

Emily Dickinson's Loaded Gun¹

by Morag Harris

One of the simplest givens in a poet's use of symbol must be that the images have no absolute single rigid referent in actuality, for they are never used as mere utilitarian signs in the way we may use naming words in our practical lives. Yet this confusion between - in essence - sign and symbol, is almost universal in the criticism of this poem, which has attracted uncommon attention over the last twenty years. The subtle and emotionally difficult changes of conjunction between the complex of lady-man-gun figures and voices in the poem is almost invariably passed over.

The "Loaded Gun", the "pencil in the hand lightly created", and "it", are qualities of creativity. This very enigmatic poem demonstrates the evolution of Emily Dickinson's very idiomatic use of "it". The poem is I think fundamentally about her preoccupation with the capacity of her art to create, but also to destroy, and the distinction between different qualities of destructiveness with which the artist must come to terms.

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through –

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And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard my Master's Head –
Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

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 –

(P754, dated conjecturally 1863)

This poem seems to me certainly connected to L656 (certain dating: September 1880):

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the Whole area of Life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because “unloaded”, but that touched “goes off”.

A lucid discussion of the poem by Cynthia Griffin Wolff places the poem in the historical religious context of “Biblical paradoxes”. In this context she identifies the poem's “I” unequivocally with “Death” and the poem's “He” with “Christ/God”. This ‘premise’, derived from answering the riddle in the last verse via various Biblical references, becomes the key to interpreting the whole poem. This is clear, and helpful because it is clear; yet at the same time it reduces the poem's complex ambiguities. For example, the “I” seems to me on one level to be a woman, not just a gun-shooting, explosively phallic male death-figure. The explosiveness seems to be in the I/She-He relationship, intrinsic with sexual nuance of various qualities, not in just one of the figures. And the “I” seems in part to be the

poet herself, with the “gun” aspect - among other things - involving a pun on the name of Emily Dickinson’s domineering grandmother, Lucretia Gunn – like her Aunt Libbie, a “male relative on the female side” (L473).

The gun by the head may have some reference to Keats’s *Isabella*, possessively guarding her decapitated lover’s head; and certainly the poem with its quality of allegorical romance seems haunted by *Isabella* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, ending in a sphinx-like riddle. It has a superficial story of a lady and a knight: the knight comes by and claims her, and the couple roam in the woods and hunt deer (with its traditional pun on “dear”). So far, a conventional ballad-like story. The incomprehensible begins when she/”I” starts to “speak for him” (couldn’t he speak for himself?) The opposition in deep metaphor of the “Loaded Gun” thrown at us in the first line, begins to make itself felt. And it is as well to put very simple questions to oneself. What is her “speaking” - to whom? Why should mountains reply, and in what sense can they? What is the “cordial light” that fills the Valley? (it seems to throw back on her deigning to smile, with sadistic relish, in that ambiguous interrogative/emphatic linguistic structure Dickinson came to exploit - “do I smile”; and so on the bright (orgasmic/triumphant/illuminating) flash of the gunshot going off; and also perhaps forward, in the image of a sun breaking through cloud, to the “Yellow Eye”.

Then the poem opens into the first simile. This concludes the whole first section (ll.1-12) where the images are so closeknit, in some way so primitive in the language, that they seem the objects themselves:

It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through.

Cousin to “Master” letter 233 (?1861): “Vesuvius said a syllable ... and Pompeii hid forever”, it builds up a camouflage of knightly beauty and courtesy, tinged with a little Romantic nature – eliciting the sinister aspect of her “smiling” and “speaking”. While the predominant image is the Lady (“carried away”, l.4), the predominant speaking voice is that of a gun (flaring, exploding, banging). In the second half of the poem, the predominant image becomes the gun, but the voice becomes less steely, more humane, to a concentrated degree so in the final riddle.

The poem then moves into the dark night, with “good day done”, possibly a harbinger of “bad night” as well as a pun on the farewell “good day”; hardly expressive of intimacy between lovers as they go to bed. There

is irony in the representation of the over-good manners of the two: their courtesy seems in part just a masked form of bargaining and playing each other off, and walks the usual fine line that subsists between ganglike persecutory collusion against the world and mutual treachery. And by the time one has realised that the image of the gun is taking over in the fourth verse, that “guarding My Master’s head” already sounds as if she’s murdered him. To limit the significance of the symbolic couple to Death and Christ is to sign-allegorise at this point. It does not help to delineate the dance of the qualities of relationship that are explored in the poem’s progression. The poem seems to me not cryptic, but rather, deeply ambiguous and ambivalent, fastening on some of the most cogent and disturbing issues in the poet’s creativity, in an analogous way to Keats with *Lamia*.

