Li-Young Lee: A Post-Modern Poet Travels Back to Transcendentalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to prove that Li-Young Lee is best described as a post-modern Transcendentalist. The ideas presented in his poetry would rest comfortably beside Emerson and Thoreau, albeit with a more Eastern favor. His lyric poetry is grounded in the tensions of American lyric poetry between expressing the lofty optimism of the Transcendental and the difficult alienation of living in a Calvinist culture. First, the paper investigates whether the ideas embedded in his poetry can comfortably fit within the broad understanding of Transcendentalism crafted by Ashton Nichols. Then, the paper determines whether Lee’s works display the same tensions are other Transcendentalists working in the lyric form by using Elisa New’s framework from her book, *The Regenerative Lyric*. Finally, using Harold Bloom’s critical analysis from *The Anxiety of Influence*, the paper determines how Lee’s return to the Transcendentalists influence his aesthetic choices by comparing his works to one of his influences, Emily Dickinson. She is an appropriate choice for comparison since she was a poet whose ideas represented a departure from the Transcendentalists. A comparison of these two poets would heighten the differences between them, since the two were headed in opposite directions in artistic and philosophical terms. Using Bloom’s framework, Lee attempts to complete Dickinson’s ideas by bringing her back to a more traditional understanding of the transcendent. He tries to redirect Dickinson’s notions of the transcendental self by restoring it to a more traditional, if more Eastern, approach. Lee also attempts to complete Dickinson’s existentialism by endowing his poetry with an affirming attitude. In some respects, Lee manages to create more accessible, sentimental poetry that conveys a transcendental reality that is affirming in its messages. In other respects, Lee’s poetry falls short of Emily Dickinson’s powerful, fearless inquiry.
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CHAPTER 1
LI-YOUNG LEE

Intensity is the first characteristic one notices when observing Li-Young Lee. Watching him on YouTube, one can see a personal intensity in his work and himself. Lacking academic sophistication, his presence is like his works: passionate, simple, and freely flowing with memories and thoughts. It is no surprise that Li-Young Lee once had a panic attack when asked to discuss his works at a reading. He regained his composure by selecting a poem and reading out to the crowd.

It was in Rochester. Rochester had this hoity-toity thing called Rochester Artist Lectures – a bunch of wealthy people put out money and every month they have a writer come in and give a talk and meet the writer. They asked me to give a talk and I said no... They kept asking me. 'I don't want to do that, I don't want to write a lecture.' They said, 'You could intersperse with poems.'... So I went there. My talk was about how you can't talk about poetry, and I went into this seizure... Somebody in the audience said, 'Read a poem.' So I opened a book and started reading a poem, and I was fine.1

Shy, introspective and passionate, Li-Young Lee has quietly built his reputation as a poet over the last thirty years. As an observer of the human spiritual condition, his poems are meditations on the topics of love, death, family, and identity. Using poetry as his forum, Li-Young Lee writes in style that is sometime narrative, often lyric, frequently dreamlike and always personal.

Writing frequently at night due to attacks of insomnia, Li-Young Lee sits at his desk. He places pages in front of him. Sometimes these pages are blank; at other times, they are poems in progress. And, he waits. There is a Zen-like approach to his writing. Leaving his mind open to the experience of inspiration, the nights are sometimes productive. Other nights, the pages remain untouched after hours of waiting. However, Li-Young Lee believes in the discipline of sitting. One night’s emptiness may make space for another night’s inspiration.² For Li-Young Lee, the vocation of poet is attempt to capture in words a transcendental experience that every human being can access, but few choose.

Li-Young Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia as a son of a Chinese exile family in 1957. His father was briefly the personal doctor to Mao Tse-tsong before being exiled to Indonesia. Dr. Lee was instrumental in founding Gamaliel University, a Christian college. However, in 1958, the Indonesian Premier Sukarno began a crack down on the Chinese community in Indonesia, and Lee’s father spent eighteen months in jail.³ The family escaped to Hong Kong, where Dr. Lee ran a multi-million dollar business and was an evangelical preacher. During an argument with a business partner, Lee’s volatile father became so irate that he quit Hong Kong and moved his family to the United States in 1964. Eventually, he


³ Hannah Fischer, “Li-Young Lee,” in Postcolonial Studies @ Emory (Fall 2000. http://www.english.emory.edu/ Bahri/Lee.html (accessed February 25, 2012)). This website and The Heath Anthology of American Literature website (below) provided the general biographical information in this chapter.
settled his family in western Pennsylvania, studied at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and became a preacher in a small Presbyterian church till he died.\textsuperscript{4}

Li-Young Lee attended the University of Pittsburgh where he studied under Gerald Stern. Gerald Stern served as Lee’s mentor in helping him discover his passion for writing.

He was an undergraduate student at the University of Pittsburgh at that time – I think it was 1978 or 79 – and I was teaching a workshop in the graduate school, which I allowed him to sign up for. I remember that, with the exception of Lee, the students were writing a fairly low-keyed poem based on specific ‘domestic’ experiences where the ‘value’ of the poem consisted of persuading the reader of the truth – and significance – of the experience . . . What characterizes Lee’s poetry is a certain humility, a kind of cunning, a love of plain speech, a search for wisdom and understanding.\textsuperscript{5}

Lee published \textit{Rose}, his first book, in 1986 and has followed that with three more books of poetry, one autobiographical rememberance and a collection of interviews. For much of his career, he worked in a warehouse in Chicago to earn money for his wife and family. Lee is one of the few modern poets to have devoted himself to being a full time poet without accepting a teaching position for financial security.

While one should never assuming that an artist’s work is entirely biographical in nature, Li-Young Lee’s subject matter is frequently about his


father, wife and sons. For Li-Young Lee, his poems frequently start on a narrative level set within domestic life and, then, pivots into a lyric. These works are meditations that examine the spiritual meaning of life underneath everyday life. One can see the modern tone in Lee’s writing in its existential attitudes and post-modern familiarities. And yet, a reader senses that Lee is ultimately returning to a more familiar terrain in American history. His poetry seeks connections, a universal self in which all life is a part. It is a worldview that assumes that the observer, the poet, has the ability to transcend the material world and touch this greater reality. Lee’s work shares a common approach with the Transcendentalists in that he believes in a universal, divine power; he emphasizes the psychological rather than logical belief system; and he has an intense focus on the personal power of transformation. Like the Transcendentalists, Lee finds “the doctrine of human individuality as both self-transcending and self-asserting – as both acknowledging its oneness with and obligation to something higher than itself, and yet ever cherishing its uniqueness and independence as a distinct being.”

Lee is often classified as a Chinese-American poet. While his writings are frequently about his experiences as an immigrant and content elements that can be traced to Chinese literature, it is his focus on the personal relationship with the divine that gives his works an American Transcendental grounding also. In fact, seeing Lee as an American writer seems more of a natural fit. He has admitted that he has long ago given up reading Chinese poetry in Mandarin and relies on

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English translations. Lee has only worked in English throughout his career and has never attempted to directly incorporate Asian poetics into his writings in the same manner as other poets like Gary Snyder.

Emily Dickinson may seem an odd counterpoint to use as a comparison to Li-Young Lee. However, it is in their differences that one makes the most fruitful conclusions. Dickinson was a poet whose works reflect a movement away from the Transcendentalists. She presaged the modern existential world of the twentieth century. Lee can be seen as a poet returning to the land that Dickinson departed. Dickinson is also appropriate because Lee often cites her as an influence for his own work. Her writing inspires Lee, and yet, his aims are distinctly different. The intent of this paper is to examine the common heritage that these two writers have in American Transcendentalism and, then, see how their ideas lead them to make different aesthetic choices in their works.
Li-Young Lee has said, “As a poet, you just want to be known as a poet. You want to be shoulder to shoulder with Whitman, Dickinson, and all the other poets . . . that a lot of art by Asian American is about being Asian-American . . . There may be certain things about us that are unique, but ultimately all our experiences are universal. We have to transcend.”¹ This quote should not be interpreted as Lee devaluing the distinctive experiences of minorities or immigrants. Rather the line shows the overarching importance that Lee places on the common humanity of all peoples. The word “transcend” is very important to understanding Li-Young Lee. His works clearly explore the metaphysical, spiritual aspects of the human experience. While his background is Chinese, his transcendental beliefs often have a Hindu or yogic context. Without adopting any formal religious affiliation, Lee seems to have developed his own version of New Age thinking that blends these Hindu ideals with an emphasis on American individualism. Lee’s starting point is the universal self, an idea that sounds reminiscent of the Indian Brahman when he describes it:

Not everything we write on that page has the same vibrations. If we write an anecdote, the vibrations don’t go out as far. If we write a story it might go deeper. What I listen for in narrative is such a wide hum that it encompasses all of our story. There’s only one story. Every story we tell is telling that one story. I don’t know what that one story is. One will never know it. We only hear parts of this great story. When I’m trying to write a narrative it isn’t the

¹ Cooper and Yu, "Art Is Who We Are," 62.
specific narrative I’m interested in. Even though there’s a strange magic that happens. The more specific you get, the closer to the hum you get.²

Embedded in this quote are several assumptions that show that Lee has much in common with an earlier set of American writers, the Transcendentalists. He clearly believes that the individual has the ability to experience the divine through close observation of their personal life. No church or religious dogma is needed to intercede on an individual’s behalf to make this connection possible. In addition, Lee feels that each person has his or her own individual path to this connection. The way Lee describes the act of writing as an act of discovery also shows that Lee shares the Transcendentalists’ love of intellectual engagement defined as a journey toward self-revelation. Over the course of his career, Lee has tried to remove any label that many critics have tried to put on his work. In fact, his poetry mostly appears in collections of Asian American poetry. Taking the preferences of editors and Lee’s own personal rejection of any labels aside, it may be best to see him as a poet working in the Transcendental tradition. A tradition that started with Emerson and Li-Young Lee may be this generation’s current touch-bearer.

If Li-Young Lee’s ultimate goal is to create meaningful art that addresses the universal concerns of humanity, it is unavoidable to examine the aesthetics of how his work makes that attempt. Using several critical frameworks and

definitions, this paper views Lee within the context of the American Transcendentalist movement to assess how his poetry fits within its broad tradition, to evaluate how his works contain the inherent tensions that lyric poetry faces when incorporating transcendental ideas and compare of Lee’s work to a selection of Emily Dickinson’s poems, an acknowledged hero of Lee’s.

This paper’s analysis of Li-Young Lee’s poetic ideas will address three issues:

- Relying on Ashton Nichols’s definition of American Transcendentalism, assess how Li-Young Lee’s poetic ideas fit within the tradition.

- Using as Elisa New’s historical literary analysis in *The Regenerative Lyric*, determine how Li-Young Lee’s works fit within a tradition of American lyric poetry that struggles between the ideals of transcendentalism and a Calvinist culture.

- Employing Harold Bloom’s critical framework in *The Anxiety of Influence*, evaluate how well Li-Young Lee’s poetry responds to one of his poetic influences by comparing several of his works with those of Emily Dickinson.

By using this process, this paper will determine how well situated Li-Young Lee’s ideas and art fit within the American tradition of transcendentalism.

Given that Li-Young Lee writes in a lyric style that tends to eschew complex poetic schemes in favor of straightforward verse, it would seem of little benefit to analyze his works from a highly rhetorical or formal critical perspective.

Poets who take personal identity as a unified and subjective category produce lyric or narrative statements that articulate (join together) their own experience in the subjective mind’s eye and they articulate (express) that experience to a wider audience. Whether the expression is confessional, formal, or political – a meditation on self, on poetic form, or on political arrangements of
society – so-called expressive poetics takes for granted the lyric subject, the givenness of the object of reflection, and the reliability of language.³

Li-Young Lee’s use of the personal lyrical style greatly enhances the transparency and accessibility of his ideas. The use of lyric poetry both reinforces the strength of his poetic voice, and also leads to an aesthetic dilemma in trying to use the form as a forum to advance transcendental ideas.

American Transcendentalism is a broad title whose membership is often the subject of debate. In this paper, the term Transcendentalism will refer to the American literary movement of the 19th century that was primarily based in New England. The German transcendentalist philosophers and Asian transcendental religions will clearly identified as being specifically outside the tradition this paper. While membership and classification of Transcendentalists is subject to a wide variety of critical interpretation, it is generally acknowledged that the father of Transcendentalism is Ralph Waldo Emerson. His teachings widely influenced the writers and artists of the American Renaissance.

Like most important movements in intellectual history, American Transcendentalism did not spring fully grown from the heads of a few individuals. In fact, it had essential roots in earlier European, and even non-Western, ways of thinking. German idealists, Swiss educators, British and Continental Romantics, Neo-Platonists, and Christian mystics all contributed streams of thought to the philosophy that would shape the Transcendental movement.⁴


For purposes on this paper, the critical definition for American Transcendentalism will be the one created by Ashton Nichols in his course, *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement*. In general, Nichols defines the Transcendental movement as having a series of broad characteristics, which include:

- A desire to reconcile science and logic with religion,
- A tendency to draw on the theological ideas as of Calvinism and Unitarianism and the idealism of Plato,
- An emphasis on the individual divine force within each person, a force with enough vitality to create individual and communal change.\(^5\)

The most important element of this definition in regards to Li-Young Lee is whether he is an idealist, how he responds to a Calvinist, deterministic culture, and whether he believes in a divine force capable of personal transformation. The paper will focus on how his belief in a divine personal connectedness rejects binary definition of social roles to create an inclusive, organic and personally affirming vision of life.

*Elisa New’s The Regenerate Lyric* provides a historical framework to examine Lee’s modern poetry within the context of his American predecessors. It is New’s contention that American lyric poets struggle with their Emersonian legacy and that American poetry often engages in a counter-dialogue with its own transcendental leanings. New defines the original source for her approach in *The Regenerate Lyric* as being derived from the critic Yvor Winters. “Winter’s insight,

\(^5\)Ibid., 6.
that American poetry is finally not about linguistic power but about ‘human isolation in a foreign universe,’ assumes the ongoing influence of an experiential Calvinism not so easily dislodged by Unitarian, Transcendentalist or Romantic forces.”

New’s insight is that Emerson and other transcendentists were successful at prose and essays; however, their approach failed in the American lyric poem. In fact, she posits that the American poem became home to religious and spiritual yearnings within American artistic traditions, particularly when those yearnings dealt with the mysterious and inadequate nature of humanity. The fact that Lee shares many of the ideals and aims of the Transcendentalists is insufficient evidence to ground him within that tradition. A pressing concern is whether one can identify whether Lee’s work shows the same tensions and thematic currents that the poems of the Transcendentalists and their predecessors contain. New’s approach illustrates a way to detect if Lee’s works fit within the tradition by identifying a certain tension between the transcendental ideals and their application in the lyric form of poetry. This tension shows that lyric poets cannot completely bury their feelings of alienation and disconnection in order to exalt the transcendance of the human spirit. Transcendentalists will be trapped between their lofty aim of describing the divine within and the emotionally powerful failure to achieve that goal. In New’s framework, American lyric poetry

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will express these feelings of disconnection in terms of its Calvinist cultural history.

