

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

**By
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Emily Dickinson and The Search For Meaning

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Publisher: Dr. Geeta Mathew
302, Crown Cypress Apartments,
324, 5th Main Road,
Koramangala, 1st Block
Bangalore 560034
Mobile: 9535799773



Printed at

Peacock Advertising India Pvt Ltd,
"Peacock House"
#158 & 159, 3rd Main, 7th Cross, Chamarajpet
Bengaluru - 560 018

₹500/-

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Preface

In my mind Emily Dickinson has always been the woman in white: an enigmatic and ghostly figure who wafted through my imagination with no let or hindrance, taking my breath away each time she appeared. I must have been a young lad entering his teens when I came across her poems, and though much of what she wrote was incomprehensible to me in those early days, she fascinated me for no clearly identifiable reason. The power of her words to stun me, to make me start and shiver, to set me off into a reverie, was obvious from the start. As I grew, I learned to seek for her hidden meanings, for her new insights, the unmatched compression and concentration of her lexicon, and the quaint strangeness of the manner of her expression.

Throughout the busy schedule of my decades in the civil service, she used to wander in and out of my life, in the form of a collection of poems someone had left behind, a critical article in a literary publication, and even a play on YouTube starring Julie Harris. When Harold Bloom included her name in the Western canon, it seemed she had finally achieved the supreme honour she was destined for.

As superannuation neared, and the prospect of doing nothing loomed large, Emily called out to me again. It was time to finally get to know this mystery woman better, to understand her through dogged research and study and to finally try to make some sense of who and

what she really was. I registered myself as a Ph.D research scholar and proposed a detailed examination of the philosophical and symbolic meaning of ‘circumference’ in her poems. Over four years I scoured through the libraries at the University at Jaipur, the USIS at New Delhi and the American Studies Research Centre at Hyderabad: there was sufficient material available, including new studies that often popped up on the internet. Doing this along with the onerous official duties was difficult, but Emily often proved to be the escape I longed for, from files and meetings and the daily political machinations that had become a part of my official life. What bliss, what joy as she beckoned me into her world.

A few weeks before my retirement, I was able to submit my thesis for evaluation. My ever-patient guide Professor Sudha Rai, then the head of the English Department at the University of Rajasthan, was more than helpful. My gratitude to her for speeding up the process for the viva call came just a few months later in December 2014 and soon enough I was awarded the Ph.D. And thus I obtained for myself the honour of adding the honorific of ‘Doctor’ to my name. Friends and colleagues wondered why I was overjoyed in acquiring this new title on a subject which has no practical use in the real world. But then Emily had taught me that the real world was within.

It was the culmination of a life-long fascination with the poetess who, without warning or notice, used to walk through my imagination. My gratitude too to Geeta my wife, who these past few years has been the iron pillar around which my life revolves, through the ups and downs of my niggling health issues and the unexpected twists and turns of our lives. Having herself obtained the Ph.D some two decades earlier, she had used all her means to gently goad me into emulating her.

This book is an edited version of my doctoral thesis. I hope the reader finds it readable and that it helps in deciphering the complex and layered mind of Emily Dickinson as she struggled to find meaning in the life she was privileged to live.

Dr CK Mathew

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson presents in her personal life, and in her prodigious work, a curious enigma the likes of which have seldom been encountered in the vast and wondrous world of literature. New England, where she lived for fifty-six years of a piquant and intriguing life, was the cradle of the classical tradition of Puritanism brought over from Europe, when the Mayflower carried freedom-loving dissidents across the North Atlantic in 1620. Two centuries down the line, in 1830, Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. The Puritan landscape and the contours of the moral philosophy she was heir to, had almost reached the end of its utility. Moral and ethical values, the mainstay of the Puritan way of life, were fast declining.

The long-simmering Civil War exploded into violence and tore the country apart in an internecine conflagration. Colonial plantation life of tobacco and cotton, sustained by the aid of black slaves, was no longer tenable. Industrialisation, commerce and business were slowly making irrelevant the old way of life. The first stirrings of basic human rights had established that colour could no longer be a barrier to freedom, though it took another century to finally establish that truth.

Westward Ho! was the clarion call of the day as young men and women swept across the wide open lands stretching out between

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the Atlantic and the Pacific. There was a nation to be built and it was waiting for willing hands to mould its future. But it would be at the cost of the old foundations of moral behaviour that had set and stabilised American life ever since the Mayflower's perilous voyage to the brave New World. The Puritan way of life, with its piety and its industriousness, its sense of service and its frugality, had helped nurture the fledgling colonies into the young nation that was now finding its feet. Across the ocean, in what was once the mother country, Charles Darwin, after the path-breaking voyage on the Beagle, was shattering religious canons with his *Origin of the Species*. The Christian World was set on its head: idols, saints and dogma fell by the wayside as an impatient nation strained to run on.

The beginnings of the literature of this brave new world were seen as early as the first half of the 17th century in the form of descriptive pieces and travelogues of life on the East Coast. For the next century and a half, it grew in size and shape, quickened by the Puritan code of New England literature. The new nation was largely excluded from the ferment of the post Renaissance world of English and European art and literature because of the insular way in which they looked at life; and more so, because of the vastness of the ocean separating mainland from colony.

The Declaration of Independence of 1776 split the master-colony relationship forever. It was only after the Civil War in the mid-19th

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century, imbued with new thoughts and ideas, that the American spirit slowly found expression and voice. Writers, including women, were evolving in a pattern that is now recognisable. The predominant theme, to start with, was what is now referred to as the early national period, where writers like Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865) addressed political and social issues of a wide variety. This phase was followed by the Romantic writers and poets who based their objections to injustice on philosophical grounds. Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Frances Osgood (1811-1850) are examples. The third phase was that of the Realists who tried to truthfully depict the conditions under which people were living, presenting an accurate imitation of life as it is. And in the fourth and final period of evolution of 19th century writing, we come to the Pre-Modernists, who moved away from archaic language and societal values and towards a personal, idiosyncratic viewpoint, with a more ambiguous and complex appreciation of life than that of the sentimental poets. It is from this group, if at all, that Emily Dickinson rises.

But who can slot Emily Dickinson into any one category? Preferring to ignore the world around her, this Queen Recluse was almost completely divorced from the political and social life around her in America. With the passage of time, and in the eccentric mannerisms that soon came to define her, and certainly with a predisposition to explore her own self rather than the society around her, she withdrew

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into her room on the second floor of her Homestead mansion, from where she hardly ever ventured out. The view of the world from her window, from the window of her heart, presents today a marvellous, intriguing and radically new perspective, enticing readers to seek to know more about her and her life. It cannot be denied that the poetry and letters of Emily Dickinson seem to stand alone, by their own definition.

The contextual relevance of Emily Dickinson must be seen in this light. In a true sense, Emily Dickinson was one of the first poets of her time, willing to question its moral foundations and to enquire into issues that would profoundly disturb accepted social mores and religious beliefs. The God she discerned was not restricted to pulpit and seminary, but to the wider world of nature and the limitless skies. She looked beyond the boundaries of convention and society and saw intimations of immortality, the liberating force of a life that lay beyond the power of death.

This doctoral thesis is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter is in the form of an introduction to the book, and presents an over view of American Literature with special emphasis on the 19th century, while also focusing on the social and cultural context within which Emily Dickinson lived her life. There are also some thoughts on the Puritan influence in New England literature, since this is the main backdrop of her life. The attempt would be to evaluate Emily

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Dickinson against this background while posing the question as to whether she fits in or does not.

Chapter II entitled “The Evolving Self,” glancing over three decades of her poetry, is largely biographical, dealing with the curious life of Emily Dickinson, with details of her family and the complex relationships she had had with its members. An understanding of the biographical backdrop of the poet is essential to comprehend the direction and the import of her particular genius. The chapter touches upon the intellectual influences on her writing, the men in her life and what they contributed, and contemporaries who may have influenced her, including her growing sense of alienation from the pious religiosity around her, and finally her gradual withdrawal from what she perceived to be the shallow life around her. And through the course of this life that was hers, her productive fecundity produced almost 1800 poems in the span of about three decades: it is ideal material that readily lends itself to study as we seek to understand the ebb and flow of her genius.

Chapter III is entitled “The Search for Circumference,” and deals with much of the body of Emily Dickinson’s works. The four main themes in her poems are termed, perhaps too simplistically, as Love, Life, Nature and Time & Eternity. There is an opposite argument too about the absence of connective webbing in her work. Such contradictory views are attempted to be resolved by arguing that there is indeed a complete and cogent philosophy articulated in her

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poems that forms the core of her beliefs. This core is directly related to her theories on ‘Circumference’, and the many thought processes associated with it, and most importantly, Death or Immortality.

Chapter IV deals with the core subject of “The Dynamics of Circumference”, exploring more fully the meaning of Circumference and attempting to define the processes of her poetic growth that led to an encompassing and complete vision of present life and the future hereafter. The main essence of this study is to make a complete exploration of her enigmatic concept of circumference, the symbols and metaphors she used to address this critical issue; how she moved beyond ritualised religion, even to the point of antagonising the Calvinist church of Amherst; to stare into the face of Death, to search for “another way - to see” (#J 627) and see beyond. The chapter shall also examine the structure of the language and syntax employed, including the versatile use of metaphor for conveying the philosophical content of her thoughts.

Chapter V concludes the study and sums up the nature of the singular life she led and the extraordinary poetry she crafted at a time when women poets were but finding expression in a profession largely left to the male gender. Her understanding of circumference informs this chapter. This conclusion is a summation of the impact of her works on the literature of our times and how she continues to influence

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modern thought on the strength of her unique vision of life. The stamp of authority she left on the world of letters shall be touched upon, especially in the context of the complex and intriguing philosophy related to Circumference. The chapter also presents an overview of what contemporary critics think about her, especially in the context of her contribution to American philosophical thought.

The key concepts that this book shall touch upon can be summarised here. Predominantly, we may say that the passage from life into death fascinated her: the transition from an earthly existence to a larger life beyond, absorbed all her attention and scrutiny. Death and its attendant sibling, Immortality, obsessed her all her life. She spent her hours and days in the exploration of these themes. To break through the bonds that restricted her and pinned her down was her task in life. The examination undertaken in this book looks at the process by which she moved away from the language and themes of her times and approached an electrically brilliant employment of syntax and metaphor, the development of a metaphysical framework hinting at the wonders that, for the true voyager, lay just beyond the circumference of the rim of the horizon.

Thus, another of this study's objectives is to try to comprehend the intricate metaphysical philosophy that Emily Dickinson developed in her life time, symbolised by her fascination with all things spherical,

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and termed in her own language as circumference. These are the geometric designs and shapes that challenged her in her poetry, as she tried to look beyond the barriers of the circumferential horizon, into the life hereafter, seeking new meaning and apocalyptic significance in all that she peered into. She used metaphor and symbol to hint at the extraordinary truth of the revelation that waited just beyond the edge of human sight. Ordinary knowledge based on the five senses was not adequate to reach that epiphany. It was necessary to force that power of vision to explode by wrestling against the restraining limits of earthly human existence, straining against the confines of experience and imagination so that the unreachable could be grasped at. Robert Browning, whom she read and admired, put it another way: “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp. Or what’s a heaven for?” (*Andrea Del Sarto*, line 98).

In Dickinson’s poems the circle is always inner space, separated from external space by some boundary. To her, the image related to the private space of personal consciousness, to her own identity. Other circles connoted, by metaphorical extension, other consciousnesses, or the range of knowledge accessible to consciousness. This identity exists within the circumferential margin that represents its limit. Circumference, then, represents the boundary itself between the circuit of personal space and whatever might be outside.

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It is margin, never centre. This is particularly apt in the context of her statement that the “Bible deals with the Centre, not with circumference” (Letter to TW Higginson, July 1862): that is to say, that while the core of values and teachings in the Bible deal with deep moral issues at the heart of human existence, she would examine all that surrounds it, through the use of metaphor, simile and allegory, to gain access to those values in a tangential, indirect way. She would prefer to “tell all the truth, but tell it slant,” (#J1129) and thus arrive at the full meaning of what she searched for. However, this appreciation of her meaning of circumference would be only too primary, too basic a view. We have to delve deeper to get a glimpse of what she was aiming for.

The circuit world, for Dickinson, comprehended consciousness, the identity, the senses and matter. It encompasses mortality, finitude and limitation. The response of consciousness to this force beyond circumference can only be awe. But awe is a sublime emotion, involving fear as well as wonder and attraction. The private self dreads being merged into the universe and cowers self-protectively behind the same wall that must, however, be penetrated somehow for the soul to escape finitude and limitation. Emily Dickinson’s simultaneous impulse toward withdrawal and self-protection and her appetite for empowerment made her concentrate on circumference, that dreaded

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yet enticing barrier. The very narrowness of her circuit incited desires for the infinite realm beyond.

Of course, there have been earlier attempts to present the physical world, including man's position in it, in the form of complex drawings. The Vitruvian Man of Leonardo da Vinci, fitting the extremities of the body into a square and a circle is an image well known to students of art and symbolism. The Hindu metaphysical concept of Mandala, a geometric design to represent the Universe is another example. It is not known whether these ideograms may have influenced Emily Dickinson; probably not.

But in this present study, we hope to arrive at Dickinson's unique approach to the goal of expansion beyond personal limits – now readily visualised through the geometric circle. It has been argued that she intentionally restricted her life to tighten her private circuit – quite deliberately risking explosion of her consciousness into the outlying realm of awe. It forced out a powerful stream of visionary apocalyptic poetry that empowered her to seek her own brand of truth. In fact, circumference contracted its circuit with a pressure that forced the enclosed consciousness to struggle against finitude, to push towards immortality, to prefer awe to complacency, to grope toward God even at the risk of self-destruction (Juhasz, 1976).

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Circumference, for Emily Dickinson, is also death – the transitional point between the familiar circuit world and immortality. Of the latter, she was never sure; this, the “Flood Subject” (mentioned in Emily Dickinson’s letter to TW Higginson, June 9th, 1866), was the all-consuming subject of many of her poems. This was the “major unsolved question”: whether “death and possibility of immortality will mark a transforming perfection of the self’s power, a direct continuation of it, or some diminution or termination.” (Stonum, 1990).

Dickinson wrote constantly about circles, spheres, discs, circuits, diameters and circumferences – reinforcing these abstract geometric terms with more concrete terms such as crowns, diadems, balls, balloons and drops of dew. Yet what she meant by these image clusters, and what she intended in asserting to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her first and reluctant critic who failed to recognise her genius, when she stated “My Business is Circumference”, remains among the most baffling puzzles to Dickinson scholars.

As a romantic quester, Dickinson confronted manifold challenges along her route to the horizon and beyond, though she reached her goal never for more than a few ecstatic moments. The essence of the metaphor becomes the process of growth itself, by which the mortal pilgrim, confined within the boundaries of time and space, severely limited by sensory capacity, tries to expand towards eternity,

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immortality and empowerment that lie just behind circumference. (Eberwein,1987).

Dickinson saw death as a barrier that must be penetrated to view the other side. The quest of her poetry was to press beyond mortal limits to gain an insight on the mysteries beyond circumference, without passing through death. Consequently, she had to reckon with death – to probe at it, and push against it, in the hope of seeing through it. That is why so many of her poems deal with death. In dealing with her topics, she treated each as an analogy with death, as an end to what can be comprehended by reason and the senses and as a possible point of entry to whatever might be imagined beyond (Juhasz, 1976).

This study aims at an exploration of her concept of circumference, the symbols and metaphors she used to address this critical issue, and how she moved beyond ritualised religion even to the point of antagonising the Calvinist Church of Amherst. This would involve a thorough analysis of most of the poems she wrote relevant to the subject, if not all. There are seventeen poems in her anthology that specifically mention the word ‘circumference’, though there are many others that dwell on the subject from different perspectives.

It is also pertinent to mention here the singular relationship she had with God: she saw Him not only as Abstract Entity but as a personally approachable Father. It is a significant fact that she never

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formally received the sacrament of baptism to become a Christian. But she often talked in lyrical terms about the mystical power of the Almighty, quite beyond the definitions found in the Christian canons of faith. At times she appears cynical, doubting and even dismissive. Throughout the life she had had the privilege to lead, this groping, questioning, reaching out to find some abiding principle of life, and after life, was perhaps the single most defining characteristic of Emily Dickinson.

The hypothesis proposed here submits that the design of her life was a process of movement from her smallness, a sense of primal inadequacy, to circumference or the point of ultimate boundary between the finite and the infinite, the known and the mysterious, the human and the divine. She used the very limitations that were imposed on her, or those which she accepted as part of her unique life, in order to break free from them and approach the unapproachable. The gradual withdrawal from things around her, the disastrous relationships she searched out for herself, the refusal of contemporary editors and publishers to accept her work, the resultant heartbreak and despair; all these should have restricted her vision and made her a disappointed and ineffectual writer. But she transformed the very nature of the limitations around her - some imposed, some received voluntarily - and used those circumscribed straits to find her own voice, to experiment with a philosophy that she developed on her very

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own. The intellectual superiority she possessed, her unusual usage of diction and language, her sharp eye of seeing significance in the most trivial of things, all aided her quest. (Juhasz, 1976)

To achieve this end, it is necessary to place her against, and then displace her from, the backdrop of the literature of her times. Though she had grown up within the ambit of the prevailing New England literature of her times, she did move drastically away into areas never before experimented with, within American literature. Did she deliberately use her constricted physical space to enable her to break through to the other side so that she could experience freedom and unlimited expression? Did she consciously strive to disrupt the natural flow of the literary tide of the day? Or was her new idiom, syntax, symbols and vision a product of her deliberate self-exclusion from society? Did she consciously reject the traditional Puritanism and Calvinism of her times so that she could revel in the ecstasy of nature and the joy of knowing a universal God not bound by ritual and dogma? Did she find what she searched for, or did she remain the perpetual quester for whom the journey itself was the destination?

An attempt is being made in this work to address these questions, and by examining critical studies that have become increasingly inward looking and psychological, to probe into the Freudian motives that may have led to the creation of the singular Dickinson vision. There have

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been insinuations about her sexual preferences and suggestions of a peculiar mental disability with, fortunately, creative results. There is speculation too about the dreaded epilepsy as a possible reason for her seclusion and self-imprisonment. There are hints too about peculiar schizophrenic tendencies that cramped her style to a condensed and highly compressed form, eschewing verbs, punctuation and grammar through a fractured and staccato diction unheard of before this. The purpose of the work shall be to isolate and focus upon the primary reasons for her search for circumference and to gauge her success on the basis of the vision she achieved in her poetry.

It must be stated that the persona of Emily Dickinson comes to signify something of rare significance in the context of how her personal life story played itself out against the backdrop of 19th century New England. Her moment in history makes her uniquely placed to reap the riches of the Puritan tradition while at the same time rebelling against it to find her own truth. It is essential to understand this social and religious background, if we are at all to understand the grand nature of her achievements. The small but fast growing town of Amherst where Emily Dickinson lived all her life was exposed to all the winds that blew across the ocean, or sprang up in the country. Further, while the poems of lesser poets may be read and appreciated even without knowledge of the personal biographical details of the poet, for Emily Dickinson this cannot be said.

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It would be a question asked forever as to what made this bright and fun-loving girl, thriving on the attention being given her and hoping soon to be the “belle of Amherst”, leave the exciting world behind her and turn to the truth that was welling within. For her the Puritan code of conduct, of which Amherst had a surfeit, had run itself out and the hallelujahs of pulpit and seminary sounded hollow and false. The new Emersonian truth pointed the way to a more fulfilling life and she sought to embrace it at a moment when the “loss of sacredness” could be felt all around her at every living moment of the day.

The nature of her circumstances, as well as the details of the extraordinary life she led, the men and women who engaged with her on a daily basis, the complex and Theban relationships she had with the closest members of her family, all add to the richness of the experience of the poet, and thus to our own experience in reading her, and appreciating the awesome nature of her prodigious achievement. This includes the manner in which, bit by bit, she found herself disappointed by the world, and especially the rigorous Calvinist dogma by which she was bound. She refused to formally proselytise, as was required of her. She searched for, but could not find, the love of a man who would understand her fully; and when she did, circumstances took each of them away from her. As she turned recluse and focussed on the self, while nurturing her creative talent, her little force exploded

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creatively and she produced enigmatic and powerful poems that have had an undeniable impact on the modern American psyche.

There are broadly two, and perhaps contradictory, views that have emerged in the second half of the 20th century. One, the more widely accepted view that Juhasz, for example, expounds: that her genius arose from her self-imposed exile and exclusion from society, which enabled her to ponder on the human condition and refine her subtle views of love and nature and immortality and other deep moral issues. As already hinted at above, the limitation imposed on her acted in an unlikely manner and compelled her to break through her constraints to achieve that rare and original vision so unique in the annals of literature (Juhasz, 1976). This view also hints at mental instability and even a neurotic obsession that fuelled her poetic genius.

Jay Leyda, however, holds the contradictory view. He argues that though Emily Dickinson lived a secluded life, she was not completely excluded from the ups and downs of social life, that she was very much an active member of her family in carrying out domestic duties and leading a busy life intersecting with all her neighbours and friends, especially through her epistolary efforts. Her shyness was but a natural expression of her quiet soul and there was nothing neurotic or unstable about it. In this view, it is her contemplative nature and deep philosophical insights that led to the flowering of her poetic genius.

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Over the years there has been a waning and waxing in the interest generated in Emily Dickinson's works. For some time towards the mid 20th century, the body of critical works had diminished to a trickle. However, with greater awareness arising with the advent of interest in poetry written by women writers, a new genre of feminist critical works has developed and there has been significant interest growing once again in Dickinson's poetry. Some of the important works that shall be referred to here in this book, includes biographies such as those by George F. Whicher, Richard Sewall, Genevieve Taggard, Rebecca Patterson and Alfred Habegger. As regards interpretative critical works, the independent essays and other works such as those by David Porter, Virginia Adair, Susanne Juhasz, Charles Anderson, Caesar Blake, Harold Bloom, Sharon Cameron, R.W. Franklin, and a host of others are proposed for study and examination.

The thesis also focuses on the impact Dickinson had on later writers. Among those who have acknowledged Dickinson's deep impression on them are Conrad Aiken, Hart Crane, Amy Lowell, John Crowe Ransom, Carl Sandburg and Allen Tate. Her formalistic style associates her with Eliot, Frost and thence to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. Albert J. Gelphi, poet-critics such as Archibald MacLeish, Lousie Bogan, and Richard Wilbur, as also Suzanne Wilson, have written about how her style, her imagery and her diction have predicted the poetry of the present age.

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George F. Whicher in his classic biography sees her exclusiveness as a self-imprisonment occasioned by a failed love-affair. His conclusion seems simplistic today when he states that her unhappiness in love, which he labels as “a death blow to her heart”, turns into a “life blow to her mind”, so that her poetry, the result of living in that mind, is seen as a compensatory activity: he suggests that Dickinson as a poet could find the fulfilment she had missed as a woman. (Whicher, 1938).

Richard Sewall in his masterly biography, almost thirty years later, has a clearer view as he attempts to summarise her indefinable appeal:

Seemingly with wilful cunning and surely with an artist's skill, she avoided direct answers to the major questions that anyone interested in her as a poet or person might have been moved to ask. With success seldom approached by one destined ultimately for literary fame, she kept her private life private: it is as if she lived out the advice she gave in her famous lines: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-/Success in Circuit lies.” She told the truth, or an approximation of it, so metaphorically that nearly a hundred years after her death and after so much painstaking research, scholars still grope for certainties. (Sewall, 1974)

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Alfred Habegger, had a wider perspective: he understood the complexity involved in trying to comprehend Emily Dickinson, when he stated:

Among the many ways readers have made sense of Dickinson, two approaches stand out. The older of them regards her as a pioneer, working in isolation and developing years ahead of her time, the fractured thought and language that were to be characteristic of high modernism. The other and more recent approach sees her as a woman of her time, an American Victorian intimately involved in female networks and responsive to female writers. Each of these approaches gets many things right. But, aside from the fact that they are fundamentally opposed and irreconcilable, both distort her historic reality. It seems wiser to begin and perhaps end with a recognition of the things that make Dickinson stand out - her genius, her extremely tenacious affection, her avoidance of public life, her reluctance to publish. (Habegger, 2002)

Many attempts have been made to compare her works to those of her contemporaries. Cheryl Walker struggled to find some method to do just this:

Dickinson probably read a great many poems by nineteenth century American women poets. But she was by nature a

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non-conformist. It is certainly the case that her poems in toto sound like no one else's, male or female...Her strategies of defamiliarisation and compression, her playfulness with abstractions, her evocation and revocation of gender constructs – these separate her from most of her sisters. But Dickinson herself knew she was not entirely alone, not writing in a vacuum. She was both at home and at sea in her New England female context. The most accurate judgment we can make is that her work remembers others' poems even as it forgets them. (Walker, 1992)

As to the subjects and topics that she wrote on, critics have had to grapple with a singular void while searching for central themes that would define the work of Emily Dickinson; they have not succeeded. As David Porter writes:

The conclusion is this: Exclusion from comprehension: this is the stark vacancy at the centre. The disabling, decohering ignorance streams through the entire canon and forms time after time the significance of her allegories...Nature thus was indeed a haunted house. (Porter, 1998)

John Cody, takes this a step further by labelling her retreat into the mind as a psychotic breakdown occasioned by her “sexual bewilderment, anxiety and frustration.” This in turn was caused by

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her mother's failure as "a loving and admirable development model" leading to a strong identification with her father and her brother, stimulating her to use her mind. But, he emphasised: "the point, important for American literature, is that threatening personality disintegration compelled a frantic Emily Dickinson to create poetry – for her a psycho-deflecting activity." (Cody, 1971)

David Porter supports this view:

Most crucially her language became idiosyncratic, disengaged from outside authority, and thus in its own way was inimitably disordered...when she disengaged her idiom from the complicated texture of social existence, she made it self-conscious, private and momentary in its grasp...when language breeds, removed from exterior referents, it becomes almost pure locution, and meaning cannot be established. (Porter, 1998)

Fred White had this perceptive comment to make while trying to pin down Dickinson's unique voice:

Dickinson's poetry dwells less in paradise than in the limited nature of humanity. Instead of directly conveying the poet's own thoughts and feelings about the subject, Dickinson prefers the aesthetically richer indirection of a dramatic rendering, whereby characters-personae- speak in their own disparate

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voices, thereby creating a richer and more complex work of art.
(White, 2002)

Richard Sewall offered this explanation which still stands relevant today:

If it can be said that she hid herself from her friends to understand friendship, to create in her imagination the divine street the lover travels, so in her search for essence of everything that came within her consciousness, she hid herself to write her poems – and (for whatever reason) hid her poems, except for a few. In a world of process and evanescence, to which the bulk of her poems testify, the only way left to her was to construct permanences of the mind... (Sewall, 1974)

Christanne Miller, after a lifetime of studying Dickinson's works, tried to define the impact of her poetry in the context of her influence on literature:

Especially since the advent of feminist criticism in the 1970s, many critics have argued that Dickinson participated in the modernising climate of her times by creating a protomodernist lyric, a poetry that rebels against 'patriarchal' meters, conventions of punctuations, grammar, rhyme, or even print to construct a new kind of poem...She was a poet ahead of her

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times and presaging (as well as influencing) the development of poetic modernism a half century later. The extreme compression of Dickinson's language and its multiple forms of disjunction – grammatical, syntactic, tonal, and logical – strikingly anticipate features of modernist verse. (Miller, 1956)

Her universal appeal still remains the mystery she exudes. Domhnall Mitchell had this to say about the inability of both an ordinary reader and an astute critic to grasp the very essence of Emily Dickinson.

At a time when the ideology of social mobility was gathering strength, when effort and talent could help one join the ranks of a new meritocracy, Dickinson's speaker goes nowhere, does and says nothing. Or to put it another way, doing and saying nothing is what she has to say. She is recording the process by which she is distinguishing herself from others. Her identity is conferred through this sense of distinction – being select rather than elected. Saying and doing nothing is the guarantee of this distinction, for to reveal information about oneself is to compromise not only the sense of one's difference, but one's social and personal integrity as well. (Mitchell, 2000)

But when all is said and done, we cannot ignore Emily Dickinson's own voice as she wrote on the reason why she put pen

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to paper. In her poem beginning “I dwell in possibility” she defined her “Occupation” as – “this /The spreading wide of narrow Hands /To gather Paradise-” (#J 657). The gathering of Paradise was her allotted task, and this she strived to achieve with a rare and precise perfection.

The methodology adopted in this thesis includes the detailed study of primary and secondary sources, though with some emphasis on modern critical material that has come out after the mid 1980s. This will include the various editions of her poems as also the later definitive collection of all her poems and letters by Thomas H. Johnson. All poems referred to shall be numbered on the basis of the Thomas H. Johnson collection (with a hash-tag and the letter J). Biographical material shall play a key role in this study, along with her letters and other fragments she wrote. Richard B. Sewall’s biography sets the tone for a proper understanding of the poet, her life and her work. Besides the acknowledged important critical essays, there are also the works of numerous critics and writers who made it their business to know all that could be known about her and to present her in a manner acceptable to an audience now willing to tolerate a radically different viewpoint.

With Emily Dickinson, there are ever-emerging theories that refine pronouncements presented earlier. While she has always, in her poetry, challenged the idea of being a woman poet, she has, with

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time, gradually grown into being recognised as a feminist poet. She yet challenges all definition by breaking boundaries and leaping free into her own space. As we have noted, fresh experimental research emphasise mental illness as the edge that sharpened her brilliance. Her relationship with her dominating father and the inadequacy of her mother are suddenly raised in the context of her deliberate exclusion from normal family life. From being a rather defiant example of the Puritan New England literature, she is suddenly a modern poet. The relevance of the research will, therefore, also lie in an attempt to place her, in the light of the bewildering maze of contradictory theories, at an appropriate place in American literature that will reconcile and unite, to the extent possible, all existing and emerging trends in poetic criticism that swirl around the poet.

It may certainly be questioned as to what modern relevance this exercise shall have. Emily Dickinson is a main stream American poet, now revered on the same level as Walt Whitman or, later, Robert Frost. While there is no dearth of material about her available for study, it is also a fact that in India, deeply perceptive analytic studies on her works are rare to find. Certainly, in some of the southern states of the country, some work has been done. There are about a dozen doctoral theses available in the American Research Studies Centre at Hyderabad. Recent browsing on the web reveals the diversification of her poetry into new areas of expression, including rap videos,

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composition of her poems into musical arrangements, animated movies and poetry recitation camps. The gifted actress Julie Harris's tour de force presentation of Emily Dickinson in a two-part play some years ago brilliantly brought out the quaint and whimsical nature of the poet, her compassion and her quirks, her sharp wit and humour and ultimately the pathos of her life which she struggled to quell by the creative expression of her poetic gift.

Studies are now branching out into new areas of research, such as the nature of the garden which she maintained at her home at Amherst, the miniature world of insects and small animals that lived in the area as well as a recent production of photographs of the two houses which housed the families, the Evergreens and the Hampstead. The original manuscripts are now available in the public domain, having recently been released on line.

Having taken an overview of the scope and extent of this study, at this point, we shall attempt to look at the singular set of circumstances that existed in the new continent in the period prior to the birth of our Emily Dickinson. Indeed, Dickinson positions herself amongst the pantheon of American writers at the most opportune historical moment so as to enable her to demonstrate the full flowering of her considerable literary talents. If she had tried all her life to hide her light under a bushel, she was also confident in her heart that Fame would seek her

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out some way or the other. That Fame would propel her to a position of pre-eminence she never doubted, but she was willing to wait for her death before she made herself immortal. But to appreciate the truth of that statement, we must digress to the past and take a bird's eye-view of the developments that transformed a wild and untamed continent.

It could be obliquely argued that Emily Dickinson was born, not in 1830 in Amherst, but in 1620, in the bowels of the Mayflower carrying the fleeing Pilgrim Fathers away from European harbours to the largely unknown, but beckoning new continent across the Atlantic. These refugees viewed their mother land as un-Godly, commercial and unfit for people like themselves. They believed that a new start in the New World was their only chance. A narrative of their trials and tribulations, the journey across the Atlantic to the New World and the initial problems experienced by them are contained in a diary written by William Bradford, an English Separatist leader in Leiden, Holland and in Plymouth Colony and a signatory to the Mayflower Compact. He was later Plymouth Colony Governor. They determined to follow their own destiny, and after much debate, they decided on the New Continent, discovered about three centuries earlier by Columbus.

The total number of persons on board the Mayflower was about one hundred and fifty. By the time they landed at New Plymouth in November 1620, about half of them had perished. Their trials and

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tribulations on the high seas apart, what is relevant to our studies is the import it would have on the life of the complex poet who lived out her life more than two hundred years later. The particular way of life, or code of conduct, the framework of the ethical underpinning of the lives that the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them, certainly sets the backdrop to the community that Emily Dickinson was born into.

For an understanding of this singular way of life, we look first at the document known as the Mayflower Compact, penned out in hand by William Bradford in 1646 in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, though its original version can be seen in *Mourt's Relation* (1622). It is a declaration of the formation of a new government, set in writing as a basic *non sequitar* for the sake of order and survival.

The Mayflower Compact of November 1620 was based simultaneously upon a majoritarian model (taking into account that women could not vote) and the settlers' allegiance to the king. It was in essence a contract in which the settlers consented to follow the Compact's rules and regulations for the sake of order and survival. The text avers that the signatories

“covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic; for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices,

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from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.”

It is a startling document, one of the first of its kind, that seeks to place joint responsibility on a group of enlightened people to foster a civil society based on just laws for their general benefit.

Ten years later, in what is now known as the Arabella Covenant, John Winthrop travelling on the frigate Arabella, further refined the Compact. Arabella was the flagship of the Winthrop Fleet on which, between April 8 and June 12, 1630, Governor John Winthrop, other members of the Company and Puritan emigrants transported themselves from England to Salem, thereby giving legal birth to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The Covenant resolved that

“(1) For the persons, we are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ; (2) the care of the public must oversway all private respects by which not only conscience but mere civil policy doth bind us; (3) the end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord, the comfort and increase of the body of Christ whereof we are members; (4) for the means whereby this must be effected, they are twofold: a conformity with the work and the end we aim at... Therefore, let us choose

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life, that we, and our seed may live; by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.”

Both these documents would later inform the Declaration of Independence of 1776 in letter and in spirit. “The founding fathers of American ideology were those New England sectaries who brought to Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay the sense of divine chosenness and the germ of the idea of patriotic resistance to tyranny and of “a new order of human freedom.” (Craven, 1956)

It was a momentous beginning; the seeds of the New England philosophy of life were being planted. The foundation of the Puritan doctrine that would define the American way of life, as well as its commerce and enterprise, for generations thereafter, was being laid.

In short, there was set the print type that would define the philosophical backdrop of the New England way of life, very nearly the American way of life, that would be reflected in much of the writing and treatises, both literary and otherwise, for the next three centuries or so. As Laurence Buell put it,

American values became to a large extent a nationalised version of what was once the ideology of the tribe that had become dominant in the New England region. In consequence, the Puritan phase of the New England history, of which the

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New Englanders were the primary custodians and interpreters, became invested with a special mystique as the key source of what was distinctively American...New England, on balance, seemed to furnish an ennobling self-image, and that, combined with effective promotion of the image (partly through New England's control of literary institutions), ensured its perpetuation. (Buell, 1986)

The summary of the events immediately following the victory of the American patriots over the British forces at Yorktown in 1781 are significant. It was the end of a loathed British colonialism and, as expected, it released the energies and imagination of the American people. From now on it was in a position to develop an intellectual and cultural life of its own. In the transformation of a wilderness into a civilised nation, we may see three marked stages: First, the period of discovery and exploration, when emphasis must be laid on the mere essentials of sustaining life; second, the period of settlement, with increase in the material comforts of life and with the development of simple but often colourful folk culture and, after 1800, the third, the period of maturity with advancement in education, manners, and the arts. (Buell, 1986)

Increasing prosperity led to the rapid establishment of schools, colleges, newspapers, printing presses, literary clubs, libraries,

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bookshops – everything that was mentally stimulating. There was more time and desire for reading than in colonial days. The hour was ripe for the production of a literature of leisure that wins the reader not just by what is told, but also by the way of the telling. America's national literature bloomed for the first time into colours rich enough to win the admiration of the rest of the world.

There were two bonds that bring the writers of this period into a unified group. First, the writers in this period stood for the literary independence of the United States. Political independence had been stated in a formal document with many signatories. Literary independence was declared no less truly in many an individual manuscript signed by its author alone. We can observe, as we read details of the work of these authors, how repeatedly the American note is struck. The first poet of the colonies, Anne Bradstreet, wrote stilted imitations of English poets, and was introduced to the London public as “the Tenth Muse lately sprung up in America.” Later, scholarly poets of the colonies were almost entirely imitative and catered to English taste. Before 1800, America had not really been put on the literary map of the world; however, within fifty years she had won a recognised place there.

The second aspect which unified this group of writers was their romanticism. We know that the greater part of the literature written

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during the colonial days was from one or another of two points of view –the Puritan or the common sense. Now we come to a third – the romantic. Romanticism came to America from Europe. The European writers rebelled against the literary styles of the preceding century, which tended to decide everything. It made huge dictionaries and decreed that the heroic couplet was the best form of verse. From this sort of thing, men like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and other English writers turned in horror. They wanted to write as they thought fit.

The greatest Romantic, Rousseau, said that everything natural is good. The better nature of man has been frozen up by the artificialities of civilisation. We need to go back to fundamentals which are not man-made, to the simple life, to a study and love of nature, obedience to our instincts and impulses. All these ideas went into European romantic literature – the freedom of literary form, freedom in imagination, and also the return to nature. This was the heritage of romanticism that Europe passed on to America.

The seed fell on fertile ground in America. Having completed one successful political revolution in America, people were ready to attack other old ideas. One of these was the Puritan notion that the human race through Adam's sin is naturally depraved. The romanticist's idea that man is naturally good was a pleasant antidote

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to this distressing thought. The Puritan had been taught to repress his instincts because they might be sinful; the romanticist was taught to humour them because everything natural was good. The Puritan was taught to fear the wrath of God and to court a gracious salvation from eternal punishment; the romanticist was taught to love God, whose work appeared everywhere in nature.

However, the American response to European romanticism differed with the attitude never expressed better than by Thoreau, when he said, "Build your castles in the air, but be sure they have foundations." The American romanticist was much more likely to be interested in humble life and the common man than in fantastic air castles. Fittingly enough, the movement in the New World has been called "Romanticism on Puritan soil."

The theoretical premises of the age to which Emily Dickinson belonged has to be understood in the full, if we are to place the subject of this study in the right-sized photo frame. New England literature developed during the three hundred years before it reached its peak in the so called New England Renaissance of about 1830-60. A detailed study would involve an exploration of the foundations of the great literary tradition, the gradual, and then the quickened, unfolding of its spread and expanse, and a close examination of the results of this great change, while giving special focus to major writers such as Emerson,

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Thoreau, Hawthorne, Stowe and Dickinson, and also a host of other figures. A comprehensive view would be possible if we attempt to gain an understanding of the authors and their genres along with the ideology of provincialism in general, and the New England strain in particular, the phenomenon of literary emergence, and the ongoing attempt to chart a course for American literary history.

The paragraph below has been quoted from the masterly Alan Schucard in his book on American Poetry and subsequent paragraphs summarise the basic character of the American way of life.

In the beginning were the Puritans. The implication of that fact must be completely understood as the basis of any examination of American poetry...Other tributaries join American poetry in its flow to the present, but its headwaters are the values that fundamentally shape much of the reality and the mythology of America- the values that the Puritans carried with them in sailing ships to subdue the wilderness in the process of restoring God's earthly kingdom. (Schucard, 1988)

The New England Puritans were influential and genteel folk who left considerable wealth and position behind to accept their mission to the New World. Many of them were zealous non-conformists in their enthusiasm to reform Christianity, to return the Anglican Church to the

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simplicity of the early Church, and to impose what they understood to be biblical structures of governance on the Church.

As Calvinists, they were bound to believe that earthly deeds or possessions had nothing whatever to do with their election or damnation, since God had decided on one or the other alternative fates for everyone before and outside of time. However, as humans they had to believe in what they could perceive with their senses. Puritans eschewed neither learning nor delight, as long as the learning led to a greater appreciation of the power and the glory of God, and the delight could be construed in some way as reflecting His gift of redemption. They associated hard work with the notion of service to God, but there was no necessary contradiction between their hope for celestial reward and their insistence on a terrestrial one. Perry Miller explains the preoccupation with business as:

“a logical consequence of Puritan theology: man is out into this world, not to spend his life in profitless singing of hymns, or in unfruitful monistic contemplation, but to do what the world requires, according to its terms...for the glory of God.” (Miller, 2004)

The Puritans laid emphasis on education more than many others did in the colonies for they believed that only an educated person could be guided correctly by the light of the Scripture. However, the theocrats

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strove to put down all intellectual deviation from the religious line. In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin and others would tend to strip away the religious imperatives of the Puritans from their practical ones, and a hundred years further on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson would use the Puritan intellectual tools for their own purposes. But in New England Puritan times, if the light that someone discovered in the Bible was at significant variance with the establishmentarian and enforced Puritan one, the dissenter recanted; if not, he could, and would, be subjected to the darkest ostracism. Emily Dickinson put the issue some two centuries later in much the same intellectual environment when she quipped, “Assent—and you are sane- /Demur—you’re straightaway dangerous-/ And handled with a Chain-”(#J 435).

The Puritans were educated and it taught them to fold in their perceptions within the context of their theological system. Lace, cloth of sundry colours, music, good, and natural beauty, could in themselves delight the Puritans, as they could any sensitive human beings: but the Puritans were always obliged to go the extra step, to find in their joys the metaphorical evidence for their beliefs. The Puritans’ aesthetic was determined both by their theological responsibility to attribute all pleasure and all pain to their Redeemer and by the harsh conditions of their lives. Puritans held that art, like all else, was a gift of God to be turned, finally, to God’s service. Poetry, like all other intellectual and

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material pursuits, was to be made with that lucidity in mind. It was, in some way, to move poet and audience closer to the great Maker and shed light somehow into the mystery of His wondrous poem. To accomplish those high goals, the Puritans ideally had always to find equilibrium between the temporal and the eternal. Balance was, after all, central to the Puritan thought. The intention of the Puritan poet was to use the evidence of the things of the world, to prove their theses concerning the existence and magnificence of Almighty God. Poetry to the Puritans was nothing if not utilitarian, a device dedicated to understanding and praising God.