Suddenly in the dark the voice, that no longer speaks through the external images visible in the daylight, is no longer veiled by them, and emerges to show the hardness of its internal nature. It prefers jealously guarding its decapitated Master’s Head to “sharing the Eider-Duck’s deep Pillow”: that is, to being his lover (the shared pillows), to dying-lying with him where he lies dead (“deep” – below earth; see also “King of Down” in L432).

But there is also a sense of the identity of the lady and the knight, first anticipated at their meeting in “identified” (recognised as mine/made identical); the owner was identified by My Life. And this, together with this other inextricable sense of their total opposition, antithesis, is continued in the next verse. The shape of “To foe of His I’m deadly foe” seems to both match foe against foe (the he-she complicity/collusion against the world), but also to match him against her: equally, as the “foe” is the foe, he is also one with her. “None stir the second time” – the subjunctive/imperative shadowing the plural indicative here (“stir”) functioning rather like a spell – picks up the image of his sleeping, even though it also refers to the foe being shot dead. And again, while that “Yellow Eye” and “Emphatic Thumb” are supposedly directed at the foe (strangely non-specific in the external world of the poem, and picking up the rhyming, defenceless “doe” of the first half), they seem directed at him too, because they pick up in a very part-object way, like nothing else here does, the ghost of her human body. That body, that should be lying with the knight, is instead glaring at him and pulling the trigger. And here again she seems identical with him in that gesture – it was he before who pulled it (“I speak for him”). The

Yellow Eye is another aspect or more evolved image of the earlier “cordial light”. The eye and the hand form one of the links to the letter passage, though they function slightly differently there; but the hand holds the pencil (or is another aspect of what the pencil also “is”, insofar as these are all images for something that we cannot otherwise see) that has that awful power to kill or to bring to light/illuminate. And here in the poem, too, we seem to stand on a knife-edge between life and death – which is truer, the apparent courtesy, or the apparent treachery? Is her smiling a deadly explosion or a communication? Does the good day give way to bad night or goodnight? Does she not become his lover because she is guarding him or because she is murdering him?

With these three figures, then – the knight, the lady, and the gun hovering between them as they interrelate in various constellations, we move into the riddle which elicits the growing question more explicitly: What are they? It seems to bear the same relation to the poem as the “for what is each instant but a gun” solution to the rest of the letter passage. But it is so enigmatic that it sends us back over the whole poem anyway. By the poem’s riddle the gun is attached, predominantly, to the “I”. Even the eye and thumb it takes on are infused with gunniness; and its voice is laid barer than in the first half of the poem. But something different happens in the riddle. She seems to be saying: Because I am made of metal that does not turn to dust like human flesh, I may live longer (the “may” seems to pick up the imperious aspect of the gun’s persona – I may, if I choose – and also a more vulnerable human aspect – there is a possibility that I shall – just as the Gun/My Life were destitute until the Owner passed.) But he simply must live longer (again there is both the vulnerability of a plea, and the brutality of a command – O please let him: or he will whether he likes it or not); because I can kill him (take wonderful trophies in regal places, like the doe-foe in mountainous scenery, if I am carried along by him; but commit shabby little murders if left to myself – standing around in dark corners under the pressure of my own emphatic thumb that perhaps turns against its identical part?). This seems to me similar to the (poet’s) pencil that has awful power to shoot off explosive little messages even if it is not guided by a master, and how terrible that can be – and nobody arrests (puts a stop to) it!/even if nobody should arrest it (take it up to use it). This is an instance where Dickinson exploits mood variation, here using an indica-