Growing up beside the mainstream tradition we call Emersonian was another tradition, call it anti-Emersonian, that articulated itself in terms Emerson did not fit us to recognize. Theological in character – at times nearly scholastic; at others, self-consciously heretical, as opposed to merely antionian – this tradition represents the virtual abandonment of Emerson’s poetics by the very poets he saw as his culture’s new priests. Not only do these poets find language itself structurally resistant to that ‘transcendence’ recent revisions of Matthiessen have pronounced all but defunct, they also find Emerson’s tenet of deferral – what he called ‘transition’ – equally inconsistent with the realization of the poem. Rather, Beginnings and Ends claim their interest and respect; they cannot do without the Judgement Day; they cannot imagine a world without shame; they cannot forget the prohibition against idols. Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Lowell, and Frost write poems fruitfully exercised by all those appurtenances of the Logos Emerson forswore: purity and the Incarnation, idolatry and God’s unnameability; awe, dread, and the lure of the Nations; sin, Doom, and the Fortunate Fall. Even as these poets try out the Emersonian ‘power’ in the poems we have long called major, they interrogate that power in poems we neglect.7

Li-Young Lee states that “we must transcend,” yet it is his meditative investigations into the limits of human understanding that bring power to his works. His works frequently focus on the finite nature of human relations and the sense of loss, a feeling of disconnection from a previous, more perfect self or unity.

All art to me is yogic practice. That is, yoga in the sense that it means ‘link,’ or ‘yoke.’ What are we yoking ourselves to? Our true nature. Our original nature. And our original nature is an actual body, that this body is only a late copy of. So for me to believe in this body is to believe in a shadow, a dream. I can only believe in the

voice that comes from an earlier body. And that body happens to be much larger than this one. It's much larger, darker, because it's beyond seeing. We get glimpses of that body sometimes in dreams. When the light of mind falls on that body we see the feeder of that body, but here's a body beyond the dream body, which is even greater than the dream body.8

Instead of celebrating the transendental nature of man in the manner of Emerson, Lee's prespective on the metaphysical focuses on humanity’s lost sense of self from its transcendent state. One of the questions this paper seeks to answer is the degree in which Lee's work aligns or fits within the tension New identifies as the struggle between American poets' Emersonian father and their Calvinist society.

Even though Lee's father was a preacher and Lee was immersed in Biblical teaching as a young boy, it is not necessary for Lee to be Christian to enter into an ongoing cannonical dialogue between American literature and its background Calvinist culture. “One does not have to insist on the existence of a unified national mind or character to recognize that ideas develop within a cultural context and that such development is often both repetitive and culmulative. And it is also, at least in the present case, responsive.”9 Lee's poems continuously explore the issues of falleness and alienation from the universal in a way that may make his poetry accessible to New's critical framework.

Since Li-Young Lee’s interviews and works rarely reveal the source influences of a specific poem, the suitable framework to analyze Lee is Harold

8 Dearing and Graber, "Working to Hear the Hum," 88.

Bloom’s approach as defined in *The Anxiety of Influence*, which takes each poet’s work as a response to its predecessors as an anxiety of writing within the canon itself. He has had a lifelong relationship with poetry in English and he was formally schooled in creative writing. The notion that his work is either consciously or unconsciously a response to his predecessors is a logical starting point for analyzing Lee’s works. “The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel, or play. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts. An authentic canonical writer may or may not internalize her or his work’s anxiety, but that scarcely matters: the strongly achieved work is the anxiety.”¹⁰ For Bloom, poets are inherently haunted by their predecessors in Canon. The very inspiration that the Canon provides by definition creates an anxiety in the poet in terms of how to create works that match or exceed in inspiration. “Poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better. The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images.”¹¹ Bloom suggests that poets adopt different strategies in their attempts to carve new aesthetic ground as a response to the anxiety of previous influence. He categorizes these strategies in the following techniques:

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Six Revisionary Ratios

1. Clinamen, . . . A poet swerves away from his precusor, by so reading his precursor’s poem as to execute a clinamen in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem . . .

2. Tessera, . . . A poet antithetically ‘completes’ his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough . . .

3. Kenosis, . . . The later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, but this ebbing is so performed in relation to a precursor’s poem-of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is not as absolute as it seems.

4. Deamonization, . . . The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor . . .

5. Askesis, . . . The later poet does not, as in kenosis, undergo a revisionary movement of emptying, but of curtailing; he yields up part of his own human and imagingative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor, and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an askesis too . . .

6. Apophrases, . . . The later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor’s work that at first we might believe the wheel has become full circle, and that we are back in the later poet’s flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios . . .

By using this framework, the paper will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of his works as compared to one of Lee’s acknowledged influences, Emily Dickinson,

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12 Ibid., 15-16.
and draw conclusions as to how well Lee’s brand of transendentalism fits within the American tradition.

In interviews, Li-Young Lee has conceded that Bloom’s central thesis that poets respond to earlier poets within the Canon is a starting point. While Bloom limits his argument that a great artist responds to just the Canon by creating an original response or an intentional misreading to her or his predecessors, Lee adopts a more Platonic approach by believing that ultimately all great artists are dealing with the same issues, just from different perspectives.

So I would say that, yes, ultimately, all of us when we write poetry go through a period where our dialogue is with the canon – with Eliot, with Dante, with whom – but if a poet doesn’t discover a dialogue that is more urgent than that, that is more personal, that is more anxiety-ridden than that, that has a greater tension and whose goal is a greater harmony: if we don’t realize that, we’re always going to be middle-shelf poets whose dialogue is with the canon.\(^\text{13}\)

While the two perspectives overlap, Bloom’s approach is limited to a secular frame while Lee focuses on a transcendental quality that, for him, resides in a metaphysical reality that all true art aims to reveal.

Lee creates his works out of a spiritual tension or anxiety that fits well within Bloom’s notion that poets start from a position of anxiety in relation to their predecessors. The scope of his anxiety is much broader than Harold Bloom’s, since he ultimately seeks to respond to a transcendent voice instead of a human one. “I had an interest in spiritual lineage connected to poetry – through Eliot,

Donne, Lorca, Tu Fu, Neruda, David the Psalmist. But I’ve realized that there is still the culture. Somehow an artist has to discover a dialogue that is so essential to his being, to his self, that it is no longer cultural or canonical, but a dialogue with your truest self. Your most naked spirit.”14 This quote may reveal that Lee’s strategy toward his follow poets within Bloom’s context is deamonization. He attempts to complete his predecessor’s work in terms of redirecting or restoring the predecessor’s ideas into his transcendent worldview. By choosing Emily Dickinson, this paper will evaluate how his strategy of deamonization has worked by comparing several of his works to several sections of her work.

This paper will begin by situating Lee’s within the context of the American Transcedental tradition and determine whether his works can be characterized as fitting within that tradition. Then, the thesis will explore whether Lee’s modern poetry is responsive to Elisa New’s contention that American lyric poetry is always struggling with the tension between pure transcendental ideals and the inherent human realities of alienation. Lastly, the paper will compare Li-Young Lee’s poems to Emily Dickinson’s works in an attempt to understand how Li-Young Lee has responded to her work as a poet within critical framework. Whether Li-Young Lee attempts to bring certain idea’s of Emily Dickinson to full completion in his work or whether his attempts to redirect her poetry in a new direction will illustrate how he fits within the field of American Transendental poetry.

14 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
LI-YOUNG LEE AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

To determine how well Li-Young Lee fits within the tradition of Transcendentalism, the analysis will consist of two parts: assessing Lee’s aims as a poet in creating a personal expression of the universal self and evaluating if the poetry itself expresses the same tensions and cultural dialogues as other Transcendental poets. The first part of this analysis is the focus of this chapter with the second concern being addressed in the next.

To order to see how Lee’s goals as a poet align with the Transcendentalists, an analysis of Lee against several key elements of Ashton Nichols’ definition of the movement will be helpful. The definition that Nichols uses for Transcendentalism is from his course *Emerson, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists*. It has three relevant tenants: an attempt to reconcile scientific and religious thought, idealism in the face of a deterministic Calvinist culture, and a belief in personal transformation. Arising out of a Universalist environment, Transcendentalists attempted to reconcile the emerging Enlightenment science with a personal approach to religion. Transcendentalists were always idealists, rejecting the philosophy of John Locke in favor of German idealists and Plato. This idealism is the core of their philosophical approach. Lastly, the Transcendentalists believed in the individual’s ability to transform his or her self through a personal connection to the divine within. In each of these categories, Lee’s works tend to align themselves as modern descendants of this early American tradition.
On the first point, Lee seems to sidestep many of the issues of the modern relativity simply fitting the empirical world as a subset of the spiritual one. Lee’s worldview neatly reconciles scientific and religious thought by believing that the empirical is an expression of the metaphysical. When Lee discusses secular problems, he links the root cause back to his contention that the universe is a single self. “If we look at the earth, we think, There’s the earth and there’s me. Well, the earth is teaching us differently. Whatever you put into the earth, you put into your body . . . There’s only one body; there’s only one mind.”¹ As a matter of philosophy, many empirical philosophers would dispute Lee’s central premise as fundamentally flawed in seeing causation in the science of relativity. In this respect, Lee is similar to the Transcendentalists that rejected the empiricism of the 19th Century. “Locke, and through him the Scottish ‘Common Sense’ philosophers, dominated the schools and seminaries of the early National period. If Transcendentalists were to be able to justify their cardinal point – that through Reason all men had immediate access to the Divine – the older philosophy had to be dethroned.”² Lee shares this need to reject the idea that individuals do not have access to the divine. From a philosophical perspective, Lee’s works share all of the strengths and weaknesses of the Transcendentalists. In addition, Lee’s response to this debate between the empirical and the metaphysical is an answer that the Transcendentalists would have found comforting:

¹ Dearing and Graber, “Working to Hear the Hum,” 92.

So you’re creating value when you write a poem. And I mean material value! They’ve proven that on the physical scale, that when a butterfly flies across Tiananmen Square, it affects the weather in Florida. In minute and inevitable ways, everything is connected. In the invisible realm—which has more reality than the visible realm because the visible is dying and without materiality—when somebody writes a poem, when they open themselves up to the universe mind and that universe mind is suddenly present in the visible world, the poet isn’t the only one that gets the benefits. Universe mind comes down and the whole mind is a little more pure.3

One can see that Lee seeks to incorporate rather than reject scientific reasoning into his worldview. However, this reconciliation reflects the same compromise that the Transcendentalists faced. Science is fitted as a subset of data into their higher idealism rather than the foundation of it, which is an empirical fallacy. Like the Transcendentalists, Lee does not successfully answer this contradiction. “Their [the Transcendentalists] belief that the clue to outer nature is always to be found in the inner world of individual psychology . . . Once the faculty of imagination is placed on a par with the faculty of reason, the writer as the primary exponent of the imagination acquires an importance in society as least equal to that of the scientist, the philosopher, and the theologian.”4 Lee and the Transcendentalists aim at communicating more psychological and spiritual ideals than the creation of a comprehensive philosophical system. It is this idealism where Lee’s shared heritage with the Transcendentalists is the strongest.

3 Marshall, “Riding a Horse That’s a Little Too Wild for You,” 141.

It is this paper’s contention that Lee’s idealism and belief in the divine self place him well within the characteristics of American transcendentalism. Lee’s poetry seeks to communicate a unity among human beings. As he has described it, “I feel that when a person writes poems they’re trying to hear a voice, or construct a voice, or discover a voice, or uncover a voice, that is not human, that includes the human . . . I think the mission of poetry is to impart a divinized voice.”

This belief in the unity of humanity is best seen when Lee’s poems undermine hierarchical structures and binary definitions, revealing the more ambiguous, organic whole underneath. It reveals the ideal of “allness” that Lee seeks to impart as an overarching content of his work.

Li-Young Lee is clearly influenced by the Eastern yogic ideals of the divine connectiveness of humanity. His idealism holds that the universal self makes itself known through authentic personal experience. The closer one draws toward an authentic personal self, the closer one becomes with this universal self. The true individual is not a social construction; it is a spiritual entity. No amount of cultural definition or hierarchical social status can provide true meaning or worth. Lee celebrates the ideal of an ethereal sense of true self that has its value from its connection to the universal whole:

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6 Ibid.
I always assumed we have no self. We go through, day-to-day, subpersonalities. I’m a father now, when I walk out of the house to visit my mother I’m a son, then when I’m speaking to you I’m a poet. Those are all sub-personalities. They are not eternal. There is a self, but it’s earlier than this, and it’s earlier than the subpersonalities that I walk through on a day-to-day basis, but the selflessness that I’m talking about is somehow extinguished and the nobody-hood is this larger body. Because it does not recognize any specific role – this larger body simply is, it’s pure voice, and that’s probably why I think that poetry is the instrument of that body more than any other art, because that body is pure voice, which you can’t see. But you can recognize it with your ear.7

Lee shares with the Transcendentalists the belief that human intuition has a special role as the tool able to recognize the true self. While the Transcendentalists incorporated Eastern ideas into their own to various degrees, the “notion of such universal divine inspiration – grace as the birthright of all – was the bedrock of the Transcendentalist movement.”8 In “The Cleaving”, Lee’s long poem that is reminiscent of Whitman, the climax of the poem is a set of corporal images in which Lee connects his idealism of the universal self to its often violent realities:

> Bodies eating bodies, heads eating heads  
> we are nothing eating nothing,  
> and though we feast,  
> are filled, overfilled,  
> we go famished.  
> We gang the doors of death.  
> That is, our deaths are fed  
> that we may continue our daily dying,  
> our bodies going  
> down, while the plates-soon-empty

7 Dearing and Graber, “Working to Hear the Hum,” 89.  
Lee's transcendence does not suffer from a lack of realism. He ingratiates his idealism with gritty images, often memories. This technique of using specific memories or personal stories to invoke a universal connection is a bedrock strategy for Lee. It allows his poetry to have an organic natural momentum without feeling that the idealism is forced or too abstract. It gives his work grounding while expressing his transcendentalism:

Thus, for all its violent eating and grotesque devouring, the metaphysics of 'The Cleaving' is Emersonain. The poet, furthermore, communes with his American literary forbears through the poem's celebratory mood, reminiscent of Walt Whitman and his brand of transcendentalism. Through 'The Cleaving,' Lee enters a dialogic relationship with Emersonian transcendentalism that is similar to the relationship between Whitman's poetry and Emerson's philosophy . . . While Whitman's poetry maintained a transcendentalist perspective that God is immanent in nature and in the human soul (encapsulated, for Emerson, in the rather disembodied notion of the Oversoul), his poetry departed from Emerson's transcendentalism in its language and philosophy of the body.10

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10 Jeffery F. L. Partridge, "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship: Li-Young Lee, Emerson, and Whitman at the Banquet Table," *Studies of the Literary Imagination* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 101, 104-126A.
Lee’s strategy of focusing on the suffering in the secular world allows him to communicate the abstract notion of the universal without falling into abstraction. It also allows Lee to subtly undermine any binary or hierarchical social structures and present his universalism as a natural conclusion to the poem.

This blending of universal and specific self illustrates how Li-Young Lee sees the world in terms of organic interdependency rather than as a series of binary relationships. This need to see the world in terms of a connected whole rather than a series of hierarchical power structures is a defining transcendental trait for Lee. He is often categorized as an ethnic poet. Unfortunately, one of the traditional fallacies of ethnocentric studies is to view an artist’s work in a binary fashion. Lee is either Chinese-in-America or he is American. This rigid approach to an immigrant’s work is crude and denies the artist the full ambiguity of their human experience.