The sources and types of Puritan poetry are plain to see. Beyond the Bible and Greek and Roman classics, seventeenth-century American writers looked to literary sources according to their individual predilections. Puritans on both side of the Atlantic scowled at theatre, and hence Shakespeare's influence is detectable only in echo. They admired the powerfully compacted language of John Donne and the metaphysical poets. Because of the misleading stereotype of Puritans as wholly humourless people who smothered the intellectual atmosphere of New England, it is necessarily to recall periodically that they were flesh and blood humans capable of a range of emotions.

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Not unexpectedly for a people in the wilderness, early American poetry disclosed an intense preoccupation with death. Musings on death, sometimes in the form of acrostic or anagrammatic wordplay, permeate the literature. A death is an occasion to cogitate more about God's dealings to man. In other words, they used a person's death to probe the Maker's ordering of His Creation so that they could better comprehend it and so serve Him.

The New England Puritans left a legacy whose exact dimensions are incalculable, but whose effect on all America has been indisputably great from those times to the present. The Puritans can pride themselves on having instilled a certain stamp on the manner and method of their life on the nation. In fact, traceable to their Puritan forebears is America's belief in the need for moral justification for private, public, and governmental acts; to insist that actions must be 'right' actions. America's heritage of questing for freedom and, once having obtained it, working to safeguard it, is, in direct and indirect ways, an important part of the inheritance of the Puritans. They came to the New World, in the first instance, to be free to purify, and live by, Christianity according to their collective conscience. They were, in other words, dissenters, when the exercise of their will was contravened by established authority, and if they turned and prosecuted, and sometimes persecuted, individuals who dissented from their regime,

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both they and their dissenters nonetheless provided America with indelible examples of freedom seekers.

Modern Americans may be most aware of the economic codicil in the Puritans' will to them – the belief in the possibility of attaining, indeed the cultural mandate to attain, a better corporeal life through hard work and thrift on the way to a more edifying life thereafter. “The Puritan ethic” and the “American work ethic” are synonymous and essential in America's very definition of itself. It is useful to keep in mind that while the primary impetus to the Puritans' crossing to the New World on the *Arabella* in 1630 was the pursuit of religious freedom; the venture and the colonial government that grew from it were both organised as a commercial as well as religious enterprise.

The roots of nationhood may also be traceable to the Puritans. In their morbid fascination with death, as expressed in their endless elegiac verse – verse that passed increasingly out of favour and into ridicule of inane form in the eighteenth century – lay the roots of history, a caring for the past and national identity that contributed to the growing feeling of statehood.

All their fundamental principles –moral, political, economic– including their paradoxical affirmation of the future, the Puritans poured into the foundations of America. They gave American poets forever the value system that they must reckon with: Emerson in

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essays and verse, Melville in his poetry as well as his fiction. The works of Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot and a host of American poets would resound with the themes of their Puritan forebears.

In order to place Emily Dickinson against the canvas of her times, we have to describe the nature and growth of the literature of the period after the Independence War and until the Civil War. For our purposes we can identify five generations to the unfolding of this age of literary exploration: the Revolutionary era writers who reached intellectual maturity by the mid-1780s or before; the Federalists era writers, who developed their mature styles between 1790 and the War of 1812; and three generations of New England romantics, who hit their stride, respectively about 1815 to 1835 (Washington Allston, William Cullen Bryant, and the senior Richard Henry Dana); 1830-1850 (Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow); and 1845 to 1865 (Lowell, Thoreau and Dickinson). All five generations,

...collectively, through teaching, writing, and personal interchange, helped revitalise the study of theology, the classics, history, and modern European literature, stimulating cultural comparativism and introducing New Englanders (with mixed feelings) to the higher criticism of Scripture—that is, the study of the Bible as a literary and historical document rather than as an inerrant given. (Buell, 1986).

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Before we conclude our first chapter which attempts to describe the social cultural and literary backdrop of New England extant before the appearance of the main subject of this study, it would be essential to glance through the available facts of women's writing during the 19th century. Elizabeth Petrino in her brief essay on *Nineteenth-century American Women's Poetry* has drawn attention to the fact that aside from Emily Dickinson, there were indeed other prominent women poets of that day and age, whose writings remained forgotten until archival investigations revealed their presence and their talent.

Cheryl Walker in her learned essay as editor of an anthology of poems of 19th Century American poets has contended that women's writing of that age contained a wider range of stylistic variations and vocal complexity than previously thought. There are several persistent types of poems such as the 'sanctuary' poem, in which the protagonist finds refuge in a shelter; the power fantasy; the free bird poem in which the speaker identifies with a bird in flight and symbolically imagines freeing herself; and the marriage poem. While warning us women's poems are hybrids, often combining more than one style and literary movement, Walker advocates dividing women's poetry into four temporal and stylistic categories: early national, romantic, realist and modern.

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Early national poets, like Lydia Sigourney, appeal to piety and reason, praise decorum and base their belief in human dignity on democracy. Romantics, like Frances Osgood, explore extreme psychological states and emotions rather than the effects of injustice on the individual. Realists like Alice and Phoebe Cary, on the other hand are poets who take up the political challenges of the romantics but devote themselves to portraying the conditions of everyday life. Finally, moderns resist sentimentalism, refuse to come to tidy conclusions about moral dilemmas, use fractured language and challenge any belief system that dictates a single view of the world (Walker, 1992)

Louise Bogan divides the women poets into four categories:

- a) Poets of the early national period such as Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865) who embody the conflict typical for women writers in this period. Her life conforms to the social standards of her age, except that she writes professionally. While on the one hand she is a sentimentalist and uses verse to evoke sympathy, on the other, she addresses political and social issues of a wide variety. She employed all the sentimental poetic conventions of her day; but at the same time, within this dominant rhetoric, she was able to challenge political injustices. Her poem *Indian Names* openly protests the excision of Indians rather than naturalising their passing into the landscape.

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- b) The Romantics who base their objection to injustice on philosophical grounds. Margaret Fuller (1810-1849) who wrote *Governor Everett Receiving the Indian Chiefs* is an example. So is Frances Sargent Osgood (1811-1850) who dealt with social life and courtship in her witty, urbane poems of the 1840s and 1850s. Her poems elevated love as an unattainable ideal, while she wittily portrayed the actual dealings between men and women. Her *Flight of Fancy* and *The Lily's Delusion* are examples.
- c) Realists: while romantics elevate the emotions and human psyche, realists accurately depict the conditions under which people live. It presents an accurate imitation of life as it is. Examples of such poets are Alice Cary (1820-1871) and Lucy Larcom (1824-1893); both of them were influenced by another poet, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892). All three were sympathetic to the woes of the working class women. And,
- d) Modernists: A modern sensibility emerged in women's nature poetry towards the end of the nineteenth century. On the basis of the analysis of poems of this period, the similarity between women poets writing in the late nineteenth century and the major women poets of early modernism can be demonstrated. More than that, it can be shown that stylistic and thematic changes in

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women's poetry between the late 1850s and 1890 – changes that, among other things, help account for the surprisingly positive reception that Dickinson's poetry enjoyed in 1890 on its first publication – are basic to the evolution of the early modernist poem. (Bogan, 1951)

Among the features of this modern trend is a movement away from archaic language and communal values and towards a personal, idiosyncratic viewpoint. This includes a more ambiguous, complex and less conventional point of view than that of the sentimental poets. Some of the more well-known names are Amy Lowell (1874-1925), Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885), Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856-1935) and of course, Emily Dickinson.

Jackson and Reese's poems are typical of the modern poems of late nineteenth-century American women writers, who refine the language of sentimentalism and omit the didacticism and piety that so many writers cleaved to earlier in the century. Reese portrays the land in the absence of human beings, downplaying the religious and communal values important to the sentimentalists. Jackson, on the other hand, adheres in her poem to the activism and Christian values of mid-nineteenth century writers; yet she underscores her detachment from the world of commercialism that Dickinson detested as well, elevating art above daily life and revealing the individual's alienation

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that later becomes standard in modern poetry. Reese and Jackson extended the achievement of women's poetry beyond protesting injustice or redefining women's roles to a self-conscious assertion of their poetic artistry.

In doing so they forecast the writing of modernists who are increasingly concerned with creating images that, as T.S. Eliot claimed, provide an objective correlative to specific emotions. More than any other poet, Dickinson uses indeterminacy and ambiguity to question the predominant mode of belief while maintaining a radically open poetic form. And Jackson, Reese and Dickinson bring the lyric to the threshold of the twentieth century by using a conversational style, common language, and frequent enjambment (a poetic device of continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line stanza): all features that are synonymous with a more contemporary sensibility.

This then is the backdrop of the cultural, religious and social fabric of the American way of life that Emily Dickinson inherited. She shares many of the characteristics of nineteenth century American women's poetry, while at the same time she exceeds her contemporaries. Love, Life, Nature, Time & Eternity and a thousand other fleeting thoughts would all be grist to her mill, as she sought to pierce the circumference that bounded the life she was privileged to

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lead. Employing syntax and metaphor as never before, breaking up words and phrases as modernists would some hundred years hence, she wrote in a fractured language that aroused the ire of critics and editors who rejected her as an untutored upstart.

It would take the dedication of her closest sibling and the determination of her sister-in-law to try to make sense of what she had written and stashed away for a quarter of a century. But for the resolve of these few women, (we may call them soul-sisters), Vinnie her sister, and others such as Susan Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd, and, of course, the redoubtable Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the poems of Emily Dickinson would never have seen the light of day, leaving us poorer in our earthly condition. They struggled to bring out the first of the many editions of her poems that would make the world finally sit up and take notice.

The fact remains that with the passage of time, Dickinson has not faded away into obscurity, when many of her contemporaries did; rather, she has gained in strength and power, influencing writers and poets who followed her, in a manner that very few of her literary compatriots could have. No wonder then that she figures, in the world of Western literature, amongst the greatest names that the generations have produced. Harold Bloom's much debated book *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* was brought out in 1994 on the panoramic subject of Western literature.

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It was a surprise best seller in the United States. Bloom defends the concept of the Western Canon by focusing on 26 writers, whom he sees as central to the canon. The list includes giants such as Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Goethe and so on. Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, James Joyce are amongst the others. What is of particular interest to us is the fact that he has included Emily Dickinson in the elite list. He gives her the highest praise: “Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other Western poet since Dante” (Bloom, 1994).

Bloom contends that Dickinson as a poet expressed desperation powerfully and constantly as very few could. Her anguish at the ruin we see, in nature and within us, is intellectual in nature, not religious. There is a comparison with Kafka, whose desperation is primarily spiritual, while Dickinson’s is essential cognitive. Bloom has expressed the view that Dickinson rethought the universal blank that Milton or Coleridge used and unmade its contours with Shakespearian substitution, knowing full well the inadequacy of metaphor. Quoting from some of her most complex poems, including “There’s a certain slant of light/ winter afternoons-” (#J 228) and “The Tint I cannot take- is best – the Colour too remote” (#J 627), Bloom argues that unlike her predecessors, Emerson and Nietzsche, who understood the bewildering nature of life, Dickinson hints at a beyond, another way to bring selfhood and the contingencies of canonical tradition

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into a dialectical relation. Her perspectivism is “another way- to see” (#J627), because it sees what cannot be seen. “Her unique transport, her Sublime, is founded upon her disturbing of all our certainties into so many blanks; and it gives her, and her authentic readers, another way to see, almost into the dark.” (Bloom, 1994)

Bloom’s inclusion of Dickinson in the exalted list, is an honour that came late, though none can now deny the merit of the poetess to stand along with the best of the best in the Canon.

CHAPTER II

THE EVOLVING SELF

There is no shortage of biographical material on Emily Dickinson. Richard B Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), the most comprehensive biography of the poet ever written is the mainstay of this chapter. Much of the details of the poet's life elaborated in this chapter have been gleaned from his magnum opus. Some of the other works referred to are Mabel Loomis Todd's recollections, Susan Dickinson's perceptive obituary published in the Springfield Daily Republican. Also crucial is Thomas Wentworth Higginson's entire correspondence with Dickinson, especially his August 1870 letter detailing their first meeting and his 1891 article in the Atlantic Monthly. Conrad Aiken, Genevieve Taggard, Josephine Pollitt, George F. Whicher, Rebecca Patterson and Alfred Habegger have also brought out authoritative tomes on the life of the poet. Yet another significant biography is the Jay Leda's interpretative opus, which in two volumes makes searching observations related to Dickinson, gleaned from an exhaustive list of sources in the poet's life.

Another important source revealing details of the course of her life is Cynthia Griffin Wolff's biography *Emily Dickinson* with its provocative interpretation of Dickinson's life that focuses on her struggle with religious faith, painting the portrait of a conflicted and

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lonely poet deeply affected by her emotionally distant parents and the oppressive evangelical fervour of the time. Also referred to are John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*; Adrienne Rich's essay: "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" (in Adrienne Rich's *Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edition). The perceptive works of Barbara Charlesworth Gelphi and Albert Gelphi, William H. Shurr, Barton Levi St. Armand's, Polly Longworth provide grist to the mill. And to pull in the strings are some critical studies by Paula Bennett, Joanne Dobson, Jane Eberwein, Betsy Erkkila, Sandra Gilber and Susan Guber, Barbara Mossberg and Dorothy Oberhaus.

The extensive biographical details in this chapter are deliberate, for the fact is that Emily Dickinson would remain a mystery without an appreciation of the minutia of the background against which she lies. Her untiring poetry and letter writing notwithstanding, the true and fine details of her life emerge, as if from a pencil tracing, only when placed against the context of the life she lived, including the myriad of oblique allusions she has made to events and incidents which help bring her into the light. Patience is required to know her, to raise her up, slowly, patiently, through the murky waters of the centuries that separate us from her.

When asked for a portrait by her Preceptor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she described herself this way:

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“I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the wren; and my hair is bold, like the chestnut burr; and my eyes, like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves. Would this do just as well?” (Letter to TW Higginson, published in Atlantic Monthly October 1891)

Who can dare describe the persona that she was? Perhaps one could begin from the end, the evocative description in the unsigned obituary in the Springfield Republican, written by none other than Emily’s sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, very soon after her poignant death on 15th May 1886. Coming as it did from a person with whom her relationship was intimate though troubled, Susan Dickinson’s honest appreciation of that rare talent makes it a unique document.

A Damascus blade gleaming and glancing in the sun was her wit. Her swift poetic rapture was like the long glistening note of a bird one hears in the June woods at high noon, but can never see...To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formulate faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm steps of martyrs who sing while they suffer. (Susan Dickinson, 1886.)

It almost seems that Emily Dickinson deployed wilful cunning to avoid direct answers to the major questions about her life. She kept

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her private life private. Indeed, she had much to say, nearly eighteen hundred poems and over a thousand letters which should have revealed all that is required to be known. But it is as if she lived out the advice she gave in her famous lines: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-/ Success in Circuit lies.” She told the truth, or an approximation of it, so metaphorically, that more than a century and a quarter after her death, and after so much painstaking research, scholars still grope for certainties.

As stated, the contents of this chapter relies substantially on Sewall, who writes, “Genius is ultimately unaccountable, and none more so than Emily Dickinson’s.” There is, as Bianchi, her niece and family biographer, said “nothing in the parentage or direct heredity of Emily Dickinson” to explain it. Her heritage shows many of those massive traits of character we associate with New England and Puritanism. As Allen Tate argued, if Hawthorne reconstituted in American fiction “the puritan drama of the soul”, after Emerson had all but extinguished it, it was Emily Dickinson, who reconstituted it in her poetry. But she did so with sturdy independence, in itself one of the tradition’s most massive traits. (Tate, 1932)

Tate maintains that Emily was very conscious of being an Amherst girl. She knew what the Puritan traits were, saw them in her family and herself, respected them, but was critical of them throughout

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her life. Emily Dickinson came at the ideal time for a poet: when a once firm and mighty tradition was losing its vitality and opening for the poet new freedoms, some exalting, some terrifying. In the smaller, more intimate sphere she saw the pettiness, the hypocrisy, and the narrow moral view that were the sad legacy of the tradition in many New England communities and a major reason, certainly, for her own alienation and withdrawal.

Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Emily's grandfather, was a model of the late-Puritan New England way: there was piety, work, singleness of purpose. Though an outstanding scholar, he later converted to Christianity and became a minister, but finally turned to law, his true vocation. The founding of Amherst College was the triumph of his life. The college reflected and shaped the character of the community for which Samuel sacrificed his life. He was forced into selling his Hampstead home and to move to Ohio in a much inferior job. There his decline was rapid. Depression of spirit caused his sickness which finally terminated his life.

The Dickinsons did not transplant easily. They avoided travel whenever possible and were miserable when it was unavoidable. Emily was true to her family type. Some of the words from her numerous letters are significant: "I don't care for rowing;" and "I do not go away, but the Grounds are ample – almost travelling..." Again, "to shut our eyes is Travel. The Seasons understand this."

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Tradition has it that Emily Dickinson's home was dominated by her father Edward Dickinson. Scholars have villainized Edward Dickinson and made him accountable for what is generally thought of as the tragedy of his daughter's life. He was a man of sterling character and integrity, always manifesting the keenest interest in public affairs, especially town affairs. He was zealous in good causes, even fanatically so. His passion was responsible for bringing the railroad to Amherst. His inner life was another matter. For all his worldly success, he was a lonely and sombre man described as "remote" and lacking the "enjoying power". Emily in a moment of bafflement said: "I am not very well acquainted with my father".

For all the humour and gentle satire with which Emily usually spoke about him, what in the end impressed her most was the pathos of his life, its austerity, its rigor, and its loneliness, even in the family. It is not that Emily failed to take her Father seriously; she took him very seriously indeed: she, however, recognised the profound differences between them and began to carve out for herself a separate domain in which she could live her own life intact. It was a complex and delicate relationship, changing and maturing with the years.

After her father's sudden death, Emily was shocked to find how shocked she was. "I cannot recall myself... I thought I was strongly built... Though it is many nights, my mind never comes home" (Letter

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to the Norcross cousins, June 1874). Her vision of this strange and remote man says it all: “His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists...” (Letter to TW Higginson, July 1874)

Emily Dickinson’s mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, was born in 1804 and grew up into an eminently conventional woman. After marriage, she came to Amherst. Austin, their first child was born in 1829. Emily was born in December the next year. One of the reasons that kept Emily at home and contributed to her seclusion was her mother’s health. When Mrs Dickenson died in November 1882, after a long illness, Emily’s letters contain only shock and loss and an enlarged sense of what her mother was and what she meant to her.

The deeper we get into Dickinson complexities, the more gruelling they get. And none are more so than those surrounding Emily’s brother, Austin (1829-1895). Austin’s story is the most harrowing, and in its innumerable relevancies to Emily, the most immediate to our purpose. Of all the family, he was closest to Emily, and his letters reveal, in groping but sometimes impressive prose, many of the inner problems and anxieties Emily worked out in her poems. It was Austin and Emily against the world, a relationship of infinite importance to both. Even when he married and moved next door, he seems to have been her chief support.

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Lavinia (Vinnie) (1833-1899), Emily's and Austin's sister, outlived all. Her comments during later years of the Dickinson scene have done much to clarify, colour or distort our view of it. On Emily she wrote once: "She had to think - she was the only one of us to do that." She was indispensable to the family's solidarity. And in one final way she was indispensable to posterity, for without her complete belief in Emily, we might never have had her poems.

The eldest sibling Austin's life is relevant to our study here. He had his schooling in the Amherst Academy and then went on to boarding school at Williston Seminary. Austin finally fixed on law as a career. Of all the girls he came into contact with, Austin was most attached to Susan Gilbert whom he married in 1856. Why Austin married Susan is of the utmost importance, for it seems that the marriage was a tragic mistake to all concerned. She set up a lively establishment and the Evergreens became a centre of attraction. This happy state did not last long, however. Susan's temperament, tastes and social ambition created an atmosphere in which the Dickinson qualities, at least Austin's and Emily's – given more to the creative and speculative, and requiring solitude – found less and less sustenance. Austin frequently absented himself from her functions.

It was in the midst of all this that his relationship with Mabel Todd acquires significance. Mable Loomis Todd was for thirteen

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years Austin's confidante in a relationship of complete intimacy. There are sufficient written records available: her daily dairy, her journal, her letters to and from Austin. She was wife of David Peck Todd, Director of the Amherst College Observatory, and concurrently mistress of Austin Dickinson. But for her, we may have never known that a poet named Emily Dickinson ever wrote a poem. Twenty-seven years younger than Austin, she revered him. Austin responded to her vivid personality and their intimacy grew steadily encouraged by their circumstances. A series of twenty-two letters from Mabel to Austin, written between November 1882 and the following February, tell the idyllic story. In their letters to each other, the dominant note is one of utter, absolute passion.

The tensions, between the Hampstead, the Dickinson parental home, and the Evergreens, where Austin moved to, had its origins in personal incompatibilities. By mid-1880s, it was all but open warfare, with Susan Dickinson and Mabel the chief antagonists. We look in vain for comment from Emily, but we may guess that her sympathies were with her brother. To follow this bitter story and sense its meaning is to gain a new perspective on much that perplexes us about Emily: her withdrawal, the tragic violent tone of her poems and even her failure to publish.

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Seeing her against the backdrop of anguish, frustration and cruelty, we can comprehend how in her quiet life she came to know and understand these things. Here is the real “Vesuvius at home.” (#J1705). Austin’s love affair with Mabel which was fully reciprocated, and now documented, was in bland defiance of Amherst convention. Emily’s early letters to Susan were rapturous, showering her with affection, pining for her in her absence, almost like love letters. But as time passed, and she became engaged to Austin, Susan could not have sustained the relationship Emily wanted. Even before the marriage, a break was imminent. Emily wrote to Susan an extraordinary letter, in which she is almost surly and dismissive:

Sue – you can go or stay – There is but one alternative – we differ often lately, and this must be the last... you need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved...I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me –there is a darker spirit will not disown it’s child... (Letter to Susan Dickinson, August 1854)

Austin took Emily’s side when the matter was obviously raised by Susan with him. By then Austin’s alienation from his own home was complete. The remaining years of this ill-fated love affair present a harrowing story of frustration and despair that in the end was

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almost too much for Austin and Mabel. What occurred, in spite of repeated protests of defiance in their correspondence, were years of double living. Mabel's husband Todd was aware of the relationship, but tolerated it in his gentle way. The community of Amherst was, however, not prepared to understand for all of the thirteen years that their affair lasted. As the years passed, the bright future that Austin and Mabel envisioned failed to materialize and signs of strain accumulated. When Austin died in August 16, 1895, his obituary recognized his tremendous will power, his useful and worthy life and that he was "the most influential citizen of Amherst."

Susan's crowning atrocity was to claim that Emily had bequeathed her poems to her and that Vinnie's actions in assigning the work of editing the poems to Mabel were illegal; a charge, though, that she never pressed. Indeed, it was Susan who first recognised Emily's genius, and hoarded every scrap sent her. Scores of such short notes were sent in a continuous stream across the lawn between the Hampstead and the Evergreens. The notes give a quick hint of the varied sympathies always existing "between Aunt Emily and my mother – from their first girlish wanderings about life, on through the books they shared, the flowers they tilled, the friends they loved, their culinary wizardry, their domestic crisis, their absorption in us children, their fun and fears, their gay whimsies and tragic realities; all their deepening experiences uniting to weld the confident and profound devotion enduring unto

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death:” so wrote Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Emily’s niece, and daughter of Austin and Susan Dickinson, in 1924, in the introduction to a collection of poems.

Here and there are traces of hidden discord: In late 1886, Emily writes: “*The tie between us is very fine, but a Hair never dissolves.*” Susan’s reply to Emily has this to say: “*If you have suffered this past summer, I am sorry. I, Emily, bear a sorrow that I never uncover – if a nightingale sings with her breast against a thorn, why not we. When I can, I shall write.*” (Susan’s letter to Emily Dickinson, October 1861)

There is no hint as to the cause of all this suffering. Perhaps it was the failure of Emily’s forbidden love for her Master, the one to whom she wrote her mysterious letters. Her life of exclusion was about to intensify and it could have been either way; Susan might have rejected Emily or Emily might have rejected Susan. So for fifteen years, Emily withdrew to her Homestead, not once venturing to the Evergreens home just three hundred feet away, except for the night of the death of Gilbert (Susan’s son and Emily’s nephew) on October 5, 1883. The letters that Emily wrote Susan in the next few months are among the tenderest since their childhood. But there is no indication that in the sharing of their grief, they were brought closer together. Indeed, there are many poems, which are addressed to Susan, and they are mostly of loss and rejection, separation and defeat. But there are no

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direct allegations or accusations. This pose of Emily is essential New England, pure Dickinson - the Puritan discipline of restraint.

The sad complexities of Austin's marriage and his involvement with Mable Todd had effects that lasted long after Emily's death in 1886, his own in 1895, and Lavinia's in 1899. The happiest of these came in the late 1880s when Mabel undertook the editing of as many of the poems as she could locate.

Mabel never saw Emily face to face--and once referred to her as "the character of Amherst" - but it could be said that she came closest to the real Emily than any of her associates. But for her intense loyalty to Austin and the insight he provided, we might have had no poems or letters at all. Mabel was willing to believe in the poems as no one else. She recognised in them a suffering yet resilient spirit, a tumultuous inner life in sharp contrast to a placid exterior and a defiance of convention and orthodoxy. It was Vinnie, having exhausted the option of getting Susan Dickinson to peruse them, who came to Mabel to copy and edit them. The project became a mission. There were many obstacles to be overcome. The first was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whose general approval was essential in persuading the publisher to go ahead at all, and this he finally gave. The publisher Houghton Mifflin rejected the poems as being "queer - the rhymes are all wrong." They were later sent to Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers

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who was reluctant, until persuaded by Arlo Bates, a poet himself, who recommended publishing a highly selected group of poems in a small edition of five hundred copies. The book proved successful beyond the expectation of anyone but Mabel.

Mabel's own *Preface to the Poems* contained the gist of Austin's views but went further to demonstrate her own empathy. She wrote how to Emily things seemed so cheap and thin and hollow that she wanted none of it. "The greatness, mystery and depth of life was so great and overwhelming to her that she could not see how people could go into all this littleness." (Todd, 1891)

Mabel heard Emily's subtle music as the others did not. She was ahead of her time in sensing and articulating the rhythmic and melodic qualities that, among other things, make Emily's poetry remarkable. In the *Preface* to the second edition of the *Poems*, she wrote of how the very absence of conventional form challenged one's attention and how her verses all showed a strange cadence of inner rhythmical music. "Lines are always daringly constructed and the 'thought-rhyme' appears frequently, - appealing, indeed, to an unrecognised sense more elusive than hearing." (Todd, 1891)

It was Mabel Todd alone who saw the importance of collecting the letters that made up her pioneer edition in 1894 – an achievement ranking close to her work on the poems. Later, after various disputes

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with the Dickinson family, she determined to have nothing more with matters Dickinson, put all the manuscript materials, including some 665 of Emily's poems in the famous camphorwood chest and shut the lid, as she thought, forever. Her withdrawal left Martha Dickinson Bianchi, (Susan and Austin's daughter) with a clear field. There was no possibility of cooperation between the two women until in 1929 when Mabel, finally relenting, entrusted their editing to her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham. But it was sixteen years before *Bolts of Melody* (1945) and another ten before all of Emily Dickinson's poems were brought together in a single edition, professionally edited, with variants, an approximation of Emily Dickinson's unique punctuation, and a tentative chronology. There is hardly a more erratic publishing record of a major poet in literary history. Finally, with the *Letters* of 1958, we were enabled to view Emily Dickinson in what seems close to entirety.

The fact remains that with the passage of time, Dickinson has not faded away into obscurity, when many of her contemporaries did; rather, she has gained in strength and power, influencing writers and poets who followed her, in a manner that very few of her literary compatriots could have. We have already seen how she figures amongst the greatest literary names that the generations have produced as evidenced in Harold Bloom's much debated book *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (1994) on the panoramic

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subject of Western literature. It is essential that we keep this fact in mind when we take a comprehensive view of Dickinson and her poetic works in the last section of the thesis.

What now remains is to step back some years in time and watch her growth from an infant to a gifted singer, as she lived out her singular life in the Amherst universe she hardly ever left. Her growth from infant to adult is a story in itself, compelling, heart-rending, riveting. A brief synopsis is attempted below, so essential before we enter the study of the body of her works.

On December 10th, 1830, Dr. Isaac Cutler officiated at the birth of the second child of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Dickinson. The daughter's name was entered in the family records as 'Emily Elizabeth' and the time of her birth as '5.00 o'clock A.M.' Thus began a childhood of which little is known and much is surmised.

Emily was born into a prominent family but not into opulence or luxury. We first hear about her when her Aunt Lavinia Norcross, took her for an extended visit to her own home. She appears to have been a model child. Aunt Lavinia's warmth and affection deserve a comment. It recalls a little ruefully Emily's remark that she "never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled" (Letter to TW Higginson, 1874).

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In school, Emily gave evidence of being something unusual. The poem “They shut me up in Prose” (#J 613, about 1862) may seem at first glance to be a complaint against repression: but clearly her concern here is with herself as a poet than with herself as a child. The little girl in the closet is unmistakably the young poet struggling to assert herself against the ‘prosaic’ influences around her and the failure of her literary advisers like Higginson, to encourage her to write poetry. She was about thirty-one when she wrote it, and by this time she could indulge in a bit of petulance and even defiance. Another poem taken as a lament on childhood also has a very different thrust. “I cried at Pity -- not at Pain--” (#J588). Though there is enough in the poem to wring pity from the stoniest heart, it is not an appeal for pity; it is a warning against it, particularly the sentimental, uninformed pity that brings out the worst in the one pitied. Emily Dickinson uses childhood as a metaphor for conveying an attitude towards a kind of pain that may have nothing to do with childhood – frustration of any kind, the experience of being excluded, or even as has been suggested, frustration as a poet. Pain can be endured, but she would “hold her ears” against the kind of pity that leads only to the debasement of self-pity.

As always her concern was with the essence. One thing is certain: Emily Dickinson took childhood seriously. She gloried in all the children of the neighbourhood and was their favourite. She listened to

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what they had to say and talked to them on even terms. As she herself outgrew childhood, the wish crept several times into her letters that she could return to childhood. She praised one friend for being “more of a woman than I am, for I love so to be a child.” (Letter to Abiah Root, 1850) When she was twenty-one, she longed to ramble among the woods and the fields and “become a child again” (Letter to Susan Dickinson, June 1852). To Austin she wrote: “I wish we were children now. I wish we were always children... how to grow up I don’t know.” (Letter to brother Austin, April 1853).

What Emily liked was the frank, fresh gaze of childhood, its powers of complete absorption, the immediacy of its vision. To her, the glory of childhood was its freedom from the commitments and clutter of adulthood. There is a good deal of the Christian ideal of the simplicity and innocence of childhood that for redemption must somehow be regained. If she had dark thoughts about her own childhood, she never confided them to anyone. Emily had a childhood and one that she was grateful for. She knows how innocence ends, but she yet glories in it. How the poem “The Child’s faith is new --/ Whole -- like His Principle--” (# J 637, about 1862) could have come out of a blighted youth is hard to see.

Edward Dickinson’s chief concern about his children during the early years was their education. In his letters, he wrote more about

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what they were learning than about their piety and Christian nature. But Emily could not bring herself to make the formal announcement of conversion to Christianity, as demanded by the Calvinist dogma. Emily wrote to her friend Abiah Root, “I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections...I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die.” (Letter to Abiah Root, 1854).

The years when Emily and Lavinia spent together at the Academy were a blossoming period in her life, full and joyous. This remarkable school, with its enlightened curriculum, its young and enthusiastic administrators and teachers, was an influence of first importance in Emily’s formative years. The girls in the Academy were under the charge of a competent and accomplished Preceptress who gave particular attention to the formation of moral and social, as well as intellectual, character of her pupils. The rich and humane education which she was receiving was one of the reasons why the world began to hold a predominant place in Emily’s affections.

Leonard Humphrey, Principal of the Academy for two years from 1846, as well as other teachers such as Daniel Taggart Fiske influenced her deeply. These young teachers and her extraordinary group of friends set the tone of Emily’s day-by-day life at school and contributed much to her blossoming. But the most profound and lasting influence on her was Reverend Professor and President of Amherst

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College, Edward Hitchcock. He was a remarkable man, the ‘pace setter’, ‘man of God and man of Science’; he was also part poet. We cannot but notice that Emily’s curriculum was varied and interesting, well beyond the reading and writing we normally associate with those supposedly unenlightened days. Emily entered the Classical Department in 1842 which offered studies in Vergil, Cicero, Ancient History and the Greek Testament. Emily’s botany text, the popular Familiar Lectures on Botany by Mrs. Almira H Lincoln, may well have been one of her most important textbooks.

Emily was already showing signs of brilliance and enjoying them in others. Milton, Cowper, Watts and Young were acceptable, but Pope tended to “wantonness and indecency”; Shakespeare, for all his “splendid moral sentiments was undoubtedly a libertine in principle and practice.” Goldsmith, Smollett, Russell and Ramsay were “believers”, but Voltaire, Hume and Gibbon were “atheists.” What the Academy did was to open her eyes, give her discipline, and set her studies in the largest possible frame of reference.

When she left the Academy after final term on August 10, 1847, she embarked on a ten-month sojourn at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, under the leadership of its founder and guiding spirit, Mary Lyon. But she never got beyond the first two terms. She went to the assemblies and listened to the sermons, many

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of which bored her. She was saddened to find herself incapable of the commitment to Christ that many of her friends were making. What she took from Mount Holyoke was the invaluable self-knowledge of a year more or less on her own, some more book learning and the example of a brilliant and loving woman who had found her work and had given her life for it.

Back home she soon joined a special group of five: Abbey Wood, Harriet Merrill, Sara Tracy, Abiah Root and herself. A special bond existed between them; they wrote to each other constantly. Letters were an important part of the self-education among these young people. As Emily grew older and saw fewer people, letters became not only indispensable for communication but a more and more carefully practised art form. The length of Emily's letters show energy; but as she complained to Abiah Root, "my pen is not swift enough to answer my purpose at all. Seems to me I could write all-night and then not say the half, nor the half of the half, of all I have to tell you." (Letter to Abiah Root, January 1846). At the age of 14, she had the confidence to write, "I am growing handsome very fast indeed. I expect I shall be the belle of Amherst when I reach my 17th year." (Letter to a friend, 1844)

There was healthy competition in Amherst and Emily was part and parcel of all these gatherings. At this time, she had a demure manner which brightened easily into fun when she felt at home;

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among strangers, though, she was shy, silent, and even deprecating. Much as she loved them, she saw increasingly that their ways were not her ways. In her early friendships, at least in the letters that record them, Emily Dickinson was quite consciously taking the measure of herself. Her earliest letters were not only exercises in style but, with their introversions and their increasingly critical comments on people and things, exercises in the discovery of herself and her word. All her friends were married one by one to businessmen or took up teaching in schools. One by one, the early group fell away, and in her early 20's she was left with only her lexicon as companion.

Some of her correspondences of this period invite closer examination. Abiah, one of the five friends, and Emily discussed freely the matter that lay so heavily on all these young people, their spiritual condition. She confesses about how she cared less for religion than ever. When Abiah Root herself takes her decision to commit to Calvinism, Emily has cause to “shed many a tear.” She can only confess that “evil voices lisp in my ear”. With Abiah safely in the fold, and Emily out, the tone of her letters changes. And the differences between the friends have widened. She argued that she had perfect confidence in God and his promises but yet did not know why she felt the world held a predominant place in her affections. “I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die. Pray for me that I may yet enter into the kingdom, that there may be room left for me in the shining courts about.” (Letter to Abiah Root, 1854)

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By the late 1850s, the time of the next letter to Abiah Root, Emily compares her life with the safe shore of Abiah's life:

The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea - I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!

In a letter to Jane Humphrey of January 1859, there are signs that she is starting to resent it.

Somehow or the other I incline to other things – and Satan covers them up with flowers, and I reach out to pick them. The path of duty looks very ugly indeed. And the place where I want to go more amiable – a great deal – it is so much easier to do wrong than right – so much pleasanter to be evil than good...

She pleads to her rock and strong assister:

I have dared to do strange things –bold things, and have asked no advice from any – I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong... What do you weave from all these threads, for I know you haven't been idle all the while I've been speaking to you, bring it nearer the window, and I will see, it's all wrong unless it has one gold thread in it, a long, big shining fibre which hides the others – and which will fade away into Heaven while you hold it, and from there come back to me.

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The letters seem to corroborate that she is coming close to her own discovery of being a poet. The reference to the gold thread, the long, shining fibre which hides the others is unmistakeable. She now recognises her destiny and must move on to grasp it. Emily was soon at the parting of many ways.

Two poems come to mind that reveal what she has been trying to tell Jane. First, the famous one, “I reckon-when I count it all- First –Poets-” (#J569): This combined with the lines of her letter regarding the golden thread is suggestive of the nature of the created world of the artist. Poetry to her embraces all the great beauties of the world, the sun and the summer and the heaven of God. The last two stanzas tell why she prefers their world to the heaven of the revivalists.

The second poem uses the metaphor of the thread and the needle to indicate what seems to have been a temporary pause in her writing, perhaps through illness or fatigue. But surely, she is talking about more than her domestic handiwork. It begins: “Don’t put up my Thread and Needle--”(#617, about 1862) Even as she falters while hemming and sewing, she can surmise that she is still at the job, dreaming that she is indeed creating beautiful seams and stitches, a metaphor for the creative act of poetry writing.

About the men who came into Emily Dickinson’s life, we have but little more than bits and scraps, a few valentines, and brief,

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often cryptic messages. Most of the rumours centre around Edward Dickinson acting as chief spoiler of his daughter's chances of romantic happiness. There is much speculation as to who among the dozen or so frequenters of the household broke Emily's heart and cut her life in two. The assumption is that Emily was staking her life on romantic happiness, and when that failed, gave up and withdrew.

Some of the leading contenders are Benjamin Franklin Newton, a law student in her father's office, almost a decade older than her, and one whom she regarded as tutor, preceptor or master and "the first of her friends". John Graves was exceptionally handsome and capable and was perhaps not a romantic possibility because of his cousinship with Emily. There are two letters that show her putting her heart out to John. In late April 1856, Emily's little elegy to him is tender, nostalgic:

It is a jolly thought to think we can be Eternal when air and earth are full of lives that are gone ... (Letter to John Graves, 1856.)

In the same letter she writes, with poetic poignancy, of the end of things, almost triumphing over the mortuary scene. It also reveals the theme that was to haunt her all her life, that of surmounting death and coming out into something purer and noble. This deserves to be quoted at some length:

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Much that is gay – have I to show, if you were with me, John, upon this April grass – then there are sadder features – here and there, wings half gone to dust, that fluttered so, last year – a mouldering plume, an empty house in which a bird resided. Where last year’s flies, their errand ran, and last year’s crickets fell! We too are flying – fading John- and the song ‘here lies’, soon upon lips that love us now- will have hummed and ended. To live, to die, and mount again the triumphant body, and next time, try the upper air – is no school boy’s theme. (Letter to John Graves, 1856.)

The other young men with whom she may have had a relationship include Henry Vaughn Emmons, Elbridge Bowdoin, George Gould and Joseph Lyman. The last was Vinnie’s suitor, and his friendship with Emily is refreshingly free from such complexities, especially romantic ones. He understood Emily as well as she understood him may be doubted. But the passages he saved from her letters are good evidence of the nature of their friendship. In this extract from one of her letters to him, she writes with growing excitement about the mighty power of words: “We used to think...that words were cheap and weak. Now I don’t know of anything so mighty. There are those to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting prince-like among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire.” (Letter to Joseph Lyman, late 1860)

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And then there is that most significant relationship of her life, that with Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom she met at Philadelphia. There is much conjecture in the nature of their friendship which lasted until Wadsworth's death in 1882. At the romantic extreme is the notion of love at first sight, mutually recognised but renounced in deference to Wadsworth being married. This version has Emily returning to Amherst in despair, writing her poems of passion and frustration, and soon later, retiring in white from the world. Another view has the Wadsworth meeting growing into an all-encompassing fantasy in her mind: according to this theory, Emily enchanted by her teacher (Wadsworth was forty-one and at the height of his powers) and knowing that he was forever forbidden to her, returned to Amherst to nourish her dream, to live in her imagination the whole course of love, fulfilled and unfulfilled, and to re-create in her poems its every phase and meaning. Thus Wadsworth was not the man in her life but the idea of what a man in her life would have been like. None can deny that something like this may have happened.

Wadsworth was a man of impressive stature providing spiritual sustenance beyond the usual Amherst fare. His powers as a preacher were well known and greatly admired by all who came into contact with him. She knew him as a man of sorrow: he confessed to her that his life is full of dark secrets. It would seem that mystery faced mystery in the meeting of these two people, and this may have been part of his fascination for her.

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Undoubtedly, Emily found in Wadsworth a fellow sufferer, and the quality of suffering common to both was that it was borne in silence. Indeed, one observer says that the undercurrent of unbelief in Wadsworth, the years of conflict and agony, and the spiritual uncertainty that he was too honest to hide from her completely (perhaps his darkest secret) found empathy with her.

One more name is important in the list of men she knew: Samuel Bowles, the ebullient editor of the Springfield Republican, special friend of Austin and Susan, to whom Dickinson had sent some of her poems. This was at a time when she was reducing her social life to elderly people and smaller children, and even fewer people of her own age.

