

A Solemn thing within the Soul
To feel itself get ripe -
And golden hang - while farther up -
The Maker's Ladders stop -
And in the Orchard far below -
You hear a Being - drop -

A Wonderful - to feel the Sun
Still toiling at the Cheek
You thought was finished -
Cool of eye, and critical of Work -
He shifts the stem - a little -
To give your Core - a look -

But solemnest - to know
Your chance in Harvest moves
A little nearer - Every Sun
The Single - to some lives.

Susan Kornfeld on "A Solemn thing within the Soul"

I can't help but think of another New England poet, Robert Frost, when I read this. His "After Apple Picking" also has a tree where fruit ripens and is picked or falls, a harvest time, and the sense that souls ripen in their season. No doubt Frost read Dickinson (in fact, he taught at Amherst College off and on for over forty years, beginning in 1917 -- not that long after Dickinson's poems began to be published), and like her, his use of everyday detail is frequently metaphysical. I think of him as in her lineage.

In Frost's poem, he is the apple picker; it is his "two-pointed ladder" that is sticking up "toward heaven" as he picks and picks and picks. Yet just as the harvest season serves as a metaphor for his own mortality, his act of sorting (some apples for the cellar to keep and others, the fallen, for the "cider-apple heap / As of no worth" -- even if they are "not bruised, or spiked with stubble") places him as a somewhat conflicted god.

Dickinson's poem, on the other hand, is all apple. The Soul hangs on the tree of life, ripening along with all other souls. The Sun, a careful orchardist, is both crafting and evaluating the apples, "toiling at the Cheek" and shifting "the stem" a little to evaluate the "Core." It's a rather analytical process: the Sun is "Cool of eye, and critical of Work" just as a master orchardist should be. As far as Dickinson's portrayals of the Deity, or the course of life, this is quite 'sunny'.

But while the soul's ultimate ripeness is "A Solemn thing" as it senses its time is near and hears other beings make that long "drop," this interactive maturation is "Wonderful." An individual might feel she is ripe, but the master orchardist might think otherwise: perhaps she needs some extra sunshine, some new experience -- good or bad -- to bring a bit of redness to her cheek.

I like the rather transgressive aspect of the sun moving the stem aside to peek at the "core" of

the soul. Dickinson must have liked it too, for it is part of the "wonderful" stanza. It doesn't sound so very wonderful to me, but my core is nowhere near as forged as Dickinson's. She must have wanted, on some deep level, an appropriate and appreciative audience, someone to truly see her.

The last stanza brings us the most solemn thing, which is to know that every day brings us closer to ripe falling – for fall we will – and that every day is the single last day for some lives. That is indeed a most solemn thing. The tactile sense of hearing them drop is eerie, fascinating, and chilling all at once. One wonders if, as in Frost's poem, they are headed for the cider heap, or if Dickinson is suggesting that the ripeness is all and after that ... the fruit simply falls.

from Robert Frost's "After Apple Picking"

リンゴ摘みのあと (抜粋)

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still.

And there's a barrel that I didn't fill

Beside it, and there may be two or three

Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.

But I am done with apple-picking now.

Essence of winter sleep is on the night,

The scent of apples; I am drowsing off.

I cannot shake the shimmer from my sight

I got from looking through a pane of glass

I skimmed this morning from the water-trough,

And held against the world of hoary grass.

It melted, and I let it fall and break.

But I was well

Upon my way to sleep before it fell,

And I could tell

What form my dreaming was about to take.

Magnified apples appear and disappear,

Stem end and blossom end,

And every fleck of russet showing clear.

わたしの長いハシゴの先は木をつきぬけ
なおも空へと向かっている。

そばにはまだ一杯にはなっていない樽が

あるし、リンゴを二個か三個

摘み残した枝もあるだろう。

でもリンゴ摘みはこれで終了だ。

夜になれば冬の眠りの本質は

リンゴの香り。わたしはうとうとし始める。

けさ飼葉桶からすくい取り

枯れ草の世界へかざして立てた

氷のガラスを透かして見たときの

きらめきが眼からぬぐえない。

それは溶けたし、わたしはそれが割れるにまかせた

でもわたしは

それが落ちるまえにはもう眠りに向かっていた

それにわかっていたのだ

自分の夢がどんなことになるのかを。

巨大な林檎があらわれては消える

茎の端、花の端、

赤茶けた斑点もくつきり見える。