The relationship between Asian American literature and mainstream America has frequently been identified in terms of Asian American literature’s resistance or subordination to mainstream America’s domination. Constrained by binary positions, and confined thematically and sociologically orientated approach, critics tend to evaluate individual texts and authors according to a predominant formula, that is, according to whether the texts demonstrate complicity with or resistance to hegemonic ideologies of assimilation. This critical approach overlooks the ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres, as well as the ways in which such interventions demonstrate a much more dynamic and complex relationship between Asian American and traditional European American literature.11

As a transcendentalist, Lee tries to create works that present a more challenging experience within the hierarchical frame of racism. His concern with the human experience is a rejection of a purely ideological approach to race relations. Lee fully acknowledges the difficulties of immigrant life while not imposing a narrow polemic ideology on the humanity of the experience. “Postmodernity problematizes traditional racial categories, meanings, and identities. It exposes race as being something that is not essential, but a construct. Of course, this is not to minimize the importance of race in our society, for it still plays a big role in how individuals are perceived, defined, and treated.”

Moving within a world of multiple labels – straight, Chinese, male, etc. – Lee’s work attempts at embracing the larger, more existential questions facing all humans. Essentially, as the critical world has adopted more post-modern approaches, it is possible to see Lee’s works in a multi-layered perspective that allows for more ambiguity to breath into the analysis, allowing the reader to approach his work in terms of identifying with the American canon and noting the additions he brings to it. “Ethnic authors may draw from cultural codes ‘alien’ to the codes of the established codes of the major literature within which they are writing. To put it in Harold Bloom’s terms, ethnic authors suffer from the same anxieties of influence as non-ethnic writers.”

While Lee has outspokenly said that he does not want his works to be

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labeled as ethnocentric, his biographic, linguistic and ethnic experience background are the setting for where he lets his transcendental ideas roam. Nothing in Li-Young Lee’s work attempts to disconnect him from his historical circumstances. If fact, understanding of how Lee uses his immigrant experience, his strategies to re-center English and his use of Chinese archetypes is essential to seeing his works within the American tradition of transcendent literature.

Lee’s most anthologized work, “Persimmons”, clearly illustrates this combination of working from the biographical, employing a destabilizing of mainstream hegemonic language and the use of traditional Chinese archetypes in an American context. Starting as a narrative and moving into a lyric, the poem grounds itself in Lee’s biographical history and, then, moves to a meditation on memory, love and language. In the opening stanzas, Lee begins to use language in a way that breaks down the linear story and opens the text up for creating the juxtaposition of emotional images.

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between persimmon and precision.
How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart.

... 

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a Chinese apple. Knowing
it wasn’t ripe or sweet, I didn’t eat
but watched the other faces.14

“Persimmons” and “precision” create alliterative connection that compared to the action of the text illustrate that knowledge of a word does not necessarily mean understanding the cultural context of the object. Lee opens the poem by suggesting that language and its underlying experience are subject to error on the part of the participants. The childhood pain at being singled out for difficulty with English, the love in trying to teach his Italian-American wife Chinese, memories of his parents, each is juxtaposed in the poem in order to thread a tissue throughout.

“The central image, persimmons, while allowing Lee a wide range of associative narratives, meditations, and descriptions, always pulls these associations back to its center, thus giving coherence to the disconnected incidents described in the poem.”15 The central image allows the poem to connect the experience together in a way that undermines normal linear experience. By first undermining conventional understanding, Lee is creating space for his transcendental worldview to seep into the poem.


On maybe its simplest level, the poem exposes the racism that Lee experienced as a child. Lee uses the irony of the authoritative American teacher telling students to eat the unripe “Chinese” apple to show how his difficulty with English is exceeded by his teacher’s ignorance of Chinese culture in general. “This pairing of ‘persimmon’ and ‘precision’ is not only about a remembered difficulty in distinguishing the two words as a child unfamiliar with the English language; it also draws attention to the arbitrariness of this distinction [i.e. a language’s assignment of phonemes to objects seems random] in the first place, and demonstrates the speaker’s proficient grasp of English as a language.”

Lee plays with the language, showing how to pick persimmons with precision and how “Fight was what I did when I was frightened,/fright was what I felt when I was fighting.”

“The first stanza provides a clear use of how the pressure to assimilate and the ever-lurking mechanisms of punishment for failure to do so find concrete manifestation in a space where the making of normative subjects and citizens is most effectively enacted – the classroom.”

Lee uses the beginning of this poem as a way of grounding the reader within the specific context of a young immigrant struggling to fit in. He does not submerge the emotional experience within his universalism. Lee allows the initial narrative to expand to

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17 Lee, Rose, 17.

allow the reader to identify with the distinct immigrant experience. “Yet even for those hyphenated Americans who are born here, language becomes a primary gauge by which the dominant culture determines whether one is fully ‘American’ or not. Through speaking ‘good enough English’ does not insure acceptance, not speaking it undeniably writes one off.”

19 The success of the poem is its ability to make the reader understand the particulars of this one story before hinting at a broader agenda.

However, Lee does not confine himself to a simple statement on racism. His goal is about language as a carrier of memory and how memories are clues to a greater reality. He links persimmons to words like “heart”, “sun”, and “ripe weight” in order to transform them into a thread linking the memories of family past and present. Lee opens the poem up to a series of memories invoking the fluid identity of the immigrant. The exchange between the speaker and Donna, the name of Lee’s wife, show how the immigrant and the native have a more ambivalent relationship than first suggested by the opening stanzas.

Donna undresses, her stomach is white. In the yard, dewy and shivering with crickets, we lie naked, face-up, face-down. I teach her Chinese. Crickets: chiu chiu. Dew: I’ve forgotten. Naked: I’ve forgotten. Ni, wo: you and me. I part her legs, remember to tell her she is beautiful as the moon.20

19 Ibid.
20 Lee, Rose, 17-19.
Lee undermines the hierarchical relationship between societies by showing how the two blend in easy and uneasy ways. “The speaker first suggests, perhaps shamefacedly, his detachment from his parents and their culture by embodying the source of his distraction in the figure of Donna, a white girl [and name of his real wife], (or woman), with whom he lies naked in the grass.”  

Unable to remember a native language, the speaker is no longer apart of his former culture and, yet, he may not completely belong to the current one. The poem moves past an easy commentary on the racism into a place of ambiguity within the complexity of human relations. In doing so, Lee begins to suggest a commonality that lay underneath the particulars of the story being told.

Under some blankets, I find a box.
Inside the box I find three scrolls.
I sit beside him and untie
three paintings by my father:
Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.
Two cats preening.
Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

Lee is taking the poem in a new direction. Using the linking word, “persimmons”, he brings the poem to a familial context. Intuitively, it makes sense to bring an immigrant’s memories back to home. Lee’s use of successive memories is a common strategy in his work. Here, the memories make a non-linear, but emotionally logical, connection from childhood to early marriage and, finally, to

21 Tim Engles, "Lee’s Persimmons," The Exilcator, 54, no. 3 (Spring 1996) 191-192.

22 Lee, Rose, 17-19.
his family of origin. The strategy does not rely on excessive rhetoric. Its origins may arise out of his cultural history.

While framing their poems in an intimate first-person lyric voice, Hongo, Chin, Mura, and Lee also write out of an oral tradition, which is essentially dialogic in nature. Thus their poems are not dramatic monologues or first-person confessions. Nor are they documentaries or exposes. Rather, their poetry is based on the give-and-take of conversation. They embody intimate revelations made between family members through letter and prayer, through a family’s story-telling and religious ritual. The poems revere these connections and are not intended to destroy them. The poems are acts of love and family obligation, which ultimately carry the authority of the older generation but also allow the younger generation to develop family voices freed from shame. In the process, the poets develop a complex dialogic poetic form where the voice in the poem is not wholly the poet’s own but shifts between family members and moves across time.  

Lee uses this technique to thread a non-linear thread through his poems. In “Persimmons”, he uses it to create a feeling of what he has termed “allness”. One leaves the poem with a feeling that the two worlds meeting in the poem are tied together much more strongly than the differences that separate them.

The one unmistakable motif that runs through Li-Young Lee’s works that is traditionally Chinese is his use of food. As in “The Cleaving,” food consumption is a symbol of universality. Food images in Lee’s poetry tend to reinforce the relational nature of life, of its underlying universality. One consumes food and is also transformed by the consumed. Images of eating become a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things.

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23 Mary Slowik, "Beyond Lot's Wife: The immigration poems of Marilynn Chin, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee, and David Mura," *MELUS* 25, no. 3/4 (Fall 2000), 221-242.
To return to Li-Young Lee’s banquet table: a consideration of ‘ethnic eating’ in his poetry, particularly in the ‘The Cleaving,’ will show that the ethnic author is simultaneously the diner and the dinner. Furthermore, we will see that the Asian American writer in contemporary American literature participates in and inherits American literature, that he is not simply a marginalized, heroic voice challenging the status quo. Asian American writers in today’s American literature are dialectically engaged with that literature and with its various and disparate traditions.  

In “Persimmons”, the image of food makes for a metaphor for his heritage and connection. The image of persimmons appears in respect to both Lee’s parents as a symbol of the rich relationship he had with them. “Some things never leave a person:/ scent of the hair of one you love,/ the texture of persimmons,/ in your palm, the ripe weight.” It would be easy for the reader to assume that the persimmon is the metaphor for the rich gift of Chinese heritage being rejected by the dominant culture. However, Lee complicates that interpretation by suggesting that identity is fluid and the gift of the persimmon may be something far more universal, such as love.

When writing about abstract notions such as race and language, Lee seeks connections even if he is describing alienation and disconnection. His poems wrestle with the ambiguity of life circumstances, but he is always seeking to show how there is a oneness that binds everything together. His idealism is often subtle, but it is a dominant trait of his work. He insists that there is a metaphysical reality that makes his poetry always arch toward the ideals of

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interconnectedness and belonging. By using the emotional power of moments of disconnection and shame, Lee gives his work a geography to operate that raises it above polemic Transcendentalism.

Lee’s work fits well within the tradition of Transcendentalism regardless of his cultural background. His idealism regarding the universal self and his intense focus on personal experience as the guide to that greater self show that Lee shares the Transcendentalists’ aesthetic aims. Lee has described poetry as “basically the locally inflected voice of the condition of allness. That condition of allness, it seems to me, is God.”26 This inspiration may also be one of Lee’s biggest weaknesses as a poet. If one regards the inner divine as his or her only measure of value, it can become an exercise in narratism. As Wenying Xu notes, Lee’s choice to be transcendental creates certain tensions within his work:

His disavowals of ethnic identification, however, place him squarely within a cultural location – the American transcendentalist poetry whose canonicity is beyond question. (One may add that its canonicity is precisely due to its transcendentalism.) Contrary to his wishes, Lee’s own transcendentalism does not produce a culturally naked self; rather it engenders a will to canon that is tied to the dominant sociocultural practice of exclusion in the name of universalism and aesthetics. Furthermore, his rejection of ethnicity in order to be regarded as a transcendentalist poet among canonical poets creates a dynamic tension with his frequent usage of ethnic signifiers in his poetry.27

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Xu’s criticism regarding the difficulty of declaring one’s value to the Canon while at the same time disavowing any right to be labelled is a valid one. It echoes the most common criticism of the Transcendentalists: if all paths to the divine are equally valid, then none are valid.
CHAPTER 4
LI-YOUNG LEE AND ELISA NEW’S PARADIGM

When Li-Young Lee discusses his art in interviews, he often speaks of the universal self and the common link between all beings. However, the context of his poems are focused much more on the struggles of alienation, isolation and disconnection between people and the universe around them. This difference between Lee’s metaphysical ideals and where his poetry tends to focus can be attributed to a literary thesis developed by Elisa New in her *The Regenerative Lyric*. In her critical approach, she demonstrates that the lyric poem is, by its very nature, a poor carrier of transcendental thought. Emerson called on poets to reinvent poetry as a celebration of the divine spirit within each person. Artists are to explore a divine connection that permits individuals to know the direct metaphysical truth about their lives on a personal, intimate level. New finds that poets that answered this call struggled with a spiritual reality of fallenness that Emerson tried unsuccessfully to dismiss. “Central to my argument is the claim that the American poetic tradition is not so unambiguously Emersonian as is assumed. Rather, Emerson’s reinvention of religion as a species of poetry is tested and found wanting by the very poetic innovators to whom he addressed himself.”¹ As poets began exploring ways to express their transcendentalist ideas, they found that human experience is limited, finite. In fact, it is the struggles with

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this ambiguity that gives their poetry the weight and depth necessary to resonate with readers.

Emerson attempted to find a message that liberated the human experience from the Calvinist notions of fallenness and sin. New's contention is that the struggles of being fallen and the guilt of sin are inherent to the human experience and make the art that discusses them meaningful. Any attempt to disconnect a form of art devoted to personal expression from this form of Calvinism will fail aesthetically. "Had Emerson found a way to liberate pleasure as a poetic principle God could approve, all our poetry since might have been different." New's paradigm of American poetry considers that poets in this tradition are trapped between the idealism of American Transcendentalism and the realities of humanity's finitude. "But when a poem disengages from a particular pressure and the particular identity withstanding that pressure, it can lose its reason to be . . . The lyric lapses into that inspirational mode whose signature, whether saluting nuptials or offering condolences, is never to lose, and so never to feel, its footing."

For New, this struggle is often resolved through faith. A centerpiece of her criticism is that while religious thought has been driven out of American prose and essays, it has reemerged within American poetry. American poetry expresses the role of faith when confronted with the limits of human knowledge.

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2 Ibid., 18.

3 Ibid., 43.
To contemplate certain American poems in particular, is to be thrust out of the theoretical universe we’ve come to know. Assumptions about, for example, the equation of literariness and an intrinsic skepticism of language are thrown into question when we acknowledge the fundamentally affirmative quality of these poems, as opposed to the negative – by which I mean antithetical rather than dolorous – and deterministic quality of our theoretical climate.\(^4\)

When New states that American poetry is best met on the experiential fields away from the confines of ideology, she is making a declaration that American poetry deals with those human experiences not easily categorized and classified by modern literary criticisms. Her contention, similar to Harold Bloom’s critical approach, is that when poets wrestle with the ambiguous and unknown qualities of human experience, poets are expressing the only true outlet of freedom known, the freedom of faith.

The New Criticism sealed the poem in the inertia of its rarity. Poetic stresses and tensions, caught in the object, allowed the critic his interval of admiration, but the poem, meanwhile, went rigid. As I understand the poems I treat here, they are neither iconic – divine artifacts of human genius – nor constructed by forces indifferent to them. Made of voice, they solicit ear. Made of timing, they distend time. The space they fill is a space of intimate concourse; the intention they realize, willed choice within limits.\(^5\)

This paper has the proposition that Lee’s poetic works fit within an American tradition of Transcendentalism. The success of this proposition goes beyond checking certain boxes regarding the content of Li-Young Lee’s poetry. The poems need to participate in the underlying dialogue and tensions within that

\(^4\)Ibid., 9.

\(^5\)Ibid., 11.
tradition, which this paper will use New's paradigm to evaluate Lee's texts against. Her critique provides a frame to understand how Lee's poetry works within the context of fallenness, how Lee expresses faith when at the limits of human experience, and finally, whether Lee's poetry serves as a spiritual response to the matter of personal freedom.