The entrance at this time of Samuel Bowles is important. His regular visits, sometimes alone and sometimes with his wife, Mary, began at this time. The warm friendships of the two families, including Emily is significant and they were soon sharing their joys and sorrows. Thirty-five of her letters to him survive and nearly fifty poems sent to him and his wife: and they are proof that she was deeply in love with him for several years and never ceased loving him, at a distance, for the rest of her life. Undoubtedly, Bowles was out of her reach in every way, professionally, domestically, morally. In the end she felt Bowles had rejected her, but she kept faith in her own poetry and in her boundless vision.

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She then throws herself into her work. If the chronological dating of her Poems is correct, then in that year itself she had penned some 366 poems: this shows that her anguish, however great, did not prostrate her, a fact which should be kept in mind when one is tempted to pity her. Her production shows how, during a time when many commentators have seen her on the edge of madness, she firmly kept her faculties under control. The theme of poem after poem is humanity at the limits of sovereignty. She does write to him now and then, and acknowledges the special place he has in her heart. But as time passes, she reconciles and knows that she has to find salvation in her own genius, that is surely hers, if not today, surely in the days to come. As she grows, her independence is complete. She seems to claim a new baptism, this time of her own choosing. It is the emancipation from a hopeless love and her declaring herself a poet. Poem after poem of this period are 'poet poems' with its celestial imagery, representing the fulfilment she has found in her new dedication. # J 499 is a fine example: "I'm ceded -- I've stopped being Theirs--" Her commitment to her golden thread, the life that she must now lead as a poet, if required in solitude, and her passion for that life, is now obvious in the lines of this splendid little gem.

Her companions were her Lexicon, the things of nature, her books, her letters, which became increasingly the measure of her fulfilled relationships; but especially her poems, in which she explored

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the truth of her fulfilments and her unfulfilments – with nature, man and God. Not that she was in the solitude of her own imagination: her family and her friends, young and old, were always important to her. But it would have taken a much more powerful attraction to have swerved her from her course than anything the young men of Amherst had to offer.

Brother Austin remained her greatest resource through the ebb and flow of Emily's relationships. They were the closest together and it can be surmised from Emily's correspondences how much of a sustaining force he was for her. There is much of him, as Jay Leda would have said, in the days and hours of her life than in any other source.

It is important to dwell at some length on the Master letters: three draft letters, found among Emily Dickinson's papers after she died, two in ink with pencil corrections and the third in pencil. Handwriting conforms that they were of the period late 1850s and early 1860s. Austin and Vinnie deliberately suppressed the contents when authorising Mabel Todd to print just a few lines of them. The letters in their entirety came out only in Millicent Todd Bingham's "Emily Dickinson's Home" in 1955 and demonstrates the slow and circuitous route by which many matters of Emily Dickinson have come to light.

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Two of them are among the most intense and fervent love letters she ever wrote and all three are extraordinary human documents, at once baffling and breath-taking. They raise innumerable questions, of which the identity of the recipient is the least important. Far more important is what they tell us of Emily Dickinson at this crucial point of her life when she went through a love crisis, as she reveals the intensity, depth and power of her love and the agony of frustration. As few have, she shows what it is to suffer. And we see her coping with the experience with all the imaginative and verbal power, and thus, partially transcending it.

The first of these letters is the shortest and the least confessional, a get-well letter written to her ailing Master.

“I would that all I love should be weak no more. The violets are by my side, the Robin very near, and ‘Spring’ they say, Who is she – going by the door. Indeed it is God’s house – and these are the gates of Heaven, and to and fro the angels go, with their sweet postillions... Each Sabbath on the Sea, makes me count the Sabbaths, till we meet on shore, and whether the hills will look as blue as the sailors say. I cannot talk anymore tonight, for this pain denies me... How strong when weak to recollect, and easy, quite, to love. Will you tell me please, please to tell me, as soon as you are well.”

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It is a beautiful, gracious letter. She is composed and in command. Only that she is a little insistent as she makes an effort to get him to understand more, one feels, than her poems. The tone is of muted entreaty.

The second, and the longest, is anything but muted. It is direct, urgent and unabashed.

“Master, if you saw a bullet hit a Bird – and he told you he was’nt shot – you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word. One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy’s bosom – then would you believe? Thomas’ faith in Anatomy, was stronger than his faith in faith. God made me— He built the heart in me – bye and bye it outgrew me – and like the little mother – with the big child – I got tired of holding him. ...Couldn’t ... you and I walk in the meadows an hour – and nobody care but the Bobolink – and his – a silver scruple?... Master – but I can wait more – wait till my hazel hair is dappled – and you carry the cane –then I can look at my watch and if the Day is too far declined – we can take the chances for Heaven ... Sir –it were comfort forever – just to look in your face, while you looked in mine – then I could play in the woods till dark –till you take me where Sundown cannot find us – and the true keep coming –till the town is full.”

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The remaining Master letter was written about 1862. They differ from the other two in the sense that she writes in abject humility, as ‘smaller,’ ‘lower,’ and is entirely self-effacing and apologetic:

“...A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart – pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint and white in the gust’s arm....Sir – only pledge that you will forgive – sometime – before the grave, and daisy will not mind – She will awake in your likeness. Master – open your life wide, and take me in forever, I will never be tired – I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be your best girl - nobody else will see me, but you –but that is enough – I shall not want anymore – and all that Heaven only will disappoint me –will be because it’s not so dear..”

This final letter shows the despair into which a sensitive person is thrown when such a love is rejected, or worst of all, seen by the loved one as an offense or intrusion.

The three letters show the progression of love: the first, the early stages of love, the second, the climax, and the last, a final cry of despair following a rejection. The possibility, of course, that the three letters are examples of phantasizing and imagination cannot be rejected, since the Dickinson rhetoric is capable of carrying her to imagined heights with the slightest stimulus. But these letters cannot be looked upon as merely fiction.

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Certainly the letters must be examined sceptically. They show an artist at every point, choosing words, images, metaphors with fine precision; establishing rhythms and cadences with a most delicate ear; arranging materials for subtle dramatic effect. Certainly the letters are not merely the release of an overburdened heart, but the work of a supremely conscious heart. To bring her materials under such control was, in a sense, to distance and command them. And thus she triumphs over them and is ready to move on. These three letters are the seedbed, the matrix of dozens of her poems, drafts of thoughts and themes appearing here, but further pondered over, developed and made into poetic wholes. Probably no poem she wrote after the experience recorded in these three letters was entirely unrelated to it. After it, she had to go somewhere, or perish. Fortunately, she knew where to go and was fully equipped for the journey.

To sum up, Emily Dickinson appropriated her experiences for her own creative uses, and this she clearly did with the ecstasy and pain recorded in the Master letters. For all intense feeling for the present, either of joy or of sadness, she never lost her Puritan sense of life as a preparation. The bitterness gone, she saw such experiences in perspective, even with pleasure, as tests of one's humanity. The cost was severe – if we are to trust her rhetoric at all, almost fatal. She was honest to every step of the way, as her many poems of anguish and suffering testify. She never blinked the hard facts, and even in

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moments of composure admitted the precariousness of the journey. #J 875 (“I stepped from Plank to Plank /A slow and cautious way”) shows that she was moving towards what she called in a poem written about 1863, ‘the perfected Life’. We can see in the poem her own final adjustment to the anguished years of the Master letters. #J 1142 “The Props assist the House /Until the House is built” expresses her independence from what had once used to prop her up and support her. As she grows in maturity, she has no longer any need for these stays and supports: she has “the perfected Life” and when the scaffolds drop, she has a soul.

It should come as no surprise by now that there are at least two Emily Dickinsons: there is the ‘real’ Emily Dickinson, the object of all sober enquiry; and then there is the figure of the legend, ‘the village mystery’ or the ‘Myth’ darkened by Vinnie’s stories of her youth and the legends of blighted love, but lightened by Martha Dickinson Bianchi’s reassuring memories of her aunt. Martha helped create this figure, fond of children, full of gnomic wisdom, of barely sufficient mystery and talent to remain a poet – or if a poet, one who celebrated the gladsome aspects of life, leaving the darker aspects to sterner spirits. In spite of pleas of scholars and critics, it is this Emily that lives on. We should know by now that Emily Dickinson is hardly the lovable but eccentric genius, the fragile, secluded flower, of the many-phased myth. We have seen her in high passion, loss, frustration, doubt, the

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perplexities and anxieties of the common lot – and the whole pervaded by a redeeming humour, a powerful zest for living, a piercing sense of beauty, and given form by a restless search for identity and vocation. We have seen her, as she reflected on her experience, developing steadily in disciplined verbal expression remarkable even in her casual utterances and superb in her greatest.

This is not to say that she was not involved in the everyday and mundane activities of the home she lived in. We know she cooked in the kitchen as we have a detailed recipe for a cake from her letters to friends. We know she was impatient of the cleaning and other household chores, whereas she would take special care in sending the neighbours living around her house some little gift, perhaps a precious poem, even flowers from her garden.

Emily Dickinson's love of flowers is obvious as her poems make innumerable references to them. Marta McDowell has detailed out the trees and flowers that were grown at Hampstead and the Evergreens. We have records that "Emily Dickinson's sixty-six-page herbarium" is beautifully arranged, bound in leather with a green fabric cover embossed in a floral pattern. It looks like an expensive photo album. And its binding was a status symbol. Emily collected a specimen of each plant, over four hundred of them, then pressed and dried them in between sheets of blotting paper. Each specimen is carefully mounted

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with strips of gummed paper and neatly labelled in her best penmanship. The layouts are lovely; on many pages Emily offset a single large specimen with several smaller ones. Sometimes the arrangements are whimsical, two daisies crisscrossed at the bottom of a page like swords supporting a coat of arms. Others are vigorous, three stems of aralia fanned out over a tripartite leaf of hepatica. Later in the album, Emily inserted more specimens per page, as if she worried about running out of room. All the pages in the album are used. As she continued to collect specimens, she had to fit them in wherever she found space.

Emily's letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, which began with her now historic note of April 15, 1862, contributed much, in their degree of pose and coyness, to the figure of the legend. But they are also among the most thoughtful and the most literary of her correspondences and tell us much of what we know about the spiritual and artistic problems she struggled with throughout her middle and later years. The Master experience was seen by her as but an instance of a vaster problem of time and mortality and her poems recur with the mortuary theme. Every death or illness she heard about sets her wondering about "those great countries in the blue sky of which we don't know anything." (Letter to her sister Lavinia, April 1860)

She saw loss of any sort, whether of a lover, or a friend, her flowers in the fall or (of crucial importance in the Higginson letters) her

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power and will to write poetry, as an emblem of the perennial mystery. And not to be able to write about them, to distil their essence in poems, meant, simply, death. She once described the Gospel as the “yearning for oneness.” It could be called the theme of her career, and sooner or later she saw every experience in its light. Her conviction that religion did not provide the solace it is supposed to, added to the sense of her piquancy. One of the ironies of her life is in her description of her family: “They are religious—except me...” (Letter to TW Higginson, April 1862). She may at times have felt emotionally walled in- or walled out—but her mind recognised no limits or limitation.

It is characteristic that in her letters to Higginson, she all but ignored the great national causes of the time and with which he had been involved for many years: abolition of slavery, women’s rights, the plight of the poor, the threat of war. It is not that she shut them out of her life; but she had to come to terms with them in her own way. The all absorbing nature of her love demanded that she finds a way out of it, a way of survival.

By 1858, she had begun to assemble her poems into groups, averaging 18-20 in each, carefully bound by threading the pages together, into what is called by Mabel Todd as ‘fascicles’ or later as ‘packets’. She followed this practice for seven years, spanning the period of her greatest productivity. It has been argued that when she

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found no encouragement from possible publishers, she came to regard this procedure as her private substitute for publication, her notion of the way her poems should be presented to the world. It has been argued that the groupings are not haphazard and that the fascicles are arranged in a calculated structure with the parts, the individual lyrics, bound together by inter-twining of imagery, metaphor, theme and mood into a sustained, emblematic narrative, with the poems arranged to present, dissect, lament, or celebrate the stages of progression from 'quest' through 'suffering' to 'resolution.' Whether one accepts this theory or not, it is clear that she was extraordinarily busy during these years and certainly not the ingénue she presented herself to Higginson.

Emily Dickinson's first letter to Higginson was occasioned by his article in the April 1862 *Atlantic Monthly*, 'Letter to a Young Contributor'; the article was meant for all young contributors and its intention was that "whoever rises from its thorough perusal strengthened and encouraged, may be reasonably certain of ultimate success". Emily was sufficiently encouraged to write her first letter, seeking Higginson's opinion on the merit of her poems, enclosing four of her poems with the letter. She asked of him: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself - it cannot see distinctly - and I have none to ask. Should you think it breathed - and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude." The pose is delicate here and there is much diffidence in her words. It is most striking in

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the sparseness of the words, with not a lead that one could normally look for.

Higginson was intrigued and wrote to her almost at once and asked many questions of her. She replied on April 25, 1862, enclosing three more of her poems and saying:

“...Thank you for the surgery; it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others, as you ask, though they might not differ. While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb.”

And then she goes on to describe herself in words that tease and stimulate, excite and arouse:

“You asked how old I was? I made no verse, but one or two, until this winter, sir. I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid. You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations... When a little girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality; but venturing too near, himself, he never returned... You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.”

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Higginson later complained of the “the fiery mist” with which Emily surrounded herself, just as we accuse Emily of reticence. But here to a total stranger, she confessed fear, prejudice, irreligion and her own isolation. For his rejection of her poems, Higginson will forever receive ignominy from the millions of faithful devotees of Emily Dickinson. All he did was to send a cautious letter to Emily sometime during the next six weeks.

Emily’s singleness of purpose in sending the poems is important. These poems are samples of her work with its variety and range. She had come a long way from the early years when she was experimenting recklessly and joyously with words in fantasy letters and youthful extravagances. She was now closer to a sense of vocation and found a form suited to her gait. Her growing sense of the healing power her verses had for others now joined with the awareness of how necessary they were to her own health of mind and spirit. All this was to emerge triumphant in her conception of the Poet as Creator, on a par, as she was to suggest in moments of audacity almost incredible in one so reared, with Deity Itself. The poem #J321 shows extraordinary confidence, and we have no doubt of the inspiration that moves her as she writes: Of all the Sounds despatched abroad, /There’s not a Charge to me /Like that old measure in the Boughs -- /That phraseless Melody --. She writes of the creative spirit, “inner than the bone”, that moves her as if with a spirit of its own. Perhaps it was the sense of mystery

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of unanswerable questions entering Emily Dickinson's major poems with tragic intensity that kept Higginson away.

The correspondence lasted until 1872: it is her perennial complaint that people did not understand her; "all men say 'what' to me". The same complaint she repeats to Higginson too. "Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince than die." She abhors artificiality and pose and tells Higginson so: "I haven't that confidence in fraud which many exercise." She is too confident of her talents: "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her." This makes perfect sense, "given her conviction about fame as an aura from beyond circumference, ungovernable from within the circuit and awarded only to true worth that continues to enrich the circuit." (Eberwein, 1987)

In August 1877, Higginson came to see her. The meeting was apparently breathless and tense. Higginson confessed that he had never been with anyone "who drained my nerve power so much." He describes her to his wife:

"A step like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & and a face a little like Belle Dove's; not plainer – with no good feature – in a very plain and exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said 'These are my

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introduction' in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice – and added under her breath Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers & hardly know what I say...” (Higginson’s letter to his wife after meeting Emily Dickinson, August 1870)

It is to his credit that he sat still and watched as “she talked soon and thence continuously and deferentially – sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her – but readily commencing.” She gave her own test of literary excellence:

“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?”

Higginson’s part in furthering Emily Dickinson’s career was a failure. But Higginson as literary mentor was important to Emily’s life. For all her protestations about her self-sufficiency, she did need friends – and literary friends - she could talk to. To her, he was a friend and guide of those who would live in the spirit.

Long after Emily died, her presence followed him and he did accept Mabel Todd’s request to edit the poems, on the assurance that she would do most of the work. Finally, he acknowledged:

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“I can’t tell you how much I am enjoying the poems. There are many new to me which take my breath away and have ‘form’ beyond most of those I have seen before.” (Higginson’s letter to Mabel Todd, November 25, 1889).

It is ironic that a man who was so prominent in his time should now be known principally as the friend and editor of Emily Dickinson. But he heard her and answered her and kept on answering through the long years of her persistence. He went to Amherst for her funeral and read Emily Bronte’s “Last Lines”, one of her favourite poems. In his journal he commented on the death of “that rare & strange creature Emily Dickinson.”

But Emily was battling her own demons in those days. External events dampened her: Wadsworth’s death in 1882, Judge Lord with whom she was involved suffering a stroke, her mother’s illness and eventual death, her cousin Willie passing away, and most distressing, the death of her nephew Gilbert, from which she never fully recovered. She slipped into a nervous prostration that was to incapacitate her for weeks. In March 1866, she wrote to the Hollands, hinting at the purpose of her poetic career:

“My flowers are near and foreign, and I have but to cross the floor to stand in the Spice Isles... I tell you what I see. The Landscape of the Spirit requires a lung, but no Tongue...” (Letter to Mrs Holland, 1866)

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“I tell you what I see” is a declaration of her purpose as a poet of both lives, inner and outer. As a poet of the inner life, her dedication to this kind of truth led her to insights of the most penetrating kind, epiphanies of the moral and spiritual life; as a poet of the external world, she caught its evanescences and its permanent realities with matchless precision. She knows that her choice of her own way of life is right: she writes how unnecessary travel is and where they should look for the true meaning in life.

In another letter to Mrs Holland in the same year, she writes:

“The Life we have is very great.

The Life that we shall see

Surpasses it, we know, because

It is Infinity.

But when all Space has been beheld,

And all Dominion shown,

The smallest Human Heart’s extent

Reduces it to none.” (#J 1162).

In 1866, in an exquisite letter to Mrs Holland, she seems to reveal the process of her writing. Essence, for her, required absence. Love comes after the guest leaves, because only then can it be disentangled from its “accidents” and truly known.

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“Dear Sister, After you went, a low wind warbled through the house like a spacious bird, making it high but lonely. When you had gone, the love came. I supposed it would. The supper of the heart is when the guest has gone.” (Letter to Mrs Holland, May 1866)

Much has been made of Emily Dickinson’s great years in the early 1860s, when she wrote, apparently, two or three hundred poems a year only to find her creative powers (so the assumption seem to be) dwindling to almost nothing during the last two decades of her life. Perhaps much of the creative power went into writing the poems, only a fraction of which we now have.

It is clear that the woman in Emily Dickinson needed an object, a person, on whom she could focus her creative powers: as Vinnie said, she was always on the lookout for “the rewarding person.” It is not clear how she become involved with Judge Otis Phillips Lord of Salem, long-time friend of the family and the man Emily referred to as her father’s closest friend and her ‘Preceptor’. Lord had graduated from Amherst in 1832 and went into the study of law, later going on to Harvard. He became a widower 1843 and moved to Salem where he stayed for the rest of their lives. He and Edward Dickinson were both die-hard Whigs and this common bond may have brought the two together. This was the man whom Emily Dickinson, in her late

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forties, called “my lovely Salem,” “my Darling,” “My Sweet One,” “my Church.” As she had with her father, she saw much more than the public face of Otis, and in both men, a paradox. She summed up the paradox shortly after his death “Abstinence from Melody was what made him die.” Lord kept working till the very end, despite his alarming illness in the spring of 1882 (which threw Emily into a panic). A stroke carried him off on March 1884, at the age of seventy-two. It has been suggested that poem #J 1633 was written during the time of his last illness: “Which question shall I clutch --/ What answer wrest from thee /Before thou dost exude away/In the recallless sea?”

Dickinson’s way of mastering death was never to give up her vocation, her gift for the highest condition of mental activity, which for her was poetry. Her love for Lord was a tonic and his influence invigorating, but she kept them both on this side of the idolatry she feared. In a way, every one of the major relationships in her life, with all that they cost her in anguish and ecstasy, was not only a stimulus, involving each time a new and very personal Muse, but also to her life as a poet, an invasion of the privacy without which she could not function. She weathered every one and continued on as a poet.

From all that we have known about her in the preceding paragraphs, what should be emerging is a perceptive, critical, self-propelling person working hard in the midst of a busy town and a

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busy family and taking the measure of both. We have had glimpses of her in action: outmanoeuvring her father, coping with the housework during her mother's illness, advising her brother, depending and not depending on her sister, living out a curious love-hate relationship with her sister-in-law – and trying out her style on them all.

One matter emerges which requires a further word: a phenomenon of temperament and need – and hence style and hence vocation – that subsumes certain themes touched upon so far and prepared her for encounters and problems to come. This is a family characteristic and it is distinct from anything recorded in Dickinson annals, and so unparalleled in Emily's immediate cultural environment, that it deserves a special term: the Dickinson Rhetoric. Higginson found the Dickinsons a subtle and circuitous family, with Emily of course, his first and central enigma. When he complained that she surrounded herself with a fiery mist, he probably meant her bewildering language, the slant and elliptical style of the poems and the letters she sent him. Or perhaps her extravagance, the hyperbole he found hard to believe. This heightened rhetoric presents a problem: the problem of pose. When can we trust these Dickinsons, when are they posing or when speaking simply? Even in the way she presents herself in the letters, she could adopt a persona or don a mask as readily as in the more obvious art constructs of a poem. It is easy to dismiss these tendencies as merely

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protective. But they are more; viewed closely and in the historical context, they may be related to the large creative effort of her life.

There was nothing in her lineage to account for the flair for language. But the Dickinsons, certainly Austin and Emily, faced a spiritual crisis unknown to their elders. The old forms and formulations were losing their sustaining power. Austin's letters find him groping and bewildered. Emily speaks of discussing theological issues. Although Vinnie joined the church, there is nothing she said or did that shows she got anything much from it. And though Austin worked hard for the church, it hardly seems to have been a source of comfort for him. Emily stopped going to church by the time she was thirty and later openly confessed to a scorn for doctrines.

The complete truth about the influences that shaped Dickinson may perhaps never be known. But it is a fact that she was not indebted to any one writer or poet who may have aided her in her philosophical growth. She had no publisher who kept her abreast of literary developments in America or the rest of the English speaking world. Certainly, therefore, it is clear that she could not have lived without books. But we know what her greatest enthusiasms were, from a few clear phrases in her writings: the Bible "dealt with the Centre"; "while Shakespeare remains Literature is firm - an Insect cannot run away with Achilles' head"; and again "Give me ever to drink of this wine;" "What

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do I think of Middlemarch? What do I think of glory?” Coming home from her school, she awaited “a feast in the reading line”. When the doctor forbade reading, “He might as well have said, ‘Eyes be blind’, ‘heart be still.’” We know how she once wrote to Higginson, “For poets –I have Keats –and Mr and Mrs Browning. For prose, Mr Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations.”

In books at the Homestead and the Evergreens libraries, we have thin pencil lines in the margin that seem to be hers, notching passages that appealed to her; sometimes a tiny ‘x’. They include the *Imitation of Christ*, *Arora Leigh*, *Reveries* etc. From such markings on margins of pages it is certain that the writers she appreciated included, Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold, Thoreau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Cullen Bryant, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas De Quincy, Alexander Smith, George Eliot and some more local writers. Shakespeare was indispensable: “why is any other book needed?” she once said to Higginson. Shakespeare’s characters lived for her much as did the people in the Bible, and she enjoyed using them in her writings. *Of the Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis: was certainly one of her choices. A word too about the Bible: Emily’s copy is an 1843 edition of the King James Version and she read it extensively and quoted from it, though not always exactly. The Bible, as it “dealt with the centre”, was infinitely richer than the *Imitation*, in point of doctrine,

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theology and vision, and it gave Dickinson her Christian heritage with all the questions to wonder about and the destiny to hope for.

A reasonable attempt has been made by Sewall to identify the books that Dickinson would have most certainly read: they include: Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, her *Poems* and *Prometheus Bound*; Robert Browning's *Dramatis Personae* and *The Ring*; William Cullen Bryant's *Poems*; Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*; Arthur Hugh Clough's *Poems*; Thomas De Quincey's *Autobiography of an English Opium Eater*; George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and *Romola*; Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Conduct of Life* and his *Essays*; Theodore Parker's *Prayers*; Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*; Adelaide Ann Proctor's *Legends and Lyrics*; Jean-Paul Richter's *Titan*; Shakespeare: *Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, and Poems*; Alexander Smith's *Poems*; Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*; Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*; James Thomson's *The Seasons*; Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and John Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianae*. This list has been compiled from a careful examination of the books at Hampstead and the Evergreens and on the basis of the markings and notes still faintly seen in the margins of the pages. They are a good pointer to the literary and intellectual fodder that would have been grist to her mill.

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With people who guard their inner lives so successfully, either with reticence or rhetoric, we must look to their actions – their life actions taken as a whole – for their overarching truth. In her early letters, she faced the problem of organisation and coherence: they abound in energy and zest but show her groping for direction and meaning. Later on we detect her posing, or stretching the truth. And many of the poems make denials or affirmations that are at variance with the known facts of her life. She may lie in her hyperbole and exaggeration; she strikes poses and dons masks and speaks through personae. But in their basic structure, they do not lie. (Sewall, 1976) It was Emily Dickinson's constant aim to make her 'truth' clear. That is why she perhaps tried her hand again and again at similar materials, often forging new meanings, but in general continuing her course towards what she called 'circumference'.

On May 15th, 1886, Emily Dickinson finally crossed through her circumference. She had been suffering from indifferent health for over two years now. On the day of her death, her brother Austin recorded in his diary: "she ceased to breathe that terrible breathing, just before the whistles sounded for six (pm)." The Amherst physician Dr Otis F Bigelow entered the cause of death on her certificate as 'Bright's disease', a general diagnosis for hypertensive symptoms and nephritis of the kidneys. As Clara Newman Turner wrote, her death was owing to her extreme reticence and retirement of disposition and reluctance

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to confer with a physician: it was hastened, no doubt, when it might possibly have been retarded, though not cured. “She lay in a white casket in the hall of her father’s house, while the bees and the butterflies she had immortalized, buzzed a Requiem without the open door.”

Emily, who had left directions for her funeral, was borne to her grave by the six Irishmen who had worked on her father’s grounds. She asked to be carried out the back door, around the garden, through the opened barn from front to back, and then to the grassy fields to the family plot, always in sight of the house.

Such was the journey, the life action of Emily Dickinson. It required extraordinary discipline and concentration. While Austin submerged his early bewilderments in his good works and Vinnie made a career of the home, Emily had other work to do. “She had to think,” said Vinnie, “she was the only one of us who had that to do.”

Jay Leda had written once that her poems have an empty space around and within: this may not be necessarily true as her poems “did not in fact hang utterly unanchored in air”. Rather like the filaments that Walt Whitman’s spider spins out of itself, “they are ductile threads that she used to connect to others” (Bennet, 1990). Be it suffice to say that though she wrote at the same time as her contemporaries mentioned above, she remained unknown until her light began to shine some decades later. Seeing her life and her work and what she accomplished

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this way makes the disparity between the quiet life and the rhetoric understandable.

The intense inner life she was born to lead, as the others were not, required no less a rhetoric for its full expression. For her there came to be no such thing as a mere rhetoric. Every word was an experiment in meaning, a route toward the discovery of new meanings in the perceptions and thoughts that entered her teeming consciousness. This was her career, her journey towards Circumference.

CHAPTER III

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In the previous chapter, we delved in some detail into the historic meeting of the poet with Higginson which resulted in the unexpected revelation of this new brilliant star of the North American continent. Wineapple's essay on the correspondence between Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Emily Dickinson makes interesting reading. We have already seen how in 1862 Emily Dickinson asked the well-known abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" Her question spawned one of the most extraordinary correspondences in American letter. For the next quarter of a century, until Dickinson's death in 1886, the poet sent Higginson almost 100 poems, many of her best, their metrical forms jagged, their punctuation unpredictable, their images honed to a fine point, their meaning elliptical, heart-gripping, electric. Poetry torn up by the roots, he later said, that took his breath away. (Wineapple, 2008)

Dickinson knew Higginson only by reputation: as a voluble man of causes with a pronounced detestation of slavery. Hence, when Dickinson asked him if he were too busy to read her poems, it was the most reasonable request in the world. Dickinson in 1862 was seeking an adviser unconnected to family, though her brother Austin and wife Susan lived next door. "Should you think it breathed--and had you the

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leisure to tell me,” she told Higginson, “I should feel quick gratitude.” (Letter to TW Higginson, April 1862)

Wineapple writes that though Emily Dickinson and Thomas Higginson were seven years apart and so seemingly different from one another, they were yet raised in a climate where old pieties no longer sufficed, the piers of faith were brittle (# J1433) and God was hard to find. “If she sought solace in poetry, a momentary stay against mortality, he found it for a time in activism, and for both, friendship was a secular salvation which, like poetry, reached toward the ineffable.” (Wineapple, 2008). It was a momentous beginning, full of promises that were late in being fulfilled. But a beginning was made in the continuing discovery of this new genius.

There are some main themes she addressed in her collection of poems over about thirty years of elusive and mysterious writing. A quick survey of the various editions of her poems will set the stage for an examination of the subjects that obsessed her all her life.

As is well known, Emily Dickinson printed only a few of her own poems, choosing instead to publish her work by circulating copies to friends and family. After her death, her sister, Lavinia, discovered literally hundreds of poems in Emily’s room. Determined to have them published, she searched for an editor. Susan Dickinson, her brother’s wife and one of Emily’s most influential readers, immediately began

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work on editing an inclusive volume of poetry, wanting to present a “full, and varied” volume of Dickinson’s works, one that would include “letters, humorous writings, illustrations”. However, at the time the more marketable image of Emily Dickinson was that of the nineteenth century “poetess,” the “eccentric, reclusive, asexual woman in white.” This was not the image Susan seemed concerned to produce.

However, Lavinia, feeling that Susan was moving too slowly, turned the manuscripts over to the perspicacious Mabel Loomis Todd, with whom, Austin Dickinson, as we have seen, had had a long serious affair. Higginson, whose astonished reception to Dickinson we have just read about, and one of Emily’s main correspondents, was assigned work as editor. Todd and Higginson published the first volume of Dickinson’s poems, *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, in 1890, to the disappointment of Susan. They had divided the poems into popular themes, such as “Love,” “Nature,” “Life,” “Time & Eternity”—prim categories that helped to establish the myth of Dickinson as “a recluse by temperament and habit,” according to Higginson’s words in the introduction to the 1890 collection of poems. Meanwhile, Susan published manuscripts of her own in journals and continued to compile her manuscripts for a complete volume of her own.

Poems was a success, and the co-editors began work on a second volume (1891). Mabel Loomis Todd produced a third volume without

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the assistance of Higginson in 1896. She also published an edition of letters in 1894. A break between Lavinia and Todd, however, put an end to the collaboration, and Lavinia continued to print on her own, in periodicals. Lavinia died in 1899, and the manuscripts were passed on to her niece, Martha Dickinson. Martha Dickinson Bianchi published Susan's collection of her own manuscripts in 1914 in *The Single Hound* and in a 1915 Atlantic Monthly article. She rearranged Todd's *Letters* and added biographical accounts in her 1924 *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Also in 1924 she combined the poems found in the three Todd-Higginson volumes with her own work and published *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

But this appellation proved too hasty: she subsequently found more manuscript material and released two further instalments, *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1929) and *Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1935). *Face to Face*, an expanded biography combined with poetry and letters, was published in 1932. Bianchi and her co-editor, Alfred Leete Hampson, have been disparaged for what other editors call sloppy work, but Ralph Franklin, who after Thomas H. Johnson, put together one of the most comprehensive anthologies of her poems, admits it is "deserving of serious study". Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart also treat her as an editor with a serious mission, giving her credit where other editors have not.

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Meanwhile, Mabel Loomis Todd and her daughter also brought out further volumes, publishing an expanded volume of *Letters*. After Bianchi's death, Millicent Todd Bingham published *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson* (1945) and *Bolts of Melody* (1945), which contained hundreds of new poems.

As early an editor as Bianchi felt that part of her responsibility was to correct the misinformation that had already spread about the "weird recluse" that people saw Dickinson as. Bianchi also notes that many of Dickinson's early fans insisted on "some actual recreation of her as a woman in her own setting -- no mere collection of reputed eccentricities or collated husks of fact from the outside... The demand for the personal Emily became difficult to ignore". Indeed, the "demand for the personal Emily" continues today. What is more, the way Dickinson the woman has been seen has profoundly influenced the way she has been seen as a poet; her poetry has conformed to her editors' ideas of her biography. This practice has continued with her modern editors, who seem just as interested as their predecessors in uncovering the "real" Emily Dickinson.

With the deaths of Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham, both family lines ended. Bianchi sold her manuscripts to Harvard University, and Bingham gave hers to Amherst College. At this time, Thomas H. Johnson prepared the new edition from both sets

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of manuscripts, publishing *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1955. From this he published *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1960), choosing the principal representations of the manuscript drafts, and selections from *Complete Poems*. He also brought out the *Final Harvest* (1962). Working with Theodora Ward, Johnson further produced *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* in 1958, in which he published all of the known letters and prose fragments. Johnson's work was, and continues to be, of major scholarly importance.

This thesis relies heavily on Johnson's *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1960) which, by its compilation of additional poems, their arrangement, and their inclusion of the numerous authorial variants for the poems is far superior to all the earlier compilations. As Johnson wrote in his introduction, his purpose was "to establish an accurate text of the poems and to give them as far as possible a chronology". Once a chronology – based on Mrs. Theodora Ward's analysis of Emily Dickinson's changing handwriting - was established, the manuscripts were grouped together and the poems assigned numbers according to their place in the chronology. Many of Emily Dickinson's poems are to be found in more than one manuscript stage, and a number of them exist in two or more variant fair copies. In order to maintain the chronological order of the poems, Johnson chose, wherever possible, the earliest fair copy of each poem; other versions are given in smaller type below the main text. His analysis

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of the important recurring words in the texts of the poems reveals the main recurring themes that must have obsessed the poet. For example, the personal pronoun I is featured 1682 times, that is to say in almost all of her poems. Death is featured 141 times and God and Time at 130 each. The soul is repeated 125 times. Heart, sea, night summer, nature, love, are repeated anywhere between 100 to 125 times.

Ralph Franklin, another major Dickinson editor published *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, which is a set of facsimile reproductions of the fascicles (1980), providing, for the first time, access to a select group of the manuscripts. This work also attempts to restructure the fascicles into their original order, not their chronological order, as Johnson had presented them. In 1986 Franklin produced *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, a set of “letters,” whether fictional or autobiographical, addressed to a “Master.” Much speculation as to the Master’s identity has fuelled Dickinson circles, perhaps giving undue significance to the works. In a major new three volume publication, Franklin produced *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1998, representing all the drafts and manuscripts available. Working from manuscripts, Franklin gives a “comprehensive account” of Dickinson’s oeuvre and her editors. In a further recent development, in 2013, *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson’s Envelope Poems*, written by Marta Werner, looks at all the 52 poems scribbled on the back of envelopes so as to throw some fresh light on the methodology adopted by the poet in herself attempting to classify her selected works.

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In 1995, Marta Werner published *Open Folios*, in which she explores a group of forty late drafts and fragments hitherto known as the ‘Lord Letters’. She argued that frequent editorial interventions have, with time, erased authentic details; and this can be undone only by un-editing them so as to restore the original Dickinson’s textual context. In another feminist interpretation, in 1998 Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith produced *Open Me Carefully*, which follows in the vein of Bianchi’s *The Single Hound*, a compilation of some of Dickinson’s correspondence with Susan. *Open Me Carefully* ranges from prose letters to poetry to what Hart and Smith identify as “letter poems.” The editors attempt to retain as much of Dickinson’s graphic quality as possible, keeping her original line breaks and attempting to reproduce her unusual punctuation as closely as possible in print.

In 1992 work was begun on the Dickinson Electronic Archives, a comprehensive website designed to give access to digital reproductions of Dickinson’s manuscripts. The editorial collective, consisting of Martha Nell Smith, Ellen Louise Hart, and Marta Werner, hopes to facilitate research into Dickinson as a graphocentric poet, one who was concerned with the layout of the actual page she wrote on. The site includes reproductions of Dickinson’s manuscripts, and many of Susan Dickinson’s texts as well, among other items. It is an on-going project and invites collaboration. In addition, in October 2013, at <www.edickinson.org> an open-access website was launched providing high

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resolution images of all Dickinson's surviving manuscripts, currently held in multiple libraries and archives.

A word in passing about the fascicles into which the poet herself combined and collected her works. The term fascicle, of course, was not hers: Mabel Todd introduced it in *Poems*. Dickinson used individual sheets of two leaves, not quires of leaves as in a notebook. Her short poems (under eight lines), for example, would have appeared at various places on pages, but almost all were placed at the bottom to fill in after the preceding poem.

In preparing a fascicle Emily Dickinson first copied poems onto sheets of stationery. The copying occurred before assembly or binding. Bibliographically, the fascicles may be described as folio in format, for the sheets, folded by the manufacturer to form two leaves, remained independent, not inserted inside each other. (Franklin, 1981)

There is still a mystery about the reasons why Emily Dickinson collected her poems into such bundles, for there seems to be no logic about the uniformity of theme or subject in the fascicles. But surely, the poet would have had her own reasons for doing so. RW Franklin remarked that a facsimile edition is of particular importance to Dickinson studies, especially because features like her unusual

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punctuation and capitalization, line and stanza division, and display of alternate readings are a source of continuing critical concern.

Because she saw no poem through the press, and left her manuscripts unprepared for the press, judgments must be informed by the manuscript conventions themselves. Perhaps no less important, interest has developed in the fascicles as artistic gatherings –as gatherings intra-related by theme, imagery, emotional movement. (Franklin, 1981)

Now that we have dealt with the primary sources of the works of Emily Dickinson, we need to look at what it was that she wrote about. Indeed, it is a difficult task to search for themes in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and her co-editor Alfred Leete Hampson simplistically classified her poems, as we have seen, into groups entitled Life, Nature, Love and Time & Eternity. Charles Anderson's summary of categories of themes in Dickinson's poems are: "art, nature, the self, death and its sequel." In contrast Thomas H Johnson's subject index to the variorum edition is thirteen pages long.

But, as David Porter asks, what is it that intrinsically holds these poems together? Earnest Dickinson readers require patience of mind and the ability to live with indefiniteness and indeterminacy, more so than any other major American poet. What is to be discovered in the vexing pattern for thematic pattern in Dickinson, is the sharp

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disjunction in her poetry between the interiors of poems, that is, the poetics, and the exteriors where one seeks the actual referents: which poems refer to real lovers, to the Civil War that touched every household in her most creative years, to the death of loved ones, to the lives of women, to her family, to her poetic aspirations, to her religious faith, to her own psychic breakdown.

Much more significant, by contrast, are the interiors where syntactical mysteries, untraceable references, and stunning lexical creations prompt an intellectual, emotional, and sign-tracing agility in the reader that is quite remarkable because of the extremely limited space of the poem in which all the promptings take place. (Porter, 1998)

David Porter goes on to add that the lack of a centre to her poems is perhaps the one distinguishing feature of her works. In his probing analysis into the subject, he affirms that exclusion from comprehension is the stark vacancy at the centre of her poetic works. The disabling, decohering ignorance streaming through the entire canon ultimately leads to the significance of her allegories. Nature thus was indeed a haunted house. To Porter the actual character of her composition and the ways the hymn form and the allegorical abstraction distorted her syntax and obscured her referents, reveals the phenomenon most basic of all her technique: the absence of connective webbing in her work.

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Thus Dickinson is the only major American poet without a clearly discernible project that is an inhering and evolving axis of thought. It is not surprising that this continues to set critics' teeth on edge, prompting their outspoken delineations of central theme after central theme." (Porter, 1998)

Harold Bloom in his perceptive Introduction to the poet, puts in a different way:

Her unique transport, her Sublime, is founded upon her unnamings of all our certitudes into so many blanks; it gives her, and her authentic readers, another way to see, almost into the dark." (Bloom, 2008)

Both Porter and Bloom see the problem of the vacancy at the core of her poetic works, but interpret the phenomenon differently. The former denied the presence of any central theme, while the latter argued that the negation of all that we once took for reality only helps the reader to find new certitudes in the darkness all around us. She is not a nihilist in that sense of the word, but would rather nudge the reader to find the new truths all around us. And that truth is just around the corner, just beyond the clouds obscuring the sky: it need just a push to break through that circumference to discover the ecstasy of life in the beyond. Suffice it to be said that for those who seek themes in her body of works, Dickinson is quite literally unclassifiable.

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Nevertheless, there are some basic themes that keep recurring in the massive volume of poetry she has left behind. They appear in various forms and moods, with growing complexity as she moves on to her great productive years. They may have appeared as simple and straightforward in the initial period as she was finding her feet. Later, they become dense in meaning and cryptic, with layers of connotations and levels of significance, until it would appear that they completely defy a literal translation or an everyday understanding that would be acceptable to both ordinary reader or discerning critic.

Making generalisations on the truths and concepts of the poesy of Emily Dickinson is impossible. Some have tried and what emerges attempts to generalise in a situation where generalisations will deviate us from the path of truth. Dickinson herself has described the role of a poet:

*“This was a Poet--It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings—
And Attar so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the Door--”*(#J 448)

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Can we with certainty say if Dickinson consciously developed a body of truth in the course of her development as an exquisite craftswoman of words? Surely, she had time enough for that exploration into herself, locked into the stillness of her first floor room at the Hampstead home for almost three decades. Did she conceive for herself a singular role as poet, to interpret life and nature and time and death and immortality and eternity? Did she, like Milton, wish to justify the ways of God to man? Or did she find the notion of a God with “an amputated hand” (#J1551) too limiting for the grand vision that suffused her life and her vision. Or again, did she use her isolation and her reclusive temperament, as well as her superior powers of observation along with her polished use of words and phrases of startling originality, to leap over the restrictions placed on her by her society and her home? Was her life story one of a continuing exploration to pierce through the bounds of earthly existence and society’s veneer to a truth that she could see around her but was just able to grasp for a few ecstatic moments in her poems. Did she use syntax and diction and ellipses to demonstrate the paucity of the written word to grasp eternal truths? Or did she use them to break through form and formality to suggest the power of a grand truth that waits for all of us, or at least for those who are willing to reach out?

