mortal lot as inescapable, trapped in time and wavering perpetually between doubt and belief in another life beyond. There she dedicated herself to creating the one thing of absolute value that, in her view, the human being is capable of. It goes under the rather inadequate name of religion, or art, the vision that comes with man’s utmost reach towards truth and beauty. Its essence is longing, with ecstasy at one end and pain at the other, the leap of the heart and the despair of the mind.”

Charles R. Anderson  
*Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*  
(Holt 1960)

“She speaks with the laconic restraint appropriate to her country, which is New England, and to herself, which is a small, shy gentlewoman who has suffered much: ‘Of God we ask one favor’... It is a remarkable poem and its power, indeed its possibility, lies almost altogether in its voice, its tone. The figure of the magic prison is beautiful in itself, but it is effective in the poem because of the level at which the poem is spoken—the level established by that ‘he is presumed to know.’ At another level even the magic prison might well become pretentious.

But what then is this tone? How does this unforgettable voice speak to us? For one thing, and most obviously, it is a wholly spontaneous tone. There is no literary assumption of posture or pose in advance. There is no sense that a subject has been chosen—that a theme is about to be developed. 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 a poet, which she did, miraculously, within a few months of her beginnings as a writer, all that awkwardness disappears.... Few poets and they among the most valued—Donne comes again to mind—have written more dramatically than Emily Dickinson, more in the live locutions of dramatic speech, words born living on the tongue, written as though spoken. Few have committed themselves as actors more livingly to the scene. It is almost impossible to begin one of her successful poems without finishing it.”

Archibald MacLeish

“The Private World: Poems of Emily Dickinson”  
*Poetry and Experience*  
(Houghton 1961)

Michael Hollister (2015)