Li-Young Lee's "the city in which I love you", with its sense of being lost, its faith in the universality of the human condition, and finally, its faith in personal freedom, is a good candidate to examine whether Lee is working within the paradigm outlined by New. The poem begins with an introductory quote from The Song of Songs, acknowledging from the beginning that this poem has its roots within the Western religious tradition. Despite Lee's beliefs in the Eastern ideas of the universal self, his upbringing by a Presbyterian father comes through frequently. This poem is inspired by The Song of Songs and, in doing so, contains many elements that reside within New's framework of American poets. The poem opens with a sense of fallenness or being lost:

> And when, in the city in which I love you,  
> even my most excellent song goes unanswered,  
> and I mount the scabbed streets,  
> the long shouts of avenues,  
> and tunnel sunken night in search of you . . .

The "you" in the poem is never defined, allowing the reader the room to imprint their own sense of what the subject of the voice is speaking of into the poem. The

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opening also hints at a deep human isolation that Lee believes resides within everyone.

But in the city
   in which I love you,
   no one comes, no one
   meets me in the brick clefts;
   in the wedged dark,

   no finger touches me secretly, no mouth
   tastes my flawless salt,
   no one wakens the honey in the cells, finds the humming
   in the ribs, the rich business in the recesses;
   hulls clogged, I continue laden, translated.7

Despite his transcendental aspirations, it is the sense of being lost that attracts Lee’s focus for the poem. Aspirational themes about universal love may make for excellent prose. However, the aesthetic demands of a lyric poem require more than intellectual engagement by the reader. Poetry needs to invoke an emotional response in the reader and the feelings of being fallen have sufficient energy to create that effect.

   It would surely be going too far to claim that only sin, or a recent showdown with Doom, produces poems; nevertheless, the poets I will treat find the ‘transition’ Emerson offered in Doom’s place a medium unlikely to float the lyric poem . . . Calvinist limitation is more than given sanctuary – it is vernacularized – in American lyric poetry, with the poem’s very raison d’etre becoming the projection of a voice, the shaping of the covenantal sentence ‘Here I am’ in the midst of utter insecurity.8

As New’s premise lays out, the lyric poem has difficulty with lofty ideals disconnected from the resonance of human experience. Lyric poets find their

7 Ibid., 53.

8 New, The Regenerate Lyric, 31-32.
power within their sense of fallenness. "Too deft, too accomplished a language, as I will soon indicate, may bewitch, and so blaspheme, but in the normal run of things, words are simply embodiments of sin, redeemable only insofar as they mark the chasm between us and God."⁹ "The city in which I love you" lays out this gap between the speaker and his transcendent object of love. It is not the glory of the beloved that emotionally anchors the poem; it is the alienation between the lover and the beloved that charges the lyric with power. This experience of separation that New argues that an essayist can rarely approach in terms of connecting the reader directly to the emotional state, since essays lend themselves to logical rather than experiential concepts.

To immerse the reader in the experience of isolation is far more important to Lee than contextualizing it within a philosophical frame. This focus on amplifying the moment over systemizing it shows how the Transcendentalist emphasizes words, both in their power and limits. "We may say . . . that Emerson's signal intellectual contribution of the 1840s is a divinization of the human word that makes permeable, or at least negotiable, the barrier between God and the human subject, and so, between an illimitable and limited language."¹⁰ Emerson’s contention that words can connect people to a divine truth is often belied by the very poets attempting to put that connection into language. Li-Young Lee, and Emily Dickinson, both seem to understand this dual

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.
nature of language – to elevate one’s experience to a communal or shared property, but also to approach the limits of language to communicate the divine truth.

Lee’s exploration in “the city in which I love you” of this disconnection comes in the form of seeking faith instead of answers. He is concerned with the resolution of a spiritual feeling, not an intellectual one. In language far more comfortable in Western religious traditions than his native China, Lee seeks a personal connection with a “you.”

Is prayer, then, the proper attitude
for the mind that longs to be freely blown,
but which gets snagged on the barb
called world, that
tooth-ache, the actual? What prayer

would I build? And to whom?
Where are you
in the cities in which I love you,
the cities daily risen to work and to money,
to the magnificent miles and the gold coasts?11

While many critics have classified Li-Young Lee as an Asian poet, it is passages like the one above that show he is clearly comfortable within the American Calvinist religious culture of seeking a personal relationship with the divine. For Lee, the poem communicates the emptiness of the human individual soul in its alienation from the higher self. One can see a blending of the personal, experiential Calvinist with a modern, Eastern-influenced response. Lee has described this experiential emptiness in his own terms:

And yet we know silence and solitude are two impossible states that exist. We’re never alone. And maybe they’re the first two institutions that give us God-hunger . . . Hunger is an emptiness. That’s why art is necessary. To remind ourselves of our solitude and our silences: that’s our original state. That’s what it comes down to again, then, that art is the practice of our original identity. And our original identity is that universal mind.\textsuperscript{12}

For Lee, his poems are often an emptying out process. Rather than build a set of ideas within a logical structure or narrative, he evokes emotions and experiences in a process of emptying himself, and the reader, toward a moment of poetic closure.

This process of \textit{letting go} or \textit{breaking through} normal linear experience is performed as an act of faith by Lee. "Poems can imagine, in Kierkegaard’s terms, not only the aesthetic contours of faith, but its internal timbre. They can do more than know Abraham’s faith. They can know what it is to be Abraham. Poems can give form to a species of faith inexpressible in discursive philosophy."\textsuperscript{13} Faith in Lee’s poems operates without any express justification. The speaker simply believes in the power of connectedness and that nothing is wasted in the universal mind.

\begin{quote}
my birthplace vanished, my citizenship earned, 
in league with stones of the earth, I 
enter, without retreat or help from history, 
of no earth, I re-enter

the city in which I love you. 
And I never believed that the multitude
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{13} New, \textit{The Regenerate Lyric}, 159.
of dreams and many words were vain.\textsuperscript{14} Similar to New, Lee also finds that faith is the vehicle towards personal freedom. Much of modern philosophy and literary criticism is about the determinism of power and social roles. While Lee does not avoid confronting the grim realities of racism and oppression in his poetry, he tends to pivot away from the separateness that this form of social criticism tends to engender. He never surrenders to fatalism. His poems typically express a journey or emptying out into life affirming epiphanies. These moments usually imply or express the transformative power of self-realization.

In “In His Own Shadow”, Lee writes a poem about the transformational power that the search for personal expression through language can have on personal freedom. It illustrates in a shortened format how Lee’s work fits within the tensions that New describes. While the work focuses on the existential feeling of separateness, Lee turns it in the end toward his transcendental idealism.

“In His Own Shadow”

He is seated in the first darkness
of his body sitting in the lighter dark
of the room,

the greater light of day behind him,
beyond the windows, where
Time is the country.

His body throws two shadows:
One onto the table
and the piece of paper before him,
and one onto his mind.

\textsuperscript{14} Lee, \textit{The City in Which I Love You}, 57.
One makes it difficult for him to see
the words he’s written and crossed out
on the paper. The other
keeps him from recognizing
another master than Death. He squits.
He reads: *Does the first light hide*
*inside the first dark?*

He reads: *While all bodies share*
*the same fate, all voices do not.*

Only the last four lines express Lee’s transendental ideas of personal liberation through the process of being emptied. These lines are at home with the Emersonian ideals of individual transendence and personal transformation. However, the rest of the poem resides within the realm of New’s framework. While the poet himself seeks to express the idea of Emersion’s universal eye, it is clear that the dramatic aesthetic of the poem resides in its struggle with faith, willingness and disconnection. “The deepest possible silence is the silence of God. I feel a poem ultimately imparts silence. That way it’s again disillusioning. It disillusions us of our own small presence in order to reveal the presence of this deeper silence.”

“the city in which I love you” and “In His Own Shadow” highlight of how Lee’s transendentalist poetry expresses itself well within the tradition of American lyric poetry acting as a response to the tensions between

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lofty transcendalism and the gritty reality of human isolation and alienation, thus allowing them to reside within the cultural dialogue that New identified.
The influence of Emily Dickinson on Li-Young Lee is not an obvious one from a stylistic perspective. Lee does not employ her structures or imitate her use of grammar and punctuation. However, both poets have an earnest need to explore the essential meaning of their personal existence within a metaphysical framework. As poets working in the lyric form, one can see Lee attempting to either complete or redirect certain ideas embedded in Dickinson’s poetry. When Dickinson explores how to create meaning through the breakdown of linear thought one can identify similar qualities resonating in Lee’s work. Using Harold Bloom’s critical framework as detailed in *The Anxiety of Influence*, Lee can be seen to complete Dickinson’s ideas or trying to redirect them back more traditional transcendental ways. Lee may be attempting to “deamonization” Dickinson by bridging backward from his postmodern sensibilities toward an earlier Transcendental era. As Harold Bloom describes the term deamonization: “the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precusor.”¹ Lee seems to draw from Dickinson the inspiration to create these non-linear experiences for readers, but he redirects this energy back toward the place Dickinson was leaving.

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Dickinson’s place in the American canon comes from her striking ability to dislocate and displace everything. It is not surprising that Lee often cites Emily Dickinson as an inspiration to his work. As the critic Harold Bloom noted: "What her [Emily Dickinson’s] critics almost always underestimate is her startling intellectual complexity. No commonplace survives her appropriations; what she does not rename or redefine, she revises beyond easy recognition."\(^2\) While her lyric poetry bears a resemblance to the era’s Romantic poets, she plowed new ground by relentlessly attacking grammar and structure in dramatic, modern ways. Take the opening lines of “This was a Poet – It is That”:

This was a Poet – It is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meanings –  
And Attar so immense\(^3\)

Dickinson disrupts the reader in this stanza by disrupting verb tense, using ellipticals and capitalizing ordinary nouns. Each technique heightens the reader’s need to engage the text at a deeper level than as narrative. The first line disrupts the sense of time immediately. The disarticulation of language causes the reader discomfort. Instead of allowing the reader to be contextualized within the normal use of the language, Dickinson causes a destabilization of the conventional thought. At one level, the poem is about the power of a poet and, by inference, the power of personal expression. Therefore, one could assume that this poem would

\(^2\) Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 272.  
dovetail with the 19th Transcendental ideals. However, by attacking the language, Dickinson creates unease. She leaves the reader unsettled because the dislocation of language implies that the normal understanding of events is unstable, not to be trusted. So the poem is both Transcendental in message, but existentially modern in structure. Part of Dickinson’s genius is that she expresses ideals that were deeply influenced by Emerson, but her works are far more psychologically complex and subversive than his “all-seeing” eye. Emerson wanted to inspire, not disturb his readers. Emerson expressed this boundless optimism in “The Transcendentalists,” “He [The Transcendentalist] believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.”\(^4\) Dickinson shared Emerson’s vision of human potential, but she pays homage to its equally unsettling qualities of fragmentation and alienation.

Because Dickinson is so strikingly original, some may question whether she should be considered a Transcendentalist. However, her “resistance to organized religion and inherited doctrines, her willingness to replace God with people as a subject of devotion and praise, and her belief in the power of human consciousness to discover eternal truths,”\(^5\) all spring from a Transcendental background. While Transcendentalists believed that a person could experience

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the divine as part of their secular experience, Dickinson expressed “Parting is all we know of heaven,/And all we need of hell.”\(^6\) For Dickinson, human experience was capable of transcending the material. She was part of the Enlightenment’s movement away from strict devotional religious poetry. Nature and, occasionally, other persons were the subjects of her devotion. Similar to the Transcendentalists, she believed that human experience alone could offer a metaphysical meaning to life. As “Deprived of other Banquet” shows, Dickinson expressed a deep belief in human potential:

Deprived of other Banquet
I entertained Myself –
At first – a scant nutrition—
An insufficient Load –

But grown by slender addings
To so esteemed a size
’Tis sumptuous enough for me –
And almost to suffice\(^7\)

Also typical of Dickinson, she includes the word “almost”, betraying her telltale skepticism. Part of her immerse power comes from her poems ability to contain an idea and its counter idea. This combination opens the poem up to constant dialogue for the reader, allowing the poem’s meaning to evolve over time as the reader returns to the text to resolve its internal dialectic.


Dickinson believed in her vocation as a means of personal transcendence, an act that in and of itself was a means of worth. She was an idealist when it came to the notions of Eternity and the Divine in ways that ran counter to the empiricism of John Locke. In these ways, Ashton considers her a Transcendentalist exploring new ground. Deeply influenced by the Transcendentalists, Dickinson bridges their idealism with the oncoming intellectual fragmentation of the twentieth century. Much of her poetry contains transcendental ideas, yet she seems to also sense their weaknesses. Her ideas of the self were far more permeable than Emerson and the Transcendentalists, sensing fragility. Whereas Emerson celebrated that “We must trust the perfection of the creation so far”, Dickinson questioned “But since Myself – assault Me – /How have I peace/Except by subjugating/Consciousness?” Her poems always seem to understand that the Earth was moving under the feet of the Enlightenment and a darker, more philosophically challenging time was coming. “It may not be said that Emily Dickinson has one philosophy, since she affirms many points of view, each one of which could support an explication sufficient to constitute an entire philosophy.” It would be mistaken to think that Dickinson simply moved from one philosophical position to another as a flight of fancy. She probed and questioned. She understood at an intuitive level that things were not

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9 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 165.

10 Kimpel, Emily Dickinson as Philosopher, 44.
as solid as the Enlightenment philosophies made them out to be. As the critic Harold Bloom said of Dickinson, “at once Emersonian and counter-Emersonian, a new and wholly personal Self-Reliance and a grand unnamning, an act of negation as dialectical and profound as any essayed by Nietzsche or Freud”\(^{11}\) One can see her place in American literature as a bridge between American transcendentalism and Romanticism and the oncoming modern world. Lee appears to be inspired by her ability to create emotional energy in her work, but, as the next chapter explores, he wants to bring that energy back to its transcendental roots. In the next chapter, Lee’s use of voice, parallel structure and relabelling will be evaluated compared to Dickinson’s comparable qualities to see how Lee’s transcendentalism influences the aesthetic choices in his works.

\(^{11}\) Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 304-305.
Like Dickinson, Lee uses a variety of strategies to create a psychological journey in his poems that often end in emotional, if not philosophical, moments of revelation. Neither Dickinson nor Lee is an overtly political or ideological poet. They feel no obligation to follow rules in writing their poetry. Each poet seeks to create art than connects with readers in an emotional rather than intellectual manner, relying very little on cultural references such as mythology. Of the two, Dickinson is the more experimental in trying to evoke a response. "Often abandoning conventional poetic standards, Dickinson chose her words for the feeling they create, for their ability to awaken in the reader a specific emotion at the moment described."¹ Lee finds Dickinson’s experiments in language to be an inspiration. Lee has described how Dickinson has inspired him, “I remember reading Emily Dickinson. Sometimes I would read a line of hers and this big quiet would fill me. The Zenists call it a deep ‘a-ha.’ Wordlessness.”² Often, their poetry seeks to create a moment similar to the effect of a koan where the reader’s tension is released in an intuitive, but not necessarily a logical, epiphany. Lee’s approach to obtaining this breakthrough moment is strikingly different because he does not employ many of Dickinson’s strategies. However, Lee seeks in

¹ Martin, The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson, 40.
Dickinson the ability to create a moment of impact. Lee has stated, “Dickinson says it’s like the top of your head being taken off. So you’re not thinking anymore. You’re just suddenly empty, but full. It was that kind of don’t-know-ness that really interested me.” By comparing Lee and Dickinson’s strategies to create this “full, but empty” feeling through the existential quality of their voices, Dickinson’s compression of text versus Lee’s use of parallel structure, and their attempts to redefine perspective, one can illustrate how Lee redirects Dickinson toward a more personal, less adventurous style of poetry.