Deciphering what Dickinson thought of as her role is impossible; but here are some premises. In an exceptionally perceptive short

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essay, Phillip Irving Mitchell writes: Art is not obligated to solve the contradictory. Truth is best revealed circumspect or slant. The audience must gradually adjust to its claims on the psyche. Truth and Beauty are conflated, even essentially one. Both are also subjective to a large extent. The Soul, also known as the self is essentially at the centre of reality. Reality and the “eye” of the creativity process do not necessarily offer the same insights. Abstractions are intensely felt; they are personified because the ideal must be experienced in the concrete. Language and poetry resonate out beyond their initial creator, even as they also continue to haunt their maker. They are almost sacramental, even eternal, outlasting those who use them. Music is the language of eternity, yet it can divide us from God in its this-worldliness. It is undeniable, unexplainable, and cannot finally be captured. It is something all true poetry should aspire to. (Mitchell, 2005)

And here too, despite the arguments of Porter and Bloom, are some of the major themes she wrote about: they give us a sense of her willingness to explore the contradictory, speak circumspectly, and intensely feel the abstract. “God” is often a human ideal, our attempt to develop some terms to explain to ourselves infinity or even existence. Yet, at other times, “God” is more theistic -- a personal being, however hidden, who we will face after death. God is sometimes a jealous, glorious being who wants our love solely; other times, he is more a tyrant and a demagogue. (Mitchell, 2005)

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Dickinson is a self-confessed “pagan,” and her faith is either weak or non-existent, yet then suddenly it haunts her again, and she desires union with the divine. She is expressly concerned with enjoying the immediate, human-sized pleasures of the earth. She is not sure if heaven is just a concept, a way for us to deal with the death we will all face, or if it is a reality in the afterlife. Her “great flood” theme on death mystified her as well as the lovers of her poems: heaven is the comfort of the poor, but it is often a cold comfort. She feels she doesn’t belong there, especially if the saints of the church will be present. She is especially suspicious of religious tradition. Heaven needs Hell to define it, yet for her both may only be earthly realms. She prefers time, the realm of the now. It is concrete and real rather than speculative. It has more permanent value. Immortality is more fleeting, yet also more binding. Time can be well-loved yet capture us. Immortality is often intimated yet often doubted. She cannot escape the possibility that it exists in its own right, so it must be accounted for.

Yet death, while it is any number of symbols in Dickinson’s poetry, is almost always positive: a doorway, a crowning, a gentleman, a step to something better. All of this, whatever it is, is the locus of existence. The self is imperial, a kingdom of one where one can enjoy one’s own best company. Yet the mind can also be a prison, which one cannot escape except via death. Because the self can question itself, even interrogate itself, the soul is a kind of double mirror. It loops

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back upon itself in mystery. At times, the soul wishes to be freed of the body, yet at other times the soul and the body are like violin and music, essential to each other. Later in life, she even muses that the spirit may be a pleasant, if doubtful hypothesis. In her more optimistic moments, the soul is joined with existence and/or God. The soul has infinite, expanding possibilities, yet it is condemned to a single identity, to limited consciousness. -- a “finite infinity.”

In this sense then, Dickinson stands at the crossroads between Christianity, Romanticism and the new secular realism. Her religious background in Amherst has both traditional Calvinist, as well as Unitarian impulses. She has adapted much of Romanticism’s thinking about the self and creativity, yet she also deeply doubts these formulations. She has begun to listen to the voice of Darwinian evolution and Modern science in general. This is what Tate calls the “perfect literary situation”. Because she stands between several eras, she may bring the vocabulary of one to bear on the still undefined ideas of another. She writes in a state of tension between epochs. (Mitchell, 2005)

In passing we may mention the considerable body of work seldom examined in detail encompassing her letters. So overwhelming are her poems that the letters, by comparison, may stand as poor cousins. The fact, however, is that her letters too reveal a mind powerful, sharp,

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perceptive and human: it would be entirely possible to imagine those to whom she wrote, as eagerly awaiting her epistles from time to time. Her unique turn of phrase, her genuine concern, her graceful touch in everyday matters: all these come out in such beauty and grace.

As we have already seen, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, published by the Roberts Brothers in 1894 was the first compilation. In her introduction to *The Letters*, Todd wrote that Emily Dickinson's verses do not always completely represent herself. They rarely show the dainty humour, the frolicsome gayety, which continually bubbled over in her daily life. The letters exhibit her elf-like intimacy with nature as she sees and understands the great mother's processes. She speaks of flowers and pines and autumnal colours with bird songs and crickets and winter window. In fact, Nature became the unique charm and consolation of her life, and as such she has written of it. There are too some fragments of writing, some phrases, half completed sentences, which mystify the reader as there are no concrete context to place them against.

With some regret, we must leave her letters behind, for the poetry she wrote beckons more urgently. Before we delve deeper into the main themes of her work, it may be kept in mind, that the continually evolving Dickinson's poetry show certain stages which, if understood, will help us realise the process and the growth of the

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philosophy that she came to espouse. William Sherwood said that once one has examined closely the content of her poems of the early part of the 1860s, it is not difficult to find a coherent pattern and development of theme and attitude. 1862 especially was a year in which a system of belief was raised and shattered, a year in which the poet made, and then was forced to relinquish, what was perhaps the most intense and significant emotional commitment of her lifetime, a year in which she went through successive states of triumph, defiance, collapse, despair, and resignation. The influence of Charles Wadsworth on her mental development, the possibility of some kind of life with him and the dashing of hope when it did not work out, certainly took its toll on her health, her mental peace and the assessment of the world around her.

Before Wadsworth's first visit Emily Dickinson's poetry and correspondence had revealed her increasing disaffection with the subject of the earthly kingdom. In Wadsworth's transfer to California, the jealousy –and the omnipotence –of the powers that be seemed clearly visible. These powers had decreed that to avoid any hint of impropriety, it would be better that Wadsworth was sent away from Amherst where 'the woman in white' was proving to be an embarrassment to the gods of decorum and decency. Earlier than this Emily Dickinson had come to assume that the price of immortality was the suspension of perception and the endurance of whatever humiliation and loneliness God might contrive to test His candidate;

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during the course of 1862 she came to feel that the self-styled God of Love proved his devotion through his jealousy and would brook no rival. In addition, it was in this year that she learned – and in the way in which things are best taught, by their enforced absence – how deeply she valued life, both moral and immortal, and, more precisely, of what “life” actually consisted. It was a year that reinforced, in the harshest way possible, much she had already apprehended of the nature of God and the limitations of man, and suggested how these limitations might be surmounted if not overcome.

“In 1862 she experienced God’s jealousy, His Power and His punishment for those who defied Him. In the same year she was to discover His mercy and His Grace.” (Sherwood, 1968)

Sherwood continues on the subject of the four periods of her life’s works extending over twenty-eight years. These four periods could be distinguished as follows and it is worth the while to quote from Sherwood in some detail:

..a period of questioning in which she tried and failed to find conclusive evidence of that immortal estate she was told would compensate for all that God and the mores of the nineteenth century Amherst made human souls and unmarried daughters of good family put up with here below; a period where, in resentment and defiance fierce to the point of heresy, she chose

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and indeed created (doing both quite without His permission) her own god, the Reverent Charles Wadsworth, who was promptly packed off to San Francisco by vigilant and higher powers; a period of despair, in every sense of this word she herself chose so carefully; and finally, a period in which all her wrongs were righted, in which the adversity that had seemed to be malignant was revealed to be instructive, and revealed in the way her heritage, her schoolmistresses and her father had told her she could hope for, if not expect, through God's own grace. (Sherwood, 1968)

The discovery of this pattern in her work was unexpected, but it made sense, more sense at least than the wild vacillations found when reading her poetry at random or even in Johnson's order within any given year. And if her poems, her letters, and Johnson's dating were to be trusted, it turned out that her "despair", her conversion, and her decision to dedicate herself to becoming a major poet was in the year 1862. This was the year in which the sheer number of poems written was significant. Commentators have been forced to assume the relevance of the year since it can be reliably maintained that the pattern suggested by Sherwood held.

This is the backdrop in which we shall attempt to probe into the major subjects that fascinated her and held her attention to the very

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end. In the following pages an attempt is being made to define the main compelling qualities of the poet's personality that contributed to her being a poet unsurpassed. These are defining characteristics, elemental features that lead to the main themes in her poems, and indeed lead to her obsession with circumference. It would be a far superior method to identify and pin them down if we have the coordinates that fix her in the firmament of poetic world. We start with the religious background that at once ties her down as well as liberates her.

In our search for thematic content in the poems of Emily Dickinson, the first and foremost influence on her which directed her creative thought to any kind of philosophy could only have been the religious background that Amherst so vividly represented. We now know for a fact that Emily did not accept the Christian religion as a vocation, as demanded by the Calvinist Church. In fact, till the very end, while remaining a Christian, she never fulfilled the rituals that were necessary to name her as a Christian within the folds of the Calvinist Church. She was querulous all her life and eschewed formal homage to the church. She had reflected on the challenges faced by the "Missionary to the Mole" who "must prove there is a sky" (#J1228) in order to guide earth bound thoughts to heaven. One can only guess what she may have thought of the prospect of facing evangelists venturing to this paradise to awaken fears of Hell? (Eberwein, 2005)

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While a Calvinist by name, she espoused no such belief in her life. The Calvinist is one who, while regarding God as all-powerful, omniscient and filled with the wrath of Adam's sin, regards man as depraved by nature, helpless and hopeless, unless elected to the small remnant of humanity saved by Christ's atonement. Emily built on that limited idea and performed her art of distillation to extract from that tradition a spirituality that shatters sectarian boundaries which link her with many Christian and non-Christian ways of sustaining the soul. In fact, what connects Dickinson to spiritualities, whether those of Christian missionaries or those of wider allusion, is her loving attentiveness to the sacredness of everything about her. Nature, particularly, bespoke a world alive with spirit. The sunset's "far theatricals of Day" (#J 597) enabled her to discern God, frost etchings on January windows struck her as "Saints' flowers" (Letter to Mrs Bowles, Christmas, 1859), music initiated "Rapture's germination." (#J 1480). Her characteristic response was gratitude, another touchstone for spirituality, but also a Christian word etymologically related to "grace." (Eberwein, 2005)

Another great word "omnipresence", when used by her relates closely to the awareness that immortality pierces boundaries of death and transforms the ordinary into the miraculous. Dickinson sensed the sacred everywhere: note her words to Mrs Holland on being gifted a rare flower: "Where did you pick arbutus? In Broadway, I suppose. They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of him

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as somewhat of a recluse.” (Emily Dickinson’s letter to Mrs Holland 1878). There is too a harshness, a scepticism that sits oddly on her, but it is of the conviction that she is informed with, strangely the conviction of doubt.

Thus, she was the lonely heir of the Puritans’ call to conversion: in the wilderness of the mind, she spun endless circles around infinity transfixed by the abyss at the center (Williams, David, 1983). Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Christian preacher and theologian, widely acknowledged to be America’s most important and original philosophical theologian, once preached: “This is to die sensibly; to die and know it... We read in Scripture of the blackness of darkness; this is it, this is the very thing.” Not fire, not torture, not eternal nothingness, but consciousness of endless consciousness alone was the terror of the pit. To be alone, without body, without perception, forever and forever, fully awake, facing “in lonely place/ That awful stranger Consciousness-”(# J 1323) this was the threat of immortality. Looking at death, Emily Dickinson knew, is dying.

It has been argued that Emily Dickinson suffered a “psychotic” breakdown and that her poems, as John Cody perceptively put it, “portray faithfully the terror of a mind collapsing under pressures that exceed its endurance.”(Cody, 1971) This is quite so. It is hard to read her letters and poems and deny that she did suffer a traumatic emotional

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experience of some kind or that her behavior was, at best, eccentric. But whatever the exact nature of this experience, whatever the causes, however analyzed in whatever discipline, Emily Dickinson would have understood it within the context provided by her intensely anachronistic Calvinist culture. It is her poetry that is important to us, and if her poetry is her response to her experience, neither Freud, nor Jung, nor Sappho can provide the primary approach for our understanding of what she wrote. To understand Emily Dickinson, it is necessary to be familiar with the spiritual Calvinist tradition of belief in a psychological crisis of conversion from the Egypt of worldly bondage across the wilderness to the promised land.

David R. Williams wrote authoritatively about a consistent tradition that was extant from the days of the first settling of New England, of imagery in which the crossing of the Children of Israel into the wilderness was compared typologically to the crucifixion of Christ. The Calvinists used this tradition to symbolize their insistence that all human beings cross into the ever-present wilderness of depraved consciousness and that they experience what can only be called madness.

Despite other well-documented doctrinal and cultural changes, the heirs of the original Puritans continued to believe, for many generations, that this conversion experience had to occur

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before there could be any hope of achieving salvation in the typologically prefigured land of Canaan. (Williams, 1983)

Emily Dickinson was the first New England writer in whom this wilderness tradition, though dominant, remained hidden. It is not just that she hid in her home and never published; these were but outward manifestations of her spiritual seclusion. It was her Calvinist spirituality that she kept hidden. Even critics for whom her private life is an open book, have not appreciated the extent to which Emily Dickinson's poetry was a personal response to what she believed to be a conversion crisis. She was no dogmatist; the Calvinist theology is never made explicit. Nevertheless, the psychological crisis of conversion, still at the heart of nineteenth-century Amherst's Calvinist piety, is the key to Dickinson's poetry. Its themes are there: consistently, forcefully, elegantly and everywhere.

Much of this sort of interpretation results both from a misunderstanding of what it meant to be a Calvinist in New England as well as from an inability to distinguish between the evangelical orthodoxy of the 1850s and the spiritual Calvinism preached by men like Edwards, Stoddard, and Hooker. Emily Dickinson was in rebellion, not against her ancestral religion, not against Calvinism, but against the sterile and superficial faith of her more immediate culture.

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“If she revolted against the church, it was in the name, not of Emerson, but of Christ. And her doing so put her in the mainstream of the true Calvinist wilderness tradition.” (Williams, 1983)

Even as early as in 1862, the doubts had arisen: “I know that he exists. / Somewhere – in silence- / He has hid his rare life /From our gross eyes” (#J 338). But we see a different picture when late in life (1882), Dickinson wrote of the falling away of blind faith and in its place the abridgement of the grace of God, as the Calvinists may have regarded Him:

*“Those --dying then
Knew where they went –
They went to God’s Right Hand –
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found”* (#J 1551).

David Williams argues that in saying that Dickinson’s poetry was an ‘art of belief’, he intends the phrase in several ways. Her poetry is in large measure about belief – about the objects of belief and its comforts, as well as belief’s great uncertainties. With daring tenacity, she explored the full range of human experience, in her reflections upon such subjects as God, the Bible, suffering, and immortality. “On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say Beings”, she

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wrote a few years before she died, “we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble.” (Draft of letter to Judge Phillip Otis Lord 1882).

To keep the “Believing nimble”, one needed skill, and in this sense too, Dickinson realised that belief is an art that demands trial and practice. In fact, ‘Nimble believing’ infers believing for intense moments in a spiritual life without permanently subscribing to any received system: this was an obsessive subject, a key experience and a stimulus to expression for Dickinson. While discussing this subject, Roger Lundin stated that as Dickinson was a product of the Romantic Age and a prophet of modernity, she comprehended more fully than most people in her day how much the human mind contributes to the process of belief.

Art, after all, is about the making of things; and in matters of belief, the history of the modern world is the story of our increasing awareness of the extent to which we participate in the making of truth as well as the finding of it. However, hard it was to fashion and sustain, belief was essential to Dickinson.
(Lundin, 2004)

But it is clear that she had faith in her own divinity, so perhaps she was yet more certain of God than her peers. She did not claim to fully understand Him, or even to have perennial faith in all His Ways

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- her poetry bears a continuing strain of doubt - but she certainly did not fear Him. The inner freedom this afforded her - rare for a woman of her time - brought her to the point of being almost cheeky in her familiarity and certainty. This confidence fed her poetry sumptuously, and gave it the well-known child-like quality. To her, truth was in nature. In that beauty she could see and feel God directly:

*“Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —
I keep it, staying at Home —
With a Bobolink for a Chorister —
And an Orchard, for a Dome —
Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice —
I just wear my Wings —
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton — sings.
God preaches, a noted Clergyman —
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last —
I’m going, all along.” (#J 324).*

There is a certain childlike sauciness, a naughty tongue in the cheek manner and an innocence that hides the wisdom that is secreted away in her mental makeup.

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It was Mabel Loomis Todd - she understood Dickinson better than most of her contemporaries - who wrote in her introduction to the *Letters of Emily Dickinson* that reverence for accepted ways and forms, merely as such, seems entirely to have been left out of Emily's constitution.

To her, God was not a far-away and dreary power to be daily addressed, - the great 'Eclipse' of which she wrote, - but He was near and familiar and pervasive. Her garden was full of His brightness and glory; the birds sang and the sky glowed because of Him. To shut herself out of the sunshine in a church, dark chilly, restricted, was rather to shut herself away from Him. (Todd, 1945).

From our vantage point more than a century later, Emily Dickinson stands as one of the major religious thinkers of her age. She knew the Christian tradition, and especially its scriptures and hymns, in depth; on several occasions, in adolescence and young adulthood, she agonisingly approached the threshold of conversion but never passed over it; and throughout her adult life, in her poems and letters, she brilliantly meditated upon the great questions of God, suffering, the problem of evil, death, and her "Flood subject," immortality. Though she never joined the church – and quit attending it at all around the age of thirty - she wrestled with God all her life. Only months before she

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died, she called herself “Pugilist and Poet.” Like Jacob, who told the angel, “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” Dickinson would not let go of God.

For Dickinson the struggle with God had a great deal to do with the considerable challenges that arose to Christian belief in her lifetime. When she was born, the argument for design was securely in place on a six-thousand-year-old earth. At about the time that she began to write poetry regularly, Darwin published *The Origin of Species* and the earth had grown suddenly older. Like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Dickinson was one of the first to trace the trajectory of God’s decline. She could see clearly about the ebbing of belief, about God’s amputated hand and that God cannot be found- (#J1551). Unlike Nietzsche, she was not gleeful about the possible loss of God, but profoundly sad about it, because “The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behaviour small-.” (#J 1551)

At the same time that she wrestled with God the Father, questioning not His existence as much as His presence and justice, Dickinson was also drawn irresistibly to Jesus the Son. It was the humanity of this One who was “acquainted with Grief” that drew her to him. “I like a look of Agony / Because I know it’s true-”, she observed in a poem, and in the suffering of Jesus she detected a truth that she could believe without a doubt. To the end of her life, Dickinson rarely

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wavered in her expressions of affection for this “Tender Pioneer.” (Lundin, 2004)

Nevertheless, at the heart of Dickinson’s spirituality, is mindfulness of omnipresence, immortality, and divinity as gifts to be enjoyed, rather than earned. She represents an amplitude congruent with her Calvinist heritage and intimately related to grace and glory, yet not restricted to any one system of spiritual practice.

We have thus seen that Dickinson while at odds with the Calvinist dogma, did at the same time deeply believe in the vision of the beauty of nature reflecting an omnipresence that suffuses the world around her. Her belief was thus far superior to the extant Amherst theology while at the same time embracing Emersonian principles of nature as the bountiful person of God and man as a particle of God.

As an extension of this thought we now look at Dickinson’s landscape of the spirit. One of the more complete explorations of the craft and spirit of Emily Dickinson was undertaken by Suzanne Juhasz. Her book *The Undiscovered Continent*, (in fact, the title repeats Dickinson’s description of the mind in # J 832) takes the reader through the landscape of the spirit and attempts to ascertain the reasons why the poet was able to break free from the expectations and norms that a patriarchal society creates for women. The major part of this chapter leans on the arguments propounded by Juhasz on the subject of the

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important themes that obsessed Dickinson, and while much care has been taken to acknowledge her contribution to the propositions given below, it is possible that not every one of them may have been credited to her.

Juhasz argues that Dickinson used all the arsenal at her command to establish her unique and exclusive position amongst the American pantheon of poets. She used strategy (to keep to her house and her room and to live in the mind to achieve certain goals and thus gaining strength from her estrangement from the tradition); she used language, (which turns out to be her greatest power and best weapon); she uses her gender (by using the child persona, identifying herself as a boy, refusing to dally in courtship games, and finally by withdrawing herself so that she does not have to enter the arena of adult womanhood); she used her powerful personality (by demanding too much of people through her intensity, in all her relationships with men and women) (Juhasz, 1983).

That is why we must spend some time in our search for thematic content in exploring the internal landscape of her spirit. The enclosed space of the mind is associated with power, while at the same time, demonstrating how isolation is confinement too. #J670 compares the chambers of the mind to the haunted castle of gothic fiction, a stereotypical setting for horror. Her argument is that the supernatural

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events in gothic castles are far safer than the terrifying moments in the mind. The horror of the mind when confronted with fears that it cannot comprehend has been expressed in this poem. But she reconciles the horror with logic as she analyses the power of the brain to overcome the frailties of the human spirit.

*“One need not be a Chamber-to be Haunted-
One need not be a House-
The brain has corridors –surpassing
Material Place.”*

Dickinson argues that the Brain is wider than the sky and deeper than the sea for it can contain both sky and sea within itself by conception and by imagination. And then in a sharp syllogism compares the capacity of the brain to the idea of God:

*“The Brain is just the weight of God –
For -- Heft them -- Pound for Pound –
And they will differ -- if they do –
As Syllable from Sound--”.*

It is a clever and intellectual poem, and one that may have got no kind reception in Amherst, had it been published then. The poem attests to the mind’s supremacy over everything in the external world

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and to its easy equivalence with God. The actuality of the mind or the brain, is revealed through a vocabulary of dimension and measurement, of capacity and colour. But then the brain is wider than the sky and deeper than the sea, because the brain is compared to God Himself. That enclosed and private space which provides protection and safety, yet demands also the struggle of self-consciousness. If the self's encounter with the self is one major kind of trauma, another is this abrupt and painful change that must occur if there is to be significant experience with the insight that it produces. Insight is change in the very boundaries which circumscribe and define the mind's space. Journeying towards the farthest reaches of consciousness brings one to the limits of knowing, where one may become most fully alive. (Juhasz, 1983)

The third consideration we may keep in mind is Dickinson use of a poetic language and a formal structure that may be viewed as responses to epistemological problems set by the subject matter. Vocabulary, figures of speech, structures of thought and stanza, modes of presentation – all contribute to the language that Dickinson fashions in order to talk about life in the mind. Her poetic vocabulary contains two special categories of words: dimensions –words of space and time –and conceptual abstractions, the words for ideas. While spatial metaphors are necessary to describe the mind itself when it is conceived of as a place, equally acts occurring within the mind are rendered with

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a vocabulary that ascribes to them spatial and temporal dimensions. Suhasz says that Dickinson's poems reveal a structure based upon the encounter, dramatic and reciprocal, between the dimensional and the conceptual vocabularies. In smaller and larger units - of phrase, line, sentence, stanza – analogy compares and conjoins abstract and concrete, idea and thing, the world of the mind and the world of nature.

Dickinson after all thinks of mental acts as real and has faced the lack of an adequate language for expressing this attitude...She doesn't think of the brain as muscle but as a place; she doesn't think of emotion as a symptom, but as an act. (Juhasz, 1983)

Such analogical metaphors that extend throughout the poem in parallel units are presented as aphorisms. They may be describing some personal experience, yet she persistently categorizes it as everyone's: we can examine some examples:

“Presentiment – is that long shadow-on the lawn” (#J764); “Experience is the angled road” (#J910); “A still –volcano life-“(#J601); “The Suburbs of a Secret” (#J1245); “Delight's despair at setting (#J1299); “My faith is larger than the hills” (#J766): thus poems begin. In each of them, an abstraction is connected by the process of metaphor to a concrete image. To test an example:

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*“Presentiment – is that long shadow-on the lawn
Indicative that Suns go down-
The Notice to the startled Grass
That Darkness –is about to pass-” (#J764);*

Presentiment, the feeling that something is about to happen, is equated with the shadow on the lawn, coming as it does before the sunset. But the second line makes it generic, that suns in general set. On the other hand, the third and fourth lines also inform that this darkness shall also pass, when the sun rises. Thus four lines, includes the full cycle of nature: the onset of dark when it is still light, the onset of light when the dark is still there. The message has become prescriptive, aphoristic: a teaching text. Metaphors as in these first lines of the poems, renders abstract concrete, concrete abstract; not annihilating differences, but underlining relationships. (Juhasz, 1983)

Aphorisms and abstractions are the playing grounds for Emily Dickinson. She uses metaphors to explain larger truths; similes to express verities in a startling manner. Synecdoche as a trope or a figure of speech is also employed whereby a part is used to depict the whole. Karl Keller put it this way: “In her aphoristic statements, she replaces I with universals for the sake of balance – even though her personality never entirely disappears amid all the abstracting of possible truths.” (Keller, 1981)

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In other words, the employment of language and all its appurtenances, including diction and metaphor, symbol and simile, trope and dots and dashes, in other words the stretching of language and its tools to its widest possible usage, is a typically Dickinsonian strategy to escape the formalised bounds of a language otherwise limited in expression. Here too, she escapes the boundaries that formalised language imposes on the writer, by devising methodology that allows her the freedom to express herself in ways unknown earlier.

Yet another special construct we have to pay attention to if we are to comprehend her craft is her relationship with pain. Pain is Emily Dickinson's special field, and she strives to claim pain as her own subject. Dickinson defines pain by circling it, surrounding it and thereby isolating it. "To reveal the presence of pain, she writes of before its arrival and after its departure... when she is finished...pain like a wild beast, has been encircled, imprisoned, and possessed in a net of words" (Juhasz). She does not eschew the autographical because she distrusts the personal, but because she wishes to generalise and hence escape or validate private experience. Her poems about pain are as personal as they are universal. In fact, her poems lack all references to persons and incidents. And why is that so? Perhaps the answer is related to a burning issue in Dickinson's life, the matter of control and power. Even as she chooses the life of the mind to obtain and maintain control over her life, so she can control pain through verbal measures much more successfully than through personal interaction.

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Again Suhasz defines the issue by stating that if she hid herself from her friends to understand friendship, to create in her imagination the divine street the lover travels, so in her search for the essence of everything that came within her consciousness, she hid herself to write her poems – and (for whatever reason) hid her poems except for a few. In a world of process and evanescence, to which the bulk of her poems testify, the only way left to her was to construct permanences of the mind. (Juhasz, 1983)

Seeking out pain was her method to obtain control over sorrow and the fleeting nature of the world. “I lived on Dread” or “The Stimulus there is /In Danger” (#J770) seems to demonstrate her close affinity to, and longing for, the full experience of pain so as to gain control over it. Only the close connection of life with danger can reveal the opportunities hidden therein. Danger is the most significant experience, for it is life enriching, provoking energy and excitement. Again, Dickinson has learnt the craft by which pain, which can debilitate and destroy, is conquered by breaking through its bondage and wresting control over it. She employs the disciplines of her mind and the sharpness of her vision to achieve this end. This gem (J#974) exhibits the acuity of her understanding:

*“The Soul’s distinct connection
With immortality*

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*Is best disclosed by Danger
Or quick Calamity –
As Lightning on a landscape
Exhibits Sheets of Place-
Not yet suspected-but for Flash
And Click – and Suddenness.”*

Despair is the most extreme of pain. Her poems try to confront despair directly while seeking out perspectives and using analogies: such poems on despair are the most exploratory in form. So is suffering. But it is death of all the human conditions that fascinates her the most. This too, the most extreme form of pain, she will approach obliquely. In the poem quoted below, she writes of despair in death-like phrases, for she is always exploratory when she attempts to define. And in this way she will approach what is to her the final mystery, the great flood. Her contemplation of the stasis in life that can bring despair, almost akin to death, or even miming death, is a fine example. She begins with phrases that recall death but is not death:

*“It was not Death, for I stood up, /And all the Dead, lie down
--/It was not Night, for all the Bells /Put out their Tongues, for
Noon.” (#J510)*

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The mind in despair is very akin to the awe noted in the presence of death.

*“When everything that ticked -- has stopped –
And space stares all around.”*

As when you are far out at sea without even the sight of a spar or report of land on the horizon.

Numbness associated with death is another recurring theme and the most well-read and puzzled over by her fans is #J341.

*“After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--”
This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First -- Chill -- then Stupor -- then the letting go--”*

The analogical progression from heart to feet, and the nerves like tombs and the quartz stone and the chill and the stupor: all become fascinating topics for the poet to dissect and examine under the scrutiny of her microscope.

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She hallowed pain in order to achieve knowledge; she wrote about it in order to achieve power. The experience of pain that her poems document, shows it to be exciting, invigorating, demanding, dangerous, profound, and fruitful. Pain as Dickinson structures it for herself, by removing its autographical causes and connections to the social world, becomes entirely personal, completely private. This is pain for a world of one... But it is precisely because Dickinson knew how to confine her experience in significant ways that she could allow it to expand in other ways in which she could be in control, so that “peril might be possessed.” (Juhasz, 1983)

Delight is more difficult than pain for Dickinson to possess. Not only is it more transitory, but it produces a paralysing contentment that creates loss of self, that self which she is always so keen to develop and maintain. Yet delight is understandably attractive to Dickinson: it is an intense and ultimate emotional experience - its place is opposite to pain on the axis of extreme emotion. Her strategy to encountering delight, is not by circling, trapping and taming it with words (as she does with pain) but by relocating it in space and time, by comparing and contrasting it to pain.

There are three strategies for experiencing pain and delight; before, during and after. Firstly, she is adept at viewing it from the perspective of before (defining it as a potential situation): these poems

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of definition are abstract in tone and form an elaborate and extremely rational form of defence.

To illustrate the first kind we look at #J252:

*“I can wade Grief –
Whole Pools of it –
I’m used to that –
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet –
And I tip -- drunken –
Let no Pebble -- smile –
‘Twas the New Liquor –
That was all!”*

Giants will gladly carry the Himmaleh, but give them the balm of joy or delight and they will wilt like men. Liquids and solids regulate this poem’s image patterns. Stanza one contrasts the water of grief with the wine of joy. There is however, no abstinence here: grief comes in quantities, pools. Whereas a little joy goes a long way and is ultimately much more devastating in its effects. It overpowers the speaker, breaks up her feet; she tips drunken.

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The same thoughtful rationale can be seen in the following, #J 1199; a little gem of ratiocination.

“Are Friends Delight or Pain?

Could Bounty but remain

Riches were good –

But if they only stay

Ampler to fly away

Riches are sad.”

Secondly, Dickinson also regards delight as in media res (as it is happening): they celebrate delight with hyperbolic rhetoric unleashing the power of the imagination and fantasy, creating a timeless state of pleasure. And finally there are poems with the perspective of afterwards (having had the experience): these poems are close to renunciation, putting the memory of the delight at the service of sacrifice. Such poems seek to hold on to the emotion, keep it going through the intensity of a celebratory rhetoric.

#J 528, starting “Mine -- by the Right of the White Election!” is an excellent example. The joy that she experiences is entirely involved with possession, as the emphatic repetition of “mine” attests. The first stanza refers to symbols used when a devotee elects to be taken into the religious surrender, as the Amherst Calvinist church would have

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practiced. But it is clear that she is not referring to Christian ritual, but demonstrating that she has been bestowed with an elevated source of power. She is elect, she has royal permission: within a very prison she has been granted a sign. We remember earlier poems where delight is characterised by its ephemerality; here it is different: this special power is for all eternity, and though the ages may try to steal the possession, the speaker is confident of her power to safeguard it.

Let us look at another example where the sexual tone is used clearly apparent (#J 211):

*“Come slowly -- Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful -- sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee--”*

Or the following, (#J 638) where the barrage of light images are violent and brilliant:

*“To my small Hearth His fire came –
And all my House aglow
Did fan and rock, with sudden light –
‘Twas Sunrise -- ‘twas the Sky--”*

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And yet again an astonishing example: it would have been difficult to regard the person of Emily Dickinson as one who explored the delights of sexual pleasure, but she tries to show the inevitable outcome of that sexuality, which is loss of self. Could the white dressed Amherst girl have written the following poem (#J 249), explicit in its meaning and import?

*“Wild Nights -- Wild Nights!
Were I with thee,
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!
Futile -- the Winds --
To a Heart in port --
Done with the Compass --
Done with the Chart!
Rowing in Eden --
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor -- Tonight --
In Thee!”*

And finally in that same mould, the ecstasy that is apparent in every word of the #J 214 which begins:

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*“I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!”*

If the extravaganza of her emotion is essential to the situation, so is its lasting power!

And thirdly, when she defines the nature of delight experienced, she takes trouble to build structures of defence against delight’s allure. Her careful measurement, her weighing of proportion in fine ratios of location, degree, effect and significance; all these are evident in such poems. But when she writes poems while she is experiencing delight, they are urgent in tone and dramatic in structure.

These are poems of the afterwards: these are poems which no longer exclaim, but which pronounce general truths. Their imagery is more concrete, more realised. There is too a sense of renunciation; memory can both delight and also make one contrite. The understanding that virtuous behaviour (here meaning remorse) brings about an equivalence of hell only underlines how complex is Dickinson’s assessment of Christian, even Puritan, stringencies. #J 744 has as its first line: “Remorse -- is Memory -- awake --/Her Parties all astir--”

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So also this perfect poem (#J 478) cannot be ignored:

*“I had no time to Hate – Because
The Grave would hinder Me –
And Life was not so ample I
Could finish -- Enmity –
Nor had I time to Love – but since
Some Industry must be –
The little Toil of Love - I thought
Be large enough for Me--”*

It is a wry poem, but deftly denies hate for the toil of love, even though she had loved and lost.

As our final example, on the theme of delight which was of high importance to her, we quote #J 76: it measures the ratio between centre and circumference (land to the sea that circles it, or the now to the future that circles it). This different vision offers a circular rather than a linear vision of time and space. Not the flight of the arrow into latitudes far on, but something else.

*“Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,*

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*Past the houses -- past the headlands --
Into deep Eternity--”*

And then the rhetoric question in the second stanza:

*“Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?”*

The nature or the technique of the journey is not examined: but it does show delight to be possessable, eternity to be available, and the two to be aspects of one another. (Juhasz, 1983)

The poem is an ideal one to take us on to the next and the most important of the themes Dickinson was obsessed with; death and immortality. And from there to her tryst with circumference. To Dickinson, experience, delight and pain have a purpose that goes beyond sensation, even knowledge and that purpose is eternity. The metaphor of that journey is present everywhere in her poems: we have just read #J 76 of going “past the houses, past the headlands, into eternity--”. Or, #J 615, where “Our journey had advanced-/ Our feet were almost come/To that odd Fork in Being’s Road-/Eternity- by Term.” And where is that Eternity? There are only questions instead

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of answers: “Is Heaven a place- a Sky- a Tree?/Where Omnipresence fly?” (#J489)

Her Christian heritage should have assured her of the promise of heaven. But she was forever the doubter. “Are you certain there is another life,” she once wrote, “when overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure.”¹ Her writing throughout her life presents the full gamut of answers to that worrying question. From qualified affirmation (“This World of not conclusion. /A species stands beyond-”) (#J501) to qualified denial: “paradise is of the opinion-” (Letters #319). While it is true that she assiduously investigates the fact of dying to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond, it is also true that there is a large body of poems attesting to a consciousness of eternity now, an eternity experienced through exploration in life and situated in the space of the mind.

Suhasz sums up Dickinson’s macabre dance with death saying that exploration is her life’s enterprise. Nothing less than eternity can define the ultimate perimeters of the mental landscape: paradoxically, it may seem both its centre and its edges. To put it another way, engagement with intense psychic experience brings one, sometimes, to the limits of experience, to the extremes of the mind: which becomes limitless. Eternity is situated at precisely those latitudes where the mind opens out upon itself, to become vast and endless, as immense

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as the universe. Where space and time desist. Thus the very endeavour to locate, to fix and situate with language the place of eternity, brings one to illocality, or abstraction incarnate.” (Juhasz, 1983)

And thus we come to circumference, which we shall more fully explore in the next chapter. Dickinson’s idea of experiential eternity leaps over the grave, negates judgment and insists that the mind’s circumference is the ultimate circumference. Immortality is the destination of the journey towards and through circumference. It is a subject that obsessed her all her life, the piercing of the bounds of life to reach through to the other side.

Three writers defined this particular abstraction: Robert Weisbuch calls her notion of eternity in life as “temporal eternity” or “experiential eternity”. Sharon Cameron says, her “belief that immortality not only will replace an inadequate temporal scheme in the future that is promised by traditional Christianity, but also that it does replace temporality in the present, as the body is transcended in the phenomenon of loss and immortality alike.” Albert Gelphi remarks succinctly: “as a psychological state, Heaven is the farthest dimension of self-hood.

Language may be inadequate to address the dimensionless concept of eternity and Dickinson’s attempts to talk about it is, as Cameron states, language

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...flung out into the reaches of the unknown in the apparent hope that it might civilize what it finds there...For immortality as Dickinson dreams it into existence, is not simply specified as permanence; it is also presence liberated from the mortal encumbrances of both flesh and language. (Cameron, 1979)

Nevertheless, language is the only way to find out what it is. Language's best procedure for ascertaining location is speculation or hypothesis. Dickinson goes beyond into the received doctrinal truths of the Amherst church as well as the facts of empirical science. But she finds them inaccurate and then counters the public with the personal, the fact with the possibility, the certain with the uncertain. Analogy allows one to use concrete forms to incarnate the abstract while understanding at the same time their figurative nature. Thus concrete and abstract come close to destroying one another when they get this close: these analogies for eternity are the extremes of Dickinson's linguistic programme for describing mental space. After them would come silence: the silence of death or total vision. We shall explore this more fully in Chapter IV.

To summarise, there are some basic philosophical concepts we have to keep in mind as we appreciate the works of Dickinson and approach the edge of the circumference which is the main burden of this thesis. They, as we have seen, are: Dickinson's treatment

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and rejection of the Calvinist doctrine; her adoption of the beauty of nature as the face of God; the internal landscape of the spirit that wrestles with the conundrums faced in life; the use of language and metaphor to express thoughts and concepts otherwise impossible to communicate; her treatment of pain and delight and the conquering of those experiences by control and poise; and her complete fascination with death and immortality. These seven concepts, if mastered, will help us to understand the riddle of Emily Dickinson and her search for circumference as the mission of her life.

A brief word about her poetic techniques. The manner in which Dickinson uses words in the construct of the poems she writes is unique: her dots and dashes, her empty spaces, the ellipses, the half rhyme, or even the barely rhyming, all became important signals that successive generations of poems borrowed freely. Cristanne Miller wrote about the poet's extended use of the dash. Dickinson's deletion of part or parts of a sentence, her yoking of contrasting vocabularies and her use of dashes to isolate a word or phrase in order to "call attention to the surprise of its relationship with others of the poem's terms" create a suggestion of a mind at work attempting to express what was before considered inexpressible. By marking that some connection exists (between words on either side of the dash, or between contrasting vocabularies or parts of a sentence) but omitting to clarify it, Dickinson's poems draw the reader (who either fills, or fails to fill

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in, that “hole in meaning”) into the multiplying, rupturing aspect of creation over the positing, controlling one.

The dash then dramatises meaning-making as a charged, tentative act; coming before the inexpressible or the unseen; it is never certain, continually fraying, always in process. Dickinson’s dashes, indicating connections without pinning them down, generate a sense of a work being built as we read, with much left unstitched as the mind pushes forward or prepares to reverse itself. (Miller, 1985). Alice Fulton suggests that one must first force the reader to take note of this space before exploiting its openness. It draws the reader’s eye to the “unconsidered”, “never admired” between things, the very thing that normally “dissolves / under vision’s dominion”. Someone paused here, the sign insists, and attempted to work out for herself, perhaps for the first time, something not before expressed and not unthinkingly assumed to be true. (Fulton, 2011)

There is another thing to be remembered in considering her poetry, if we are to allow ourselves the full enjoyment of it; and that is her peculiar rhymes. It is usual in verse to call those sounds perfect rhymes and which the final consonants (if there be any) and the final vowels are identical, but the consonants preceding these final vowels, different. So that we call “hand” and “land” perfect rhymes. But this is only conventional custom among poets. It is consonant with laws of

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poetry, of course: but it is not in itself a law. It is merely one means of the writer's disposal for marking of his lines for the reader's ear. And when Emily Dickinson chose to use in her own work another slightly different convention, she was at perfect liberty to do so. She violated no law of poetry. The laws of art are as inviolable as the laws of nature.

“Who never wanted-maddest joy/
Remains to him unknown; /
The banquet of abstemiousness/
Surpasses that of wine.” (#J1430).
“Wine” and “unknown” are not perfect rhymes...yet they serve to mark her lines for readers quite well. Why? Because she has made a new rule for herself, and has followed it carefully. It is simply this - that the final vowels need not be identical; only the final consonants need be identical. The vowels may vary. It is wrong to say that she disregarded any law here. Bliss Carmen in her critique in the Boston Evening Transcript asked the question: Did her new usage of the falling rhyme tend to beautiful results? Indeed, there is a haunting gypsy accent about it, quite in keeping with the tenor of that wilding music. “What a strange and gnome-like presence lurks in all her lines.” (Carmen, 2011)

It would be inappropriate to leave her prodigious body of works without sampling some of her more important poetic pieces and attaching to them some brief comments made by some of the more serious Dickinson critics. An excellent effort made in Thomas Davis's

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book entitled *14 by Emily Dickinson* looked at these selected poems with some discerning care. Here we do not examine all fourteen but about a dozen.

We start with #J 130 which begins: “These are the days when Birds come back --/A very few -- a Bird or two --/To take a backward look.” Charles Anderson attempts to explain it this way: The illusory season is one of the glories of New England’s climate, coming as it does between a brief but brilliant summer and the long snow-bound winter. Woven in with her probing of the season’s ambiguous appearance is the allied query: Does it symbolize death or immortality? The structure is indicated by the balanced exclamations, “Oh fraud,” and “oh Sacrament.” Which it is, she never says.