tive where one would expect a subjunctive. She very often exploited the inverse in later work. And that is a great power. But I cannot die (partly, I lack a greater power - “dying” perhaps being the epitome of human qualities; she may be powerful, but she is not feeling – she can guard her Master’s Head, but she cannot share his bed. And this picks up the plea-aspect of “he must live”, because He is more humane than “I”; the pencil without the hand is worse than nothing). But another aspect of the statement in its context is the reiteration of the gun’s blind force and indestructibility: my only capacity is to kill; also, I will never die, so if left to myself, I will just stand around neglected in dark corners, potentially murderous to no purpose. I need the Master, to come into the world, and I need the Master (whatever he “is”) to go on creating constructively (killing constructively? It seems to walk a fine line). This seems to me the more humane voice underlying the predominant gun image at the end of the poem. Its brutality is undermined by its ultimate concession of dependence on the knight, indeed its will to be dependent, and the implicit praise of humane values. If it is true, as I think, that this poem is an allegorical demonstration of the creative process, it does seem to say that any art, any expression, is in some sense inevitably an act of violation, and the artist is constrained to fundamentally distinguish between, and come to terms with – perhaps at great cost – different qualities of destructiveness. These seem to me issues currently being investigated very centrally in certain areas of psychoanalysis today.

There are many points of contact between the poem and the letter. An important one is, I suggest, the pencil (in reality not divisible from its hand) and the gun (in reality not divisible from the lady). They are both eternal and will outlive the hand that moves them (in their inhuman aspect), and this eternity may be related to the eternity/universality of art. They both create shapes, that eyes outside them (and their own) see, and these shapes have great beauty or terrible beauty. I refer particularly to the second and third verses of the poem and suggest that there is a parallel between the “eyes that can see at a distance”, the mountains, the sun on the valley, and Vesuvius’ mighty eruption. (She still wrote of “cordial mountains”, and “speechless mountains”, in L948:1884 and L1000:1885 respectively.) Perhaps in this sense, the moving from the instructed hand (in the prose passage) to the inhuman “pencil” (why not repeat “hand” for example) is

a similar technique, or at least a parallel movement in the language, to the poem's oscillating between Gun and Lady – is a description of an inhuman force that takes over (is?) the act of creation or destruction, that can kill or save whoever is at the receiving end (even the hand that makes it “go off”), and that does not care, once the fuse has been lit and the creation is on its way, any more than the event of birth stops because it knows the mother's life may be in danger. But somewhere, both in the poem and the prose, beyond the gun and beyond the pencil (of the artist), there is a force that is caring, as it were, about what happens. And it seems to me the caring lies in the ambiguities: for example, in the letter (it is true, probably written 20 years later), while Dickinson is saying that the pencil's power cannot be denied and is external, she is also saying, on one level, “Why isn't anybody stopping it?” In the poem, it is the lady's human voice that emerges, to remain, beyond the invincibility of the gun.

There is also a link between the letter's “unloaded gun” (presumably an “instant” not yet belonging to anybody's precise life and so having no specific import), that goes off by being touched by a letter (either creating a letter, a shape; or receiving a letter – the grammar holds both possibilities), and the lady-gun (the loaded life – the instant in a specific context) being touched by her knight, her owner, so that she talks and smiles, “goes off”.

What they both, then, seem to be depicting is a creative or destructive force that is objective and autonomous, but becomes harnessed into a hand (the Master – or Lady – of the poem? The letter writer or receiver?) that will use it either to create or destroy, or both perhaps in some more complex constellation; but whatever it does, it does it both to itself and to its object. Still, the event and its determining quality seem to lie in the kind of relationship between the parts.

Conclusion

Much has been said about Dickinson's personal rebellion against her father-figure, the male literary tradition, against her Puritan religious tradition, and all this undoubtedly has truth in it. But it leaves an overall view of her, today, in line with her dependent “best little girl”/bad little girl masquerading persona, and this is quite misleading really. It seems to me that the influence of the political spirit of the age in her context, her

wider-embracing sense of national identity and history, the courageous effort of her passionate integration of the mother and father figures into her maturer mentality and sexuality, her intellectual capacity to confront and assimilate new forms of knowledge current to her era, her understanding of method in attaining meaningful knowledge, has been very much underestimated in appreciating the forceful breadth of her work. Because she made so little fuss about it, and mastered her art so superbly, she held out in seeming – for at least a hundred years – artless.