**Voice**

Both Dickinson and Lee have expressed that the vocation of poetry is of metaphysical importance, regardless of whether anyone reads their poems at all. Most of Dickinson’s poetry was not published until after her death. Lee has expressed that the act of creating a poem in and of itself changes the universal mind, thus providing essential value to the whole of humanity. From a transcendental perspective, the lyric form is an attractive medium, since the form builds into itself an assumption regarding the authority of the speaker. The empowered voice of the speaker reinforces the central transcendental idea that each person could find the divine through intuitive thought. “Whether the expression is confessional, formal, or political – a meditation on self, on poetic form, or on political arrangements of society – so-called expressive poetics takes

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4 Ibid., 105.
for granted the lyric subject, the givenness of the object of reflection, and the reliability of language.”

When one reads Lee and Dickinson, it is a given that the voice of the poem has the authenticity to speak to direct experience. Neither poet makes formal justifications as to why their words and their perspectives have the authority to speak to the reader. In “Epistle”, Lee meditates on the power of personal expression given voice:

It is not heavenly and it is not sweet.
It is accompanied by steady human weeping,
and twin furrowing between the brows,

but it is what I know,
and so am able to tell.

In this poem, the speaker acknowledges that there is a wisdom in being the boy that listens without understanding why his parents are crying. He believes that human experience, by itself, has metaphysical meaning. The lyric form is ideal for his transcendentalism because his audience has a built-in expectation that they are going to read something meaningful. It is a given reality within the personal lyric that human experience, especially everyday living, is of vital importance. Dickinson also celebrates the power of voice in “The Poets light but Lamps –.”

The light that the works of poets give off is a “vital Light” of the “Suns.” Ironically, it is this personal forum that also gives rise to the counter-transcendental tradition highlighted by New. One can detect this counter-tradition in both Lee

6 Lee, Rose, 13.
7 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 214.
and Dickinson’s voices. In “The Poets light but Lamps –,” the power of the poet is limited by “Each Age a Lens/Disseminating their/Circumference.” In “The Hammock” Lee celebrates the vitality of the personal voice within its own finite existence:

Between two unknowns, I live my life.
Between my mother’s hopes, older than I am
by coming before me, and my child’s wishes, older than I am
by outliving me. And what’s it like? . . .
Yes, and a little singing between two great rests.\(^8\)

For both Dickinson and Lee, their voices speak with an existential quality that gives their works weight and heft. The lyric form demands that the poet dwell on the particular, creating a tension for poets that wish to express metaphysical ideas. Lee and Dickinson seem to resolve this tension by giving their voices an existential tone.

The key to understanding how each poet integrates this existential tone of their voice into their works is tied to creating the “empty, but full” moment. Each poet is concerned with exploring how to get past the limits of words themselves to express the phenomena of living, of existing. The sense of being fallen that New identifies exists for Lee and Dickinson more as a sense of unawareness than as a state of sin. In Dickinson’s “The difference between Despair,” she eloquently expresses this “Mind” “That knows – it cannot see –.”\(^9\) The first stanza acknowledges that the mind is aware of pain as memory and fearful in the face of


\(^9\) Dickinson, \textit{Final Harvest}, 56.
unknown future pain. Unable to know, but trapped by memory, the “Mind” in this poem is unable to transcend its humanity. She gives the reader the beautiful image of the “Mind” as a “Bust,” frozen by fear and shaped by despair. In Lee’s “A Final Thing,” he situates this human disconnection from the divine within typical household setting:

Will my first morning of heaven be this?
No. And this is not
my last morning on earth.
I am simply last
in my house
to waken, and the first
sound I hear
is the voice of one I love
speaking to one we love.
I hear it through the bedroom wall;

something, someday, I’ll close my eyes to recall.10

The sin, or tragedy, in both poems is the ignorance of oneself. Each poet senses that there is a greater truth, but it exists just past the field of his or her awareness. The essential framework of New’s critique that American lyric poetry is the forum of religious thought remains intact, but Lee and Dickinson transform its Calvinist perspective into an existential one. Both poets would disagree with New’s characterization of American poetry being about the sinner wrestling with the nature of original sin. Rather, each poet is expressing the human condition where language and, by implication, human thought fails to understand the totality of human experience – that there is a meaning beyond the capacity of language. Lee has described this process as trying to hear a frequency beneath the words:

If you hear a conversation going on in the next room and you don’t hear the words you can tell by the way the voice moves whether it’s a mother speaking to a child, whether it’s a mother reprimanding the child, whether it’s a mother reading a story to the child, whether it’s the mother telling the child a joke, whether it’s lovers arguing. You don’t have to hear the words. You can hear the rhythms, the harmonies, the disharmonies, in the voices and sentences. Those voices, those sentences, those frequencies, those vibrations, those naked voices, are more interesting to me than words. The words are like birds that perch on this frequency of sound.\textsuperscript{11}

Lee and Dickinson attempt to craft a way to access this experience by invoking an emotional state of mind rather than trying to contextualize it.

In “He fumbles at your Soul,” Dickinson creates an allegory about an approaching thunderstorm into an emotion, but not logical, climax. Critics have variously interpreted this poem as Dickinson’s romantic attachment to an unattainable man, her fear of masculine power, a drama between the poet and her own sense of power, or the fear of death.\textsuperscript{12} Situating the poem within an ideological or critical framework is not necessarily the effect Dickinson was trying to achieve in her work. She connects the apprehension of a violent storm with a state of being, the feeling of “The Universe – is still –.”\textsuperscript{13} The poem lends itself to multiple meanings, but it is the feeling that the poem creates strikes a universal cord. In “Dwelling,” Lee captures this sense that there are moments when meaning is carried by emotions instead of ideas:

As though touching her

\textsuperscript{11} Dearing and Graber, “Working to Hear the Hum,” 88.

\textsuperscript{12} Miller, \textit{Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar}, 114-115.

\textsuperscript{13} Dickinson, \textit{Final Harvest}, 61.
might make him known to himself, . . .

And the places on her body have no names.  
And she is what’s immense about the night.  
And their clothes on the floor are arranged for forgetfulness.  

Where Lee and Dickinson find common ground with New is her contention that the feeling of disconnection is a byproduct of the poet realizing that words alone simply cannot close the gap. For both writers, this limit of discourse is the source of being fallen. Consequently, their poems speak with a quality and tone of discovery, that questing into the present moment is of paramount importance.

God encounters man on a 'limit' which is of a character necessarily veiled or unknown and which does not submit to human knowledge . . . Dickinson is less an Emersonian idealist – an American Kantian or Romantic – seeking center through pursuit of her poetic persona, than she is the most confirmed kind of Protestant, everywhere apprehending her own ‘limit,’ finding in each Emersonian circle of adequacy but another center to be dissolved.

Dickinson’s need to experience the edges of life brings an existential urgency to her works, a need for the reader to contemplate the thin ice of life on which all floats on. Lee, however, never sets sail on waters as deep or dangerous as Dickinson. While Dickinson never fully gives up on the existence of God, she subverts all of the conventional notions of his Calvinist existence while Lee incorporates his post-modern existentialism within a worldview that, ironically, would have fit comfortably within 19th century transcendental thought. Lee always remains in the center of his world, tying the human experience together in a

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14 Lee, Book of My Nights, 55.

15 New, The Regenerate Lyric, 162.
dialogue. Dickinson is on the circumference, dislodging and destabilizing human experience.

Perhaps the clearest difference in the existential tone to each poet’s voice is the subject of death, a frequent topic of their work. While both poets approach death with an acceptance a transcendental reality is unknowable by humans in their regular existence, one can see that Lee stops short of Dickinson or, rather, he returns to the safety of ideas that Dickinson undermines. Lee’s goals are ultimately to transcend the existential quality of life with an affirming message about how the reader is divinely connected to a greater self. Lee has describes his existentialism as the subtext of all his poetry:

I would say love and death because love is life. [are the real subjects] Death is either negation or fertility depending on how you solve that quandary each time. When you write a poem, basically you have a stage: you put a little tree here, a little house here, and you watch love and death enact as you wipe that out, you put a little coastline here and you watch love and death enact there, but it’s the same subject.16

He floats on the abyss of modern life, but the safe harbour of the Transcendentalists are always his destination. This allows his voice to be more transparent and accessible than Dickinson. Therefore his voice is free of pretence or guile. For example, in “Virtues of the Boring Husband,” Lee adopts a self-referenal tone that is lacking in Dickinson: “Whenever I talk, my wife falls asleep./ So, now, when she can’t sleep, I talk./ It’s like magic.”17  Dickinson’s voice

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16 Cooper and Yu, "Art Is Who We Are," 63.

17 Lee, Behind My Eyes, 92.
is far more nuanced. Her existentialism is pointed toward the deeper waters of the modern world. Her poems often leave the reader on uncomfortable ground. So she makes her voice less conventional, more opaque in order to create a zone of emotional safety for the reader. Her “I reason, Earth is short –“ encapsulates how her voice becomes distant, less intimate from the reader while drawing closer to her existential questioning of Christian doctrine:

I reason, Earth is short –
And Anguish – absolute –
And many hurt,
But, what of that? . . .

I reason, that in Heaven –
Somehow, it will be even –
Some new Equation, given –
But, what of that?18

The withdrawal of her voice in this poem allows a zone of emotional detachment for the reader. This detachment is important because Dickinson is suggesting that ultimately, there may be no heaven, or meaning, to thrive for in life. “The poems’ linguistic and metaphorical complexity allows Dickinson’s readers to see her truths only as they are capable of admitting them.”19 Since Lee’s message is intened to ultimately comfort and inspire, the voice he employs is more inclusive, seeking connect to the reader rather than distance.

While it can be suggested that this voice difference between Lee and Dickison is gender based, it is also a result of Dickinson’s refusal to ease the

18 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 54.
19 Miller, Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar, 17.
reader with an answer to the anxiety her work generates. As the closing lines of “My Life has stood – a Loaded Gun –” show, Dickinson’s voice has an edge of existential angst where only questions seems to have meaning: “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 –.” 20 The multi-layered allegory of the gun can represent many types of potential unleashed by engaging in a relationship. The metaphor of the poem moves from stasis to fantastic action, and then, returns to rest. Because Dickinson does not close off the poem by situating it within an ideological perspective, the poem focuses on the psychological journey from the thrill of discovering one’s own power to the fear of that power’s ultimate impotence. “From a broader perspective, however, it is no cause for wonder that this mind of extraordinary capacity in its life of strict – even though chosen – limitation occasionally felt itself capable of nothing but paralytic stasis.”21 The concluding lines show profound doubt about her own voice in the world and a skepticism regarding the vitality of life. Comparing this voice to Lee’s “To Life” and one can see why Dickinson felt the need to place emotional distance with her work:

“To Life”

Who hasn’t thought, ‘Take me with you,’
hearing the wind go by?
And finding himself left behind, resumed
his own true version of time

20 Dickinson, *Final Harvest*, 187-188.

on earth, a seed fallen here to die
and be born a thing promised
in the one dream
every cell of him has dreamed headlong
since infancy, every common minute has served.
Born twice, he has two mothers, one who dies, and one
the mortar in which he’s tried. His double
nature cleaves his eye, splits his voice.
So if you hear him say, while he sits at the bed
of one mother, ‘Take me home,’
listen closer. To Life,
he says, ‘Keep me at heart.’

Whereas Dickinson’s “My Life has stood – a Loaded Gun –” leaves the reader with an open question life unlived, “To Life” shows Lee taking the same concern for finding authentic life is a more affirming direction. Dickinson see relationships as unleasing and captivating simultaneously. Lee acknowledges that he “has two mothers, one who dies, and one/the mortar in which he’s tried.” In the end, Lee see the speaker as having the final say over this split identity. “To Life,/he says, ‘Keep me at heart’.” Again, Lee is binding the poem together as a organic work that is ultimately life-affirming in its outlook. However, Dickinson is always on the circumference, pushing into the unknown.

In “Because I could not stop for Death,” Dickinson dares to suggest that the human experience is ultimately a lonely one: “Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet/
Feels shorter than the Day/I first surmised the Horses’ Heads/Were toward Eternity –.” She does not permit herself the safe harbour of the universal, transcendental mind. The poem moves from the highly grounded experience of

[22 Lee, Behind My Eyes, 85.]
[23 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 177-178.]
riding in a carriage toward a moment of complete irresolution. The last lines do not offer any solice or comfort regarding death’s immenance. One senses the speaker is staring into an unknown abyss, realizing that no answers lie in the afterworld. “This poem’s last stanza also suggests that true eternity lies in the single day in which we recognize death and thus capitalize on the present moment, which is itself infinite.”

Solitude seems to be an essential quality in her world. Unlike Lee’s binding of relationships together, the speaker of “Because I could not stop for Death” is alone. She senses that life is an act of inquiry, not resolution.

The fall of man and man’s sinfulness, as we have seen, play almost no part in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. She has so much the sense of loss and desolation that she regards them as almost exclusively the quality of life. When she speaks of Eden as apart from ‘home,’ she unusually means heaven, the heaven which lies in the future. She has not fallen. She is fallen.

Lee’s existentialism is balanced by his transecendentalism. Lee sees meaning in death, where Dickinson see emptiness. During this response in an interview, notice how Lee blends the notion of dying with the creation of meaning:

I have this theory, Alan. I notice, for instance, a poem is the scored human voice. Voice is speech, and all speech is done with the exhaled breath. You can’t inhale and speak so you have to breathe out. Unfortunately, or fortunately, the exhaled breath is the dying breath... Now when we speak, we’re using that dying breath. I think that gives writing a particularly tragic color, because you’re

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using the dying breath, inflecting or figuring your dying breath. But meaning gets born.  

Dickinson’s voice carries with it the threat that maybe no meaning ever gets born, which leaves the reader on unsteady ground. In order to provide some relief in her work, she incorporates a degree of personal distance her voice. Lee, on the other hand, wants the reader close by because he has a life transforming message to deliver. His voice is warm, intimate and conversational. Lee’s choice to redirect Dickinson’s voice into a more conventional form of poetry reflects his strategy to move the reader closer to his vision of the universal self that resides underneath the illusory, existential state of ordinary life.

**Compression and Parallel Structure**

Dickinson’s primary technique for evoking what Lee has termed a “full, but empty” feeling is compression of text through word choice and grammar. She shortens her verse into dense, compact text that allows the reader to access the poem with multiple levels of meaning. “Compression allows for protective ambiguity, conveys a sense of the speaker’s withheld power, and implies a profundity beyond the obvious import of its message.”

Dickinson priority was in creating a visceral impact by creating a non-linear moment. Lee has described this attempt to achieve non-linear meaning in terms that similar to Dickinson: “The meaning is a felt experience, not an understood experience. Here is the

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difference: I read with my whole body, so I hear a word like ‘ambidextrous’ differently from a word like ‘rut.’”