The central lines look both ways: the illusion is almost plausible enough for belief, the sure signs of death are transfigured by language that looks forward to the Eucharist. She has been reasoning empirically, like an adult, from the evidence of nature. Following this is the sudden reversal invoked by the scriptural allusion, “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Only if she can become a child again will she understand the emblematic meaning. Then the sacramental view will be possible; the body and blood of this autumnal death, flaming lead and decaying stalk, will become symbols for immortality. To recapitulate: In the

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first stanza, the surface of things in *Indian Summer* suggest that life is everlasting, but this is an illusion of the ‘Indian giver.’ In the second, the inner secret, first intuited, and then explicitly revealed, is that the year is really dying; but immediately the paradox is reversed and the underside of death bears witness of rebirth, of altered elements, at least to one who wants to believe. Finally, this desire for belief becomes plaintive; with all the evidence against her, the poet can only say, Permit me to become a child and partake sacramentally of immortality! The poem itself is a kind of ‘last Communion’ between her critical mind and her yearning heart.

#J 214, which we looked at briefly earlier, is another splendid poem for examination. It begins: “I taste a liquor never brewed—/From Tankards scooped in Pearl”. Genevieve Taggard says of this poem that “Idiotic meddler” is one of the most delicious lines in the English language! “From tankards scooped in pearl” enjoins our attention: quite apart from the sounds received and carried on by it, it runs the voice from the *a*’s in ‘tankards’ to the *o*’s in ‘scooped’ and then produces the word ‘pearl’, on which to let them culminate; the *nk* and the *r* in ‘tankard’ catching all the other consonants as the ripple of colour runs down the line. If anyone needs the pale device of rhyme after such interplay of sound, culminating in ‘Yield such an alcohol,’ he is tone-deaf and deserves to be so.

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But he should be told that, while he was hearing nothing, the stanza as a whole has been giving off the variations on the sound of *l*, firmly placed in the middle of the first line, at the end of the second, near the beginning of the third to culminate in ‘yield’ and the *l*’s of ‘alcohol.’ The next stanza is equally, though differently, inebriate. “Inebriate of air am I’ plays with the delicate *i* sound in the first word, repeats it in ‘air’ and then grounds it in the word ‘I.’ Line two is all *e* and *ew* sound, alliterated and emphasized by the *ee*’s run into ‘reeling.’ Then comes “inns of moulten blue’, which would be only a phrase if the *i*’s of the stanza were still not in the ear and the *ou* and the u in ‘moulten’ and ‘blue’ did not come as a perfect conclusion, a sensuous resolution. The reader is required to read the poem with analytical eyes. (Howell, 2003)

Thomas H Johnson adds:

“This is an excellent example of both ED’s concern with and indifference to rhyme and metrical exactness. The poem uses Common Meter, but the regularity is broken in two ways. The third lines of the first and fourth stanzas are both catalectic, and the rhymes of those stanzas are imperfect. These variations unquestionably were deliberate, for they are typical of her modifications of traditional forms.”

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Another well-known poem #J 216 deserves a closer look, even though we have examined it in the context of Dickinson's letter to Higginson where she enclosed this poem: we know the first line well by now: "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers --/Untouched by Morning /And untouched by Noon -- Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection--"

Thomas H Johnson surmised that it is unlikely that Dickinson ever completed this poem in a version that entirely satisfied her. The second stanza in her first version was as follows: "Light laughs the breeze/ In her Castle above them --/Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear, / Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence --/Ah, what sagacity perished here!" The story of how she laboured in 1861 to create a finished poem unfolds in an exchange of notes with Susan, who evidently had not approved of the earlier version when Dickinson asked her opinion. Susan had written as follows:

"I am not suited, dear Emily, with the second verse – It is remarkable as the chain lightening that blinds us hot nights in the Southern sky but it does not go with the ghostly glimmer of the first verse as well as the other one- it just occurs to me that the first verse is complete in itself it needs no other, and can't be coupled. Strange things always go alone – as there is only one Gabriel and one Sun."

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Emily's note in reply is poignant: "Could I make you and Austin proud-sometime-a great way off- 'twould give me taller feet." Thus the poem she handed over to Higginson through her letter changes the second verse as follows: "Grand go the years, / In the Crescent above them -/ Worlds scoop their Arcs -/ And firmaments -row -/ Diadems -drop-"

Another one of her best-known poems that stuns the mind as a near-perfect work of art (#J258) begins as follows: "There's a certain Slant of light/Winter Afternoons--" Yvors Winter wrote with deep understanding on this poem: The poem deals with the inexplicable fact of change, of the absolute cleavage between successive states of being... seasonal change is employed as the concrete symbol of the moral change. This is not the same thing as the so-called pathetic fallacy of the romantics, the imposition of a personal emotion upon a physical object incapable of feeling such an emotion, or of motivating it in a human being. It is rather a legitimate and traditional form of allegory, in which the relationships between the items described resemble exactly the relationships between certain moral ideas or experiences; the identity of relationship evoking simultaneously and identifying with each other the feelings attendant upon both series as they appear separately.

Donald E Thackeray critiqued: The significance of the slant of light is within. The sudden inward change is so thorough that

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the poet, holding her breath and listening, sees her own emotional state reflected in the very landscape and shadows. The emotion, too intense to last, subsides as the slant of light lengthens and lowers into the gray of twilight. Then, “ ‘tis like the distance/ on the look of death.” The feeling of softened, lengthened distances as seen at dusk, the poignancy in the departure of something precious, the resigned awareness of death – not felt with the acute sensations of before but contemplated dispassionately – all are included in this solemn final image. (Thackeray, 1954)

Charles R. Anderson amplified these thoughts in the following manner: These multiple images exemplifying the protean condition of despair are vividly discrete, but they grow out of each other and into each other with a fitness that creates the intended meaning in shock after shock of recognition. Its amorphous quality is embodied at the outset in ‘light’, a diffused substance that can be apprehended but not grasped. Further, this is a slanting light, as uncertain of source and indirect in impact as the feeling of despair often is. Finally, it is that pale light of “winter Afternoons,” when both the day and the year seem to be going down to death, the seasonal opposite of summer which symbolised for her the fullness of joy and living. Next, by the shift of simile, this desolation becomes “like the Heft /Of cathedral Tunes.”

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The nebulous has now been made palpable, but converting light waves into sound waves whose weight can be felt by the whole body. Since the music “oppresses” the connotation of funeral is added to the heavy resonance of all pealing bells. In its ambiguousness, “Heavenly Hurt,’ could refer to the pain of paradisiac ecstasy, but more immediately this seems to be an adjective of agency, from heaven, rather than an attributive one. The hurt is inflicted from above, “sent us of the Air.” The natural image takes on a new meaning in the light of her Lexicon which gives only one meaning for ‘slant’ as a noun, ‘an oblique reflection or gibe.’ It is then a mocking light, like the heavenly hurt that comes from the sudden instinctive awareness of man’s lot since the Fall, doomed to mortality and irremediable suffering. Because of this, it is beyond human correction, “None may teach it –Any.” While it leaves no scar, it does leave internal difference, the mark of all significant “Meanings”. When the psyche is once stricken with the pain of such knowledge, it can never be the same again. The change is final and irrevocable, sealed. As the sun drops towards the horizon just before setting, ‘the Landscape listens’ in apprehension that the very light which makes it exist as a landscape is about to be extinguished (Anderson, 1960).

#J322 demands a similar examination. The first line is as follows: “There came a Day at Summer’s full /Entirely for me--/I thought that such were for the Saints /Where Resurrections – be -”. While

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commenting on this poem, Clark Griffith wrote that Dickinson's view of love was conditioned by her horror of evanescence. She had to see that human attachments, like all other experiences, will be fleeting and transitory. No sooner are they founded than the attachments become vulnerable to the inroads of change and time. Separation and loss as they are presented in this poem have obviously been generalised into the effects of passing time. Whom the poet has lost seems highly unimportant. What does emerge with tragic force, however, is the speaker's acute awareness of temporality, her perception that every relationship is foredoomed by change and can never be preserved from time's encroachments. The text, in short, is less about "lovers" than about transiency, the transiency which weakens and destroys all human ties. The theme is deprivation, to be sure. But it is a deprivation that involves a loss to time far more than the loss of a specific individual.

#J 341 is another perfect and oft-quoted poem, beginning, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes --/The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs --/The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,/And Yesterday, or Centuries before?" we have glanced at it earlier too, though now we do it with more clarity. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren said that this is an attempt to communicate the nature of experience which comes "after great pain." The pain is not a physical pain, it is some great sorrow or mental pain which leaves the mind numb.

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The poet has developed an inanimate lifelessness, a stony or wooden or leaden stiffness: now she proceeds to use a new figure, of a freezing person, which epitomises the effect of those which have preceded it. The experience of grief is like a death by freezing: there is the chill, then the stupor and then the last stage when the body gives up the fight against the cold and dies. A reference to Christ in the second stanza is important: The heart asks whether it is not experiencing His pain and having lost the sense of time and place, asks if it was Christ who bore the pain, and whether it was yesterday or centuries before. The implication is that pain is a constant part of the human lot.

On the other hand, Francis Manley writes that Dickinson's problem was to describe an essentially paradoxical state of mind in which one is alive but yet numb to life, both a living organism and a frozen form. According to the superficial movement of the poem, the time after great pain will later be remembered as a period of living death similar to the sensation of freezing. Yet, there is not only a doubt that this hour of crisis may not be outlived, but even the statement that it will be remembered is made ambivalent by being modified by its own negative, that it will be remembered just as freezing persons remember the snow. Ironically, freezing persons never remember the snow as they die in it, destroyed by a warm contented numbness in which they sleep and perish in entranced delusion. Because there is no solution to this ambivalence, the poem ends unresolved, suspended between life

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and death in a quartz contentment, the most deadly anguish of all, the very essence of pain, which is not pain, but a blank peace, just as the essence of sound is silence.

One of Dickinson's most beautiful poems is #J 449 which begins "I died for Beauty -- but was scarce/Adjusted in the Tomb/When One who died for Truth, was lain/ In an adjoining room". Frederic Carpenter writes that on the surface, this seems to be a fairly simple restatement of the old romantic dream of Keats: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all /Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." But on closer examination, it is seen to imply a radical revision of that idea, and to suggest a much more exact and truthful restatement of it. It implies a different philosophy of it, at once one more classical and more modern: the key phrase, which has now been reversed, is 'on earth.' Emily by implication, denies the truth of the dream on earth, but specifically affirms its truth in heaven, in the eyes of God, or – more realistically and strangely, in the earth. She contrasts the value of human life on earth with the values of God. And she redefines the romantic dream of Keats more effectively than if she had argued it. The 'perfect dream' of the union of beauty and truth can be realised only in death. On earth, that is "why I failed."

Richard Chase continues in this fashion on the same poem saying that this is one of Dickinson's best poems as it brings up the

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familiar question of how beauty and truth are related. Beauty and truth are focuses of experience, intensified moments of our perception of the universe and man's destiny in it. They produce such similar ecstatic emotions in the percipient soul as to be indistinguishable. They are nothing but the moments which we experience with the greatest intensity and joy the full sense of our destiny. The poet says that she died in the name of, or in pursuit of, beauty, whereas the gentleman dies in the name of or in pursuit of truth. In other words, she is identifying beauty and truth with 'immortality.' And this is the only sense in which it may be said she tried to give beauty and truth a metaphysical meaning. And the great power of the poem lies in the remarkable feeling of the impotence and limitation of human condition and of man's consciousness and the inevitable engulfment of man in the natural world.

#J 465 is an intriguing poem where the poet dies, beginning, "I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died --/The Stillness in the Room/Was like the Stillness in the Air --/Between the Heaves of Storm--" This is a much discussed subject, since it also deals in the most direct way Dickinson's own perception of death. Gerhard Friedrich states that in an atmosphere of outward quiet and inner calm, the dying person proceeds to bequeath his world possessions and then finds his attention withdrawn by the fly's buzzing. The fly is associated with one's concern for a few earthly belongings, a distraction from the momentous issue.

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The obtrusiveness of the inferior, physical aspects of existence, and the busybody activity associated with them, is poignantly illustrated by the intervening insect. Even so small a creature is sufficient to separate the dying person from 'the light', so that the vision is blurred and spiritual awareness is lost. The last line may be paraphrased to read: Way laid by irrelevant, tangible, finite objects of little importance, I was no longer capable of that deeper perception which would clearly reveal to me the infinite spiritual reality.

John Ciardi states that he would find myself better persuaded, as he does not agree with Friedrich, to think of the fly not as a distraction taking Emily's thoughts from glory and blocking the divine light, but as a last dear sound from the world as the light of consciousness sank from her, i.e. the windows failed. So he takes the last line to be simply: 'And then there was no more of me, and nothing to see with.'

On the other hand, Charles R Anderson states that to take this poem literally as an attempted inside view of the gradual extinction of consciousness and the beginning of the soul's flight into eternity would be to distort its meaning, for this is not an imaginative projection of her own death. In structure, in language, in imagery, it is simply an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of her time and place towards the significance of death. Yet, mystery is evoked by a single word, that extraordinarily interposed colour 'Blue.'

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Charles Anderson also went on to examine #J 501, beginning, “This World is not Conclusion. /A Species stands beyond--” He argues that whenever the formulas of conventional religion are invoked, the resistance of her enquiring mind rises to cancel them out or at least to balance them in a precarious equilibrium. Such is her strategy in this poem. Her private debate is framed by the public profession of faith, as in a church service remembered during her subsequent inner struggle to make this official belief personal. The structure of antithesis is set by the fifth line, ‘It beckons, and it baffles,’ the two alliterating predations balanced on a fulcrum and weighted syllable against syllable. Throughout the centre of the poem, philosophy has usurped the role of faith. But to answer the questions raised by the rational mind requires something more than the calm assumption of immortality made at the beginning. The martyred saints of an earlier day bore the contempt of unbelievers, even to the point of crucifixion because they were exalted by faith.

“Faith’ finally appears at the opening of the fourth stanza, however, this shy young lady does not make a very dignified entrance into the august assemblage of scholars. She trips at the threshold, is covered with confusion, fidgets with her hands and instead of offering any triumphant evidence asks the first inane question that enters her head. Can a weather vane, in default of a steeple, point the way to heaven? The last stanza is the final reversal of the first one, its quiet

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assertion having been replaced by the noise of debate and then by the attempt to drown that out with rolling hallelujahs. But modern man is afflicted by doubts, and there is no drug to relieve his pain. ‘Narcotics’ is the sharpest epithet she ever applied to the sermons and hymns of an orthodoxy she found inadequate. The poem has moved steadily downwards from a flat statement of belief to a confession of gnawing doubt that ‘nibbles at the soul.’ There is no attempt at a resolution of the debate, and this is the source of its special effect. Anderson feels that this is the plight of the religious sensibility in an increasingly rational age, but the poet does not take sides.

The next is one of Dickinson’s best known poems, #J 712: “Because I could not stop for Death --/He kindly stopped for me --/The Carriage held but just Ourselves --/And Immortality.” Allen Tate and Yvor Winters were two of Dickinson’s most profound critics and each of them analysed the poem as follows: Tate says that the content of death in the poem eludes forever any explicit definition. He is a gentleman taking a lady out for a drive. But note the restraint that keeps the poet from carrying this so far that it is ludicrous and incredible; and note that subtly inter-fused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to every romantic poet, love being a symbol interchangeable with death. The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of Immortality.

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This is the heart of the poem: she has presented a typically Christian theme in all its final irresolution, without making any final statement about it. There is no solution to the problem; there can only be a statement of it in the full context of intellect and feeling. A construction of the human will, elaborated with all the abstracting powers of the mind, is put to the concrete test of experience: the idea of immortality is confronted with the fact of physical disintegration. We are not told what to think: we are told to look at the situation.”

Yvor Winters on the other hand stated that in the fourth line we find a familiar device of using a major abstraction in a somewhat loose and indefinable manner. Similarly, in the last stanza there is the semi-playful pretence of familiarity with the posthumous experience of eternity, so that the poem ends unconvincingly though gracefully with the formulaic gesture, very roughly comparable to that of the concluding couplet of many an Elizabethan sonnet of love. For the rest, the poem is a remarkably beautiful poem on the subject of the daily realization of the imminence of death. It is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking. In so far as it is concentrating on the life left behind, it is wholly successful; in so far as it attempts to experience the death to come, it is fraudulent, however exquisitely, and in this it falls below her finest achievement.

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#J 1068 is yet another immortal poem of Dickinson: “Further in Summer than the Birds/Pathetic from the Grass/A minor Nation celebrates/Its unobtrusive Mass.” Three prominent critics had these words to say. First, Yvor Winters: According to him in this poem we are shown the essential cleavage between man, as represented by the author-reader, and nature, as represented by the insects in the late summer grass. The subject is the plight of man, the willing and freely moving entity, in a universe in which he is by virtue of his essential qualities a foreigner. The intense nostalgia of the poem is the nostalgia of man for the mode of being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share. The change described in the last two lines is the change in the appearance is nature and in the feeling of the observer which results from a recognition of the cleavage.

On the other hand, Thomas H Johnson deliberated that crickets arrive later in the summer than the birds do, and their song warning us of summer’s departure, is afflictive. Together and as a group, they offer a High Mass to their Mother. We hear but cannot see them at their communion. The change of season (Grace) from summer to autumn is so gradual that only such a sign as the chirping of crickets brings change to our notice. We muse upon the fact sadly, for each year that passes increases the loneliness that we feel for things irrevocably gone. These long, long thoughts (Antiquet) seem to tie the present to all pasts at the very moment (Noon) when the day seems most golden. The cricket

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songs remind us of, indeed they typify, the repose that Nature will take in her long winter sleep. Yet August is still at full, and glancing about we see no sign that the season is changing. No furrow yet crosses the glow of summer. Yet by an occult signal (for how do crickets know when their predestined moment to chirp has arrived?) we are warned that summer is passing. Thus our enjoyment of nature at the full is enlarged.

Finally, Charles R Anderson expressed his thoughts enquiring if this 'repose' is the changelessness of eternity or of the long sleep of winter? It all depends on how one interprets the 'Difference' that heightens nature at this moment of transition. The Christian ceremony of the mass when carried through to completion produces a change, it is true, the reincarnation in which mortals symbolically share. But this is after all a ritual of crickets, not men; their canticle is a 'Spectral' one, producing a 'Druidic Difference'-all suggestive of a pre-Christian nature rite whose meaning is lost in the dim past. Perhaps they are celebrating, not the promise of immortality man yearns for, but the principle of mortality in nature, the process of the year going down to death."

One last poem for examination is J# 1463, which begins, "A Route of Evanescence/With a revolving Wheel --/A Resonance of Emerald --/A Rush of Cochineal--". Whicher analyses the import of

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the poem by stating that we are able to compare her final triumphant poem on the hummingbird with an earlier version written about twenty years earlier. (“Within my garden rides a Bird: #J 500). In the largely superior latter poem, is the whole sensation of the humming bird: first, a dazzle of sudden sense impressions, movement, motion of wings, colour, and whirl (in the reiterated r’s) all at once; then (the bird’s departure taken for granted) the emptiness emphasised by the clear picture of nodding blossoms; and finally the startled mind of the spectator regaining his poise with a whimsical comment. Nothing could be spared and no more is needed.

While the poems examined in this chapter are few, they reveal the magic and craft of the poet as well as the major concerns that may have moved her in the era she lived in. It is still a matter of amazement that her concerns were universal and all encompassing, having relevance, not only to days she lived in, but also in the eclectic and confusing times that we are now privileged to live. When faith in the divine has blurred, when the realities of the life around are confusing in the cacophony of voices we hear, it is remarkable that Dickinson’s voice still rings clear and calm, a clarion call to ponder these question within the silence of the heart.

In conclusion, we may say that her announcement “I dwell in possibility” reveals that the house of poetry sustained Emily

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Dickinson, giving her a refuge within which to use her creative poetic ability. Poetry pushed aside the confines of a traditional lifestyle and allowed Dickinson to breathe freely in what could have been a smothering existence. Her poetic environment gave Dickinson access to unlimited imagination and intuitiveness through which she came to know the universe and, ultimately, her own idea of Paradise. Indeed, poetry enabled Dickinson to live an elaborate and full life through mental images without regard to physical confines. E. Miller Budick notes that “I dwell in Possibility” presents a description of Dickinson’s self-inspired and self-contained intellect and the means by which she obtained and nurtured her inspirations. He explains that poetry provided the means by which Dickinson explored life and was connected to the universe:

For Dickinson writing poetry is not just one of life’s activities, it is a way of existence, life itself... For Dickinson there are intimate and important relationships among the structure of the cosmos, human perceptions of that cosmos, and the ways the poetic mind formulates its cosmological and epistemological discoveries. (Budick, 1985)

Apart from the form of the poem, the substance or content or idea is also startlingly presented. Dickinson caught the wandering attention of the reader and forced him to take note. Charles Wright

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wrote about Dickinson: “the only poet who, when I read her, I feel as though I understand, I know, and have heard before, somewhere, what she is trying to tell me. Emily Dickinson is the only writer I’ve ever read who knows my name, whose work has influenced me at my heart’s core, whose music is the music of the songs I’ve listened to and remembered in my very body.” He goes on to write that Dickinson’s poems are traditional and oddly surreal at the same time written from the point of view of someone watching, from inside, the world go on outside, and always aspiring to something beyond that world that waited surely as sunrise.

Dickinson’s poems, in their surreal simplicity and ache, are without question the artistic high ground, the city of light, in this uniquely American landscape. Charles Wright had this to say: “She sat in her room and the galaxy unrolled beneath her feet. She sat in her room and the garden and the orchard outside her windows took on the ghostly garments of infinity...Her poetry was an electron microscope trained on the infinite and the idea of God. Such distances under her fingertips! Inside the tube of the climbing rose, the River of Heaven flowed. Under the oaks throat, the broken ladder to Paradise awaited reassembly... Her poems are immense voyages into the unknowable.” (Wright, 1987)

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We shall explore more fully in the next chapter, the limits of language and the tension between the abstract and the concrete in metaphor and simile as well as the soaring complexities in the poetry of Dickinson which shall focus largely on her search for circumference and the ecstasy that lies beyond.

CHAPTER IV

THE DYNAMICS OF CIRCUMFERENCE

The first reference we have to the intriguing word ‘circumference’ that she grappled with in her poetry, is in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on 2 July 1862, when she wrote, “My Business is Circumference.” Years later, Dickinson writes, “The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the circumference”. These two cryptic sentences, while reinforcing the conundrum, also give hint to the meaning she was searching for in her life and in her prodigious works. In fact there are some key words she keeps returning to in her poetic expressions: Eternity, Death, Arc, Crescent: but few have received as much attention, or been as difficult to elucidate, as her idiosyncratic use of Circumference.

This concept, which is central to an understanding of some of Dickinson’s most difficult poems, has usually been read as a limited affirmation of humankind’s ability to experience the sublime. Although such a reading places Dickinson firmly in the nineteenth-century Transcendental tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, it overlooks the more radical and theoretically challenging implications of her vision of Circumference. The dictionary meaning is derived from the Latin root meaning “to carry or go around”: **circumference**, n. [Fr. < L. *circum*, round, about + *fer-re*, to bear] loan translation of Gk. *perifereia*, rotundity, outer surface, periphery.

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We have referred to Dickinson's fascination with geometric shapes. We are informed of the resonance that Emerson's "Circles" may have had on her. In fact, most philosophical thinkers and writers have had some fascination with physical shapes from very early times. The Vitruvian Man, who was inserted into a circle and a square in a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci circa 1490, exemplifies the ideal human proportions, which in turn had been described by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius in his treatise *De Architectura*. Similarly, the Mandala is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism representing the Universe. It is sometimes used as a spiritual tool for establishing a sacred space or as an aid for focussing attention while meditating and while inducing trance. It came to be used as a generic term for any plan, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically; as a microcosm of the universe.

The circle is regarded as a universal symbol representing totality, wholeness, simultaneity, infinity, eternity, original perfection and even God. Roundness is held sacred as the most natural shape and is also interpreted as timelessness and spacelessness. The circle represents the eternal 'now', this moment, the only one you ever have. It symbolises celestial Unity and Recurrence. Concentric circles may represent different states of consciousness in manifest existences. Three concentric circles can signify past, present and future; or earth, air and water. It is unlikely that Emily Dickinson may have had knowledge of

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the Mandala, though the iconic drawing of Da Vinci may have come to her knowledge, as the wealth of European Renaissance was indeed spreading throughout the world.

Dickinson's usage, and her emphasis, is derived from the sense of encompassing. Circumference is a double metaphor, signifying both extension and limit. Albert Gelpi, wrote authoritatively:

Emily Dickinson's most frequent metaphor for ecstasy was Circumference. Each of the negotiations which consciousness conducted between the "me" and the "not me" established a circumference. . . The circle had long been a symbol for the spirit in activity. Circumference comes to serve as a complex symbol for those disrupted moments when in some sense time transcends time. . . [It is] an indispensable defense perimeter which separates man from God. (Gelpi, 1966)

As we have mentioned before, there are about a dozen and a half poems where the word circumference appears in Dickinson's poems. However, it must be said that the concept of a tightening space, the sublime awareness of it and the urge to push against it, to penetrate through it and to escape free, occurs in more poems than can be correctly identified. For a discerning critic, a careful analysis could be attempted, on each one of them, though in the course of this doctoral thesis, we have already examined in detail some of them. But to the

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untutored amateur critic, it would be difficult to identify the abstract meanings shining resplendent behind the words. So we then listen to the words of those established critics, who have spent a life time in studying the meaning of metaphor and symbol in the words of poets.

Galileo once wrote that if one is to understand the grand book of the universe, one must understand the language it is written in. That language is the mathematics of geometrical figures such as triangles, arcs, squares and circles. Without the ability to comprehend and interpret such characters, one is left wandering about in a dark labyrinth. Dickinson had a fascination with geometrical shapes and designs. It is in this context that there is speculation of Dickinson having come across Emerson's essay on circles, where he expounds his theory of the circle of human life. As Ruth Miller has pointed out, in the *Lexicon Emily Dickinson* used, "just below the word 'Circumference' appears this strange word: 'circumferentor' with the following definition: 'An instrument used by surveyors for taking angles...only a rough approximation to the truth is obtained by this instrument. Circumference itself was, therefore, the ultimate truth for Emily Dickinson.'" (Miller, 1968)

The term circumference as used by Emily Dickinson has led the critics to various interpretations. Let us run through them quickly. R.K. Agarwal, in his doctoral thesis "A Critical study of the Major

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themes in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson” under the Aligarh Muslim University, June 1986, has conveniently listed them out for us:

- Porter disparagingly calls it “her best-known catch-all word,” and thinks that “apparently her attempt to colonize realm beyond the boundary of the senses has something to do with the vexing word “Circumference” that so exercises Dickinson readers.
- Audrey T. Rogers thinks that circumference “becomes the boundary that separates that which she could perceive and that which lay beyond the horizon –beyond reach –the limit of human understanding.
- William Sherwood regards it as “the extension of existence whose arc is all that mortal man can see.”
- John S. Mann states that circumference perhaps remains the best single word for shifting aesthetic patterns in her poetry, since it so accurately describes the outward and inward movement in the poet’s radius of expression.
- Charles R. Anderson goes deeper into its meaning and observes that “her centre is the enquiring mind whose business is circumference, intent upon exploring the whole infinity of the universe that lies before her.”

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- Thomas H Johnson feels that the term “meant a projection of her imagination into all relationships of man, nature, and spirit.”
- Theodora Ward thinks that it expresses her vision of the great wholeness of the universe.”

Ruth Miller refers to the use of this term in several poems and concludes that the term circuit signifies the real and limited world of the living man, and circumference refers to the truth about heaven and the cosmic universe. “It is the business of the poet”, she says, “to observe transient phenomena and explain thereby the fixed universe.” (Miller, 1968)

Referring to her business of circumference, Henry H. Wells surmises that Emily’s self-appointed task as poet and as thinker was to examine personality with microscopic vision, “to digest whatever the mind affords in knowledge of the external or the internal world, but ultimately to fix attention only on the eternally human qualities.” (Wells, 1959)

Richard B Sewall gives a wider interpretation and observes that by circumference Emily Dickinson “probably meant (in 1862) her purpose to encompass the truth of life, the whole range of human experience, and somehow to arrest it in her poetry. She set out to be Expositor, Interpreter, Analyst, Orpheus – all in one.” (Sewall, 1976)

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But we can try to probe into the origins of the concept in the poet's mind by relating to thinkers of the contemporary period whose writings may have influenced her. An obvious influence would certainly have been Emerson. Ralph Waldo Emerson, born in 1803 at Boston, was just about twenty years her senior and as a prominent and influential figure of New England, it is obvious that she would have read him with some interest. The candour and the vigour of his thinking had led him often to champion unpopular causes, and during his earlier years of authorship his departures from Unitarian orthodoxy were viewed with hostility and alarm. In the Abolitionist movement also he took a prominent part, which brought him the distinction of being mobbed in Boston and Cambridge. In these and other controversies, however, while frank in his opinions, and eloquent and vigorous in his expression of them, he showed a remarkable quality of tact and reasonableness, which preserved to him a rare dignity. It would be worthwhile to quote Emerson from the very paragraph in his *Essays* that may have influenced the thinking of Dickinson.

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary picture is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere... One moral we have already deduced in considering the circular or

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compensatory character of every human action... Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens (Emerson, 1841).

One paragraph from the essay is of particular reference to the subject we study. Emerson wrote that men cease to interest us when we find their limitations. The only sin is limitation. As soon as you once come up with a man's limitations, it is all over with him. Has he talents? has he enterprises? has he knowledge? It boots not. Infinitely alluring and attractive was he to you yesterday, a great hope, a sea to swim in; now, you have found his shores, found it a pond, and you care not if you never see it again." (Emerson, 1841)

The import is clear: set a man up against his limitations and he ceases to be of any significance. And that is why the creative and imaginative force is much to be admired. Emerson saluted the genius of a poet and his power to change perspectives of life: that is the reason why we value the poet. All the argument and all the wisdom is not in the encyclopaedia, or the treatise on metaphysics, or the Body of Divinity, but in the sonnet or the play. "In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do not believe in remedial force, in the power of change and reform. But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with

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the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode or a brisk romance, full of daring thought and action. He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities. He claps wings to the sides of all the solid old lumber of the world, and I am capable once more of choosing a straight path in theory and practice. (Emerson, 1841)

In a sense, the poet's work is disruptive; he can startle you from your complacency and challenge you to take another step forward. He can make the air you breathe sharper and more invigorating, he can force you to test your own limitations and break free. The words of Emerson in his essay quoted above and the three statements covering three concepts must surely have found echo in Dickinson: the first, the ever expanding and cyclical nature of human activity and thought; the second, the negativity of limitations; and third, the defining role of the poet to open one's eyes to one's own possibilities.

The symbolic meaning of geometric circles, has been analysed and examined in many learned theses and is not proposed to be delved into in any detail here. However, we must make particular mention of the manner in which Dickinson addressed the question of circumference as a metaphorical symbol, not only by addressing the question to her life in particular, but also in confronting the role of the poet in general while interpreting the mysteries of life to the readers.

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Dickinson's literary background certainly included religious writing, apart from the Bible of course. We remember St. Augustine's mantra again, quoted by Emerson. "God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere".

An odd reference here needs to be mentioned. The very same quote of Emerson resonates, surprisingly, in the writings of Vivekananda. We know that the youthful saint visited the US for the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions. His public address there is still celebrated. Now, it is quite plausible that he had read the writings of Emerson. In his essay on 'God: Personal and Impersonal', taken from his Notes of Class Talks and Lectures, featured in Volume 8 of the Complete Works of Vivekananda, he has written the same thought in the very same words: "Many of you remember the definition I gave of the soul; that each soul is a circle whose centre is in one point and circumference nowhere.... And what is God? God is a circle with its circumference nowhere and centre everywhere." In some way, Emerson and Vivekananda have a commonality: this unique coincidence of thoughts certainly requires a deeper examination that is not the subject of the current study.

St. Augustine, one is certain, must have been in her library. That she had to go beyond the known circle of her awareness and the explored spaces of the world was a lesson she had to learn the hard

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way. But when the church did not give answers, when one tragedy after another struck her life, when she was disappointed in her heart by all the imagined and real loves she may have admired, when family relationships turned sour, there came a time when she had to seek answers beyond this closed orb of the earth. Her singular relationship with God, distinct and different from the Calvinist orthodoxy, requires special mention. The anecdote mentioned below is revelatory:

The debate centers on the story of Dickinson's refusal when at Miss Lyon's Seminary at Mount Holyoke in 1847 to stand up and confess Christianity. Although sometimes interpreted as a youthful rebellion against religion, the evidence indicates that she refused to conform, not because she did not believe, but because she believed too well. According to the one good account of this incident, she did not reject Christ; she simply refused to lie and claim a sincere desire for Christ when she knew the mystic promise had not yet been made hers. The wording of the request was not such as Emily could accede to and she remained seated the only one who did not rise. It is reported that she said: "They thought it queer I didn't rise" adding with a twinkle in her eye, "I thought a lie would be queerer."

This alone might be considered ambiguous evidence. But placed next to the letters she wrote during this period, it becomes obvious that her rebellion was well thought-out and deliberate. Her acceptance of

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a superior reality beyond the accepted dogma of the Amherst church must surely have impelled her on the path to find the ecstasy and mystery beyond the circumference of our limited lives. Her disappointment with Christianity was perhaps the starting point of this voyage of discovery.

In 1846, as the revival at Mount Holyoke was just beginning, Dickinson revealed to her friend, Abiah Root, that she had briefly believed herself one of the saved but that she had been mistaken. She had once been almost persuaded to be a Christian. She could say with sincerity that for a short time she had never before enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness when she felt she had found her savior. But she soon forgot her morning prayers. One by one her old habits returned and she cared less for religion than ever.

“I have longed to hear from you to know what decision you have made. I hope you are a Christian for I feel that it is impossible for anyone to be happy without a treasure in heaven. I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ. (Letter to Abiah Root, 1845)

Her desire to believe remained sincere, but the lesson of this false conversion stayed with her, for she feared that she might “again be deceived and I dared not trust myself.” (Emily Dickinson’s letter to Abiah Root January 1846)

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We learn from Robert Sewall of the incident during Dickinson's first semester mathematics examination at Mount Holyoke, when unprepared to recite the first four books of Euclid, she strode to the blackboard and brazened out the situation by drawing some sort of diagram and casting such a bewildering spell of language that the "dazed teacher" awarded her top honours. A century and a half later we hope that the diagram represented a circle and that the verbal spell she cast included such Euclidean terms such as circumference and circuit, later rendered both magical and riddling in her poems.

There are some serious critics who have struggled to make sense of the mystery of the circumference concept. Jane Donahue Eberwein is one of them. She contends that there is no escaping the circle imagery when we read the works of Dickinson as she wrote constantly about circles, spheres, discs, circuits, diameters and circumferences – reinforcing these abstract geometric terms with more concrete terms such as crowns, diadems, balls, balloons and drops of dew. "Yet what she meant by these image clusters and what she intended in asserting to Higginson that "My Business is Circumference" remains among the most baffling puzzles to Dickinson scholars." (Eberwein, 1985)

Fortunately, we all know what a circle looks like: a 360-degree round plane bounded by a line known as circumference and sometimes intersected by diameters that divide the circumference into arcs.

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Webster's Dictionary gives three meanings: "the line that goes round or encompasses a circle"; "the space included in a circle"; and "an orb"; "a circle"; "anything circular or orbicular." Scholars have asked several questions: What does her circle represent? Is it any round space a geometric abstraction? Is it the poet's sense of self, the sphere of consciousness welling out from her personal centre? Is it life – hers particularly, or in general? Can the term apply to any bounded, protected inner space? And does the word circumference apply to that inner space as a whole or only to its perimeter? Does the circumference move in any way; if so, does it expand in an Emersonian process of growth?

It seems clear upon reading Dickinson's poems that the circle is always inner space, separated by some boundary from external space or substance. Sometimes it is simply an orb of absence as when she writes: "Place was where the Presence was / Circumference between" (#J 1084). It would be safe to judge that the poet's primary use of the image related to the private space of personal consciousness – to her own identity – and that other circles connoted, by metaphorical extension, other consciousnesses or the range of knowledge accessible to consciousness. This identity exists within the circumferential margin that represents its limit. And the term circuit refers to the space enclosed in a circle, or within certain limits. The realm accessible to the consciousness can be defined as the circuit world. Circumference,

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then, represents the boundary itself between the circuit of personal space and whatever might be outside. It is margin, never centre.

We cannot avoid this longish explanation from Jane Eberwein. She points out that the circuit world, for Dickinson, comprehended consciousness, the identity, the senses, and matter. It encompasses mortality, finitude, and limitation. Most of what the soul recognises as itself, both positive and negative human properties, is subsumed within the circuit. There are as many circuits as there are beings – each bounded by its own circumference and external space. Swirling outside the circumferences of private circuits is a vast sea of general space representing infinity, immortality, and that empowerment beyond human limitation to which the self aspires. The response of consciousness to this force beyond circumference can only be awe.

But awe is a sublime emotion, involving fear as well as wonder and attraction. The private self, unable to conceive in sensate terms of its ability to exist beyond its circuit as “Costumeless Consciousness” (#J 1454), dreads being merged into the universe and cowers self-protectively behind the same wall that must be penetrated somehow for the soul to escape finitude and limitation. “Emily Dickinson’s simultaneous impulse toward withdrawal and self-protection and her appetite for empowerment made her concentrate on circumference, that dreaded yet enticing barrier. The very narrowness of her circuit incited desires for the infinite realm beyond.” (Eberwein, 1985)

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And thus we conjecture at Dickinson's unique approach to the goal of expansion beyond personal limits – now easily visualised through the geometric circle. Shelly and Elizabeth Barrett Browning have both used the term circumference, but they are used just as static images. Emerson too has used the image in his works. But, as Eberwein again perceptively points out, Dickinson's use of the terms reflects the very essence of her philosophy: she deliberately restricted her life, intensifying every limitation, expunging every extra word or mark of punctuation; she drew circumference in upon herself to tighten her private circuit – quite deliberately risking explosion of her consciousness into the outlying realm of awe.

As Emerson envisages the circle, it promised infinite expansion of the personal circuit world; as Dickinson envisaged it, the circumference contracted its circuit with a pressure that forced the enclosed consciousness to struggle against finitude, to push towards immortality, to prefer awe to complacency, to grope toward God even at the risk of self-destruction.

Circumference, for Emily Dickinson, is death – the transitional point between the familiar circuit world and either immortality or nothingness. She never knew which, though she hoped for fulfilment of Christian promises and generally imagined such fulfilment when she tried to peer beyond circumference.
(Eberwein, 1985)

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The fascination, or even fixation, with circumference in Dickinson's poems, then, goes far beyond obsession with death itself. Death was but a barrier that must be penetrated to see to the other side. The quest of her poetry, and indeed her life, was to press beyond mortal limits while remaining safe, to gain a perspective on the mysteries beyond circumference, without passing through death. Consequently, she had to reckon with death, to address the issue of the awe of Death, to probe at it and to push against it in the hope of seeing through it. No wonder so many of her poems dealt with death.

We must see once again the poem #J 712, one of her most beloved poems, well-loved and lyrical, and mysterious and startling. "Because I could not stop for Death --/He kindly stopped for me --/The Carriage held but just Ourselves --/And Immortality." There are layers of overlapping meaning in the poem: Death as inevitable fact of life; the awesome grandeur of the passage, symbolised by the carriage; the end of all worldly labour and leisure; the last backward glance at the treasured moments of life; school, the beauty of nature through the setting sun, the nobility of labour depicted through the fields of gazing grain, the waiting graves, the beckon of eternity. It can be sung as a simple song, or as an elegiac melody, or a lyrical expression of an immortal truth, or a profound message from across the circumference dividing life and death.

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Death was circumference and it loomed as a barrier obscuring awesome mysteries: it also distracted the self-protective consciousness from studying these mysteries. Locked in the circuit of her own consciousness, she strained to comprehend this adventure and pursue her quest beyond it. Eberwein again states that Dickinson did so symbolically, and the most important circumferential symbols are those dealing with any barrier or transition point within the range of human experience: natural circumferences like sunrises and sunsets, horizons, transitional seasons, bulbs, cocoons, and flying creatures; circumferential points in the human life cycle and in states of consciousness; even divinely mediated circumferences such as conversion and sacrament. In dealing with these topics, she treated each as an analogy with death, as an end to what can be comprehended by reason and the senses, and as a possible point of entry to whatever might be imagined beyond. (Eberwein, 1985)

The earth itself is spherical, and of course, so is its horizon. Also the sun and the moon, which daily draw the eye towards eastern and western boundaries of sight while raising conjecture about the realms beyond physical vision. Dickinson's close attentiveness to nature's daily cycles, thus intensified her awareness that each person remains locked within a private circuit, even while obviously enclosed within the earth's ampler sphere and its circumferential curtain of sky.

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She focussed attention on temporal as well as spatial circumferences, paying particular heed to transitional seasons. Summer and winter did not excite her interest so much as the subtle passages between them. Dickinson was mistress of the subtle hint of change, the dawning intuition of loss and recovery. Many of her spring poems address the renewal analogy while proclaiming nature's resurging vitality of new birth as well as spring's renewal after passage through winter's bleak circumference.

Indeed, it was almost as if Dickinson felt compelled to roam the border area between the temporal and the eternal, hoping to transcend the artificial divisions of this world and achieve union with the One. Crossing this circumference became important to her. And Nature became the key. Through its agency, she thought a person might achieve a mystical union with the deity, losing oneself in the divine spirit immanent in the natural world. Spiritual renewal and divinity are then available here and now if one learns to tap the wellspring of Nature.

But to embrace such a view, one has to throw over the Christian concepts of sin, grace, forgiveness, and justification. From the perspective of traditional religion, the poet was indeed sailing into "dangerous waters" in flirting with such an idea. During this early period, she may have done no more than "flirt"; but she clearly yearned

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for a mystical experience and even, on occasion, wrote as if she had attained it. Poem #J 122, starting with the lines “A something in a summer’s Day/As slow her flambeaux burn away/Which solemnizes me” shows how deeply Nature could stir the poet, and the language, she uses -- references to light, ecstasy, wonder, grace -- is typical of a mystic.