Richard Sewell's prediction that "we will become increasingly aware of the toughness and sinew of her poetry, its challenge to our understanding" (1963) seems right; that "far from the little figure of frustrations and renunciations and regrets, we will come to see her as a poet of great strength, courage and singleness of purpose". Dickinson was a "stander and waiter", like Milton in his blindness, or like Herder teaching Goethe in his "semi-blindness in a darkened room". She followed and exemplified the principles of European Romantic aesthetics, current amongst the Weimar philosophers, which then found their way into English literature when picked up (and perhaps transformed) by Coleridge. Time and again her poems demonstrate an observant but receptive "flooding" (the "naïf" phase) with an intermingling of self by the phenomena, a subject-object non-differentiation, followed by an active sustaining of the impact, reflecting-on and feeling-into the subject, learning by practice how to respond to it adequately via the medium available (the honing of technique) (the "sentimentalische" phase), until finally, essence or individuality begins to imbue and become "ideal" art in the sense of containing an ideational pattern that reveals as it discovers. [Genre transformation?] The particular becomes the universal; the poet speaks to the human condition by means of the very idiosyncrasy of her symbol-formation. Emily Dickinson is herself the Loaded Gun whose words, like Shakespeare's sonnet, have the power to fire an "instant" of our lives into significance, the "whole area of life or of death".

Appendix 1 by Meg Harris Williams

In line with the argument of Morag's thesis that Dickinson's genius consists not in removing herself from intellectual and poetic tradition, but rather

in transforming it by means of wrestling with The Symbolic (“great bewildering metaphor”), I append here a note on some other poetic echoes which resonate within the poem.

The poem both is, and is about, one of those instants which is seized and its significance “identified”. As such it recalls Wordsworth’s “spots of time” in *The Prelude*, in particular those dialogues with the mountains and their echoes. In

Every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply –

we recall “the shouts we sent/ Made all the mountains ring”, or

every icy crag
Twinkled like iron, when the distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy ...

– passages in which the presence of the mountains (their echoes and enveloping shadows) seems to engulf the child and then through a break or chasm to allow a meaningful strain to penetrate, organising the experience into “the types and symbols of Eternity,/ Of first and last and midst and without end”.

In Dickinson’s sunlight flooding over the valley we recall Wordsworth’s sun “lay his beauty on the morning hills”. The seminal flow of “let its pleasure through” occurs after the ambiguous “do I smile”:

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –

– itself recalling the creator of Blake’s *Tyger*:

Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

– and its darker aspects are gathered back into the Yellow Eye, the sun’s rays focussed back into their source with its hint of inhumanity (Blake’s ‘In what distant deeps or skies Burnt the fire of thine eyes’). Combining the Blake and Wordsworth brings out the ambiguous qualities of the gun’s power, a power which is in visual terms both female (eye) and male (thumb). Instead of the caressing movement of “lay his beauty on the morning hills”, she has

On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –

A line whose rhythm is itself an “emphatic Thumb”, strict in its “fearful symmetry”: “I-ley-yel-Eye”. The symmetrical sounds here express an identification, equivalent to (and echoing) the word “identified” in the first verse. There the gun was identified by its owner, or with its owner, by means of a hand being placed upon it so that they became one body; here the gun is identifying its prey, the doe-foe, clinched within its sights. It has “impelled shapes to eyes at a distance”, a pencil with a “life-warrant or death-warrant”, the power of poetry which Emily Dickinson described as “the top of my head taken off”.

It is at this moment of apparent power that the gun’s impotence is revealed. In the first part of the poem, the “I” was the passive partner, “carried away”; in the later part, responding to its new usefulness, the “I” appears to be the active element, no longer standing in corners but guarding its master’s head. In its unity, fused with the lover-figure, the gun forgets it is merely an instrument of a spirituality beyond itself – not only the pencil but also the hand that holds it is merely a container:

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created ...?

(compare Keats, “when this warm scribe my hand is in its grave...”).

Ultimately the forced identification between the spirit and the instrument is reluctantly relinquished:

For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die –

As the thumb slips from the trigger a new concept is created; we move with the rhyme from “I-Eye” to “I-die”.

There are also echoes of *Antony and Cleopatra* in the central stanzas of the poem – in the giant-like “Vesuvian face” we see the lovers’ stature, and in “at Night – our good Day done”, we hear

Unarm, Eros, the long day’s task is done
And we must sleep,

and

Finish, good lady, the bright day is done
And we are for the dark.