Li-Young Lee’s primary poetic vehicle for invoking this emotional or spiritual moment is through the use of parallel structures to link non-linear memories together into a cohesive whole. Lee’s use of memory is simultaneously connective and disruptive to the reader’s understanding of the poem. His poems often arc through a series of emotional vignettes in an attempt to break past traditional linear storytelling, thus sparking the desired psychological insight. In “Little Father,” Lee links three images together with parallel wording that allow the poem to build to the realization that his father’s memory is kept going at the cost of the son’s life energy:

I buried my father
in the sky.
Since then, the birds
clean and comb him every morning . . .

I buried my father underground.
Since then, my ladders
only climb down, . . .

I buried my father in my heart.
Now he grows in me, my strange son, . . .

little father I ransom with my life.

Lee builds emotional tension throughout the poem by linking images of a sentimental nature together through the use of parallel structure. The repetition of “I buried my father” creates a sentimental feeling within the reader and links


29 Lee, Book of My Nights, 38.
the different images together into a comprehensive portrait. In other cases, Lee creates recurring images to link the memories together. In “Persimmons”, the viewer was connecting emotionally back across time, linking being humiliated in school, courting his wife and his relationship with his father together with the image of the fruit. In “God Seeks a Destiny”, Lee places the observer as a child in a tree. The movement in this poem is in the child’s eyes:

The child climbs into the apple tree
and can’t get down, . . .

There’s his sister painting her eyelids
the hues of morning and evening . . .

There’s his brother falling asleep
Over his ABC’s and 1, 2, 3’s.

There’s the baby
in a basket beside their mother, . . .

And where is his father?
In the room with the shut curtains, of course.
He’s talking to God again, who plays
hide and seek among His names . . .

Here, the parallel structure consists of the recurring word “There’s” and the linkage of family members until Lee finally breaks the parallel structure with the image of the father. Ultimately, the poem dwells on a child, unseen and trapped in the tree, and the father, unseen in the house and looking for God. Lee is exploring how his father’s attempts to find the divine lead him to be alienated from his family and unseen by his son. The son is experiencing disconnection by being trapped in the tree. Once Lee establishes this emotional dynamic, he pivots

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“And who wakes now but God in the boy’s flesh/and astonished bright blood.”
The boy becomes aware of his own physicality and lowers himself to the earth. In this work, Lee’s God is found in life’s physicality. The boy finds his grounding in life and in God when he discovers the divine power within himself. This pattern of using parallel structure and pivot points can be found throughout Lee’s works. It allows Lee to be a quest poet, but of the heart rather than the body.

This questing arc through a poem toward a moment of emotional release is common strategy for both poets. Dickinson builds her tension through stripping the poem down to the core, allowing the action of the poem to be accessible from multiple levels. “Dickinson is not merely a spiritual poet but a poet who devises scenarios in which spiritual conflicts are played out, thus allowing us to acquire a deeper understanding of the interplay between the supernatural and the natural.”31 Lee builds the momentum in his poems through structuring parallel images or memories that weave together in an emotionally evokative fashion.

Each poet is always working on two levels: the physical and allogorical. Whereas Dickinson often allows the reader to have a dialectic dialogue with her work because the meaning for the reader can evolve over time, Lee seeks to redirect the reader’s emotional energy back into a transcendental framework, situating the experience for the reader within a more traditional, more comfortable experience. For example, Dickinson’s “My Life had stood – a Loaded

Gun –“ with its melloncoly conclusion can be renewed by the reader within a romantic context, as a metaphor on gender roles, or as a philosophical statement on creativity. She has unnamed the experience within the poem in order to allow the reader to bring their own set of emotions and life experiences into the work.

Lee, on the other hand, offers emotional identification with his works to guide the reader to a pre-set designation. When one reads “The Cleaving” or “the city in which I love you”, the poems do not offer themselves up to recontextuation by the reader upon rereading. Lee’s message of transcendence offers both an answer to the poem and a closure to any additional meanings. When Lee deamonizes Dickinson, he is seeking to recreate the emotional impact of that “full, but empty” moment. However his redirection of Dickinson’s strategies force Lee to narrow the focus of his reader.

This redirection and its consequences can be clearly seen when comparing Dickinson’s “Pain – has an Element of Blank” to Lee’s “This Room and Everything in It.” In “Pain – has an Element of Blank –,” Dickinson disrupts the flow of the poem with both punctuation and word choice to provoke a certain disruptive emotion within the reader. The dashes behind “Pain” and “Past” create pauses in the reader’s mind to allow the idea in the sentence to land stronger. This is not a logical argument regarding the cause and effect of suffering. Dickinson is redefining her domestic world by raising the stakes to existential level.

Pain – has an Element of Blank –
It cannot recollect
When it begun – or if there were
A time when it was not –

It has no Future – but itself –
Its Infinite contain
Its Past – enlightened to perceive
New Periods – of Pain.\textsuperscript{32}

She is clearly hinting at a heightened psychological state that existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre would later explore. The normal façade of life is pulled back to reveal a more meaningful, but non-linear existence. When Dickinson chooses words like “Blank” and “Infinite” in a poem, she is aiming at elevating these words to an almost Platonic ideal. They serve to disrupt the reader, since she seems to simultaneously heighten and undercut the words. It is an experience that Harold Bloom has termed as “redefining”, but Lee calls as the “empty, but full” moment. His definition may be more accurate than Bloom’s, since Dickinson seems more concerned with questioning the emptiness of social definitions than defining new ones. “Blank” operates as to create a void, a tension that carries the poem forward. She sets up “Blank” as the doorway to describe the rest of her ideas. “Infinite” works in a similar fashion, raising the stakes of the poem from a mere passing emotion to an existential crisis. “Pain” creates its own immortal moment, its own memory that brings ongoing pain. The compressed word choice places the burden on the reader for meaning. This shifting is dialectic, since the reader goes back over the poem again and again to ask what meaning lies in these words.

\textsuperscript{32} Dickinson, \textit{Final Harvest}, 166.
The use of dashes within the poem also creates spaces, or silences, within Dickinson’s poem, which operate to both focus the reader on the words written and to create emotional room before to the next word hits the reader’s eye. “Dickinson’s dashes often function in predictable ways: to isolate words whose meanings suggest isolation or otherwise to reflect the semantic content of the words the surround, and to create suspense in a text.”33 The dashes create silence and breathing space within the poem. Lee says that the use of spaces and silence within the poem as a deliberate shaping technique: “There’s a pregnant kind of silence, the kind of silence I want to inflect. It’s like when sculptors use rock–stone – in order for us to experience space.”34 The role of silence is important to both Dickinson and Lee. Both poets share the belief that silence reflects a meaningful experience. For Lee, silence is a fundamental part of communicating with the universal mind. For Dickinson, silence created openings within conventional language, allowing normative definitions to dissolve away. It amplifies the fullness of the words by surrounding them with emptiness. In a real sense, Dickinson was trying something akin to a koan approach by compressing and disrupting language until the reader creates meaning out of the vacuum. Her works create a cognitive crisis in the reader’s mind that is only released through an emotional or spiritual insight.

33 Miller, Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar, 51.

In “This Room and Everything in It,” the subject of the poem is the author’s attempt to generate non-linear meaning through the connection of memories. The poem is transparently about the process of writing a poem and how the cognitive process fails to achieve the moment of amplification that Lee is seeking. This poem follows Lee’s typical strategy of moving from a straightforward narrative moment into a lyric, which often culminates in an emotional or spiritual epiphany.

Lie still now
while I prepare for my future,
certain hard days ahead,
when I’ll need what I know so clearly this moment.

I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory

I am letting this room
and everything in it
stand for my ideas about love
and its difficulties...  

He captures the reader with a narrative moment and then, breaks the continuity of the reader’s thought process by inserting breaks, silences and a certain blankness to the context. "Very often, Lee’s poems begin as narrative poems... a discreet (or not so discreet) leap from the narrative mode into the lyrical one, a place where the narrative impluse breaks down, where coherence and meaning...

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Here, Lee paints a picture of a writer approaching his work in a logical, thoughtful manner, but the logic cannot hold. Lee begins to thread various memories in a non-linear fashion, evoking sentimental responses from the reader in a way that Emily Dickinson rarely employed. Lee discusses this non-linear movement as a way to keep the reader engaged: "That's how I recognize poetic speech . . . it feels to me that when a poem is very successful, the center of it keeps shifting, and the audience isn't always clear." His intent is similar to Dickinson's in that he seeks to empty the reader's understanding of the setting to create a fuller experience:

I’ll close my eyes  
and recall this room and everything in it:  
My body is estrangement.  
This desire, perfection.  
Your closed eyes my extinction.  
Now I’ve forgotten my  
Idea. The book  
on the windowsill, raffled by wind . . .  
the even-numbered pages are  
the past, the odd-numbered pages, the future.  
The sun is  
God, your body is milk . . .

Lee attempts to illustrate the limits of poetic metaphor. However, this approach breaks down as the author vainly seeks to retain an internally consistent logic.

useless, useless . . .

36 Jones, Marie C, "Exhile seems both a blessing and a curse," in Night of No Exhile (Dissertation, University of North Texas, Aug 1999), 6.


your cries are song, my body's not me...
o good . . . my idea
has evaporated . . . your hair is time, your thighs are song . . .
it had something to do
with death . . . it had something
to do with love.\footnote{Ibid.}

In the end, “punctuation is our best clue to understand what is happening: suspension points are everywhere, showing that ellipsis and fragmentation are taking over.”\footnote{Jones, "Exhile seems both a blessing and a curse," 21.} The parallel structure of the early stanzas disappears into a series of broken phrases. Here, one can see Lee shaping the silences of the text to achieve a non-linear meaning. In the last part of the poem, Dickinson's influence appears as the poem becomes more compressed and leads to the introduction of silence within the poem. The text breaks into pieces to allow space in the thought process. The reader understands that the speaker is grasping as a meaning just beyond words. The irony of Lee's works is that his use of grammar is more conventional than Dickinson's. She incorporates her disruptions in a more abrupt fashion, often ignoring a contextual setup. Instead, she attacks the reader's intellect with punctation and word choices that repositions the reader into an entirely new place. Reamy Jansen would argue that Dickinson and Lee are creating textual bliss, an idea proposed by Roland Barthes, by bringing silence and space into their poems:

This description comes close to the one Roland Barthes gives of textual bliss (la jouissance textuelle) in \textit{The Pleasure of the Text} (1973). For Barthes, bliss happens when the reader feels that

\textit{...}
something is breaking down inside his/her reading experience – and what is breaking down is meaning itself . . . Bliss, however, is not identical with happiness. Textual bliss is unsettling, almost painful experience for the reader because it is coeval with the loss of meaning.  

The differences between Lee and Dickinson show that when Lee deamonizes Dickinson’s approach to textual bliss, his tactic is to create a more emotionally connective, more traditionally transcendental understanding of self than her works present. However, this attempt comes at the aesthetic price that Elisa New pointed out as an inherent limitation of the lyric form. The lyric poem simply demands a level of grounding that does not accommodate lofty abstract ideas easily.

There is another important difference between how Dickinson and Lee is the underlying meaning that silence creates within their works. Lee has described the role of silence in life as an indicator toward a higher self: “That’s why art is necessary. To remind ourselves of our solitude and our silences: that’s our original state. That’s what it comes down to again, then, that art is the practice of our original identity. And our original identity is that universal mind.” However, Dickinson is interested in the emptiness as emptiness. In “He fumbles at your Soul”, Dickinson’s silence takes the reader into this void without any release or relief:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by degrees –

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41 Ibid., 5-6.

Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked Soul –

When Winds take Forests in their Paws –
The Universe – is still –

Whereas Lee’s moments of bliss have a life affirming context, Dickinson is more fearless. In these two poems, one can see how Dickinson and Lee attempt to invoke in the reader a moment of bliss, a moment of understanding of the sheer precious temporal nature of life itself.

Redefining

Lee’s approach to poetry is more sentimental and connective than Dickinson. This technique helps to create the emotional power of his poems, but in a significant way, it limits his efforts to redefine the very meaning of language in the way Dickinson remarkably performs. In fact, when Lee wrestles with redefining the meaning of words and social roles, he tends to be indirect, always eshewing a binary relationship. His “Words for Worry” is an excellent example of how Lee uses words in an overlapping manner, blurring their meaning in an evocative way, but never completely undermining them. By blending the various roles that a man plays in life, Lee threads connective linguistic tissue throughout the poem, but he does not unname them as Dickinson was apt to do. The social roles of the participants are never placed in hierarchical, or binary, fashion, which
is supportive of Lee’s overall transcendent message. The closest Lee approaches Dickinson’s removal of conventional meaning is in the lines of “He-Dreams-for-All-Our-Sakes/His-Play-Vouchsafes-Our-Winter-Share./His-Dispersal-Wins-the-Birds.” Similar to Dickinson, Lee is suggesting that there is meaning beyond the normal use of these words. Yet, where Dickinson ultimately stands as a voice standing on the circumference rearranging the entire perspective of life itself, Lee resides in the middle of the circle, connecting all around him in a tapestry of meaning.

But only one word for father.
And sometimes a man is both.
Which is to say sometimes a man manifests mysteries beyond his own understanding.

For instance, being the one and the many, and the loneliness of either. Or

the living light we see by, we never see. Or

the sole word weighs heavy as a various name.43

Both Dickinson and Lee usually place the climax of their poems in the last sentence. This structure allows the author to withhold the revelation till the tension of the poem is highest. In their most powerful works, the final sentence is often a shift in perspective, causing the reader to redefine the meaning of words before. "What is the essence of Dickinson’s poetic method? According to Weisbuch, ‘Dickinson’s typical poem,’ he explains, ‘enacts a hypothesis about the

world by patterning a parallel analogical world.” Both Lee and Dickinson rely on the alagorical structure where their poems move on both the metaphysical and tangible levels. The closure of the poem can be seen as where the poets tie off the strands of personal and impersonal thought. Lee has described that his poems operate on two level, which function to bring the reader into the climatic moment of his poem.

Yes, my work has always been a struggle between the personal and impersonal. It’s always been an impersonal voice I’d like to achieve. I’ll be honest with you, every poem, at the risk of oversimplifying, is at least about two things. There’s this subject, in this case let’s say the father, and then the poem is about itself. The poem, if it is successful, enacts its own making. That’s what we mean when we say in the best light, poetry is about poetry. The poem is like a person. You are about your history. You’re referential in that you refer to yourself. You’re about your parents, where you come from, but you’re also about you and a poem is like that.

Holding till the end to reveal the metaphysical redefinition of the poem allows Dickinson and Lee to heighten its impact.

In her “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –,” one can see how Dickinson combines the idealism of human/divine relationship with a simple physical metaphor of the gun. “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –/In Corners – till a Day/The Owner passed – identified –/And carried Me away –.” This need to be specific and particular within the lyric will always distinguishes it from the

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45 Cooper and Yu, “Art Is Who We Are,” 62.