In this early poem, the veil might as well be the circumference she wishes to pierce. Interestingly, Dickinson combines in this one poem both the language of the “old” religion (solemnizes, grace, veil) and the language of mysticism, her “new” religion; (transcending ecstasy, transporting bright, shimmering) as she tries to articulate a sense of the ineffable “something” in Nature. As is typical of mystics, the poet struggles with the difficulty of expressing what is fundamentally inexpressible: “Behind the panaroma of the world, behind the covenant and behind the Scriptures there loomed an inconceivable being about whom no man could confidently predict anything.” (Millar, 1964)

But she never despaired, nor yielded to nihilism. She had thus taken upon herself a doubly challenging task: developing her craft while also attempting to give ineffable experience verbal expression. Her dominant mood in the later years of her life was scepticism, and in this she was paralleling, if not mirroring, the developing modern temper of the nineteenth century. “I shall know why – when Time is over.” (#J 193)

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Among Dickinson's many images for smashing through that icy barrier, the most frequent involved seeds and bulbs: desiccated remnants; improbable but faithful sources of new flowers. Most of these poems can be dismissed as sentimental effusions. Far more effective as emblems for protective circuit breached by shattering circumference were her cocoon and butterfly poems. Birds, bees, butterflies – all the soaring creatures who populate Dickinson's poems exemplify freedom to move about within firmamental circumference.

Once again it is Eberwein, who has confronted and partially succeeded in the task the task of defining the very nature of the mystery of circumference. She states that Dickinson craved permanence of a sort denied to ephemeral beings, and she wanted flight to smash through circumference, not just drift among it. How can one rise while resting except through death's reversal of worlds by which the buried may be lifted through eternal life? It was this transition that absorbed her attention – this and the hope of catching glimpses beyond circumference even before death motivated other approaches to the riddle when natural analogies failed her.

Her problem was a distinctively human one or one involving interaction between the human and the divine. Natural circumferences hinted at solutions without providing them, and the poet found human experience a richer source of meditation on her most absorbing theme. (Eberwein, 1985)

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Much more satisfactory than natural transitions as representations of the poet's push against circumference were the major transitions in the human cycle, each of them a movement from one identity to another. The most important change was, of course, death, the ultimate circumference. When she identified the general situation of women as brought out in "Born –Bridalled – Shrouded- / In a Day-" (# J1072), she combined life's major transitions to suggest their essential unity as encounters with circumference. Dickinson's bridal poems are examples of role playing, because life had denied her the one major circumferential passage most women can anticipate, experience, remember, and record – birth being hidden from us and death unreportable.

The cramped, narrow circuit walling itself defensively against external influences often represented psychological truths to Dickinson, who presented the brain as a self-enclosed circle unable to protect itself against threatened ruptures. She was fascinated by circumferential states of consciousness, by those points at which the brain explodes or seeps beyond barriers as one mental condition gives to another. Despite the brain's jealous protection of its internal space, she recognised the great danger of isolating itself as a circuit of emptiness, numbness and resistance to change.

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In one of her quaint prose fragments she has written: “’Tis a dangerous moment for anyone when the meaning goes out of things and Life stands straight – and punctual – and yet no signal comes. Yet such moments are. If we survive them, they expand us, if we do not, but that is Death, whose if is everlasting.” (Emily Dickinson’s prose fragment no. 49)

A more routine circumferential experience of the mind is the daily transition between sleep and waking, between dreams and rational applications of consciousness. As imaginative processes, dreams bridge a mental circumference analogous to the division between circuit life and resurrected being. “Awakening” was already used in Amherst vocabulary, a metaphor applied to an early stage of Calvinist conversion, itself the most significant circumferential point in spiritual life. Emily could only laugh at the professed awakenings displayed in religious revivals: “It reminds me of Don Quixote demanding the surrender of the wind mill...” (Letter to the Norcross cousins, April 1873).

But then Emily was still sleeping: she had never been awakened. She had written to her friend, Abiah Root about a season of false awakening, but she had drifted back to habitual routine without pushing beyond her spiritual circuit. Thereafter, Emily Dickinson seems to have sealed her circuit more tightly against incursions from beyond circumference.

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Emily was reluctant to awaken, not because she had stopped loving Jesus, but because she had discovered the exclusive narrowness by which the minister and the congregation defined those who loved Christ as only those whose claims of conversion entitled them to participate in the communion service that was about to begin: the others had to leave. She did not want to be confined by a community whose definition of religion was the preference to wall themselves in when the whole purpose of religion was to open human circuits out into that awesome space beyond circumference as revealed by Scripture and intuited by faith. Yet the idea of sacrament was important to Dickinson and the word was central to her vocabulary. Perhaps she believed in the Calvin definition of sacrament as a testimony of divine grace towards us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety.

Sacraments established by God but practised by men, proved the permeability of the circumference bounding the mortal circuit, thus opening access to eternity and awe. Excluded herself from the formal communion service in her church, Emily nonetheless valued and tried to attain the sense of consecrated community that she identified as essential to the idea of sacrament. (Eberwein, 1985)

It is important to understand that while Dickinson had almost contempt for the Calvinist's religious fervour, she could not deny her

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absorption with the symbols of Christianity that promised a divine afterlife. Her imagination found the sacrament of the Lord's Supper absorbing, as it commemorated Christ's Passover observance, death, and Resurrection (his triumphant though agonising passage through circumference) and brought him back symbolically in material signs to be consumed by the faithful communicants.

No ritual she knew went further than this in demonstrating the permeability in both directions of those barriers between limitation and aspiration; and the Eucharist became her all-encompassing symbol for transitions across circumference.
(Eberwein, 1985)

Emily's fears about venturing towards circumference are depicted in the poem (#J 378), beginning "I saw no Way -- The Heavens were stitched --/I felt the Columns close --" It cries out for a chalkboard for clarity. To make sense of it we have to visualise the speaker's position along the margin of an exploding circle. At first she is entrapped within a circuit, buried just below the earth's circumference in the outer layer of the circuit. Miraculously, the circumference yielded, the circle opened. It split in half, throwing open the circuit within. The hemispheres now separated, rolled at her touch along each other's circumference to create parallel arcs with bell shaped hollows between them. The sudden release after imprisonment is so startling as perhaps

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to make her wish for renewed confinement. We have no sense that she has fallen into the arms of God or awe, but we leave her in uncertainty and fear. She is still “out upon circumference”, confined to the domain of death but looking externally towards the mysterious space outside the circuit. Once she gets her bearings, she may yet use the altered perspective of death to gain the otherwise impossible insight beyond circumference, while still clinging to the remains of her mortal circuit.

The obsession with circumference requires us to examine in some more detail Dickinson’s perspective on death. The imminent contingency of death struck Dickinson as life’s most fascinating feature, as the source of all adventure, and as a perpetual incentive to wonder. None can read her works without discovering her intense involvement with the fact of death, though readers respond differently to the poet’s obsession as either morbid or healthy depending on their own dispositions to confront death’s enigma with evasion, despair, curiosity, or hope. There is no evading the subject, from one of her first sprightly valentines in 1850, “The worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride” (#J1), to her three lines to T.W. Higginson in the summer of 1864:

The only news I know

Is bulletins all day

From Immortality (# J 826)

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and on to the cryptic words from her last letter to the Norcross cousins, “Little Cousins, Called back, Emily”. (Letter to the Norcross Cousins, May 1886)

Even if we fortified the circuit of consciousness and mortal existence, the circumference would ultimately give way and lead us to whatever lay beyond circumference. To her, ‘the Flood subject’ was immortality and Death presented itself as the barrier, the closed door. She insisted upon trying the lock so that she could discover if she could trust Christian promises of eternal and intensified life. Would the limitations that crushed her in life give way to great power, the gift that seemed to her to subsume the glory and the dominion? To find out the poet balanced herself on the perilous edge of circumference – living always in the presence of death with mind and nerves astoundingly alert.

About her ailing mother she once wrote:

“I tell her we shall all fly so soon, not to let it grieve her, and what indeed is Earth, but a Nest, from whose rim we are all falling?” (Letter to Mrs Holland, October 1879)

Many poems and letters she has written to close friends and family focus on death as the dividing line between the circuit side of existence as now experienced, and the other side of mystery. Eberwein

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writes that the circumferential mental states most nearly analogous to death – despair, catatonia, madness – often aped death’s physical qualities of stiffness and numbness; they create an absence within a person comparable to the distance death sets between the corpse and the circuit world. Fortified with the hope of lasting awareness, and with trust in the accessibility of awe to those valiant enough to seek circumference, Dickinson presented herself as an obstinate quester seeking glimpses of ‘the other side’ and demanding ultimate entry. (Eberwein, 1985)

Calvinist tradition had trained the poet to watch for signals of salvation at the point of death, to look for evidence that Christ had come for the saint who persevered till the end. She enquired from the attending minister when her friend Ben Newton died if he had been “willing to die and if you think of him at Home.” Death impinges on the circuit world chiefly as an insatiable source of deprivations; and Dickinson acutely sensitive to loss, resented its maraudings. She portrayed the continuous presence of objects no longer valuable once the dead had left the circuit world, such as the things one leaves behind; a little book, a thimble, a hat, a shoe. These are symbols of inactivity which violates the circuit world even when the material objects that have been the product of earlier industriousness remain behind.

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The keen comments of Eberwein need to be again resorted to. She states that Death is so ennobling an adventure for the dying whether they resort to it only for the purposes of escape or courageously challenge it in the quest for fulfilment. The grand solemnity of funerals testifies to death's exalting transfiguration even of the simplest person, though Dickinson harboured doubts about fanfare and grandeur, so reluctantly and passively accepted. Beyond circumference, however, the "majesty of Death" might privilege the suddenly elevated soul with welcome glory – the sort she anticipates in her coronation poems. "Dying is a wild Night and a new Road", she once wrote and she often anticipated the journey and steeled herself for the test. It is not the termination of life that excited her but the prospect of its intensification beyond circumference. (Eberwein, 1985)

Dickinson knew too well that life was riddled by partings and she constantly reminded herself that it was only the preface to supreme things. Loss and the prospect of death encouraged her to cherish everything around her with the intensity of passion that vibrates in all her writings. The fact remains that Dickinson's choices in life - mostly negative choices - sharply diminished her circle. Rather than expanding upon the attachments of people within the circuit world, she restricted them. Rather than emphasising temporal events, she ignored or belittled them. She narrowed her circle to little more than the natural world of her garden, a moderate group of intimates and

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her own consciousness. It was a narrow world, deliberately so; and by tightening the circle that enclosed her, she guaranteed a painful fit. She assured herself that she would be pressing at the boundaries of mortality and consciousness.

She made sure she would never forget circumference or miss any messages from beyond it. Dickinson made it her distinctive business to lay stress on the circle's circumference. She focussed her poetic insights with particular intensity on all kinds of transitions and barriers – especially the barrier of death. Loving the circle enclosed within her circuit, she still valued its centre also. Immortality lay outside the circumference, as she generally conceived it, but eternity or forever was at the centre. She assured her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson: “There is no first, or last, in Forever -It is Centre, there, all the time-”. Eternity emerges as a force concurrent with the circle as well as with the post-circumferential realm. With eternity at the centre of the circle and immortality without, time became unimportant except to those worldly agglomerative souls whose expanded circles left them free in personal space but generally out of touch with centre or circumference. (Eberwein, 1985)

Credit for preventing circumference from engrossing her finity goes to God, who opens perspectives in infinity to her within her circuit. Were she not reminded of immortality, Dickinson acknowledges in

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the poem #J 802, she would limit her horizons to time. It begins with the lines, “Time feels so vast that were it not/ For an Eternity --/ I fear me this Circumference/ Engross my Finity--”

Eberwein’s critical analysis then touches on the shattering clash of images when she writes that linear images suddenly intrude upon the circle, slash across it, and intersect circumference to push outward into the domain of awe. The full extent of these diameters remains hidden, although parts of them cut the otherwise only slightly permeable membrane of the circle. It is worth our while to recall some of these linear images: death as the “Bisecting Messenger” of paradise (#J1411), and also as the outward thrusting force of nature: “The eager look –on Landscapes -/As if they just repressed / some Secret –that was pushing/ Like Columns –in the Breast-” (#J627) How long can the most circuit-bound heart withstand such battering rams? Anything that can cut can hurt, and God’s diameters often appear as dreaded attackers of the circuit world, barricaded as it is to defend itself against invasion from without.

Not until she stands outside the circumference will she behold the “Stupendous Vision” that justifies immediate injury to the circuit. The famous “Slant of Light” reminds the poet of death as it cuts across circumference beyond wintry stasis, God’s diameters, then inflict “Heavenly Hurt” that stings the circuit into recognition of whatever

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lies beyond it to aim such darts. Lightning, must “dazzle gradually” or every man would be blind who is unaccustomed to the divine radiance without. All these linear thrusts bring messages from immortality (Eberwein 1985).

And on the usage of symbols, we look at one more startling image of God’s diameters meeting at the centre of the mortal circle to link finite man with immortality. The asterisk symbol Dickinson began in the late 1860s, but stressed heavily only in her final decade. This “a star shaped juncture of diametrical lines creates a new circle of its own – one without visible circumference, without limits to its outward propulsion.” She used this first in 1868 where she described the empty husk of a corpse as marked by “just an Asterisk” (# J 1135) to represent the soul’s escape. She used it also in other poems, as when she mourned the death of Helen Hunt Jackson: “Of Glory not a Beam is left/But her Eternal House --/The Asterisk is for the Dead/The Living, for the Stars--” (#J1647) It was a glorious symbol for her, thrusting out as it did from the centre of identity and consciousness into immortality and obliterating not the self but the obstacle of death. God’s diameters and explosive human force merged and triumphed.

Unlike Emerson, whose image of the circle “has no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference”, Dickinson calls attention to the circle’s necessary boundary or perimeter without which it has neither

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shape nor meaning. By containing the expansive momentum of this favoured Emersonian symbol of the sublime, Dickinson challenges one of the central tenets of Romanticism - that humankind can transcend material reality to become “part or particle of God” (from Emerson’s “Essay” Chapter IV: “I became a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I am part or particle of God.”) Further, as Laura Gribben argues, by blocking the impulse toward transcendence, Dickinson calls into question the claims of Emerson’s poet, “the transparency of self and world” that Emerson prophesies, “the infinitude of his individual man”. (Gribben, 1993)

Circumference marks the borderline of symbolic and linguistic order. This border is a highly charged point of convergence where oppositions are collapsed, boundaries are explored, and meaning originates. Circumference is also the space within a circle where life is lived, pain is felt, and death is observed. It is not, as Thomas Johnson argues, the means by which Dickinson elicits “awe from the object or idea by which she is inspired”; it is not the means to a sublime end but is at once the source and terminus of poetic discourse, marking the perimeter beyond which language, thought, and “awe” cannot penetrate.(Eberwein, 1985)

The source of Dickinson’s resistance to the sublime can be traced to her Calvinist roots, which place God beyond the influence

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of human will, and to her precarious and defiant status as a female poet writing both against and within a male tradition. For Dickinson, Circumference not only separates the self from the sublime but also protects the integrity of the self from an identity-threatening merger with an authoritative other.

Joanne Feit Diehl argues that to experience the transcendent sublime, “the poet must have faith that he/she retains the capacity to survive such an upheaval intact.” The male poet, who belongs to a powerful, patriarchal literary tradition, can draw upon the strength of that tradition. The woman poet who, however, perceives herself as an outsider, “would be wary of such experience, dreading its power to usurp her energies as she acknowledges the crucial nature of the sublime encounter itself.” (Deihl, 1990)

Here there are feelings of awe and the sublime; the sublime has an element of fear or terror. Although the speaker in Dickinson’s poems of Circumference often dreads the usurping power of the sublime, at times she goes even further, questioning the degree to which such an “encounter” is even possible. Typically, Dickinson connected this concept with mingled with aesthetic perception. If all that is knowable is contained within Circumference, then the sublime itself is a construct of the Romantic imagination, an ideal “other” created in order to be absorbed into the self.

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Genevieve Taggard's introduction to her work on Circumference in the context of metaphysical verse of the period from the fifteenth to the twentieth century is a good place to explore the universe of the circumference. The paragraphs below simply quote from her masterly work, or paraphrase her words, to form the meaning of our content: they serve as theoretical background to much of what we have to say in this chapter. For a premise, can we say that the concept of circumference is a metaphysical conceit? And in that sense, whether Dickinson can be termed as a metaphysical poet?

This needs to be examined in the light of the following arguments of Taggard. For some centuries English critics have been at work to revise or apply the term metaphysical given to John Donne and his school. The word does very well if we use it of poetry, or to describe a state of mind. But it is inadequate to designate a system of thought with the exactitude of the philosopher or the scientist. It was Johnson who borrowed the suggestion and defined the school to describe not only Donne, but all the amorous and philosophical poets who succeeded him, and who employed a similarly fantastic language, or who affected odd figurative inversions.

Taggard had been attempting to collect into a book what may be considered the most powerful of Donne's verses, together with others since his time, not merely from the school commonly supposed to be metaphysical, but from English and American poets generally.

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She surmises that there are more poems of this genre than there are poets. With many lyric and dramatic minds, the metaphysical is a mood assumed for the moment, or one manner of approach, not a constant quality. Unless we agree to use Donne as the measure of the metaphysical poet, and draw all others to scale, we must admit to begin with, that in searching for the Metaphysical Poem we are only after an abstraction. A long search, however, among many approximations, and repeated varieties, gives a reader a certain knack of imagining the purest possibility of treatment, of which the poems one encounters are only “less acute designs” (Taggard). After deep analysis, Taggard finds only two genuinely metaphysical poets of the first order of clarity in the entire span of our poetry, namely John Donne and Emily Dickinson. Dante, Goethe and Lucretius live in other languages.

In his excellent introduction to “Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems,” Grierson argues that metaphysical poetry, in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which, like that of the *Divina Commedia*, the *De Natura Rerum* and perhaps Goethe’s *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence. These poems were written out of a definite attempt to interpret the riddle, the atoms of Epicurus rushing through infinite empty space, the theology of the schoolmen as elaborated in the catechetical disquisitions of St. Thomas, and Spinoza’s vision of life *sub specie aeternitatis*, (meaning from the perspective of the eternal) which are beyond good and evil.

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The idea laid hold on the mind and the imagination of a great poet, unified and illumined his comprehension of life, intensified and heightened his personal consciousness of joy and sorrow, of hope and fear, by broadening their significance, revealing to him in the history of his own soul, a brief abstract of the drama of human destiny. We only need to recall the words of one of the greatest Romantic poets of all time, William Wordsworth in his Preface to the Ballads: "Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge--it is as immortal as the heart of man." Its themes are not only the simplest experiences of the surface of life, sorrow and joy, love and battle, the peace of the country, the bustle and stir of towns, but equally the boldest conceptions, the profoundest intuitions, the subtlest and most complex classifications and 'discourse of reason,' if into these, too, the poet can 'carry sensation,' make of them passionate experiences communicable in vivid and moving imagery, in rich and varied harmonies." (Grierson, 1947).

Grierson's brilliant analysis of the metaphysical poets is essential to understand the psychological framework which Dickinson revelled in. He sketches out the underpinnings of that moral foundation which became the inheritance of Dickinson. Johnson and Dryden described the seventeenth century poet as a man of learning who drew on his knowledge for his phrases, symbols and comparisons, and who treated of matters "beyond physics." However, the eighteenth century does have in mind something it has not defined. Taking Donne as an

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example, it wished to describe a scientific sharpness and an angularity; an acerbity of phrase designated by them as “wit”; and a coldness that made it possible for the mind to probe itself, as it writes of itself, lavishly and unmercifully. All this was concealed under the large word, learning. “Beyond physics” involved God, the universe, and the soul’s torments--psychological poetry.

Such a poet is born with a salty sanity in his bones. He will take neither the Keatsian sensuous assurance of life, nor the Miltonic moral glory, nor even a Poesque exit into madness. What he needs to find is a thoughtful pattern in the universe’s need in him, or else himself present the universe with that pattern when it is lacking. Ideas being for this temperament as real as grass blades or locomotives, the poet’s imagination is always riding the two horses in the circus, Idea and Fact; they gallop neck and neck in his work; he has a genius for both the concrete word and the dazzling concept. (Grierson, 1947)

In Donne’s case the two horses got to galloping apart after a time--he saw that he finally must take to one or the other. But Science fascinated him too. Galileo and Copernicus gave him the food his imagination craved; from them, for a time, he constructed his new philosophies--having played at paste till qualified for pearl (#J 320)--until the labour of putting raw science in relation to the world’s cultural knowledge got to be too difficult. Such a labour is not the

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work of one man; a poet may only perform it with some group to pick and cull for him. And because Donne had to have a coherent universe, even though a fictitious one, he went over to God.

Can we examine the greatest poetic figures of English literature under this prism? We can try. Shakespeare's mind lived in a metaphysical country and the image of its bigness casts a shadow over all who have written since. But his dramatic and human gifts enrich on one hand where his lyricism etherializes on the other; the metaphysical temper is seen only in some speeches in the plays or in the less musical sonnets. Milton, with his grand learning, tried to construct a scheme worthy of God and Man, but he lacked the wit and the impudence that creates the dilemma of the metaphysical mind. Pope and Dryden used metaphysical material: Pope delighted in changing the shape of an idea into a metal ribbon; Dryden built a word cathedral of regular, formal prosody. Keats is the clearest possible example of what a metaphysical poet is not. His truth is in essence, not in pattern; he knows the substance of life to be sufficient; any scheme was to Keats, extraneous.

Coleridge and Poe, with Swinburne, Rossetti and the rest of the wild young poets. abandon the world of metaphysical exactitude for the mad splendours of the world. Blake, fierce and tender, who saw visions on English greens, made a lamb and a tiger with a simplicity

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and an insight one step beyond the mind. Science, for him, was a hellish invention against the spirit of man. Making mind and emotion one, as no one else but Keats has approximated, Blake says: “A tear is an intellectual thing.” But the metaphysician is neither fierce nor tender, as was Blake. He is a stoic, and has small joy in even that attitude. Wordsworth and Shelley both meditate continually on man’s destiny, the universe’s destiny, and cover much. But they separate themselves off by an attitude of worship; there is a lack of saltiness and homeliness. It is Donne’s frank querying, which they lack, that makes a good beginning for the whole self, the whole universe, the whole man. In the end God becomes his unity and to Him Donne speaks curtly, as to an honoured inescapable fact, with his own antagonistic majesty. These lines from “A hymn to God the Father” is a fine example.

*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.*

Browning most clearly has characteristics that link him with Shakespeare and Donne. Splendid and broad as Browning’s blade is, at times it lacks the keen edge of the lightly acid gentlemen. “His

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dramatic monologues desert the nicety of metaphysical tracing; first and last, (with noble exceptions) he runs to God a little too swiftly, because of a lack of subtlety, I think, or a love of benignity.” (Grierson) But in either the well-trodden or the ragged by-paths of English-American poetry, Taggard can only discover one mind whose predominant flavor is in Donne’s world. To Taggard, Emily Dickinson and John Donne were both attempting a revolutionary technique and a plain homely grandeur. Neither quality has been very well understood. That angularity complained of by Johnson and Dryden in Donne, became the snare of Colonel Higginson’s platitudes when he tried to give Emily Dickinson helpful criticism. What these critics could not see was that both these poets were deserting formal composition for the subtlest of all techniques--the form of an idea. Ideas are irregular; they are beautiful in their entire uniqueness as pure form when simply revealed as idea, not as some form of expression.

To give an idea no form but itself, to show it as organic by an inner music, as if the bones of a skeleton were singing in their own rhythm--that is the technical obsession of the metaphysical poet. Beside him every other poet becomes a little diffuse and decorative. (Taggard, 1934)

Emily confessed her desire when she wrote to “scalp the naked soul.”(#J 315) Few poets would pretend to so little, or do so much.

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Where Donne allows his cerebral fancy and his pedantry to spin out, past his climax (which so often comes in one line or two, followed by a larger climax, not so acute) Emily says, making of one thought the design of a poem: “The heart asks pleasure first, /And then excuse from pain;/And then those little anodynes/That deaden suffering;/And then, to go to sleep, /And then, if it should be/The will of its Inquisitor/ The liberty to die. (#J536)

Such a sharp knife has rarely flashed in literature. The mind of Emily Dickinson has the power of a microscope. To the small facts that fall so well within a woman’s knowledge she applies the enlarging gift of her imagination--with the result that she does just what Blake wanted himself to do: she sees the world in a grain of sand. She gives us universe in atoms, makes a death in eight lines wild and gigantic as a dramatist of pure terror: “We noticed smallest things--/Things overlooked before, /By this great light upon our minds/Italicized, as ‘twere.” (#J 1100)

In passing, we may mention two propositions that have a relevance to the subject of Dickinson’s search for circumference; one, the heart of Hindu philosophy, the holistic theory of reincarnation arising from the non-duality of Atma and the Paramatma; and the other, the core of Christian doctrine, that of resurrection of the Christ from death. It may be recalled that in the introduction to this thesis, a

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proposition had been made on the subject of whether the concept of circumference has any resonance in Eastern philosophies, in particular the great Indian philosophy espoused in the Bhagawad Gita, especially that of re-birth or reincarnation. The most authoritative translation of the Bhagavad Gita ever attempted is by Dr S Radhakrishnan, our philosopher President who dedicated the magnum opus to Mahatma Gandhi. In his introduction to Bhagawad Gita, Dr Radhakrishnan writes: “Every scripture has two sides, one temporary and perishable, belonging to the ideas and the period and the country in which it is produced, and the other eternal and imperishable, and applicable to all ages and countries.” The quote is particularly relevant for it points out the irrelevance of geography and latitude when eternal truths are revealed. Such truths are universal and timeless and expound undying verities.

We may with certainty say that Dickinson may never have had access to any of the great written Sanskrit philosophical religious works. Indeed, ensconced as she was on east board New England, she was half a world away from the Orient. But the universal truth expressed by Dr Radhakrishnan finds a singular refashioning or reworking in many of the Flood poems, or poems about Death, written by Dickinson. What she terms circumference, or arc, or eternity is, in fact, the gateway from this world to the next, where the fleeing soul finds eternal life. Could we hazard a guess that Dickinson’s impassioned longing to find

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that “costumeless consciousness” is nothing but a reflection of this theory?

Graham Brown has tried to correlate the teachings of transcendentalism to the Bhagawad Gita in his brief essay called the “The Transformation of Nature: Emily Dickinson’s Mystic Poetry”. As he describes it, Transcendentalism was a philosophic and literary movement that flourished in New England as a reaction against 18th century rationalism, the sceptical philosophy of Locke, and the confining religious orthodoxy of New England Calvinism. Brown states that Transcendentalism’s beliefs were idealistic, mystical, eclectic and individualistic, shaped by the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, as well as the teaching of Confucius, the Sufis, the writers of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhists and Swedenborg. Transcendentalism had at its fundamental base a monism holding to the unity of the world and God and the immanence of God in the world. Because of this indwelling of divinity, everything in the world is a microcosm containing within itself all the laws and the meaning of existence. Likewise, the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and latently contains all that the world contains.

Man may fulfil his divine potentialities either through rapt mystical state, in which the divine is infused into the human, or through coming into contact with the truth, beauty, and goodness

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embodied in nature and originating in the Over-Soul. (Brown, 2000)

The concept of the oneness of the body with the universal spirit is a truth Dickinson had intuited on her own, through the faculty of observation. Hers was a conversion to the world of the spirit by Nature Herself, occasioned through the faculty of intuition. This is a notion she held in common with the Transcendentalists, as evidenced in many of her poems, #J 420 being a fine example. Intuition arrives at the central core of the truth not by cogitation or concentration, but by a leap of the unconscious awareness residing within, bounding across logic and reason, to the brilliant truth that will not be denied. It requires high sensitivity and faith, not argument and discourse.

“You’ll know it -- as you know ‘tis Noon --/By Glory --/As you do the Sun --/By Glory --/As you will in Heaven --/Know God the Father -- and the Son.” As Dickinson states in the same poem, mighty things assert themselves by Intuition. Is it required for Omnipotence to explain the nature of the truth? “Omnipotence – had not a Tongue–/ His lisp –is lightning – and the sun–/ His Conversation–with Sea–/ “How shall you know”? Consult your eye!”

Much present in the poetry of Dickinson is the idea of the proximity of the Eternal in the here and now. Like other visionaries she was not content to await Judgement Day for a glimpse of Paradise;

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but, like William Blake, knew that it is visible if the doors of perception could be cleansed.

The ‘lover’ in many of her poems is Eternity itself. There is even a sense of the individual ‘I’ consciousness dissolving into Divinity, the oceanic consciousness: “ ‘Tis little I – could care for pearls/ Who own the ample sea – (#J466). Or else, this little gem (#J 832) is akin to the writings of the mystics and great religious teachers whose teachings point the way to self-knowledge: “Explore thyself!/Therein thyself shalt find/The “Undiscovered Continent” --/No Settler had the Mind.” Finding that Heaven even while on Earth, was her greatest ecstasy, even though it may have meant her exclusion from normal human joys and happiness, everyday intercourse with the society around her and the mundane transactions of human existence. She tries to find that unity with the inexpressible divinity all around her, by employing all the skills at her command, by distorting language and metaphor, by constricting physical and mental space, by piercing through the circumference that binds her, by seeking the centre of the ineffable truth through the powers of the mind and the soul.

In her poems she envisaged worlds far beyond the apparent simplicity of her daily life. Virtually unknown in her lifetime, Dickinson now is perhaps the greatest of the visionaries in 19th century American poetry, with a powerful impact on modern poetry, far ahead of her days

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both in terms of form and idea. In the final reckoning, it is perhaps that sense of vastness, as wide as the universe, that carries her poems so powerfully forward into the future, whether it is this or any other century. She knew with a rare certainty that the self is more than the body signified: she uttered that “the brain is just the weight of God”, “wider than the sky”, “deeper than the sea” (#J632), thus identifying with the immensities in the universe. That vastness spread outward from her short quatrains: none before or after grasped that vastness within the cup of mortal hands. Her poems reveal “firmaments that fill her basket”; her poems were her acquaintance with eternity.

Although the imagery needs no repetition, we may in passing mention the concept of resurrection with its Christian overtones as intersecting the imagery of circumference. The Resurrection of the Christ as narrated in the Bible, we know for sure, was one of the most important sources of inspiration for Dickinson. This then was a direct example of the breaking through the circumference of life, not to meet eternal death, but to come out again, resurrected and alive, and full of the ecstasy of the eternal. The four gospels of the Bible, all mention the crucifixion, the death and then the resurrection in some detail.

The event is the foundation of the Christian theology, especially in that it fulfils the pre-Christian prediction, that the Messiah would come to Israel and preach about the Kingdom of God, would admonish

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the people to change their ways, would be put to death, but would conquer death by his resurrection and his testament of the Everlasting Life. Steeped as she was in the Calvinist theology, while denying the rigidity of that doctrine and its rituals, she accepted the possibility of the mystery of life beyond death. She surrendered herself to the universality in Nature and she hoped all her life for the great revelation that would clarify the critical questions that Life presented. That revelation lay just beyond circumference, the moment between this and the next.

The word resurrection finds constant repetition in the poems of Dickinson. There are at least nine of her poems where the specific word finds mention (#J 74, 216, 322, 491, 515, 608, 876, 984, 1530). Cloistered in the closeness of her room, and in her search for meaning beyond the boundaries, beyond the known circumference of life known to ordinary mortals, Dickinson would have explored the meaning of Resurrection as a possible solution to the mystery of life. Her fascination, some would say obsession, with death was not only to address the question of the end of life as the macabre truth, but to pierce beyond that curtain into the afterlife so as to search for more permanent truths on the other side. We remember how, despite her reluctance to take the formal vows of Calvinism at Amherst, she deeply believed in the Christian theology of atonement and forgiveness and the message to live life like children. The death and resurrection of

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Christ was an incomparable analogy to help understand the nature of the circumscribed life we lead and the liberating force of death which takes us on to a better and more everlasting life, filled with significance and ecstasy.

What does resurrection mean in the Christian philosophy? The new Pope Francis, in his series of messages known as the ‘Year of Faith Catechesis’ delivered in May 2013, said:

Jesus gave himself on the Cross, taking the burden of our sins upon himself and descending into the abyss of death, then in the Resurrection he triumphed over them, took them away and opened before us the path to rebirth and to a new life (Pope Francis, 2013).

Thus the Resurrection after the agonising death on the cross is the doorway to a rebirth and an everlasting life. We may conclude with certainty Dickinson’s frequent and endless investigation into the nature and meaning of death was to satisfy her endless curiosity. This was the ultimate circumference of death she wished to cross through so as to find the final meaning of life.

Through the Resurrection, we are born again as little children, innocent, unspoilt, uncorrupted. Dickinson believed that the metaphor of a child symbolised the unspoilt beauty of innocence with all its bliss and joy.

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We have instances of child-like imagery in the poems of Dickinson, where even the speaker of the lines of the poet assumes the identity of a child. She sees Heaven as a place where children have the love of the heavenly Father: #J 71 is a fine example: “I hope the Father in the skies/Will lift his little girl --/Old fashioned -- naught -- everything --/Over the stile of “Pearl.” Or better still this extract from #J 130: “...Oh Sacrament of summer days,/ Oh Last Communion in the Haze --/Permit a child to join/Thy sacred emblems to partake --/They consecrated bread to take/And thine immortal wine!”

Comparisons are odious but there is sufficient justification to look at a few poets, who may have inherited, in some measure, large or small, the legacy of Dickinson. There are two names which immediately present themselves, namely Walt Whitman and Robert Frost. Herman Melville is another name suggested for comparison, but he is not so well known for his poetry as for his prose.

Both Dickinson (1830-1886) and Whitman (1819-1892) were poets of the late 19th century, and both lived on the eastern seaboard of the continent. They were contemporaries, each with a unique own style of writing, with large variations on their style of writing. Whitman uses free verse, with long compositions, while Dickinson uses complex slant and regular rhymes, along with half rhymes in brief spurts of poetic expression. While he has lengthy and wordy descriptions in

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his poems, Dickinson's are compressed and straight to the point, often tightly structured, though with their own unconventional traits such as dots and dashes, ellipses and punctuation marks. Sometimes Dickinson's lines end abruptly; innocuous words are capitalized and often her meters are typical of hymnals. Dickinson voice is quiet and self-effacing while Whitman is loud expansive and even boasting. Whitman travelled a lot and imbibed his experience from across the vast country.

While Whitman delighted in going out into the world (I am enamour'd of growing out of doors / Of men that live among cattle or taste of the oceans or wood...) (Whitman from "Songs of Myself: 7,8" from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855). Dickinson stayed at home and explored herself and the grand world outside from within the confined of her room and her heart. However, both reflect on their experiences in terms of their relationship to the natural world, moving from concrete observations of nature to metaphysical or spiritual reflections. Both were innovators of poetry, and could be defined as Romantic poets though they may not fit the dictionary definition exactly. Both noted the importance of individualism in society; they revelled in nature seeing it as an important connection to God. Again both believed that one doesn't have to go to church to be with God. Both poets believed that life is continuous and that there is something beyond the rim of existence.

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For both, death was a main theme and they both remained unruffled in the face of death. Whitman had no hesitation in dealing with taboo subjects, such as sex, the human body etc., while Dickinson was more careful and circumspect in the use of words, preferring to approach even difficult subjects tangentially. They both believed too that death took them to a better place. And though they were poets cut from different cloths, they helped shape the literary character of the America of today.

Walt Whitman can be best described as a talkative poet. His poems draw pictures and he wants the reader to see and feel. Simple things are portrayed beautifully in depth and style. “Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till downcast eyes have faith to take it from you.” (Poem 86 of *Leaves of Grass*, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”) Another one of his literary traits can be seen in his poem “Song of Myself” (from *Leaves of Grass*), where he describes his fascination with himself, “my respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs.” He left behind a momentous collection of writings; by the time of his death he was a true figure in literature in the time of his era.

On the other hand, Dickinson’s ideas and writing differs greatly from Whitman’s. She gives a world of meaning and thought in but a few words. And although she does paint with her words, she at the same time allows you to paint the picture yourself.

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Further, each of them had something to say about God, while rejecting traditional Christianity and substituting their own religious vision. For about a third of the world's population, Christianity asserts that all human beings are born guilty by reason of Original Sin and must be redeemed by acceptance of Salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Matt Wallace, in his essay on the subject, examines this issue in some detail. Though Whitman was a Quaker, he expounded on Quaker doctrine of 'inner light' to allow for maximum religious freedom. According to him, no restrictions whatever should be placed on an individual's religious conviction. He denounced the belief that man existed only for the glorification of God and preached that "man's only duty on earth is to enjoy life to the fullest extent, guided only by Deity planted intuitions of one's own soul." Allen Tate had commented that this formed the very foundation of Whitman's own private religion. Of particular interest to us is the thought that Whitman's private religions may have been influenced by Hindi teachings, though when Thoreau asked him about this specifically, after noting the similarity and the resonances in *The Leaves of Grass*, Whitman replied, "No, tell me about them." However, years later, Whitman himself named 'the ancient Hindoo poems' as embryonic facts of '*Leaves of Grass*'.

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As we have seen earlier, the Creator is the ultimate source and meaning of existence; everything else that exists is subordinate to God. Similarly, the soul is a human being's transcendent essence destined to spend eternity either in the presence of God or separated from Him; the soul is the true self and is superior to the temporary vessel of the body. In Hinduism, the ultimate reality is the Atman, the universal Self. It is not an individual being, but rather the totality of all being.

Through knowledge of the one's true self, one gains knowledge of the universal Self. In "Song of Myself", Whitman gives full voice to his 'private religion', discarding the traditional Christian views of 'God' and 'Soul' and substituting a quasi-Hindu view. While creating an equivalence between soul and body, he goes on to dethrone God: "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is." Further, he goes on to say: "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself."

There are clear similarities here with Dickinson's works. She could not bring herself to make the required public profession of faith though she truly may have wanted to. We have read her agonised letters to Abiah Root, clear proof of her reluctance to accept blind faith as demanded of her. By her late twenties, she turned her back on the church and her face towards poetry. Like Whitman, she declared

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her independence from traditional Christianity, while at the same time declaring her devotion to the true God, which manifested himself in nature and the sun and the wind and the waters. Though Dickinson found it impossible to be a Christian in the doctrinally pure sense, throughout her life she “wrestled with God the father”, and “was drawn irresistibly to Jesus the son.” (Lundin, 1998)

Both poets substituted their respective rejected traditional Christianity with their own religious vision. For Whitman, as we have seen, it was a ‘private religion’ which celebrated the uniqueness and grandeur of the individual within the whole life and the cosmos. For Dickinson, it was a cherished dual struggle to understand her relationship with God and to create her own place in the world in which she lived.

Michel Estabrook in his essay comparing Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson argued that though the two poets are often considered the most representative and influential American poets, and yet they are, in many respects, very different. Indeed, one of the hallmark differences between them is in the length of lines they use in their poems. Characteristically, Whitman employs, and is indeed the master of, the long line. Dickinson, on the other hand, makes use exclusively of short, staccato, unadorned lines. Estabrook argues that a case can be made for the notion that a relationship exists between line length

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and the kinds of ideas expressed by these poets. The ideas Whitman presents in his poems are more individual, personal, and emotional, whereas Dickinson presents ideas which seem more universal and at times almost factual in nature. This basic difference between the two can be supported by examining a “typical” poem by each poet.

When Whitman presents the idea of death in his poetry it is very personalized, almost to the point of being unique to him. In “Song of Myself,” stanza 49, he addresses Death directly: “And as to you Death, and your bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me”. He admits that Death has the power to do as it wishes, to do him harm, but he will not be afraid. He is not readily resigning himself to Death, and he will certainly not be intimidated. “And as to you Corpse, I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me”. He sees the good that can come from Death. “I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing, I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts of melons”. Furthermore, even though Death may take him now, “No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before,” he is going because he has no choice, but it is not the end, and he will argue and put up a fight. He will rise above the inevitable: “Toss to the moaning gibberish of the dry limbs. I ascend from the moon, I ascend from the night, I perceive that the ghastly glimmer is noonday sunbeams small.” We can see that Death is not a simple idea for Whitman. He faces it unafraid, tries to talk it down, push it back, beat

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it away. Ultimately, he accepts it, yet does not. He taunts Death in his defiance and in his affirmation of life.

Dickinson, on the other hand, presents the idea of death in a much different way. In her poem, "Because I could not stop for Death," one simple idea is expressed, that Death is inevitable. Because most people do not ask for Death, "He kindly stopped for me". Then he went slowly about his business, taking her along with him on his journey. They passed by life, youth, children, and the fields and light of Earth. They "paused before a House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground" before continuing "toward Eternity." Not once does she fight the inevitable tug of death. She is going just like everyone else has gone and must go. There is nothing to be done about it, so go along just like everyone else. She is uninterested in persuading or in even discussing the subject. She is resigned to her fate, a universal fate, not particularly personalized for her. In this case, it is almost a pleasant experience, a comfortable resignation to what is inevitable.

We can see then that the long and complex lines of Whitman are used for deep, complicated and emotional expression. His ideas are seldom simple, but instead, multifaceted and sprawling in scope. They are steeped in individuality, rooted in and reflecting the frequently illogical fluctuations of personality. There is plenty of room in his lines for such expression. Whereas Dickinson, due in part to the

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abbreviated, staccato nature of her lines, is much more restrained. Yet both, needless to say, say what they must clearly and beautifully.

Along with this differing nature of the manner in which they express their ideas, the feel of their poems is also different. Whitman feels big and grand, fearless of death. He feels louder, brighter, bolder, when he ties together all types of people, all generations, those just born, those dying or dead, with the symbol of grass. For him grass is “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” (Song of Myself: Line 110) “The smallest sprout shows really there is no death.../ All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / and to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.” (lines 126, 129-130)

But one common thread that binds them together is the fact that both can be considered the founders of modern American poetry. The works of the two literary legends influenced and contributed substantially to world poetry, and especially American poetry.