Now these echoes help to modulate the end of the poem to its humanistic conclusion. The “power to die”, as distinct from merely being extinguished, is seen to be inseparable from the power to love. This modulation marks the end of the creative ‘instant’ which is the poem itself. The poem is the symbol, not the gun. The symbol is the dance, not the dancer – a hunt for the doe. Now the dance is over, the mesh of pencil-lines lightly held by the hand lightly created, a new shape to our eyes (“I’s”) comprising the arena of life and death.

Appendix 2 – more readings of Emily Dickinson poems by Morag Harris²

The following two poems, both of which I consider as being in her “late” phase and among her most beautiful, show Dickinson’s understanding of the aesthetic path traced by Schiller.³ The struggle to intensify and deepen relationship to, but to delimit tyrannical meddling with the object, is brilliantly fathomed and played out in the “Master” letters. And the poems, also, demonstrate her confrontation with this need to stop coveting the object but to achieve an aesthetic distance from it, which at the same time means to more totally assimilate it, in the “supreme agitation and utter repose” of Schiller’s description.

I cannot Live with You –
It would be Life –
And Life is over there -
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to –
Putting up
Our Life – his Porcelain –
Like a Cup

Discarded of the Housewife –
Quaint – or Broke –
A newer Sèvres please –
Old Ones crack –

2 The above is extracted from Morag Harris’s paper “Who is this Schiller?’ – Coleridge’s Transmission of the Development of Aesthetic Theory and Mode between Europe and America”.

3 Morag’s PhD research was intended to demonstrate ED’s awareness of the Romantic tradition in aesthetics and its practical effect on the evolution of her poetic language.

I could not die – with You –
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down –
You – could not –

And I – Could I stand by
And see You – freeze –
Without my Right of Frost –
Death's privilege?

Nor could I rise – with You –
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus' –
That New Grace

Glow plain – and foreign
On my homesick Eye –
Except that You than He
Shone closer by –

They'd judge Us – How –
For You – served Heaven – You know,
Or sought to –
I could not –

Because You saturated Sight –
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise –

And were You lost, I would be –
Though My Name
Range loudest
On the Heavenly fame –

And were You – saved –
And I –condemned to be
Where You were not –
That self – were Hell to Me –

So We must meet apart –
You there – I – here –
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are – and Prayer –
And that White Sustenance Despair.

(Poem 640; conjectured written c.1862)

“I cannot live with you” (the “cannot” reminds of the “completely beaten – man is nought” aspect of Goethe’s and Schiller’s descriptions) at first blush tempts one to read the whole poem as a story about a tragically unattainable love – “spasmodic”, self-pitying poetry of the sort that women were ridiculed for writing in Dickinson’s time and context. In fact it seems to be instead to be – rather like Coleridge’s verse letter on so-called “dejection” – a demonstration of how to *sustain* aesthetic relationship to the object, not rushing into it and not being overwhelmed by it. Opposing distinctions work the first nine stanzas, that “wrestle” like the faculties in Schiller’s images, yet as they do so, they maintain relationship through the “Shelf” image (so like her “Door” images elsewhere – a sort of membrane signifying meeting and parting, Heaven and Hell). Until in the tenth stanza there is that line that in its ambiguity puts the lovers together, almost imperceptibly unites them momentarily in:

And were you lost, I would be –

Beautifully for once the opposites fail to oppose each other so unequivocally – there is a sort of slip towards combining the senses of “I would be lost too” and “I would exist/survive/remain”. As if to say, the one thing she would do together with him – instead of opposing, wrestling – would be to get “lost”, which is also interesting in its distinction from “die” in stanza 4, and again, seems to refer to the “nought” of the aesthetic state

when aesthetic vision is attained at the cost of relinquishing every desire to manipulate the object, to damage its freedom of “self-exposition”.

Compare this to the following poem:

This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life
I mention it to you,
When Sunrise through a fissure drop
The Day must follow too.

If we demur, its gaping sides
Disclose as 'twere a Tomb
Ourself am lying straight wherein
The Favourite of Doom.

