

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



For each ecstatic instant

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years—
Bitter contested farthings—
And coffers heaped with tears.

Emily Dickinson¹

Reflections

In any study of ecstatic literature, it is surely important to understand the singular word: ecstasy. From the Greek *ekstasis*—literally, “standing outside oneself” or “standing elsewhere”—ecstasy is an experience that not only transcends mere ‘happiness,’ but transcends even the language we have available to describe it. To speak of the poetry of ecstasy is to speak of trance and transport, of an attempt to put into language an experience of rapture. The great Sufi mystics—known for such poetry—explain that ecstasy is not the subject of a poem; rather it *is* the poem.

Emily Dickinson, though raised in a strict Calvinist household, was never a “conventional” Christian; she wrote often of her agonizing doubt and ultimately she did not join the church or participate in public religious life. But poem after poem of hers reveals a deeply spiritual understanding of the role of the sacred as well as her belief that an experience of God was not something beyond us or something available only in the afterlife, but something accessible and knowable now on earth. We know from her other work that her understanding of ecstasy was aligned with the Greeks—that self-transcendence is indicative of divine communion.

Of all Dickinson’s work, I find this poem especially intriguing as it attempts to rationalize and quantify the very thing that can never be precisely calculated nor understood. Here we have in only eight lines, a lyric of reason and metrical accuracy, of exchange and measure albeit a “quivering ratio.” The poet draws on language of financial exchange to articulate a

¹ “For each ecstatic instant” from *Collected Poems* by Emily Dickinson. Public Domain.

relationship between ecstasy and agony, rapture and pain. But realizing that ecstasy is more than “intense joy,” and is more an *experience* than a feeling—regarded by some as evidence of insanity—moves one closer to understanding ecstasy as a spiritual event, one Simone Weil describes as an undoing of the “creature in us” so to unite with God. Dickinson’s poem suggests an ecstatic experience is an uneven exchange: one moment of sublime transcendence paid for with years of agony, and tears are the legal tender.

We have heard variations of this ratio before—for every joy a sorrow, for every delight a disappointment, for every victory a defeat, for every assurance a doubt. Dickinson challenges the fairness of these equations. After all, how can an experience of the soul ever balance proportionately another experience of human life? How can one ever repay a moment of ecstatic communion with the divine and with what currency? By God’s economy, Dickinson seems to say, there is no coffer deep enough to hold whatever we think we owe.

✧ About the poet

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, and lived a reclusive life on the family homestead but for the year she attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Though she was a prolific poet, less than a dozen poems were printed during her lifetime; it was only after her death that her sister discovered the breadth of her writing. Now, she is recognized—nearly universally—as one of the most influential figures in American literature.



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