Yet another major American poet we may consider in relation to the work of Dickinson is Robert Frost. We may seek resonances and comparisons in the poetry of Robert Frost and Dickinson so as to see whether there are congruities in the vision and the philosophy inherent on their themes and visions. Margaret Freeman has made an attempt to do this. She writes that both poets claimed Amherst as their home, Dickinson having been born there, and Frost settling there as his final

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dwelling place. Freeman suggests that Frost practised a schema in the format of his poetic works: a Linear Path schema with its internal structure of a starting point, an end point and a series of points along the way; and a parallel Balance schema, with a point of axis around which forces and weights must be distributed, so that the counteract and balance of one another. These two schemas inform all his poems including use of meter and rhythm, stanza and rhyme, imagery and metaphor.

In contrast, as David Porter has complained, Dickinson is thought to have no poetics, reflecting an openendedness, a lack of linearity: poems fail to finish what it was expected to do, lapsing into redundancy with no sense of direction and completeness. Surely, the lines do tease and astonish and withhold sense in the beginning, but clarification is not delivered. Margaret Freeman, however, disagrees, since Dickinson, by the very nature of her singular being, never relied on poetics. She refused to be subjected to any tradition or rule. We know she wrote to Higginson: "I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organise-my little Force explodes - and leaves me bare and charred." (Letter to TW Higginson, August 1862).

While this sentence is often read as failure, Freeman suggests that Dickinson is following the Container schema, with its internal structure of spatial boundedness, involving separation, differentiation

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and enclosure. Once the container is breached, the forces that limit and constrain are no longer operative, and the constrained theme or idea of the poem is in a state of boundlessness, of freedom. Here we hint at circumference again: breaking through the bounds of creative expression to find freedom beyond the rim. There is also the schema of change, of mutability, that is ever present in her poems.

A comparison to Frost is inevitable here: Frost once wrote in his preface to his *Complete Poems* (1949) that a poem should provide a “momentary stay against confusion,” and defined poetry as an artistic medium which reflects stability and permanence encompassed by the moment of the poem. What he probably meant was that a poem should contain some clarification of life, however slight, some perspective or insight. He believed too that a creative act is inspired by God, that the impulse to write is divine and that poetry could express dimensions of immortality. In ‘Birches’, Frost’s ‘momentary stay’ is the desire to believe, if only for a while, that one can “come back” and “begin over” the journey of life; but this is balanced by a knowledge and acceptance of the unidirectional linearity of life.

When introducing the anthology ‘New Poets of England and America’ (1957) he alluded to his belief that poets enter a meditative “state of grace” while composing. For Dickinson too thoughts of divinity could not have been far from her as she wrote her poems. She

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could see divinity in nature and the presence of a larger spirit in the universe around her, especially as she mulled over Immortality. In this feature at least, there is remarkable consonance between Dickinson and Frost.

However, it cannot be denied that as opposed to Frost, she often demonstrated in her poems, with blistering integrity, that any momentary stays are illusory and fake and, if attempted, will explode. In one of her most famous poems just referred to, “Because I could not stop/ for Death-” the journey’s linear progression is interrupted as the sun passes the riders and the heads of the horses are merely turned ‘toward’ eternity. The linear metaphor of movement through time is replaced with the schemas of Container and Change which creates a dynamic explosion of emotion and feeling. In life, the Container can be either open or can be breached under pressure. In either case, the open or breached container provides the environment for the dynamics of movement and transformation to occur. This can be seen in the “building of the soul” in “The Props assist the House-” (#J 1142) or the emergence of the butterfly from its cocoon in “My Cocoon tightens – Colours tease-” (#J 1099).

Another dramatic poem to demonstrate this is #J 216 “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers”: in the first stanza, the container scheme of death is untouched and not affected by the changing cycle of time in

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contract with the second stanza, where the years pass in the cyclical sweep of planetary motion. The Change schema of the second stanza invokes not only change in movement but also transformation as the diadems and doges of her closing lines are subjected to the vicissitudes of mutability. As we have seen earlier, Dickinson's 'crescent', 'arcs', and 'disc' are terms associated with her use of 'Circumference' throughout her poetry and all invoke the idea of circle and cycle that are part of the main Container schema of her poetics.

Margaret Freeman has attempted to compare the two poets in the basis of the cognitive linguistic approach by taking up Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of light." Both are structurally alike in having four stanzas of four lines each, with the outer stanzas providing a frame for the inner ones. Their stress-timed tetrameters mirror each other, with Frost's iambic and Dickinson's trochaic meters.

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<p>Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening:</p> <p>Robert Frost</p>	<p>There's a certain Slant of Light (#J 258):</p> <p>Emily Dickinson</p>
<p>Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village, though; He will not see me stopping here To watch his woods fill up with snow.</p> <p>My little horse must think it queer To stop without a farmhouse near Between the woods and frozen lake The darkest evening of the year.</p> <p>He gives his harness bells a shake To ask if there is some mistake. The only other sound's the sweep Of easy wind and downy flake.</p> <p>The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep; And mile to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep</p>	<p>There's a certain Slant of light, Winter Afternoons -- That oppresses, like the Heft Of Cathedral Tunes --</p> <p>Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -- We can find no scar, But internal difference, Where the Meanings, are --</p> <p>None may teach it -- Any -- 'Tis the Seal Despair -- An imperial affliction Sent us of the Air --</p> <p>When it comes, the Landscape listens -- Shadows - hold their breath - When it goes, 'tis like the Distance On the look of Death --</p>

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Both outer stanzas of Frost establish the setting and the theme, and introduce the human characters in the poem: the speaker, the owner of the woods, and by inference, those to whom promises have been made. The poem begins in stasis, as the speaker/rider stops to watch the “woods fill up with snow,” and ends in implied movement, with the rider thinking about moving on, with “promises to keep” and “miles to go.” It is the inner two stanzas that turn the poem into an epistemic contemplation/experience of an opposition that has the possibility (though not the probability) of being out of the speaker’s control. The middle two stanzas focus on the speaker’s horse, unsettled by the stopping, and wanting to move on. Thus, the two schemas of ‘Balance’ and ‘Path’ structure the poem, with two conflicting desires—the desire for stasis and the desire for movement—and the resolution of these desires at the end by the speaker’s acceptance of the need for movement, a movement which, on another level, is frequently read as the turn toward life as opposed to an inviting death. The speaker has also moved with the poem from a maximally objective position of thinking, knowing, and stopping to the more subjective perspective of mentally accepting the obligations of movement.

The trajectory of the poem, therefore, is linear, not circular. It reflects the metaphor of life is a journey through time, with the speaker as an agent moving across life’s terrain, being active, making decisions, exerting control.

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Although the poem ostensibly describes a solitary, intimate moment, the feelings of the speaker are expressed only through inference: from the feelings projected onto his horse and from the suggestive description of external events—the darkest evening, the frozen lake, the wind and the flake, the woods themselves. There is, in consequence, no suspicion that the speaker is not in control of the situation. However, threatening and irrational the external world might be, the poet will always be able to create that “stay,” however “momentary,” “against confusion.”

Dickinson’s poem, though structurally similar, is quite different. Like Frost’s poem, Dickinson’s outer two stanzas also provide the setting and the theme, in this case the particular quality that winter light may have in the late afternoon, especially in northerly latitudes (like Amherst), where the winter sun stays low on the horizon. Unlike Frost’s poem, however, the grounding of Dickinson’s poem is maximally subjective from the outset. This distinction is reflected in the different uses of the present tense. In Frost’s poem, the present tense refers to the speaker’s reality space; in Dickinson’s it refers to the “perpetual” present of experience. Whereas Frost’s poem profiles the ground with explicit self-reference to the speaker, the ground in Dickinson’s poem is offstage, minimalized further by the phonological reduction of the verb in the opening phrase, “There’s.” The agent of these outer stanzas, the slant of light, is a natural phenomenon, and its

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movement is not linear, but rather that of appearing and disappearing, emerging into view and then receding from it.

In the first stanza, this subjectivity is reinforced by the lack of a complement after the verb “oppresses,” a silence that paradoxically draws us as listeners closer to the oppressive nature of the light. In the last stanza, the ground is also maximally subjective, with speaker and listener offstage, outside the objective scene. The passiveness of human agency is further reinforced by contrast to the natural elements of landscape and shadows that “listen” and “hold their breath” in response to the appearance of the slant of light. The effect is one of total stasis, of life held in suspension. Whatever agency there is in this poem, it is not human.

The deictic terms “comes” and “goes” further establish a perspective of a stationary viewpoint, with the when and the where of the coming and the going left unstated. The two inner stanzas are different. The ground, that is, the speaker’s perspective, is made more objective, as the two stanzas draw both speaker and hearer into the scene. We, however, are still not agents, but rather patient receivers of the power of the light to hurt. The only agency attributed to us is that of discovering the effects of the light. And even this discovery is negative: “We can find no scar.” Nor are we given any power over the light; it cannot be taught, and we cannot be taught anything that would enable us to control it. The effect is internal.

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In this poem, the Container is breached by a force from the outside, rather than a force from within, so that change occurs within the container of the human being. Ironically, the light is thus maximally distanced from the speaker and hearer in the two outer stanzas, but is made present to the speaker and hearer in the two interior ones, as it causes inside the container of ourselves “internal difference / Where the Meanings, are -.” Just as the light has been placed into our mental space through the opening existential construction, so are we drawn into the light’s “objective scene” in these interior stanzas. The light hurts us, not, paradoxically, in a physical, but in a mental-emotional way, as an affliction of despair.

The movement that occurs in Dickinson’s poem is not the movement of a purposeful being, as in Frost’s poem, but the apparent movement of a natural phenomenon, expressed abstractly as a “Slant of light.” Nor is the movement linear, across space, but rather that of coming into and then fading from view. With the ground of the perspective of speaker and hearer unprofiled, offstage, we are made to feel the effect of the light, not as an objective, but as a subjective phenomenon. Inside that frame, representing the frame of the Container schema of the human being in the inner stanzas, the damage has been done, not visible, but internal, an affliction of “Despair.”

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We are made one with the “certain Slant of light” which, as it comes and goes, leaves us, through the operation of the Change schema, with the intimation of our own mortality. Frost’s death comes at the end of a journey; Dickinson’s is present with us, delivered by the

force of the light that can bring “Heavenly Hurt.” This, then, is the source of her power, latent within the container of her outer frame, but potentially ready to explode. Thomas Carlisle refers to this phenomenon in his poem, “Emily Dickinson,” when he describes her as “demure as dynamite.” It was not a question of who is the better poet, but rather a question of the difference in their poetics that results in a very different kind of poetry.

Margaret Freeman concluded the comparison by stating that one might understand why it is that Dickinson has grown in reputation to surpass Frost. Although Frost lived in the twentieth century, the metaphorical schemas of his poetics look back to the eighteenth century belief in human rationality and faith in human purpose. Although Dickinson lived in the nineteenth century, the metaphorical schemas of her poetics look forward to the twenty first, as we increasingly recognize the destructive power of natural forces greater than our own. Frost’s wildness is that of the wooded hills, constrained within the parameters of human achievement; Dickinson’s wildness is that of the wilderness, untouched and untamed. Frost, in the end, is tame and safe; Dickinson is wild and dangerous.

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In the kind of world we live in today, with the destructive forces of earthquakes, floods, and fires, with terrorists' acts and horrendous violations of human rights, Dickinson speaks to us more directly of our own experience: that there are forces greater than ours, but that our own forces mirror them in their power to explode, to leave us "bare and charred." Frost may achieve "a momentary stay", but it will always give way, at least in our time, to Dickinson's exploding forces. (Freeman, 2002)

Comparisons have been made with pop-folk singer Bob Dylan's craft in his 1997 music album "Time out of Mind" with regard to the Emily Dickinson's apocalyptic expectations of the return of divine vision to an empty soul once ravished, then left bereft, the bride at the altar praying for the return of the bridegroom. For the lost love to which both these poets pour out their hearts is only symbolically another person. As it did in the Old Testament, as it did in Puritan poetry, as it often has in great American literature, the human other stands in for a transcendent reality, for a truth outside the texts of human culture.

As William Faulkner (1897-1962) says humans can comprehend truth "only through the complexity of passion and lust and hate and fear which drives the heart" (Faulkner, *The Bear*, 1964). Even the old Puritans wrote love songs which on the surface were thoroughly

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sensual but clearly were addressed not just to the human form. Dylan as the powerful symbol of music had an indelible place in the pantheon of American music.

Rock ‘n Roll was born out of gospel and the blues, and the most powerful aspect of this music, rock critic Greil Marcus tells us, “did not come from Africa but from the Puritan revival of the Great Awakening, the revival that spread across the American colonies more than 200 years ago. It was an explosion of dread and piety that southern whites passed onto their slaves and that blacks ultimately fashioned into their own religion.” (Marcus, 2011). It is this tradition which both Dylan and Dickinson use to understand their spiritual experience.

Both Emily Dickinson and Bob Dylan suffered a similar breaking out of the cage of conditioned consciousness to stand for a moment outside of the text, outside of the cause and effect relationships of time, to be awakened from the walking sleep of normal consciousness to experience the light of what Dickinson called “Eternity.” But both lost that vision, the moment passed, leaving them back in the literal world ravished but abandoned, damaged goods unable to return to Egypt but unable to forget their glimpse of the promised land. Left alone with an unbearable longing for the return of that vision, they both were forced to put back on and wear the human masks with which we all lie our way through the world. Both these Americans reacted with the same

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fierce need to give voice to their longing and their loss, walking, as Dylan sang, “through streets that are dead.” And to that, we owe the power of their poetry. Nevertheless, for both poets the longing is made somewhat easier by what little still is left of the memory of the love that’s been lost. Both seem to claim that, as the old Puritans preached, they are “in the world but not of it.”

Dickinson could claim that the moment of vision gave her at least a tiny taste of eternity, a single dram of heaven, a glimpse of the reality outside of false perceptions of the world. But that single dram, though it only came once a world, was better than never having seen a glimpse of what is outside the worldly cage. So too, while Dylan knows he is in the world with its illusion of flesh and dirt and its lies and deceptions and sham identities, he sings in the last two lines of the album, “I’m there in my mind/ And that’s good enough for now.”

By narrowing her circle, Emily Dickinson positioned herself in constant direct contact with both centre and circumference in a spot that would inevitably be pierced over and over by God’s painful but liberating diameters. With her “narrow Hands” (#J 657), she gathered paradise in a way with which no giant could compete. Each deprivation and negative choice contracted her circuit and brought her closer to immortality. The smallness of the poet’s self-image and the exaggerated way in which she habitually restricted her claims to power

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or even to physical stature provide clues to her assault on the force that enclosed all human limitation and that she desperately wanted to penetrate. Because she considered herself “small, like the Wren,” she positioned herself to share in God’s glory.

This was a poet of contradictions: she explored familial relationships, between father and daughter, between sister and sister, between sister and brother, between sister and sister-in-law through letters and poems that speak both privately and also universally to us, even through the ages that separate her times from ours. She lived and loved the men who came into her life, without once leaving a trace of the identity of the person, her “Master”, to whom she had given her heart. She roamed the outer most psychological limits of the human consciousness, for almost three decades, without once leaving her bedroom at the Hampstead. She constricted her style and poesy deliberately so that she could, with the force of that constriction, break through the circumference separating life and death and expand her consciousness farther than any poet of her time and age could have possibly speculated.

She broke and fractured the English language, and layered meaning after meaning on words in new contexts and with a new perspective; she gave birth to innovative interpretations on old and stale words while living the quiet and unknown life of a spinster all her

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life; she constructed a prototype of poetry that found resonance three decades later, when poetry was revolutionised in the modern era. She fashioned a form of poetic psychological examination of thought and behaviour that startles the senses and brings new light to bear on human behaviour and intention. She saw deeper than others; she delved into the most secret recesses of consciousness, dredging out secret and hidden motives that compel us to act in our own singular ways. And in the end, she lived out her life, not even knowing that her unique view of life and death would ever see the light of day. That then is the reason that she stands tall in the pantheon of poets and writers in the English speaking world.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the course of this doctoral thesis, after examining in some detail the evolution of the social, religious and literary backdrop of New England emerging from the days immediately following the voyage of the Mayflower, the growth of the literature of New England in the years after the War of Independence and immediately following the Civil War was also studied. The personal life story of the remarkable poet was then discussed: her first forays into poetry, her education at Amherst, her troubled relationship with her father and her sister-in-law, her disastrous love affairs and the deliberate manner in which she lived a secluded life, all the better to nurture that rare and unforgettable talent to seek beauty and divinity in the world around her. A scrutiny was made of her quest for meaning in life, and life after life, through the singular instrument of circumference, and it is quite possible that she may have grasped that meaning albeit fleetingly in some of the poems she so poignantly crafted.

Seven of the principal characteristics of Dickinson's life and poetics were identified, since this is essential to gain a fuller understanding of the nature and singularity of the poet's persona with special reference to circumference. While each, or several of them, may have been explored in full by various authors and critics, an attempt

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has been made in this study to collate them together at one place. They may be summarised again for clarity: Dickinson's wilful denial of the Calvin Doctrine of Christianity; the replacement of that void by her appreciation of the beauty of nature as the face of God; the internal landscape of the spirit as the playground or, rather, the battleground of the conflicting inner concepts that must be confronted; the use of language and metaphor and all its appurtenants, to present the truth as she sees it with startling honesty and a disturbing clarity; her embrace of pain to distil the meaning of the life she led and the use of it to gain a higher knowledge; her glee in the absolute enjoyment of delight with the heart-breaking innocence of a child; and finally, her Flood subject, that of immortality and death as the means to break through the circumference and reach, however fleetingly, the evanescent ecstasy of eternity. Was there a conscious design to this Dickinsonian strategy, or is it only that present day critics, with hindsight, know much more than she did, with our modern day instruments of psychoanalysis and interpretation?

The fact remains that with the passage of time, Dickinson has not faded away into obscurity, when many of her contemporaries did; rather, she has gained in strength and power, influencing writers and poets who followed her, in a manner that very few of her literary contemporaries could have. We have seen her name figure in the list of the greatest names in literature as brought out in Bloom's 1994

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work, *The Western Canon*. And her influence, far from waning, continues to impact on later poets. It would be difficult to say which poet has not been influenced in some way or the other by Dickinson. Her challenge of orthodoxy, whether on terms of religious belief or on the contentious issue of the format of a poem, both find empathy in a number of poets who came after her. In fact, there are no later poets, especially after the first quarter of the twentieth century, who can claim a complete disassociation with her. What is now termed as modern poetry must by necessity find some resonance in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Surely, no literary genre typified the Modern period as much as poetry, and no phrase summed up Modernist poetry so well as Ezra Pound's poetic command "Make it New!" Perhaps drawn to poetry's impromptu nature and its emotionally dense language, many of the era's greatest writers were poets, and they gave modern American poetry as distinct a voice as Emily Dickinson had given it decades before.

The modern poets, in some way or another, all sought to make their poetry something new, something different from the literature that had come before them. From the intricate poetic constructions of Robert Frost to the challenging stylistic innovations of such experimental writers as e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, modernist poetry showed a deep dissatisfaction with tradition. Frost's poems, such as "The Road Not Taken" and "Design,"

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wrestled with the question of a seemingly hostile world and the issue of free will versus determinism, all in the form of strict verse and elaborate nature imagery. Focusing more on stylistic exploration, e.e. cummings's poems challenged readers by intentionally subverting the very rules of grammar that the English language was built upon, presenting a new style of poetry that dealt less with conscious topics and more with associations and dreamlike images. William Carlos Williams, a former paediatrician, became a celebrated poet and his poems such as *This Is Just to Say* and *The Red Wheel Barrow*, with their simple styles and seemingly inconsequential subject matter, set the stage for a poet's quiet revolt against unquestioning convention, be it literary, social, or logical.

Some poets of the time sought to make their poems intentionally difficult, drawing the reader into the work. T.S. Eliot, along with Pound, turned to ancient Greek and Latin texts for inspiration as they tried to understand their very modern world around them while maintaining a connection with the classics of the past. Eliot's most famous work, *The Waste Land*, expressed a bleak view of the post-World War I humanity in puzzling language, rich with obscure allusions, attempting to force the reader to be an active part of the poetic process. Similarly, Wallace Stevens, an insurance salesman turned acclaimed poet, rejected even the artist's life, despite writing some of the most acclaimed poetry of this time. His poems, such as "*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a*

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Blackbird,” were written in his own idiosyncratic, intricate, precisely phrased inner language of symbols and metaphors, making for both challenging and stunning reading.

Academic criticism of the past twenty years has blended issues of Dickinson’s psychology, biography, history, and, most importantly, linguistics. Wendy Martin in her essay “Dickinson’s Legacy Today” in the *Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* said that in analyzing her use of diction and syntax, twentieth-century critics have helped shape Dickinson studies into a field of gigantic proportions. The emphasis placed on Dickinson’s writing, mixed with all of these other aspects, has allowed scholars to more fully understand Dickinson’s mind and art. Not only has Dickinson greatly affected the development of important critical viewpoints, but she has also greatly influenced other writers. William Carlos Williams, who called Emily Dickinson “his patron saint,” acknowledged her influence on his poetry. His concept of the variable foot as a relative, not a fixed, stress, using the breath and inflection of American speech instead of rigid accent and measured syllables to determine phrase and line length, is based on Dickinson’s flexible organic metrics. Similarly inspired by Dickinson’s poetry are Frost’s “sentence sounds” – the rhythms of everyday speech loosely structured by standard poetic forms. So also is Ezra Pound’s “functional,” as opposed to “forced”, metrics. In an interesting anecdote noted in Jay Parini’s biography of Robert

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Frost, not only did Dickinson greatly affect Frost's poetry, but she also played an integral role in shaping his biography. Attempting to court his eventual wife, Elinor White, Frost sought to impress her by reading her favourite poems by Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, while he introduced White to his own favourite – Emily Dickinson.

The poet Marianne Moore was also greatly influenced by Dickinson's poetry. In *The Anxiety of Gender* (1984), Vivian Pollak writes that Dickinson was an "ally" to Moore in her search for finding the proper voice for articulating her thoughts and emotions: "pointed, yet not sour; powerful, yet not masculinized; moral, yet not didactic." (Pollock, 1984). Since the release of the Johnson edition of Dickinson's poetry and letters, many poets have used Dickinson's influence to guide their writing. Poets like Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg, Wallace Stevens, and Sylvia Plath all incorporate aspects of Dickinson in their poetry, all the while proclaiming her to be one of the best poets in the world. Adrienne Rich's poem "E" shows the incalculable effects Dickinson has had on literature. Poets such as Rich, Hart Crane, Joyce Carol Oates, and Billy Collins have admired Dickinson's power and control over her creative life as well as her pioneering use of language.

Although poetry is the most obvious creative medium that Dickinson has influenced, she has also had a significant impact on

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music, theatre, dance, film, art, and popular culture. Some musicians, such as the 1960s' folk duo Simon and Garfunkel, have written songs about Dickinson or referenced her in their lyrics. Other musicians, from opera sopranos to rock singers, have sung Dickinson's poems to music. There have also been several successful theatrical productions of different aspects of Dickinson's life and her work. Author Susan Glaspell based her 1931 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Alison's House*, on Dickinson's life. The most well-known play about Dickinson – William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst* (1976) – was a favourite with critics and audiences alike. The play had great success on Broadway and earned the leading actress, Julie Harris, a Tony Award.

Many writers have incorporated her genius into their works beginning with Martha Graham's 1940 piece, *Letter to the World*. In this production, Graham focuses on Dickinson's romantic life, creating choreography appropriately matched to her personal relationships and experiences. These experiences are divided into five stages, each using a different poem in its telling of the story. Both Heinz Poll with his *Called Back – Emily* (1984), and Warren Spears with his *Rowing in Eden* (1987), created ballets which sought to depict Dickinson's romantic life and the beauty of her words. Visual artists honour Dickinson's work in a variety of ways. For example, Joseph Cornell pays homage to Dickinson by creating "box constructions" that include collages, painted interiors, grids, and objects. Roni Horn,

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Paul Katz, and Lesley Dill have also used Dickinson as inspiration for their art. Dill makes sculptures that incorporate actual words from Dickinson's poems. The wealth of artists inspired by Dickinson led to the first major visual art exhibition devoted to and inspired entirely by Dickinson, organized by Susan Danly at College's Mead Art Museum in 1997. Actress Julie Harris, artist Lesley Dill, poet Billy Collins, and critic Polly Longworth are all featured in Jim Wolpaw's playful 2002 documentary, *Loaded Gun: Life, and Death, and Dickinson*. This film chronicles one man's quest to understand the woman behind the mythology and to explore what Dickinson means to different types of people. Dickinson's popularity can be experienced to the fullest at the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts, where from around the world go to walk through The Homestead and The Evergreens and attend events such as marathon readings of all of Dickinson's poems.

Dickinson continues to intrigue and fascinate the generations of literature students coming after her. She is the never-ending subject matter of debates and discussions, term papers and doctoral theses. It cannot be denied that she has influenced, and continues to influence writers, as she looms ever larger on the emerging psyche. It also cannot be questioned that in the method of her delivery and in the physiological concepts she drew attention to, she can be very clearly situated in the post-modern era. Her staccato delivery and

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her playfulness with rhymes and metre, her sudden dashes and dots and exclamation marks, her capitalizations of words and her half-rhymes, all exhibit both her contempt for outdated forms as well as her impatience to experiment with new idioms and patterns. That she is a major influence on writers who lived after her days were over, is accepted fact: that truth is apparent in the language and diction of the many who followed her.

There is one more facet of her writings that we may glance at. In the course of this research, we have dealt with at length, and summarily, a large collection of her poems. We have also gone through extracts from her letters, more personal and immediate, than the formalised themes of the poems. It has been rightly said that while the poems pronounce her views on universal truths through herself and her unique voice, the letters reflect spontaneity and warmth as they are written, almost as a daily and personal engagement with family and friends. The third form of expression is seen in the “Prose Fragments”, collected after her death from nooks and corners of her room, written on loose papers, including envelope covers and bills. Each of them has been numbered with the prefix PF. Perhaps they are drafts of poems in the making or the beginnings of letters she could not complete. But, nevertheless, they reflect one more side to her personality, her wit, her thoughtfulness and the manner of her expression.

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PF 2: “No dreaming can compare with reality, for Reality itself is a dream from which but a portion of mankind have yet waked and part of us is a not familiar Peninsula.”

(The kernel of truth hidden in this fragment is that we have to find our heaven or hell here on this earth and not in some fantasized version of Paradise.)

PF 4: “The import of that Paragraph “The Word made Flesh”. Had he the faintest intimation Who broached it Yesterday! “Made Flesh and dwelt among us.”

(The reference is to the Biblical Jesus, who, fulfilling Messianic prophesies, took on the bodily form to walk the Earth among us.)

PF 53: “When it becomes necessary for us to stake our all upon the belief of another in as for instance Eternity, we find it is impossible to make the transfer - Belief is unconsciously to most of us Ourselves - an Untried Experience-.”

(Undoubtedly, this is a concept which Dickinson must have laboured to understand all her life.)

PF 69: “Consummation is the hurry of fools but Expectation the Elixir of the Gods –.”

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(Dickinson lived her life on Hope and spent her life singing songs like “a thing with feathers”. It was not for her to drain dry the cup of life, but to wait in exquisite hope for the ecstasy that mature understanding would bring.)

PF 70: “Death being the first form of Life which we have had the power to Contemplate, our entrance here being an Exclusion from comprehension, it is amazing that the fascination of our predicament does not entice us more. With such sentences as these directly over our Heads we are as exempt from Exultation as the Stones –.”

(Seeing Death as a form of life is surely a metaphor for circumference; for as we have seen, physical death for her may have been but a doorway to a greater life and a greater truth.)

PF 80: “I don’t keep the Moth part of the House - I keep the Butterfly part.”

(A seemingly flip statement; but one she surely meant with the kind of poetic sensibility she possessed. Did she mean she preferred beauty to morbidity?)

PF 81: “I held it so tight that I lost it, said the Child of the Butterfly. Of many a vaster Capture that is the Elegy.”

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(A thing of beauty cannot be clutched to one's breast and not allowed to go. The selfish hold of one's prized possession may result in the loss of what was so ardently desired.)

PF 99: "Paradise is no Journey because it is within - but for that very cause though - it is the most Arduous of Journeys - because as the Servant Conscientiously says at the Door, We are out."

(This repeats Dickinson's philosophy that one must seek to find our heaven here on earth itself, and within ourselves: this is similar in thought to PF 2.)

PF 113: "There are those who are shallow intentionally and only profound by accident."

(A wry remark on the citizens of Amherst perhaps!)

PF 114: "To know whether we are in Heaven or on Earth is one of the most impossible of the mind's decisions, but I think the balance always leans in favour of the negative - if Heaven is negative."

(We can see how obsessed she was, even in her prose fragments, with the concept of finding heaven here on earth, not in church or in sermons, but through the seeing eyes of her craft.)

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What the fragments also reveal is the contemplative nature of Dickinson's personality. In all her waking hours, whether she was writing poetry or her letters, she was cogitating on the great mysteries of Life around her, about her craft of poetry and the gift of imagination granted to her to see the truth of the real nature of life, even life beyond life. This is not to say that she was not involved in the everyday and mundane activities of the home she lived in. We know she cooked in the kitchen: we have, in her letters to friends, a detailed recipe for a cake. We know she was impatient of the cleaning and other household chores, whereas she would take special care in sending the neighbours living around her house some little gift, perhaps a precious poem, even flowers from her garden.

But having briefly drawn attention to the normality of the life she lived in, at least initially, we cannot but admit that she realised she had a special purpose which required all her energies and the days and years of her life. This attempts to focus on her concept of circumference as the mysterious imperative of her life, perhaps her door to the mystery of life itself. In the previous four chapters we have seen various aspects of her life and her craft, the manner in which others have seen her works and the impact she has had on writing in general and on poetry in particular. Now, the intent of this final part of this chapter is to arrive at conclusions and to generalise the broad perspectives we have explored in the course of this research.

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A quick round of some perceptive comments made about her art and craft by serious critics, who have tried to highlight certain other not-so-well-known aspects of Dickinson's works, is attempted here. From them, we shall make our arguments for justifying the stand we have taken, by identifying her singular traits and making our final observations.

Perhaps the central core of her body of works shall forever remain death and immortality, and we cannot help but comment on the same in this final chapter of conclusions. As Mary Powell stated, to fully understand Emily Dickinson's attitude toward life one must grapple, as Dickinson herself did, with the problem of death. Death was *the* problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve but which she always explored, even before the deaths of loved ones during the last decade of her life. Because Dickinson's poetry is dedicated to recording the subtle emotions of the moment, her attitude toward death is not consistent from poem to poem. At times, her poems seem to embrace the possibility, even probability, of immortality and an afterlife. Other poems are more depressed and despairing, while still others suggest the poet's resigned acceptance of uncertainty. The poems record the changes in Dickinson's fluctuating emotions. However, there is a persistent thread of mystery, silence, and uncertainty that always surrounds death in her writing. (Powell, 2007.)

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While the culture of her times attempted to make death familiar and even comfortable, she undercut sentimental Victorian ideas about death and the afterlife by emphasizing the inherent inscrutability of death. Her project is not necessarily to clarify death but to explore its silence, mystery, and unknowability as well as to record the range of emotions that this frightening mystery awakens in the human heart. The importance of mortality to Dickinson's work is evident in the sheer number of poems and letters that are preoccupied with the subject. The subject index of Johnson's reading edition of Dickinson's poems lists almost 150 poems under the headings of "dead" and "death." The passing away of many of her friends and family, almost with a definite periodicity, confounded her poetic sensibilities. We have seen how the faith of the Calvinist that she was, suffered damage as she turned to questions pertaining to the nature of life and death.

Personal losses notwithstanding, Dickinson's interest in death was not confined to the last decade of her life. On the contrary, in 1852 at the age of twenty-one Dickinson wrote to Jane Humphrey, "I think of the grave very often". Some of her very earliest poems written in 1852-3, though extremely conventional and sentimental, nonetheless revolve around death, resurrection, and eternity, subjects that repeatedly reappear in Dickinson's poetry and prose for the remainder of her life. Though Dickinson's fascination with death might seem an abnormal obsession to contemporary readers in a culture that pushes death to the

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margins of consciousness, such interest was, in fact, quite commonplace in nineteenth century Victorian America. This interest in deathbed scenes descended from Puritan ideas that there was no more telling sign of election than a serene deathbed acceptance which served as inspiration and consolation to those left behind. Appropriate deathbed behaviour, or *ars moriendi*, was a common topic of conversation as well as an important part of sentimental fiction.

When Gilbert, her eight-year old nephew died, Dickinson's compassionate letter to the little boy's mother reflected her struggle for control and her groping towards her art in the task of coping with death. "The Vision of Immortal life has been fulfilled – how simply at last the Fathom comes! The Passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us ...No crescent was this Creature – He travelled from the Full - Such soar, but never set -. I see him in the Star, and meet his velocity in everything that flies..." And in the quatrain at the end she wrote: "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light/ Painless except for us-/who slowly ford the Mystery/which thou has leaped across."

She understood and, prism-like, refracted to Susan an image of the dear child's brief unfinished life as an elemental part of God's mystery – a mystery equal in enigma, in surprise, to immortality itself, and, like seas and stars and suns, emblematic of its certainty.

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“Dickinson had pushed past willingness to die, past birds and angels, past sweet goodnights and reunions in heaven, to a clearer, more complete vision of the soul’s trajectory from seen to unseen, a vision that dominated her later years and the late consolations. Through closer acquaintance with death, she had accepted its validity, if not its pain.” (Mackenzie and Dana, 2007)

Nineteenth-century America’s fascination with death and immortality was exemplified by the massive popularity of mourning manuals and the growth of the rural cemetery movement. Dickinson’s interest in death, then, is not macabre but in alignment with her culture. However, Dickinson’s depictions of death are much more complicated and stark than conventional representations; she reverses cultural ideas in order to convey her own more complex attitudes toward death and the afterlife.

Emily Dickinson’s early letters seem to embrace the sentimental ideas of the afterlife as a reunion of loved ones. For example, she writes to Mrs Holland in 1855: “Thank God there is a world, and that the friends we love dwell forever and ever in a house above...” The possibility that heaven as well as the world may be a mere “dream” complicates Dickinson’s seemingly sure insistence on an eternal reunion with friends. In 1856, Dickinson (again to Mrs Holland)

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expresses her wishes for a heaven: “My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the *biggest* I have seen in June, and in it are my friends – all of them – every one of them – those who are with me now, and those who were “parted” as we walked, and “snatched up to Heaven.” Since Dickinson’s emotional investment in this life was so intense, it is not surprising that in this letter she hopes for a future world that is a potential extension of what she already has and loves – friends, family, and nature.

However, her scepticism surfaces again in the letter when Dickinson tells Mrs Holland, “[I]f God had been here this summer, and seen the things that *I* have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous. Don’t tell Him for the world, though, for after all He’s said about it, I should like to see what He *was* building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either.” (Emily Dickinson’s letter to Mrs Holland, August 1856). The playful, mocking tone again registers her disbelief in the heaven that God has promised. Two years later Dickinson’s uncertainty about death creates, but does not answer, questions: “Good-night! I can’t stay any longer in a world of death... Ah! democratic Death! Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden, – then deep to his bosom calling the serf’s child! Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things? Who is alive? The woods are dead. Is Mrs. H. alive? Annie and Katie – are they below, or received to nowhere?” (Emily Dickinson’s letter to

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Mrs Holland, 1858). The silence of the grave provides no answers for Dickinson's questions as she struggles to make a connection between the cycles of nature and the deaths of those around her.

Thus, for Dickinson, one's legacy ultimately lies in the ability to live fully in the present and to bequeath an inheritance of self to loved ones. Dickinson's bequest is the poetry that records her own attempts to understand and appreciate each individual moment. In the effort to achieve "circumference," her poems offer a wide range of sometimes contradictory perspectives that depend upon the moment in which she wrote. Sometimes the poems plunge into dangerous self-reflection or despair. Sometimes they embrace a moment of transcendence and ecstasy. Dickinson's poems map the flux and changes of human experience. They are the legacy of a life lived with full consciousness and self-awareness.

Dickinson's existentialist sensibility has much in common with that of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813–55). In this proposition, Fred White argues that for Kierkegaard, life must be accepted for what it is – as a finite (that is, non-universal) existence. Kierkegaard refutes Hegel's universal synthesis because it ignores reality at the individual level. Individual existence is flawed and filled with suffering and limitations (both physical and mental), but that defines life's authenticity. Kierkegaard criticizes the Romantic

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poets for using their powers of creative imagination to escape into inauthentic realms of their own making. Thus, they live “in a totally hypothetical and subjunctive way,” which causes them to lose touch not only with the authentic world but with themselves. Aside from Kierkegaard, whose ideas probably had not yet spread beyond Europe in Dickinson’s day, a kind of proto-existentialist thought can be detected in America via Calvinist and Presbyterian Christianity, which advocated deep learning and self-discovery. The Presbyterian minister Charles Wadsworth, who as we have seen was one of Dickinson’s spiritual mentors (aside from the possibility that she was in love with him), asserted from the pulpit that “Man’s business on this sublunary platform is to work out his hidden character in the face of the universe.” We can note the similarity between this statement Dickinson’s “My business is Circumference.” Self-reliance was also behind Mary Lyon’s rigorous curriculum at the Mt. Holyoke Seminary for Women – it placed heavy emphasis on the natural sciences. Studying nature was an important prerequisite to becoming a good Christian; a sure path to God was through intense study of His creations.

Henry David Thoreau, whom Dickinson had probably read, for she mentions him in a letter, advocated self-knowledge and self-betterment through deliberate intimate knowledge of the physical world and learning “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.” And of course, the plays of Shakespeare, her most

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beloved author, are filled with existential moments, from Macbeth's "sound and fury" anguish over the meaninglessness of human destiny to Hamlet's bitter assessment of human nature ("What a piece of work is a man! How infinite in faculty . . . in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"). And Shakespeare would certainly have agreed with Dickinson's speaker's claim that "'Hamlet' to Himself were Hamlet –/ Had not Shakespeare wrote–" (#J741).

Quite clearly, then, Dickinson had sufficient exposure to existentialist thinking for it to have influenced her at least indirectly. Dickinson's poems are existential for yet another reason: their speakers seldom feel secure in the promise of – or refuse to take refuge in – a transcendent reality as do the speakers in so much of Romantic poetry. Dickinson's speakers ironically are *most* secure with the doubts and uncertainties of their flawed and finite existence – a disposition that John Keats, a proto-existentialist Romantic (whose immortality questing personae eventually confront their mortality), termed "negative capability." There may exist an infinity of possible realms – Heaven itself among them – that beckon to be explored, but they never can be *escaped* into. The speaker can never venture beyond "circumference," the word in this context effectively conveying the paradoxical human predicament of being both free and confined: free to explore while at the same time confined by the inescapable forces of gravity, mortality, and the limitations of individual human perception.

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And yet, the very act of exploring – of venturing out “upon Circumference” despite her being a mere Speck upon the earth – is what makes her life purposeful and – paradoxically– more meaningful than before. To examine one’s life unflinchingly and learn to accept it for what it really is – the prime existential directive – is to liberate oneself from such inflexible directives as church dogma that present themselves as the sole path to salvation. For her, a mortal woman, whose paradigm of reality consists of domestic objects like thread and needle, cannot consider the fabric of heaven anything more than “stitched.”

In another poem the speaker proudly proclaims, “The Queen discerns like me – Provincially –” (# J285). The existentialist thus learns to accept her intrinsically restricted reality, just as the speaker in the #J 79, progresses from an enthusiastic expectation of reaching heaven to an enthusiastic acceptance of disbelief in that very expectation. Dickinson skilfully dramatizes the lapse of childlike faith as an existential awareness of the consequences of maintaining such faith takes hold. From going to heaven as an astonishing expedition to wondering if she could get a little space for herself, it is in the third stanza that she finally utters that “I’m glad I don’t believe it /For it would stop my breath –/And I’d like to look a little more/At such a curious Earth! /I’m glad they did believe it/Whom I have never found/ Since the mighty Autumn afternoon/I left them in the ground.”

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Like a three-act stage play, this three-stanza dramatic monologue captures the speaker's dawning scepticism toward the Christian promise of an afterlife, a scepticism that leads her to a triumphant existential rejection of that afterlife. The speaker's tone changes from sarcasm to a triumphant, almost Nietzschean bravado in not only expressing disbelief in the heaven myth, but in equating it with annihilation of self – for if the myth were true, it would mean losing the world – the “*mighty* Autumn afternoon” – forever. Faced with the resulting isolation and finitude, the individual must direct his or her own life with great deliberateness, despite the fact that there is no certainty of behaviour, no divinely sanctioned moral code. As Kierkegaard asserts, “Fulfilment is always in the wish,” and “Doubt is a cunning passion.” Now lest the individual be overwhelmed by hopelessness and despair, Kierkegaard posits a way out, and that is to abandon reason and make a pure leap of faith across the unbridgeable gulf to God. As we shall see, Dickinson's speakers do not make such a leap. They may be poised to do so, just as Dickinson herself had been poised to receive Christ during her student days, but they are unable to take that final step toward becoming a Christian.

Conrad Aiken in his masterly appreciation of the poet placed her in the context of the literary history of America. Emerson was at the height of his career, and living only sixty miles away: his poems came out when she was seventeen. When she was twenty, Hawthorne

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published *The Scarlet Letter*; and *The House of the Seven Gables* the year after. The same year, 1851, brought out Melville's *Moby Dick*. The death of Poe took place in 1849 – in 1850 was published the first collected edition of his poems. When she was twenty-four, Thoreau's *Walden* appeared; when she was twenty-five, *Leaves of Grass*.