46 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 187-188.
transcendental ideal. Elisa New recognizes this need for the poet to distance his or her self from Emerson because of the inherent limitations of Emersonian philosophy in poetry. "I am proposing that the lyric is not very well adapted to deferred horizons, to temporal imprecision, to indeterminacy, for it is precisely a genre of determination. Hewing out a time of its own, if you will a term, the poem replicates in its sound and shape what it feels like to live that term, determining its own contours from limits it discerns and internalizes."47 The demands of the lyric itself require that the poet to abandon the ethereal world of the metaphysical and focus on the specific, the secular. Dickinson never abandons the particular in grounding her works. Lee’s works solve Elisa New’s problem in a similar manner to Dickinson's approach by focusing on the secular till he twists the allegory together in the end. Their poems rarely leave the realm of being solidly grounded within the particulars of the lyric. Only at the conclusion of the poem does Dickinson move the poem into its existential question: “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 –”48 It is a relational poem with the speaker raising powerful inquiries into the nature of human potential and the source of its release. Instead of Emerson’s “all seeing eye”, where nature’s meaning is seen by the artist in its very essense, Dickinson allows the poem to see, and then, she ends the poem by seeing again with “Without – the power to die –." She retains the power of

47 New, The Regenerate Lyric, 41.

48 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 187-188.
definition by never releasing it to the abstract ideas of transcendentalism. She defines her world on her terms:

Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, who wish to recover the symbolic power of words by re-invoking their original meaning, Dickinson ‘works to denaturalize the available symbolic resources of our condition and culture’ (92), and in so doing privileges the poet’s power to reshape language over her ability to mediate between language and nature.49

Again, Dickinson places herself on the circumference of her world and looks inward from a fresh, unbounded perspective. Yet, Lee does not seem to grasp that Dickinson is emptying her voice of conventional meaning to wrestle with the very meaning of language that words and grammar convey. Dickinson’s unwillingness to settle on a comprehensive set of transcendental ideals gives her attacks on language and grammar an underlying power that Lee’s poetry lacks. She observes nature and, rather than replicating its conventional meaning, she redefines: “She never does stop unnaming them [secular objects] as she sublimely and outrageously unnames even the blanks. Emerson urged the poet to unname and rename. Whitman shrewdly evaded naming and unnamming. Dickinson was not much interested in renaming.”50 This need of Dickinson to probe the impersonal brings her poetry a tone of inquiry rather than conclusiveness. She enters the metaphysical as a questioner, a journeyer, that never finds her destination.

While Emily Dickinson was clearly influenced by Emerson, her poetics viewed


50 Bloom, The Western Canon, 275.
reality in a fundamentally different perspective. "While the Transcendentalists often observed nature to discover metaphors for the soul and to learn eternal truths, Dickinson believed the minutest details of nature were significant in themselves – not as signs or representations of higher truths." Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Dickinson’s transcendentalism is never at peace with itself. Lee’s more conventional lyrics can be seen to dovetail with his less skeptical transcendentalism. Aesthetically, Lee favors more sentimental, accessible poems while Dickinson’s approach was more modern. In some ways, Lee’s attempt to complete and redirect Dickinson can be seen as an attempt to actually move her back to safer, more approachable ground.

It can be argued that Lee is successful with his deamonization of Emily Dickinson because his vision of the transcendent is an affirmation of life, its purposes and humanity. This success allows Lee to create works that are solidly grounded in personal, domestic life with an emotional accessibility that resonants with readers. The confidence of his voice allow for the reader to connect to the organic community around them. Since Lee’s purpose is to situate the reader into a relationship with their own humanity, his works can be seen as aesthetically pleasing and artistically successful.

A more judiance view would comment that Lee’s transcendentalism is rather unremarkable New Age yoga that is wholly inadequate to filling in the void where Dickinson journeys. Dickinson’s goals are simply much grander than Lee’s.

51 Martin, The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson, 93.
She was questioning the very nature of language, punctuation, religion and the nature of death itself. Lee uses language as a disruptive tool, but does not attempt to relabel and rename reality itself. Lee's interest is in personal transformation; Dickinson questioned whether the person even exists as a self. While Lee's works are enjoyable and emotionally accessible, it is also true that they possess a sentimental, more conventional quality that lack the true originality of Emily Dickinson.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Li-Young Lee is best described as a post-modern Transcendentalist. The ideas in his works would rest comfortably beside Emerson and Thoreau, albeit with a more Eastern favor. It is his belief that the universal mind can be accessed directly by individual self-discovery that makes his metaphysics American in their character. His lyric poetry is also grounded in the tension that American lyric poetry has between expressing the lofty optimism of the Transcendental and the difficult alienation and sense of being fallen that secular living creates. His poems display the strengths of Transcendentalists through their message of positive personal transformation and life as a meaningful experience. They also suffer from the same weaknesses of the Transcendentalists by resorting to sophomoric faith in the universal.

Lee attempts to complete Dickinson’s ideas by bringing them back to a more traditional understanding of the transcendent by evoking a more solid sense of a person’s ability to connect to the divine. Lee also attempts to complete Dickinson’s existentialism by endowing his poetry about death with a life-affirming attitude. In some respects, Lee manages to create more accessible, sentimental poetry that conveys a transcendental reality that is comforting and emotionally connective in its messages. In other respects, Lee’s poetry falls short of Emily Dickinson’s powerful, fearless inquiry and redefining reality on her own terms. While Lee is interested in exploring the transitory veil of personal life, he
does not question his underlying idealism. Lee stops short of Dickinson’s skepticism. It is her skepticism, the willingness to doubt even oneself as a self, that grants Dickinson her canonical power. She taps into an inherent human fear that maybe social ideas and beliefs in the universally divine are also mistaken. To believe in the power of personal transformation and, yet, be fearful of its own existence, empowers Dickinson’s poetry with a uniquely human ambivalence regarding one’s own self.
“The Cleaving”
By Li-Young Lee

He gossips like my grandmother, this man
with my face, and I could stand
amused all afternoon
in the Hon Kee Grocery,
amid hanging meats he
chops: roast pork cut
from a hog hung
by nose and shoulders,
her entire skin burnt
crisp, flesh I know
to be sweet,
her shining
face grinning
up at ducks
dangling single file,
each pierced by black
hooks through breast, bill,
and steaming from a hole
stitched shut at the ass.
I step to the counter, recite,
and he, without even slightly
varying the rhythm of his current confession or harangue,
scribbles my order on a greasy receipt,
and chops it up quick.

Such a sorrowful Chinese face,
nomad, Gobi, Northern
in its boniness
clear from the high
warlike forehead
to the sheer edge of the jaw.
He could be my brother, but finer,
and, except for his left forearm, which is engorged,
sinewy from his daily grip and
wield of a two-pound tool,
he’s delicate, narrow-waisted, his frame
so slight a lover, some
rough other
might break it down
its smooth, oily length.
In his light-handed calligraphy
on receipts and in his
moodiness, he is
a Southerner from a river-province;
suited for scholarship, his face poised
above an open book, he'd mumble
his favorite passages.
He could be my grandfather;
he came to America to get a Western education
in 1917, but too homesick to study,
he sits in the park all day, reading poems
and writing letters to his mother.

He lops the head off, chops
the neck of the duck
into six, slits
the body
open, groin
to breast, and drains
the scalding juices,
then quarters the carcass
with two fast hacks of the cleaver,
old blade that has worn
into the surface of the round
foot-thick chop-block
a scoop that cradles precisely the curved steel.

The head, flung from the body, opens
down the middle where the butcher
cleanly halved it between
the eyes, and I
see, foetal-crouched
inside the skull, the homunculus,
grey brain grainy
to eat.
Did this animal, after all, at the moment
its neck broke,
image the way his executioner
shrinks from his own death?
Is this how
I, too, recoil from my day?
See how this shape
hordes itself; see how
little it is.
See its grease on the blade.
Is this how I’ll be found
when judgement is passed, when names
are called, when crimes are tallied?
This is also how I looked before I tore my mother open.
Is this how I presided over my century, is this how
I regarded the murders?
This is also how I prayed.
Was it me in the Other
I prayed to when I prayed?
This too was how I slept, clutching my wife.
Was it me in the other I loved
when I loved another?
The butcher sees me eye this delicacy.
With a finger, he picks it
out of the skull-cradle
and offers it to me.
I take it gingerly between my fingers
and suck it down.
I eat my man.

The noise the body makes
when the body meets
the soul over the soul’s ocean and penumbra
is the old sound of up-and-down, in-and-out,
a lump of muscle chug-chugging blood
into the ear; a lover’s
heart-shaped tongue;
flesh rocking flesh until flesh comes;
the butcher working
at his block and blade to marry their shapes
by violence and time;
an engine crossing,
re-crossing salt water, hauling
immigrants and the junk
of the poor. These
are the faces I love, the bodies
and scents of bodies
for which I long
in various ways, at various times,
thirteen gathered around the redwood,
happy, talkative, voracious
at day's end,
eager to eat
four kinds of meat
prepared four different ways,
numerous plates and bowls of rice and vegetables,
each made by distinct affections
and brought to table by many hands.

Brothers and sisters by blood and design,
who sit in separate bodies of varied shapes,
we constitute a many-membered
body of love.
In a world of shapes
of my desires, each one here
is a shape of one of my desires, and each
is known to me and dear by virtue
of each one's unique corruption
of those texts, the face, the body:
that jut jaw
to gnash tendon;
that wide nose to meet the blows
a face like that invites;
those long eyes closing on the seen;
those thick lips
to suck the meat of animals
or recite 300 poems of the T'ang;
these teeth to bite my monosyllables;
these cheekbones to make
those syllables sing the soul.
Puffed or sunken
according to the life,
dark or light according
to the birth, straight
or humped, whole, manqué, quasi, each pleases, verging
on utter grotesquery.
All are beautiful by variety.
The soul too
is a debasement
of a text, but, thus, it
acquires salience, although a
human salience, but
inimitable, and, hence, memorable.
God is the text.
The soul is a corruption
and a mnemonic.

A bright moment,
I hold up an old head
from the sea and admire the haughty
down-curved mouth
that seems to disdain
all the eyes are blind to,
including me, the eater.
Whole unto itself, complete
without me, yet its
shape complements the shape of my mind.
I take it as text and evidence
of the world’s love for me,
and I feel urged to utterance,
urged to read the body of the world, urged
to say it
in human terms,
my reading a kind of eating, my eating
a kind of reading,
my saying a diminishment, my noise
a love-in-answer.
What is it in me would
devour the world to utter it?
What is it in me will not let
the world be, would eat
not just this fish,
but the one who killed it,
the butcher who cleaned it.
I would eat the way he
squats, the way he
reaches into the plastic tubs
and pulls out a fish, clubs it, takes it
to the sink, guts it, drops it on the weighing pan.
I would eat that thrash
and plunge of the watery body
in the water, that liquid violence
between the man’s hands,
I would eat
the gutless twitching on the scales,
three pounds of dumb
nerve and pulse, I would eat it all
to utter it.
The deaths at the sinks, those bodies prepared
for eating, I would eat,
and the standing deaths
at the counters, in the aisles,
the walking deaths in the streets,
the death-far-from-home, the death-
in-a-strange-land, these Chinatown
deaths, these American deaths.
I would devour this race to sing it,
this race that according to Emerson
managed to preserve to a hair
for three or four thousand years
the ugliest features in the world.
I would eat these features, eat
the last three or four thousand years, every hair.
And I would eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his
soporific transcendence.
I would eat this head,
glazed in pepper-speckled sauce,
the cooked eyes opaque in their sockets.
I bring it to my mouth and—
the way I was taught, the way I’ve watched
others before me do—
with a stiff tongue lick out
the cheek-meat and the meat
over the armored jaw, my eating,
its sensual, salient nowness,
punctuating the void
from which such hunger springs and to which it proceeds.

And what
is this
I excavate
with my mouth?
What is this
plated, ribbed, hinged
architecture, this carp head,
but one more
articulation of a single nothing
severally manifested?
What is my eating,
rapt as it is,
but another
shape of going,
my immaculate expiration?

O, nothing is so
steadfast it won’t go
the way the body goes.
The body goes.
The body’s grave,
so serious
in its dying,
arduous as martyrs
in that task and as
glorious. It goes
empty always
and announces its going
by spasms and groans, farts and sweats.

What I thought were the arms
aching cleave, were the knees trembling leave.
What I thought were the muscles
insisting resist, persist, exist,
were the pores
hissing mist and waste.
What I thought was the body humming reside, reside,
was the body sighing revise, revise.
O, the murderous deletions, the keening
down to nothing, the cleaving.
All of the body’s revisions end
in death.
All of the body’s revisions end.

Bodies eating bodies, heads eating heads,
we are nothing eating nothing,
and though we feast,
are filled, overfilled,
we go famished.
We gang the doors of death.
That is, out deaths are fed
that we may continue our daily dying,
our bodies going
down, while the plates-soon-empty
are passed around, that true
direction of our true prayers,
while the butcher spells
his message, manifold,
in the mortal air.
He coaxes, cleaves, brings change
before our very eyes, and at every
moment of our being.
As we eat we’re eaten.
Else what is this
violence, this salt, this
passion, this heaven?

I thought the soul an airy thing.
I did not know the soul
is cleaved so that the soul might be restored.
Live wood hewn,
its sap springs from a sticky wound.
No seed, no egg has he
whose business calls for an axe.
In the trade of my soul’s shaping,
he traffics in hews and hacks.

No easy thing, violence.
One of its names? Change. Change
resides in the embrace
of the effaced and the effacer,
in the covenant of the opened and the opener;
the axe accomplishes it on the soul’s axis.
What then may I do
but cleave to what cleaves me.
I kiss the blade and eat my meat.
I thank the wielder and receive,
while terror spirits
my change, sorrow also.
The terror the butcher
scripts in the unhealed
air, the sorrow of his Shang
dynasty face,
African face with slit eyes. He is
my sister, this
beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
keeper of sabbaths, diviner
of holy texts, this dark
dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
I daily face,
this immigrant,
this man with my own face.¹

“Persimmons”
By Li-Young Lee

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between persimmon and precision.
How to choose
persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart.

Donna undresses, her stomach is white.
In the yard, dewy and shivering
with crickets, we lie naked,
face-up, face-down.
I teach her Chinese.
Naked: I’ve forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me.
I part her legs,
remember to tell her
she is beautiful as the moon.

Other words
that got me into trouble were
fight and fright, wren and yarn.
Fight was what I did when I was frightened,
fright was what I felt when I was fighting.

Wrens are small, plain birds,
yarn is what one knits with.
Wren are soft as yarn.
My mother made birds out of yarn.
I loved to watch her tie the stuff;
a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a Chinese apple. Knowing
it wasn’t ripe or sweet, I didn’t eat
but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun
inside, something golden, glowing,
warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,
forgotten and not yet ripe.
I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,
where each morning a cardinal
sang, The sun, the sun.

Finally understanding
he was going blind,
my father sat up all one night
waiting for a song, a ghost.
I gave him the persimmons,
swelled, heavy as sadness,
and sweet as love.

This year, in the muddy lighting
of my parents’ cellar, I rummage, looking
for something I lost.
My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,
black cane between his knees,
hand over hand, gripping the handle.

He’s so happy that I’ve come home.
I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.
All gone, he answers.

Under some blankets, I find a box.
Inside the box I find three scrolls.
I sit beside him and untie
three paintings by my father:
Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.
Two cats preening.
Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.
He raises both hands to touch the cloth,
asks, Which is this?

This is persimmons, Father.

Oh, the feel of the wolftail on the silk,
the strength, the tense
precision in the wrist.
I painted them hundreds of times
eyes closed. These I painted blind.
Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,
in your palm, the ripe weight. ²

“The City In Which I Loved You”
By Li-Young Lee

And when, in the city in which I love you,
even my most excellent song goes unanswered,
and I mount the scabbed streets,
the long shouts of avenues,
and tunnel sunken night in search of you . . .