When it has just contained a Life
Then, Darling, it will close
And yet so bolder every Day
So turbulent it grows

I'm tempted half to stitch it up
With a retaining Breath
I should not miss in yielding, though
To Him, it would be Death –

And so I hear it big about
My Burial – before
A Life quite ready to depart
Can harass me no more –

(Poem 858; c.1864)

I would suggest that what easily seems a “happier” poem on a literal reality plane – Schiller’s ‘raw material’ level – is in fact doing simply the same thing: sustaining the aesthetic relationship of subject and object (or subject-subject, really) through the medium of the poetic form. It is irrelevant whether the lovers are thought to live apart or together or have contractual

vows or not; the “material” is “consumed” in the Ideal art form; it is of no interest at this stage of transformation into symbolic meaning of a higher order. The “shelf” of the other poem is in the symbol of the “Chasm” here, the “fissure”, the “gaping sides” that are a birth or a death, the image of the pregnancy that is about to end in the child/third element being born (close in significance to the “white sustenance” of poem 640), with the undeniable possibility of the mother’s death in childbirth that she seems able, however, to bear to risk (she has the child for love of him). Her own factual life is ‘nought’ – and yet everything – in the constellation of feeling. The inner form of the language conveys the complexity of the emotional state breathtakingly subtly and economically, and it is typical of the quite stunningly packed yet elastic and versatile quality of Dickinson’s use of language in mature work.

Conclusion

Both Coleridge and Dickinson discuss the issue of one “word” or sign symbolizing multiple things and all their relationships. My guess is that the “telegraphic-hieroglyphic” mode that Coleridge and Dickinson were aiming for is analogous to Schiller’s vision of an “arrangement of dots... as hieroglyph of the human figure ... the psyche having the same geometrical regularity as the crystalline, inorganic form of the snowflake... an unchanging sameness of structure underlying all the variety of natural forms’ (as described by Elizabeth Wilkinson, *Plurality*, p.188). A similar image is used by Dickinson in Poem 216: “Safe in their alabaster chambers.../Soundless as dots on a disc of snow”. This crystalline arrangement settles around a “naïf” phase when a genuinely new, “great bewildering idea” tries to “break in on our minds” (as Susanne Langer describes it). It has the most potential for netting the most ‘new information’ crammed in to the most totally containing space. It is where the impact of subject and object takes place. As Coleridge puts it: “As soon as the human mind is intelligibly addressed by any outward medium, exclusive of articulate Speech, so soon does *Art* commence.” The “actual manner of combining” can never be fathomed:

Deity will see to it
That you never do it –

but whose combining leaves traces afterwards everywhere, when its content has flooded our emotionality and perception like Dickinson's "loaded gun" or "pencil-in-a-hand-lightly-created".

Appendix 3 - Notes on Emily Dickinson's Poem 1284 by Meg Harris Williams⁴

Had we our senses
But perhaps 'tis well they're not at Home
So intimate with Madness
He's liable with them

Had we the eyes within our Head -
How well that we are Blind -
We could not look upon the Earth -
So utterly unmoved -

I imagine these words spoken by a woman in the midst of a mundane activity such as pastrymaking, looking out of the window at the spring (this poem seems to be amongst a group of spring poems). In the first verse she carries on working, occasionally glancing upwards; in the second she stops and looks out. The mundane activity is the background, even the groundwork, for the idea of something inexpressible (the mental "movement" of the last line) to break through. Something is going on out there which is disconnected from the mind of the speaker despite her appearing to be looking at it; she cannot gauge its meaning for her. She is "at home", dissociated (for the time being) from sense and madness, which far from being opposites are "intimate" and "liable" with one another, engaged in some mysterious sexual activity (suggested by the personification of Madness and the stirring of sensuality-sense).

The first verse is not only ungrammatical but does not *make sense*. The verb is left out – liable to do what? – the activity is left as a gap, an absence of knowledge, while "liable" becomes an adjective, suggesting a strange intermingling of conditions. "Liable" has its semi-legal implications of

⁴ Written for Alaknanda Samarth to suggest a context for her acted recital of the poem.

responsibility, as well as suggesting leaning-toward, mingling-with, pliable, in process of formation.

The second verse starts again, more sharply, less ambiguous, as if talking to children (“Have you got eyes in your head?” style), as if trying to reform the thought which had escaped or disintegrated. It’s in a way a poetic commonplace (“wake up and experience things”), driven home in a sensuous way (head-blind-unmoved), but it gets its impact from its relation to the first verse and the idea of the unformulable (what is this experience held by the Earth?). And we are reminded that the equipment is there – the eyes *are* within the Head though they may be switched off; the senses are not “at Home” but nevertheless, this sensebound vehicle *is* their home and like children they may come back any minute. The phrase “not at Home” indicates a temporary state. Perhaps because it has been confirmed and clarified it is now ready to be changed.