One can say with justice that she came to full “consciousness” at the very moment when American literature came to flower. That she knew this, there cannot be any question; nor that she was stimulated and influenced by it. One must assume that she found in her immediate environment no one of her stature, with whom she could admit or discuss such things. Perhaps her extreme self-exclusion and secrecy was both a protest and a display – a kind of vanity masquerading as modesty. She became increasingly precious, of her person as of her thought. She believes that anything she says, however brief, will be of importance; however cryptic, will be deciphered. She enjoys being something of a mystery, and sometimes deliberately and awkwardly exaggerates it. Is this a human failing? we may ask. Is this the result of the consciousness of her own genius? Did she tuck away her poems in her cupboards, knowing full well that her brilliance cannot be denied, that one day it will dazzle the world?

We need to reiterate once more in this last chapter, her special connection with the true world around her. And how through that

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awe, she approached the grand mystery of life, often falling short in comprehension of that gigantic philosophy, but always, always striving to grasp the evanescent truth. Her real reverence that made her the mystic poet of the finest sort, was reserved for Nature, which seemed to her a more manifest and beautiful evidence of Divine Will than creeds espoused in churches. This she saw, observed and loved, with a burning simplicity and passion which, nevertheless, did not exclude her very agile sense of humour. Her Nature poems, however, are not the most secretly revelatory or dramatically compulsive of her poems, nor, on the whole, the best. To see her at her best and most characteristic and most profound, one must turn to the remarkable range of metaphysical speculation and ironic introspection which is displayed in those sections of her posthumous books which her editors have captioned Life, and Time and Eternity.

In the former sections are the greater numbers of her set “meditations” on the nature of things. For some critics they will always appear too bare, bleak and fragmentary. They have no trappings, only here and there a shred of purple. The thought is there, at all events, hard, bright and clear; and her symbols, metaphors, of which she could be prodigal, have an analogous clarity and translucency. What is also there is a downright homeliness which is a perpetual surprise and delight. Emerson’s gnomic style she tunes up to the epigrammatic – the epigrammatic she often carries to the point of the cryptic; she becomes what one might call an epigrammatic symbolist.

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Once one adjusts to the angularity of the mode, its lack of eloquence or rhetorical speed, its naive and often prosaic directness, one discovers felicities of thought and phrase on every page. The magic is terse and sure. And ultimately one simply accepts Dickinson's singular perversity, her lapses and tyrannies, and accepts them as an inevitable part of the strange and original genius she was. The lapses and tyrannies become a positive charm – one even suspects they were deliberate. They satisfied her – therefore they satisfy us. This marks our complete surrender to her highly individual gift, and to the singular sharp beauty, present everywhere, of her personality. The two things cannot be separated; and together, one must suppose, they suffice to put her among the finest poets in the language.

Peter Lubock saw the piquancy in her life and in her work when he wrote that that Dickinson's acute sensibility of feeling and swift audacity of mind were her gifts; when she was stirred, her thoughts would be off like lightning, to snatch an image and return again before another would have time to blink. And when the stars were kind, when the first words that occurred to her were also the right words, she produced a little poem that of its kind is alone in poetry. Emily was no poetic moralist; she darted straight at the idea that struck her for its beauty; she did not work towards it through any argument or debate. It was always hit or miss with her; and at the happy moment she could hit with a metaphor, a figure, a word even, a vanishing impression

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that in another second would have passed like a streak. She saw these sudden and desirable apparitions everywhere. To this determined little anchoress, so carefully shut up in her provincial cell, nothing was sacred and nothing daunting; she made as free with heaven and hell, life and death, as with daisies and butterflies outside her window.

She was small, she was obstinate, she was not as wise as she ended by thinking herself; but her voice was unique, and she flung out the short cry of her joy or pain or mockery with a note that cannot be forgotten. It is much to say in a world where voices are so many. (Lubbock, 1924)

In 1927, Hart Crane (1899-1932) wrote a sonnet “To Emily Dickinson,” a powerful, ground breaking response to the poet. It begins: “You who desired so much –in vain to ask –/Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,/ Dared dignify the labour, bless the quest –/Achieved that stillness ultimately blest, /Being of all, least sought for: Emily, hear!” Crane is calling attention to Dickinson’s unfulfilled ‘hunger’. Reaching for something she could never possess, Dickinson “dignified” the experience of coming up short by taking it as poetry’s “endless task.” Within that experience, she achieved a kind of “stillness”- writing herself into a position where desire’s cogs stopped grinding and were converted into something new. It is a relationship to the world in what was sought for is abandoned and a stilled openness takes its place.

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It is this strain of thought that is repeated by Jorie Graham who, in her many talks and interpretations of Dickinson's poems, says that Dickinson understands that one comes closest to the unknown in those moments when there is a breakdown in thinking or remembering or being at home. A perceptive reader can see Dickinson's use of order and its breakdown, senses and their extinguishing, imagery and its obliteration, rhyme and its increase or failure, the speaker moving from an active to a passive stance, remembering and then forgetting, narrative that breaks off into silence. She "attempts at letting the timeless as experienced in extreme states of being –anguish, despair, for example, or in the presence of death – penetrate the language in order to stain it."

A.C. Ward, at a time when Dickinson was being rediscovered, stated that Emily Dickinson's poetry resembles fused quartz. The essential point is to convey the impression of verse which has been fired to a final release from softening alloy, verse which achieves full identity with Beauty without ever being demonstrably "beautiful." It is certain, at any rate, that in Emily Dickinson the verse and the vision are one. Her apparent simplicity is as delusive as Blake's; and she uses no poetic ornamentation. When simple metrical rhyming verse serves for what she has to say, she uses that. When assonance, or half rhymes, or a-metre serve better, she uses any or all of those devices.

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“But always the thing-to-be-said finds the fit mould that will exactly contain in its utmost concentration –which is only to express in another way what has already been noted, namely, that her vision and her verse attain the unity which is achieved only by poets of a high order.” (Ward, 1961)

Archibald MacLeish speaks movingly about the poet’s heart and her exquisite craft. How does this unforgettable voice speak to us, he asks. Breath is drawn and there are words that will not leave you time to watch her coming toward you. Poem after poem – more than a hundred and fifty of them- begins with the word ‘I’, the talker’s word. She is already in the poem before she begins it, as a child is already in the adventure before he finds a word to speak for it. To put it in other terms, few poets and they among the most valued –Donne comes again to mind –have written more dramatically than Emily Dickinson, more in the live locutions of dramatic speech, words born living on the tongue, written as though spoken.

It is almost impossible to begin one of her successful poems without finishing it. The punctuation may bewilder you. The density of the thing said may defeat your understanding. But you will read on nevertheless because you will not be able to stop. Something is being said to you and you have no choice but hear. (MacLeish, 1960)

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And this is a second characteristic of the voice – that it not only speaks but speaks to you. Hers is not the soliloquy that we overhear. Poetry of this kind can create universes. The subject of poetry is the human experience and its object must therefore be humanity even in a time like ours when humanity seems to prefer to limit its knowledge of the experience of life. It is no excuse to a poet that humanity will not listen. MacLeish says that there is nothing more paradoxical in the whole history of poetry, than Emily Dickinson's commitment of that live voice to a private box full of pages and snippets tied together with little loops of thread. Other poets have published to the general world poems capable of speaking only to themselves or to one or two beside. Emily locked away in a chest a voice which cries to all of us of our common life and love and death and fear and wonder.

MacLeish says that Dickinson's tone is the root of her greatness. The source of poetry, as Emily knew more positively than most, is a particular awareness of the world. "It is that Distills amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings." The key to the poetry of any poem, therefore, is its particularity –the uniqueness of its vision of the world as it sees. In some poems the particularity can be found in the images into which the vision is translated. In others it seems to exist in the rhythm which carries the vision "alive into the heart". In still others it is found in a play of mind which breaks the light of the perception like a prism. The particularity has as many forms almost as there are poets capable of the loneliness in which uniqueness is obliged to live.

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Paul Bray made an astute observation about the manner in which she has been misunderstood. A wide divergence between public image and real substance seems to be the fate of the major American poets. Nowhere is this gulf between the commonly imagined persona and the poetry wider than in the case of Dickinson. Most Dickinson criticism is narrowly focused. A small number of the poems are susceptible to comprehensible interpretation; as a result, these are the ones that are most widely anthologized and discussed, while an embarrassed silence or the pall of reputed failure falls over the rest. Even her best critics - Charles Anderson, for example - treat her as a kind of eighteenth-century wit, seeing her language as more adequate to the demands of her subject matter than it is or ever could be. Cynthia Griffin Wolff gets closer to the truth when she writes of the inaccessibility of Dickinson's strongest poetry.

But while biographers, anthologists, and critics share some of the responsibility, most of it falls on the poet herself. It is a necessary price that must be paid for the poetry, which everywhere puts up almost insurmountable obstacles. It is poetry that masquerades as one thing only to reveal itself as another, but this revelation is not necessarily awarded to "close reading."

Dickinson's poems are elusive, not merely difficult. It will not yield its results to the reader who approaches a difficult or ambiguous

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text, reads, gets stuck, reads over and over up to that point, and concludes that it is impossible to understand. But whether one advances or retreats, victoriously masters the text or surrenders to its opacity in either humility or disgust, this is not the kind of reading to which Dickinson's poetry will yield its rewards. But there is a kind of reader who would accept the persistence of mystery that only deepens as one proceeds. Such a text has something elusive about it; elusiveness is the lure that draws the reader forward. Dickinson differs from other great poets in this elusive indefinable quality.

One would eventually realize that this accretion of mystery, this growing, changing, unfolding mysteriousness, is the experience of the text. The text is something that moves with one and invites one to advance further; it is a horizon, to be approached through what one might call not close reading, but "reading at a distance." Analysing each poem for what it is, and what significance it conveys, is a limiting exercise: it does not enable the reader to comprehend the vast philosophy that Dickinson espouses through the length and breadth of the body of her prodigious work. The broader vision reveals the expansive nature of the philosophy that she believed in. One of the great tragedies of being a prodigious poet is that attention is focussed only on a few poems, which are comprehensible to the lowest common denominator and one tends to ignore the more dense poems simply because we do not have the mental discipline to pursue their interior

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meanings vigorously. That is why it is profitable to take some time off to look at the not so well known poems that Dickinson has written but which have not got the attention that it so clearly deserves.

#J 986 beginning, “A narrow fellow in the grass,” though seen in anthologies has not been appreciated for the elusive quality just described. “The Grass divides as with a Comb— /A spotted shaft is seen—/And then it closes at your feet/And opens further on--”. #J 398 is a poignant poem of walls, obstructions, barriers, that stand in the way of the meeting of true minds. “But ‘tis a single Hair --/A filament -- a law --/A Cobweb -- wove in Adamant --/A Battlement -- of Straw --/A limit like the Veil/Unto the Lady’s face --/But every Mesh -- a Citadel --/And Dragons -- in the Crease.” There is a hint of circumference in this poem; the barrier that divides the lovers is thin – a single hair, but it stands as a citadel guarded by dragons. Or the brief comment in #J 931: “Noon--is the Hinge of Day—/ Evening--the Tissue Door—/ Morning -- the East compelling the sill / Till all the World is ajar--” The power of the elusive and difficult nature of these not-so-well-known poems teach a lesson often repeated: that one has to read the entire body of works of Dickinson if we are to truly assess her position in the western canon.

As Helen McNeil said, one function of Dickinson’s accomplishments is to force us to reconsider what we understand by

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greatness, gender and poetic knowledge. By coming to know her we come to know them in a different way. In Dickinson's day, 'poet' was an unambiguous term; poets were those who wrote in verse, using regular metre and rhythm. There was some question whether free verse or the 'breath lines' of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* were poetry. Dickinson developed her arguments through rich metaphors, slant rhymes, metrical variation, capitalisation for emphasis, lack of titles, unconventional punctuation and highly condensed syntax. Most of her contemporaries assumed these innovations to be a result of ineptitude. (McNeil, 1986)

But for the full force of Dickinson's expression to be seen, her texts must be accepted as writing, not edged into the pantheon of the 'literary'. Exclusions from the literary are legion. The 'great poem' is usually an epic, a long poem, or a linked sequence of poems. Many of Dickinson's most vivid expressions are found in her letters; when letters are not considered worth critical attention, her work is distorted. When the poet is a woman, her womanliness needs to be considered as a generative force in the poem, not something that puts her in a sub-category of literature. Finally, when a poet's work has been neglected for as long as Dickinson's was, it can look peculiar because it has not had a clear influence on today's poetry. In this way the poet can be punished anew for having been punished in the past. When, as with Dickinson, her work informs and is informed by a female tradition, it

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looks mysterious as well because the continuity of female tradition is unrecognised.

It is, in fact, easy not to know Emily Dickinson. Because she is such an original writer, she has tended to be described according to what she is not; not a man, not like Walt Whitman, not ‘professional’, not normal, and not married. A writer who is described as different from what we know is bound to seem difficult. A writer who is seen to come from a group whose limitations we think we know – an old maid American Victorian recluse poet – is going to look limited. As we read her poems, she is describing some new state or arguing some new premise or pioneering some new use of language.

She has a lot to teach us, not least when she offers her awesomely accurate inside pictures of taboo subjects, such as fear, hopeless longing, dread, death and loss. Even though her works have only gradually filtered through to a large public, there is a genuinely popular element to Dickinson. It is those trained in critical theories who find Dickinson ‘different’, because she doesn’t fit a received model for literary greatness. In fact, to think about how Dickinson wrote is to experience gaps and silences in the existing model. Reading her fully means redefining those models. It is an exhilarating sensation.

Helen McNeil continues to surmise that if Walt Whitman is the American poet of wholeness, Emily Dickinson is the American

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Poet of what is broken and absent. She knows herself, but she knows how the self breaks upon its encounter with the way things are. Non-mythological and anti-Platonic, Dickinson uses her art to break certitudes. She is a heuristic poet, a poet of investigation, of knowledge as value. Her poetry experiences and argues and questions. Her poetry assumes the presence of a feeling self, instead of depicting a struggle towards self-knowledge.

She uses her nakedly knowing self as a tool with which she can possess and command abstractions such as time, space and death, and emotions such as pleasure or pain. But by token of that same close command, so-called abstractions in Dickinson are treated as entities, things touched or touching. Often, while doing so, Dickinson comes close to contradicting herself; she contains multitudes, but each facet of the multitude is accorded a separate poem. Thus the existence of a Dickinson poem on a given topic or state, such as the moment of death, or the child's experience of loss, means that there are other poems exploring other possible assertions, facets, or questions thrown by the topic, until 'topic' itself becomes an arbitrary term. Dickinson's canon shows tendencies, it displays favoured, even obsessive, areas of investigations, but it offers few set themes.

Dickinson's questioning poems can be said to be about personal loss, the limits of sense, the body, love, time and eternity, or about the

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visible and the invisible, or about threshold states. More precisely, they are about the process of the mind seeking knowledge. It is this heuristic model, this investigative push that constitutes the deep Dickinson theme. Dickinson pursues that knowledge wherever it is to be found, no matter how it makes her feel. She reports her pursuit seemingly as it occurs, with such profound attention that her poems offer exhilaration, no matter how sombre their topic.

To see Dickinson as an epistemological poet who advances a theory of poetry in her work, does not mean that she is exclusively, or even primarily, an intellectual poet. She was brilliant, well-educated, and confident in the use of conceptual, scientific, legal and linguistic terminology, but the truly remarkable quality of mind in her poetry comes from her refusal to separate this mind from the body and emotions which temper it. Dickinson writes close to the traditions of post-Romantic poetry and women's poetry in that her poetry expresses strong emotion. She stands to the side of it to the extent that the drive from knowledge dominates. And the affairs of the heart are seen as part of that knowledge, not separate. Hers is an epistemology of feeling.

It is actually quite difficult to locate Dickinson's refusal to sublimate in literary-historical terms, because it is so alien to our usual structuring of dualism. Dickinson has the direct access to emotion which is thought to be - and is- a characteristic of much women's

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poetry. She does not, however, soften those emotions into acceptability or use poetry as an escape, either for herself or for her reader. Perhaps her knowledge has gone unrecognised for just this reason: she doesn't present this as a solution to human loss or pain. Rather it is a way of experiencing fully and with utmost clarity whatever must be experienced.

Knowing desire, and knowing lack, absence and loss, are not small areas, as Dickinson well knew. A good part of her particular wisdom lies in her poetry's acceptance of loss and lack as being available to knowledge. To know loss is still to know. As Dickinson explores loss, she finds it has a specific shape for the emotions. It occurs arbitrarily without reason. In her letters as well as her poems, she shows no ability to insulate herself or deflect the shock of withdrawn affection, departure or death. Every time it hurts as if it were the first time.

One of the most important differences between Dickinson and her Puritan forebears is that she does not accept the concept of original sin. For her it is perverse for us to have to suffer as we do. Also for Dickinson, loss is not made good through later rewards in heaven for those who suffer in earth. The Christian economy of rewards for the just and punishment for the wicked has ceased to function for her. Loss simply happens. Yet the state of loss itself can be understood, and the act of coming to understand it is the act of a mind shaping itself.

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Dickinson sees herself not as a poet of the holistic centre, but of circumference. This was not necessarily a small assignment. When circumference is at its smallest, as in the poem ‘A Coffin – is a small Domain’, the grave is a ‘Circumference without Relief’. At its most vast, it leads Dickinson into unusual vagueness, as when she addresses “Circumference, thou Bride of Awe’. Usually it offers a way of expressing power, particularly the linguistic power to contain meaning. One advantage of the circumference metaphor is that it allows for absence, for space, without being destroyed. Circumference is the assignment Dickinson gave herself, but she carries out her business by linking the gems of distinct, individual words. In terms of figurative language, this is a metonymic impulse, substituting rather than transcending, finding the meaning inside or next to the signifier.

Be that as it may, we can say that the multitude of faces she presents makes it imperative that she has to be known fully, or not at all. This reinforces the argument presented earlier, that one can know Dickinson only if all her poems are read and understood thoroughly. A handful, or even a hundred poems cannot let you know the real Dickinson.

John Cody argued that Dickinson may have been predicting the arrival of the modernist view of life by the manner in which she seeks to bare her soul and make psychological discoveries about

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herself, which immediately translated into universal truths. He wrote that her poems appear to have afforded her emotional relief from her psychic pain, but they were more than a vehicle for its expression. They possessed also an analytical and documentary function. With penetrating self-observation and unnerving intuition, she anticipated the major discoveries of psychoanalysis. She was on almost familiar terms with the unconscious and realised its role as a potent motivating force. She also grasped the existence and function of repression and a host of other ego defences. She was vividly aware of the phenomenon of identification and transference. She probably has more to tell us regarding the mysterious process of sublimation that we are yet in a position to understand fully. One suspects that the ultimate elucidation of certain of her more obscure psychological poems awaits further advances in our scientific knowledge of personality.

In sum the critics find that Emily Dickinson's seclusion was natural, sensible, and non-eccentric and also that it was regressive ("a retreat backward into childhood"), "neurotic" and anxiety ridden. We are told that her life was rich, deep, exuberant and zestful as well as tumultuous, disconsolate, empty and frustrated. Clearly the diagnosis of "insanity" is not made lightly by some of these authors, though something within them blocks their attempts to face the full implication of the evidence. They want to get at the truth about Emily Dickinson but to admit to the existence of "insanity" is irreconcilable

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with their aspect of her great gifts and brilliant intelligence. Besides, as Archibald MacLeish has admitted, “most of us are half in love with this dead girl.”

Given the all or none concept of mental illness implied in their writings, it is understandable that these authors should shrink from imputing it to Emily Dickinson. No one could bear to acknowledge such a madness in a person with whom one is half in love. In that light, among the divergences and contradictions only one matter is agreed upon: she was sane. She went to the “outskirts of sanity,” she had a “brush with crack-up,” she “half surrendered” to psychosis, she considered sanity “barely possible,” the foundations of her psychic house were shaken, she “outfought her madness,” the struggles within her psyche were grave and “almost fatal,” she underwent an “emotional disaster,” her emotions overwhelmed her “to the point of helplessness,” she was “abnormal and strange,” “obsessive” and “compulsive” – but hard-pressed as she must have evidently have been at times, she managed to stay “sane,” that is to say, she was probably one of us.

There is another explanation offered: recently, Lyndall Gordon’s new interpretation, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family Feuds*, (2010), points to epilepsy as the secret that Emily Dickinson harboured within her all her life, and the main reason for

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her self-imposed exclusion. While this finding is based on supposition and interpretation of some medical records, there is nothing to really substantiate this verdict: it remains as yet another fascinating aspect of the poet's life.

In a critical essay published in the *American Poetry Review*, American College teacher Michael Ryan wrote that Dickinson meant her poems to be an experience, to render experience as well as refer to it. For her, the living presence is the poem itself: the poem is not an intermediary between poet and reader; it is the thing alive the reader experiences directly. Thus the most articulate thing one can say about a Dickinson poem is to read it aloud.

Dickinson was an absolute master of all these: grammar, rhythm, rhetoric, and narrative--and a master of the inextricable, intricate, intimate, and constantly shifting interrelationships among them as they proceed from nanosecond to nanosecond at the warp-speed at which the brain processes language. (Ryan, 2009)

The words on the printed page may present themselves in a particular manner, but when read out and heard in the manner in which it was intended by the poet, then the sound of the syllables, the knock of the consonants and the resonances and the echoes of the vowels all together make an impression that is powerful and sensitive at the same time.

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Joyce Nower believes that although Emily Dickinson grappled with her belief in a Deity, she never submerged her identity in that belief or relinquished her grasp of what she conceived to be the reality of the human condition. She had no easy answers, no cure-alls for the human condition. True, often she could not keep all the loose ends together, and at those times she went over the edge into despair; but she was game for the adventure, insistent on maintaining an independent identity, tough-minded and honest about her view of the Deity's remoteness and (at times) perversity, prideful in her rebelliousness, and acid in her attack on dogma. She was, indeed, a spiritual warrior. What is crucial here is that this crisis of faith threw up for debate and redefinition the great issues of that time: deity, nature, the subjective and objective nature of the universe, conscience, consciousness, good, evil, the collective, the individual, etc. Emily Dickinson espoused many of these redefinitions, with the notable exception of allegiance to the Over-Soul of Emerson. For her, Jehovah, whom she constantly questioned, was still real; but He was a stripped-down model, so to speak, without the trappings of the usual Christian dogma.

The ideological importance of Emily Dickinson, then, lies in the fact that she is at the heart of the tensions produced by the nineteenth century crisis of faith: the metamorphosis of "God" into "god." Interestingly enough, it is only thirty-six years after her death, in 1922 that T.S. Eliot, also born a New Englander, published "The Waste

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Land,” the monumental twentieth century work which explicitly identifies the breakdown of faith, culture, and morality in Western civilization. But Western civilization had to go through severe economic and political changes before “The Waste Land” could be written; Dickinson’s spiritual journey can be considered as part of only the first trickle in a broad historical stream that eventually swept across the plains of Europe and America. Yet the thin line beyond which lies disbelief is never crossed. In spite of the insecurities, in spite of the reality of death, in spite of the deaf ear of God - in spite of all that, “To lose one’s faith - surpass/The loss of an Estate -/Because Estates can be/Replenished - faith cannot - ... “ Faith is “Inherited with Life- “ and to relinquish it leads to “Being’s - Beggary- .” (#J 377)

Yet she wonders what manner of Deity this is who never seems to take any steps to alleviate the human condition. That she sees him as remote is evidenced in many of the foregoing quotations. It’s true that in an early poem (#J61), she experiences Jehovah as a “personal” deity when she addresses him in little girl style as “Papa above,” for example. But a father speaks, and this one too often does not!

If this smacks of rebelliousness, it is. Anyone who carefully nurtures an individual consciousness outside of what is generally accepted, who seeks re-enforcement from whatever source (say, the writings of Emerson and Thoreau), does not surprise us by writing

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at the end of a poem: “We apologize to thee (to God) for thine own Duplicity-” (#J 1461) But Dickinson’s rebelliousness takes an even more serious turn when she almost explicitly attacks such cherished Christian doctrines as that good people go to Heaven and sinners “to Jail” (#J234); that belief can heal (#J1270); that we are carriers of original sin (#J1601); that heaven will compensate us for the lonely struggle of getting there (#J1603); that God and Jesus are one and the same (#J357); and so on. No wonder such ideas were denounced from several pulpits around Amherst. And no wonder that her father kept bringing her books intended to improve her wayward ways. All, of course, to no avail.

What, then, is Emily Dickinson’s bequest? Only a few steps separate the spiritual rebelliousness and struggle of Emily Dickinson from the demise of the Deity that Eliot writes about in “The Waste Land,” (1922). But a change in ideology does not occur in a vacuum. Eliot’s poem is brewed in a larger pot: the horrors of World War I came twenty-eight years after the death of Dickinson in 1886. The scramble to cut up the world into markets was fought out between the great European powers both in their colonies and in Europe, where poison gas and submarines were added to the arsenal of war technology. Under these strains, the thread of belief frayed and often broke, leaving large numbers of people spiritually ready for new beliefs - such as, for example, totalitarianism.

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In the midst of this teeming and fertile soil of the America, we may like to consider if Dickinson's works still continue to influence, if not inspire later writers and poets. In her 1993 book *The Regenerate Lyric*, Elisa New describes the Dickinson that many contemporary writers respond to. She focuses on what she calls "the instructive, if irremediable, gap between the subject and God", which is an abiding preoccupation in American poetry. In another anthology of writers' perspective on Dickinson, she argues that Dickinson's "chastened attraction to an unformed realm where she exercises little power to speak of" and the "blind and wandering language – as spiritual instrument" that she develops in response, produced one of the most powerful forms this preoccupation has taken. (Elisa New, 1993)

In America, spiritual bankruptcy, came only after World War II, from which the country emerged onto the world stage as the key imperialist power. Intellectual and spiritual impoverishment resulted from, among other things, the suppression of thought during the ensuing Cold War. Needless to say, a spiritual and intellectual rebellion took place. Led by independent thinkers, journalists, and artists, it included the Beat generation of nomadic youth who searched for "beatitude," and who did much to initiate a long-overdue questioning of social priorities. The dissent was deepened by Korea, Vietnam, napalm, anti-personnel missiles, the gradual corruption of our natural resources, Watergate, radiation from power plants, right up to today's

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global actions with accompanying limitations on rights and freedoms at home.

In this context, the spiritual struggle embarked on by Emily Dickinson - and by extension the various liberation movements that came after that - may seem somewhat antiquated, almost quaint. Yet we know that there is nothing quaint about them. Spiritual struggle, ever connected more or less obviously to economic and political aspects of life, has always been part of what makes us human beings. Emily Dickinson's was well-articulated, and it seemed lacking in economic and political aspects only in so far as she was not conscious of the implications of being a woman in a patriarchal household. Quite aside from its aesthetic merit, her poetry is important to us for this reason.

And also for another reason: the stakes of life and death are higher now, and there is a tendency for many to sink into rigid ideologies, to forego the rational for the intuitive, or to subordinate themselves to some hierarchy of so-called seers and gurus who instead of demanding that we come to consciousness, work to submerge our identities in theirs and to mystify us with hocus-pocus. This kind of spirituality lives off fuzzy definitions, "feelings," substitutes painful choice with tarot card readings, and, in general, does not move us forward. Rather, let us use Emily Dickinson as a humanistic model of someone - passionate and rational and intuitive - who always struggled against submerging herself in man or deity!

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Several attempts have been made to reassess Dickinson's poetic work from a post-modern perspective. David Porter sees Dickinson's words as anchorless- a withdrawal into words with a complete exclusion of interest in circumstantial reality. To him, her "severely inward poems could not regard the complicated world in a faithfully detailed way" (Porter, 1985). In a different manner, Guy Rotella sees the metaphors in a poem like "There's a certain slant of Light" projected from within, from a perspective of nature based on what is actually there, though we know that Dickinson's faith in intuition and self-reliance are certainties of negation, thus weakening the foundations on which spiritualist and symbolist trust in nature and in God are based. It may be recalled that John Cody, in a competent psychoanalytic reading of Dickinson's works, had seen the poet as having taken a psychic economy in which art and language are less-than-abundant recompense for psychic trauma and loss.

On the other hand, two decades later, Mary Loeffelholz interrogates the gendered relationship of words to meanings in her society, in a manner as to bring focus on such studies which were outside the paradigm of literary and study till then. Sharon Cameron too sets out to probe the very nature of the lyric in terms of the complexities of lyricism in Dickinson poems. She uses Dickinson's syntactic and temporal discontinuities as a way of using language – in this case the medium of the lyric poetry –to get a taste of what otherwise lies beyond

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experience. E. Miller Budick argues that “in its dissociation from the society and the world, Dickinson’s poetry is a poetry about language” and though they are distanced from the world, their “life of language does not exist apart from the larger life of the universe and of God.”

Susan Howe is a remarkable example of literary criticism presented as prose poetry as she gives us Dickinson from the point of view of looking out. As one post-modern poet contemplating another, Howe recognises the way Dickinson “explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with a reader.” The nature and extent of complex investigations in the post-modern context make it increasingly difficult to incorporate them all in a study such as this. The limitations are obvious. Hence we must try to find some of our own interpretations to make a final sense of the subject of circumference that we started out with.

Lovers of the poetry of Dickinson will be pleased to know that an on-line Emily Dickinson Archive <<http://www.dickinson.org>> has been inaugurated in mid-October 2013, giving full details of the manuscript pages of all of her works. For intensive study of her poems and her letters, there could be no better collection.

There is nothing in Sewall’s biography to support the hypothesis of the spiritual oversaturation of Dickinson’s psyche. He does speak of a period of crisis but locates it in her adulthood. It has been speculated

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that from early childhood, Dickinson waged a desperate struggle to maintain psychic integrity against a spiritualized natural world that encroached upon her, spoke to her, and, in a sense, threatened to engulf her. What evidence there is comes from the poetry itself. While the poetry can often be one of personae (she was very fond of Robert Browning), it occasionally adopts a heavily internalized autobiographical mode, some of whose moments should give us serious pause. #J410, beginning, “The first Day’s Night had come--” is a serious attempt to understand the state of the mind after facing a terrible struggle in the soul, the reason for which is not revealed by the poet. But the apparatus of the poet, strings and bow, are not functional, and the brain is unable to cope. She knows that “Something’s odd-within-.” The scenario is cosmic; the speaker is immediately caught up in a drama of biblical magnitude. But the dimensions of the soul are not equal to the task, especially when called upon to give voice to the experience that has been endured. Moreover, this experience is not over and done with, as the speaker at first believed, but continues in waves. Initially made mute, she is then made blind, and the response to this horrific largeness is the giddy laughter of the stage bedlamite, laughter that continues until the present tense of the poem. An internal change has been wrought by this experience. Would the span of time between the inner metamorphosis and the present moment be dwelt upon so insistently (“ ‘tis Years”/”tis Centuries”) if a disturbingly long period of time has not elapsed between then and now--the distance between childhood and adulthood?

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An equally misleading view of her work, but from an opposite perspective, comes from those who use her as a foil to the supposedly more expansive Whitman, as did Allen Ginsberg in the recent *Voices and Visions* television series (1988). This misconception will probably disappear when the present cycle of simpleminded and wearisome clichés about the virtues of unrhymed and unmetered verse has finally run its course; it is, therefore, less pernicious, because less tenacious. But to see her form as remarkable primarily for its un-Whitmanian constriction is not only to overlook her extraordinary variations on iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines, but to underrate her own sophistication in the choice hymn meter for a poetry so visionary as to be militantly nondenominational.

How then do we conclude this examination on the subject of circumference and symbolism in the poems of Emily Dickinson? We glance again at her obituary by Susan Dickinson, written a few days after her death in 1886, christened her as a Damascus blade gleaming and glancing in the sun and her poetic rapture the long glistening note of a bird one hears in the June woods at high noon, but can never see. With our present distance from the poet, both in terms of distance and time, we do not have that immediacy and that rapture her family had had. But in the sum of it all, Susan's words still ring with truth and empathy, and we repeat: "To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formulate faith, hardly knowing

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the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm steps of martyrs who sing while they suffer.”

Dickinson’s life was like no others. The ordinariness of her early days did not prophesy the later richness of her poesy nor the uniqueness of the life she led. Psychoanalysts will puzzle forever on the reasons why she withdrew herself into herself. How do we summarise her life: a bright education cut short by circumstances not yet clearly understood; the family life twisted by parental authority and misunderstanding across the hedge that separated her from her brother; the blighted relationships with a series of brilliant men who entered her life only to be evicted sooner than later; the gradual withdrawal into a private world bound down within the four walls of her room; the deliberate exploration of a vaster inner world with a wider eyes and deeper comprehension; a troubled questioning of the truth that she had inherited followed by a rejection of Christian values that were no longer sustainable in a changing world; the writing of cryptic and epigrammatic bursts of staggering lines that illuminate and confound; a rare understanding of the philosophical complexities mankind is heir to; a deliberate deferral to publish her truth to the curious world during her life time; a yearning to break free from the bonds of this fleshly world; the groping towards a higher truth more often failing than succeeding: all these we have tried to study and understand. To her,

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the life she led, and the world she inhabited, was but a staging ground to the higher truth beyond the rim where sight and knowledge ends. The perimeter of her existence refused to limit itself and she broke free again and again, through every boundary that she had to confront.

The expanding wealth of Dickinson art and scholarship allows readers to delve into the mind and works of one of America's finest poets. As readers gain greater access to Dickinson's manuscripts with the help of online resources, interest in her work continues to grow. Practically unknown during her own lifetime, Dickinson is now regarded as one of the most influential poets in American literary history. She is no longer misunderstood as a mousy, reclusive spinster who wrote poetry in her spare time; instead, Emily Dickinson has come to be appreciated as a courageous pioneer of a bold and modern poetic style that commands an international readership.

In Emily Dickinson the puritan world is no-longer self-contained; it is no longer complete; her sensibility exceeds its dimensions. She has trimmed down its supernatural proportions; it has become a morality; instead of the tragedy of the spirit, there is a commentary upon it. Thus, circumference remains the line on the horizon, the transitory dusk or dawn before night falls or day breaks, the hair ("Crisis is a Hair toward which the forces creep": #J 889) dividing 'now' from 'not now', the dim boundary between life and death, the margin outside

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which eternal joy resides, in contrast to the miseries of this transient world.

When she finally crossed over the circumference, we can be sure that she waited for what came in the hereafter with the curiosity of a child, though a lonely child for she had herself willed it as such.

*“The going from a world we know
To one a wonder still
Is like the child’s adversity
Whose vista is a hill,
Behind the hill is sorcery
And everything unknown,
But will the secret compensate
For climbing it alone?” (#J 1603)*

A few weeks before she died, she wrote to a friend who had lost her husband:

The enthusiasm of God at the reception of His sons! How ecstatic! How infinite! Says the blissful voice, not yet a voice, but a vision, “I will not let thee go, except I bless thee.”

Jacob had wrestled with his unknown adversary on a dark night. When the identity of the mighty wrestler was revealed, he asked to

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be blessed by the Angel. “Emily Dickinson in a sublime inversion of Genesis 32:26 confers the blessing herself. Such breath-taking authority becomes credible only in the light of the long, slow, hard pilgrimage, with every step honoured and all honestly.” (Sewall, 1976)

One could venture to say that the real purpose of her life’s mission was to perceive the truth about the great mysteries of life and death, gleaned out of years of contemplation and awareness, and to use that wisdom as a balm for those who were suffering, each of us in our own private worlds. The fact that she did not do so in her lifetime is perhaps the result of a natural inward reticence, a lack of self-promotion that would have been anathema to her spirit. The fact that she stored away her nuggets of wisdom in the corners of her room indicates that she may have hoped, after she had pierced through that circumference for the last time, for a discerning eye to know and understand her truth and reveal it at the right time. We know Vinnie did that for her. As the hidden wealth in her poems reveal themselves to us surely and steadily, as our understanding of her revelations grows and matures, as we realise the true curative value of her wisdom, then it becomes easier to appreciate the manner in which she hid her light within the small room she dwelt in, so that one day its light may illuminate the darkness within our souls. She reminds us that we are not alone in this world, that poetry is what.... “makes you know that you are not alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own.” (Dylan, 1952)

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There is a growing thought now that Dickinson anticipated and intended that the range of her light should shine with enlarged circumference after her death, by way of the posthumous publication of her works, evidenced by the fact “her most anguished *cris de coeur* and the extraordinary love poems, her most glorious poems, remained hidden away among the two-thirds of her canon awaiting transmission to the world after she was gone.” (Mackenzie and Dana, 2007). Indeed, it is a fact that throughout her life, she exercised the prerogative of her mission as a consoler: through her poems and her letters and her flowers sent to fellow sufferers. She knew too that her consolation has the power to heal only if she herself has suffered the pain of it all. “Unto a broken heart/No other one may go/Without the high prerogative/Itself hath suffered too.” (#J1704). Most particularly, she raised to high art the letters written to console relatives and friends who has experienced the death of a loved one. Her published correspondence includes some sixty surviving letters of solace for the human trauma that she had herself found hardest to comprehend or bear.

Her circumference may have symbolised all the restraining bonds that held her down, in family and relationships, in the failure of her religion, in the genius of her poesy, in the void between knowledge and understanding; and truly, throughout the piquant life she led, she broke through them one by one. However, it is the circumference separating life and death that really challenged and defied her

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comprehension time and again. Calvinists sought consolation from the terror of death through two key concepts: the willingness to die and the expectation of reunion with loved ones in heaven. Dickinson accepted these consolations until one death after another in her family tore into the foundation of those consolations. Then it was that the tenor of her understanding shifted to a new key and she abandoned some of the well-worn devices of her inherited faith. One may even say that she made it her life mission to ease those whom she loved through the inevitability of the pain of death. She could as well have been reciting her own mission in life in #J 919: “If I can stop one Heart from breaking/I shall not live in vain/If I can ease one Life the Aching/ Or cool one Pain/Or help one fainting Robin/Unto his Nest again/I shall not live in Vain.”

APPENDIX

LIST OF POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON REFERRED TO OR EXAMINED IN THIS WORK WITH OPENING LINES.

Chapter I		
1.	#J 435	Much madness is divinest Sensed—To a discerning Eye
2.	#J 657	I dwell in Possibility --
3.	#J1129	Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --

Chapter II		
1.	#J 875	I stepped from Plank to Plank
2.	#J 613	They shut me up in Prose --
3.	(#J 228)	“There’s a certain slant of light/ winter afternoons-”
4.	#J 588	I cried at Pity –not at pain
5.	#J 569	I reckon – when I count it all
6.	(#J 657)	The Tint I cannot take- is best – the Colour too remote
7.	#J 1705	Volcanoes be in Sicily
8.	#J 1633	Still own thee-still thou art
9.	#J 1162	The Life we have is very great
10.	#J 1142	The Props assist the house

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Chapter III		
	# J 341	After great Pain, a formal feeling comes -
	# J 764	Presentiment – is that long Shadow – on the Lawn
	#J 1068	Further in Summer than the Birds
	#J 1199	Are Friends Delight or Pain?
	#J 1228	So much of Heaven has gone from earth
	#J 1245	The Suburbs of a Secret
	#J 1299	Delight’s Despair at setting
	#J 130	These are the days when Birds come back -
	#J 1430	Who never wanted maddest joy
	#J 1480	The fascinating chill that music leaves
	#J 1551	Those – dying then,
	#J 211	Come slowly - Eden!
	#J 214	I taste a liquor never brewed -
	#J 216	Safe in their Alabaster Chambers-
	#J 249	Wild Nights – Wild Nights !
	#J 252	I can wade Grief -
	#J 258	There’s a certain slant of Light
	#J 322	There came a day at Summer’s full
	#J 324	Some keep the Sabbath going to Church
	#J 341	After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
	#J 448	This was a poet – It is That
	#J 449	I died for Beauty – but was scarce
	#J 465	I heard a Fly buzz – when I died -

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	#J 478	I had no time to Hate -
	#J 489	We pray – to heaven
	#J 500	Within my garden, rides a Bird
	#J 501	This world is not Conclusion
	#J 510	It was not Death, for I stood up,
	#J 528	Mine – by the Right of Royal Election !
	#J 597	It always felt to me – a wrong
	#J 601	A still –Volcano -Life
	#J 615	Our journey had advanced
	#J 638	To my small hearth His fire came
	#J 670	One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted
	#J 712	Because I could not stop for Death
	#J 744	Remorse – is Memory – awake-
	#J 76	Exultation is the going
	#J 764	Presentiment – is that long shadow – on the Lawn
	#J 766	My faith is larger than the Hills
	#J 770	I live on Dread
	#J 910	Experience is the Angled Road

Chapter IV		
	#J 1	Awake ye Muses none, sing me a strain divine
	#J 1068	The ecstasy to guess
	#J 1100	The last night that she lived
	#J 122	A something in a Summer's day

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	#J 1647	Of glory not a beam is left
	#J 193	I shall know –when Time is over
	#J 315	He fumbles at your Soul
	#J 320	We play at Paste -
	#J 378	I see no way – the Heavens were stitched
	#J 420	You’ll know it – as you know ‘tis Noon
	#J 536	The Heart asks Pleasure first
	#J 712	Because I could not stop for death
	#J 802	Time feels so vast that were it not
	#J 832	Soto! Explore thyself!
	#J1411	Of paradise’s existence
	#J466	‘Tis little I could care for pearls
	#J632	The brain is wider than the sky

Chapter V

	#J 986	A narrow fellow in the Grass
	#J 931	Noon – is the Hinge of Day -
	#J 919	If one can stop one Heart from breaking
	#J 889	Crisis is a Hair
	#J 79	Going to Heaven!
	#J 741	Drama’s Vitallest Expression is the Common Day
	#J 410	The first Day’s Night had come -
	#J 398	I had not minded –Walls-
	#J 377	To lose one’s faith -surpass

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	#J 357	God is a distant stately lover
	#J 234	You're right - "the way is narrow"
	#J 1704	Unto a broken heart
	#J 1603	The going from a world we know
	#J 1601	Of God we ask one favour
	#J 1461	"Heavenly Father" take to thee
	#J 1270	Is heaven a physician

Poems mentioning the word Circumference: #J 313, 354, 378, 515, 552, 633, 798, 802, 883, 889, 943, 967, 1084, 1343, 1620, 1663.

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