That I negotiate fog, bituminous
rain rining like teeth into the beggar’s tin,
or two men jackaling a third in some alley
weirdly lit by a couch on fire, that I
drag my extinction in search of you . . .

Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches, swastikaed synagogues,
defended houses of worship, past
newspapered windows of tenements, along the violated,
the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this
storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed
city I call home, in which I am a guest . . .

a bruise, blue
in the muscle, you

impinge upon me.
As bone hugs the ache home, so
I'm vexed to love you, your body

the shape of returns, your hair a torso
of light, your heat
I must have, your opening
I'd eat, each moment
of that soft-finned fruit,
inverted fountain in which I don't see me.

My tongue remembers your wounded flavor.
The vein in my neck
adores you. A sword
stands up between my hips,
my hidden fleece send forth its scent of human oil.

The shadows under my arms,
I promise, are tender, the shadows
under my face. Do not calculate,
but come, smooth other, rough sister.
Yet, how will you know me
among the captives, my hair grown long,
my blood motley, my ways trespassed upon?
In the uproar, the confusion
of accents and inflections
how will you hear me when I open my mouth?

Look for me, one of the drab population
under fissured edifices, fractured
artifices. Make my various
names flock overhead,
I will follow you.
Hew me to your beauty.

Stack in me the unaccountable fire,
bring on me the iron leaf, but tenderly.
Folded one hundred times and
creased, I'll not crack.
Threshed to excellence, I'll achieve you.

but in the city
in which I love you,
no one comes, no one
meets me in the brick clefts;
in the wedged dark,

no finger touches me secretly, no mouth
tastes my flawless salt,
no one wakens the honey in the cells, finds the humming
in the ribs, the rich business in the recesses;
hulls clogged, I continue laden, translated

by exhaustion and time's appetite, my sleep abandoned
in bus stations and storefront stoops,
my insomnia erected under a sky
cross-hatched by wires, branches,
and black flights of rain. Lewd body of wind

jams me in the passageways, doors slam
like guns going off, a gun goes off, a pie plate spins
past, whizzing its thin tremolo,
a plastic bag, fat with wind, barrels by and slaps
a chain-link fence, wraps it like clung skin.

In the excavated places,
I waited for you, and I did not cry out.
In the derelict rooms, my body needed you,
and there was such flight in my breast.
During the daily assaults, I called to you,

and my voice pursued you,
even backward
to that other city
in which I saw a woman
squat in the street

beside a body,
and fan with a handkerchief flies from its face.
That woman
was not me. And
the corpse

lying there, lying there
so still it seemed with great effort, as though
his whole being was concentrating on the hole
in his forehead, so still
I expected he’d sit up any minute and laugh out loud:

that man was not me;
his wound was his, his death not mine.
and the soldier
who fired the shot, then lit a cigarette:
he was not me.

And the ones I do not see
in cities all over the world,
the ones sitting, standing, lying down, those
in prisons playing checkers with their knocked-out teeth:
they are not me. Some of them are

my age, even my height and weight;
none of them is me.
The woman who is slapped, the man who is kicked,
the ones who don't survive,
whose names I do not know;

they are not me forever,
the ones who no longer live
in the cities in which
you are not,
the cities in which I looked for you.

The rain stops, the moon
in her breaths appears overhead.
the only sound now is a far flapping.
Over the National Bank, the flag of some republic or other
gallops like water on fire to tear itself away.

If I feel the night
move to disclosures or crescendos,
it’s only because I'm famished
for meaning; the night
merely dissolves.

And your otherness is perfect as my death.
Your otherness exhausts me,
like looking suddenly up from here
to impossible stars fading.
Everything is punished by your absence.
Is prayer, then, the proper attitude
for the mind that longs to be freely blown,
but which gets snagged on the barb
called world, that
tooth-ache, the actual? What prayer

would I build? And to whom?
Where are you
in the cities in which I love you,
the cities daily risen to work and to money,
to the magnificent miles and the gold coasts?

Morning comes to this city vacant of you.
Pages and windows flare, and you are not there.
Someone sweeps his portion of sidewalk,
wakens the drunk, slumped like laundry,
and you are gone.

You are not in the wind
which someone notes in the margins of a book.
You are gone out of the small fires in abandoned lots
where human figures huddle,
each aspiring to its own ghost.

Between brick walls, in a space no wider than my face,
a leafless sapling stands in mud.
In its branches, a nest of raw mouths
gaping and cheeping, scrawny fires that must eat.
My hunger for you is no less than theirs.

At the gates of the city in which I love you,
the sea hauls the sun on its back,
strikes the land, which rebukes it.
what ardor in its sliding heft,
a flameless friction on the rocks.

Like the sea, I am recommended by my orphaning.
Noisy with telegrams not received,
quarrelsome with aliases,
intricate with misguided journeys,
by my expulsions have I come to love you.

Straight from my father’s wrath,
and long from my mother’s womb,
late in this century and on a Wednesday morning,  
bearing the mark of one who's experienced  
neither heaven nor hell,  

my birthplace vanished, my citizenship earned,  
in league with stones of the earth, I  
enter, without retreat or help from history,  
the days of no day, my earth  
of no earth, I re-enter  

the city in which I love you.  
And I never believed that the multitude  
of dreams and many words were vain.³  

“This was a Poet – It is That”  
By Emily Dickinson  

This was a Poet – It’s is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meaning –  
And Attar so immense  

From the familiar species  
That perished by the Door –  
We wonder it was not Ourselves  
Arrested it – before –  

Of Pictures, the Discloser –  
The Poet – it is He –  
Entitles Us – by Contrast –  
To ceaseless Poverty –  

Of Portion – so unconscious –  
The Robbing – could not harm –  
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –  
Exterior – to Time –⁴  

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⁴ Dickinson, Final Harvest, 106-107.
“Me from Myself – to banish –“
By Emily Dickinson

Me from Myself – to banish –
Had I Art –
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart –

But since Myself – assault Me –
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We’re mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication –
Me – of Me?5

“Epistle”
By Li-Young Lee

Of wisdom, splendid columns of light
waking sweet foreheads,
I know nothing

but what I’ve glimpsed in my most hopeful of daydreams.
Of a world without end,
amen,

I know nothing,
but what I sang of once with others,
all of us standing in the vaulted room.

But there is wisdom
in the hour in which a boy
sits in his room listening

to the sound of weeping
coming from some other room
of his father’s house,

5 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 165.
and that boy was me, and he
listened without understanding, and was soon frightened
by how the monotonous sobs resembled laughter.

All of this while noon became vast day,
while sunlight and the clock
gave birth to melancholy,

before the days grew vacant,
the sun grew terrible, the clock stopped,
and melancholy gave up to grief.

All of this
in a dead hour of a dead day,
among doors closed for nap or prayer.

Who was weeping? Why?
Did the boy fall asleep?
Did he flee that house? Is he there now?

Before it all gets wiped away, let me say,
there is wisdom in the slender hour
which arrives between two shadows.

It is not heavenly and it is not sweet.
It is accompanied by steady human weeping,
and twin furrows between the brows,

but it is what I know,
and so am able to tell.6

“The Poets light but Lamps —“
By Emily Dickinson

The Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves – go out –
The Wicks they stimulate –
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns –
Each Age a Lens

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6 Lee, Rose, 13-14.
Disseminating their
Circumference – 7

“The Hammock”
By Li-Young Lee

When I lay my head in my mother’s lap
I think how day hides the stars,
the way I lay hidden once, waiting
inside my mother’s singing to herself. And I remember
how she carried me on her back
between home and the kindergarten,
once each morning and once each afternoon.

I don’t know what my mother’s thinking.

When my son lays his head in my lap, I wonder:
Do his father’s kisses keep his father’s worries
from becoming his? I think, Dear God, and remember
there are stars we haven’t heard from yet:
They have so far to arrive. Amen,
I think, and I feel almost comforted.

I’ve no idea what my child is thinking.

Between two unknowns, I live my life.
Between my mother’s hopes, older than I am
by coming before me, and my child’s wishes, older than I am
by outliving me. And what’s it like?
Is it a door, and good-bye on either side?

A window, and eternity on either side?
Yes, and a little singing between two great rests.” 8

“The difference between Despair”
By Emily Dickinson

The difference between Despair

7 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 214.

8 Lee, Book of My Nights, 48.
And Fear – is like the One
Between the instant of a Wreck –
And when the Wreck has been –

The Mind is smooth – no Motion –
Contented as the Eye
Upon the Forehead of a Bust –
That knows – it cannot see –

“A Final Thing”
By Li-Young Lee

I am that last, that
final thing, the body
in a white sheet listening,

the whole of me trained,
curled like one great ear on
a sound, a noise I know, a

woman talking
in another room,
the woman I love; and

though I can’t hear
her words, by their voicing
I can guess

she is telling a story,

using a voice which speaks to another,
weighted with that other’s attention,
and avowing it
by deepening in intention.

Rich with the fullness of what’s declared,
this voice points
away from itself
to some place

in the hearer,

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9 Dickinson, Final Harvest, 56.
sends the hearer back
to himself
to find what he knows.

A saying full of hearing,
a murmuring full of telling
and compassion for the listener
and for what’s told,

thinner, higher, uncertain.
Querying, it seems
an invitation to be met,
stirring anticipation, embodying
incompletion of time and day.

My son, my first-born, and his mother
are involved in a story no longer theirs,
for I am implicated,
all three of us now
clinging to expectancy, riding sound and air.

Will my first morning of heaven be this?
No. And this is not
my last morning on earth.
I am simply last
in my house

to waken, and the first
sound I hear
is the voice of one I love
speaking to one we love.
I hear it through the bedroom wall;

something, someday, I’ll close my eyes to recall.10

“Dwelling”
By Li-Young Lee

As though touching her
might make him known to himself,

as though his hand moving
over her body might find who
he is, as though he lay inside her, a country

his hand’s traveling uncovered,
as though such a country arose
continually up out of her
to meet his hand’s setting forth and setting forth.

And the places on her body have no names.
And she is what’s immense about the night.
And their clothes on the floor are arranged
for forgetfulness.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{quote}
“I reason, Earth is short –“
By Emily Dickinson

I reason, Earth is short –
And Anguish – absolute –
And many hurt,
But, what of that?

I reason, we could die –
The best Vitality
Cannot excel Decay,
But, what of that?

I reason, that in Heaven –
Somehow, it will be even –
Some new Equation, given –
But, what of that?\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –“
By Emily Dickinson

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

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Dickinson, \textit{Final Harvest}, 54.
\end{footnotes}
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 repy –

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

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 –^{13}

“Because I could not stop for Death –“
By Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove

^{13} Ibid., 187-188.
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –”14

“Little Father”
By Li-Young Lee

I buried my father
in the sky.
Since then, the birds
clean and comb him every morning
and pull the blanket up to his chin
every night.

I buried my father underground.
Since then, my ladders
only climb down,
and all the earth has become a house
whose rooms are the hours, whose doors
stand open at evening, receiving
guest after guest.
Sometimes I see past them
to the tables spread for a wedding feast.

I buried my father in my heart.
Now he grows in me, my strange son,

14 Ibid., 177-178.
my little root who won't drink milk,
little pale foot sunk in unheard-of night,
little clock spring newly wet
in the fire, little grape, parent to the future
wine, a son the fruit of his own son,
little father I ransom with my life.”

“God Seeks a Destiny”
By Li-Young Lee

The child climbs into the apple tree
and can’t get down,
and can’t cry out of fear
he’ll wake the baby inside the house.

From where he’s perched, he can see into
all of the windows at the back of the house.

There’s his sister painting her eyelids
the hues of morning and evening.

There’s his brother falling asleep
over his ABC’s and 1, 2, 3’s.

There’s the baby
in a basket beside their mother,
whose seated at the kitchen table.
She’s adding and subtracting numbers
in a dog-eared ledger.
And he can tell by her frown she’s suspicious
Death owns the figures,
and the decimal is a double agent.

And where is his father?
In the room with the shut curtains, of course.
He’s talking to God again, who plays
hide and seek among His names.

But wasn’t it God who lured the child
ever higher into the tree with glimpses
of God’s own ripening body?

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15 Lee, Book of My Nights, 38.
Stranded thus in a branching net
staked between earth and sky, between
present summer and future summer,
isn’t the boy God’s prey?

And who wakes now but God in the boy’s flesh
and astonished bright blood,
as his hands suddenly see,
his feet begin to find
his weight alive,
his mind aligned
not with the fate of a stunned will

but some greener knowing and
feeling his way back to earth.

God’s destiny is safe
for now inside the child.\(^{16}\)

“Pain – has an Element of Blank – “
By Emily Dickinson

Pain – has an Element of Blank –
It cannot recollect
When it begun – or if there were
A time when it was not –

It has no Future – but itself –
Its Infinite contain
Its Past – enlightened to perceive
New Periods – of Pain.”\(^{17}\)

“This Room and Everything in It”
By Li-Young Lee

Lie still now

\(^{16}\) Lee, *Behind My Eyes*, 75-76.

\(^{17}\) Dickinson, *Final Harvest*, 166.
while I prepare for my future,
certain hard days ahead,
when I’ll need what I know so clearly this moment.

I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory

I am letting this room
and everything in it
stand for my ideas about love
and its difficulties.

I’ll let your love-cries,
those spacious notes
of a moment ago,
stand for distance.

Your scent,
that scent
of spice and a wound,
I’ll let stand for mystery
Your sunken belly
is a daily cup
of milk I drank
as a boy before morning prayer.

The sun on the face
of the wall
is God, the face
I can’t see, my soul,

and so on, each thing
standing for a separate idea,
and those ideas forming the constellation
of my greater idea.
And one day, when I need
to tell myself something intelligent
about love

I’ll close my eyes
and recall this room and everything in it:
My body is estrangement.
This desire, perfection.
Your closed eyes my extinction.
Now I’ve forgotten my
Idea. The book
on the windowsill, raffled by wind
the even-numbered pages are
the past, the odd-numbered pages, the future.
The sun is
God, your body is milk . . .
useless, useless . . .
your cries are song, my body's not me . . .
no good . . . my idea
has evaporated . . . your hair is time, your thighs are song . . .
it had something to do
with death . . . it had something
to do with love.”

“Words for Worry”
By Li-Young Le
Another word for father is worry.
Worry boils the water
for tea in the middle of the night.
Worry trimmed the child's nails before
singing him to sleep.
Another word for son is delight,
another word, hidden.
And another is One-Who-Goes-Away.
Yet another, One-Who-Returns.
So many words for son:
He-Dreams-for-All-Our-Sakes.
His-Play-Vouchsafes-Our-Winter-Share.
His-Dispersal-Wins-the-Birds.

But only one word for father.
And sometimes a man is both.
Which is to say sometimes a man manifests mysteries beyond
his own understanding.

For instance, being the one and the many,
and the loneliness of either. Or

the living light we see by, we never see. Or

the sole word weighs
heavy as a various name.

And sleepless worry folds the laundry for tomorrow.
Tired worry wakes the child for school.

Orphan worry writes the note he hides
in the child’s lunch bag.
It begins, Dear Firefly....”1

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19 Lee, Book of My Nights, 36-37.


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