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# A View from Eternity: The Spiritual Journey of Emily Dickinson

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A VIEW FROM ETERNITY:  
THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF EMILY DICKINSON

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Sandra L. McChesney

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A gap in the extant criticism of Emily Dickinson requires further discussion of the significance of her poetry. This study utilizes a theory of New Historicism to analyze Emily Dickinson's biography and body of work; it draws upon Dickinson's own poems and letters as well as critical, historical, social, political, and scientific sources. The study shows that the poet deliberately structured her lifestyle in a triangular configuration: she resided in her father's house; she developed her authoritative voice; and she explored her spirituality. This examination further indicates that Dickinson's construction of her way of life led her to formulate a new cosmology parallel to that proposed by scholars in many social, political, and scientific disciplines today.

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CHAPTER 1  
FINDING NEW FOCUS IN THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT  
OF EMILY DICKINSON

When I first started reading Emily Dickinson seriously in an undergraduate course, I began to “see” and “hear” her. Though many poems affected me, hundreds seemed obscure and beyond my understanding, but I could grasp the idea of a developing spirituality. Suddenly, I sensed an arranged lifestyle that seemed logical to me—if she left her home setting in the usual course of the day, Dickinson would have to attend the Congregational Church on Sunday with her family. Because Dickinson had associated with Benjamin Newton during the time period I was reading, and he had introduced her to Unitarian influences, I assumed that Dickinson had adopted Unitarian concepts and had turned away from Congregationalism—I was a confident junior with an unshakable idea. Later, I enrolled in graduate school, planning to develop that certainty.

Another decade of study, however, enlarged my thinking. I began to understand some of the poems that had previously seemed indecipherable. I saw that, as Dickinson matured, her struggle with spirituality had led her to question the Calvinist background of the Congregational Church, to explore Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, and then to move beyond these beliefs and form her own ontology, a spiritual concept that contemporary thinkers in many disciplines perceive as a progression in human understanding of cosmology. That realization made me look at her lifestyle much more closely, and I gradually identified the structure of a triangle of intent in Dickinson’s actions. As I conceived her situation, Dickinson deliberately built an everyday life that

allowed her to produce her poetry: she located herself in her father's house; she developed an authoritative voice; and she explored her spiritual beliefs. The combination of *what* she produced and *how* she produced it became such a remarkable whole to me that I read for years to see if anyone had already connected all these elements in like manner, but no one has done so. Though rich and detailed scholarship on Dickinson abounds, and the authors offer sound premises and minute support for their arguments, my concept of a triangle of intent leading to a paradigm of spirituality that resonates with contemporary thinkers seems to be unexplored. Thus, that concept forms the basis of this dissertation, which utilizes a theory of New Historicism to analyze Emily Dickinson's biography and body of work; it draws upon Dickinson's own poems and letters as well as critical, historical, social, political, and scientific sources.

Ever a private person, warm and open only when she wished to be, reserved and obscure when reticence allowed her to put distance between herself and the world, Dickinson piques curiosity perhaps most strongly because she chose a life of seclusion. Dickinson's choice of lifestyle directly informed her developing intellect, which allowed her to explore the spiritual thinking that, in turn, influenced her poetry. In her poetry she reveals a concept of spirituality that challenges the human mind to look beyond socially imposed limits of spiritual growth, to encourage thinking that stretches intellect to the limits of comprehension, and to experience, as Fritjof Capra describes, a unity that "transcends not only the separation of mind and body, but also the separation of self and world" (68). All of these factors have led to a current worldwide interest in Dickinson's poetry that I feel resonates as part of a new paradigm that turns away from destructive power and toward a unity of spirit and energy in the universe.

Dickinson's withdrawal from the active world outside her home has puzzled her readers and has brought forth a variety of theories that try to explain how a bright child from a socially active family eventually decided that seclusion was preferable to a public life. To account for Dickinson's withdrawal, some reasons of mental health have been explored, in particular agoraphobia. John Cody, whom Alfred Habegger refers to as "the pioneering psychoanalytic biographer," argues in *After Great Pain* (1971) that Dickinson suffered from agoraphobia and fear of strangers that made her increasingly unable to leave her house. He mentions that, "if an aged seamstress who claimed to have made dresses for Emily can be believed," Dickinson's clothes "had to be fitted to her sister because she could not face the seamstress" (46). Dickinson's inability to face people outside the family, Cody says, caused Dickinson to "[run] from the gardeners" who needed instructions and to ask her sister to buy a watering can that she wanted, because Dickinson could not bring herself to speak with the vendor at the door (L 272); (46). Cody asserts that Dickinson "grew increasingly phobic about leaving the house" and points to Dickinson's description of attending church alone (240). She writes to Sue of walking to her pew: "How big and broad the aisle seemed, full huge enough before, as I quaked slowly up . . . and there I sat, and sighed, and wondered I was scared so, for surely in the whole world was nothing I need to fear" (L 154). However, Dickinson had just two days before, on January 13, 1854, written to Edward Everett Hale to ask if Benjamin Newton had been prepared to die. "He often talked of God," she writes, "but I do not know certainly if he was his Father in Heaven" (L 153). As preoccupied with questions of faith as Dickinson must have been in those few days, walking into the formal

house of God with doubts in her mind could certainly have caused her to quake, perhaps at nothing in this world but in the hereafter.

Critics differ widely on reasons for Dickinson's reclusive actions. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), also see Dickinson's behavior as agoraphobic. They claim that Dickinson was an avid reader of novels, "especially novels by women" (585). Gilbert and Gubar point particularly to novels by authors such as George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte, "who secreted bitter self-portraits of madwomen in the attics of their novels." Dickinson, they say, actually "herself became a madwoman—became . . . both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic, trapped in a room in her father's house)" (583). In addition, Gilbert and Gubar assert, Dickinson's girlish wish "to be kept from 'what they call households'" ironically came true as she discovered the tradeoff: "[A]s she grew older, she discovered that the price of her salvation was her agoraphobic imprisonment in her father's household, along with a concomitant exclusion from the passionate drama of adult sexuality" (595). I cannot agree with these theories because Dickinson does not appear to me to be such an abject victim.

Gilbert and Gubar's examination of the apparent diagnosis of agoraphobia perhaps dwells too heavily on the physical and does not go far enough in recognizing the expansion of Dickinson's spiritual development, but they do explain further: "For a self-aware and volcanic talent like Dickinson's . . . no imprisonment could be permanent" (606). I completely agree: the force of Dickinson's individuality and her stubborn temperament enabled her to control her environment, of course with the cooperation of her family. Gilbert and Gubar offer as an example Dickinson's poem "Dare you see a

Soul *at the White Heat?*”— (Fr 401), in which the ““smallest room’ of her little girl self has now become . . . not just Nobody’s claustrophobic house of Doom,” but “the fiery chamber of a Loaded Gun, a bomb with a volcano’s blazing interiority” and “the sign of her soul’s triumph” (612, 613). This poem, arguably one of her finest, will be addressed more fully in Chapter 4. Dickinson has indeed triumphed over her emotional conflicts, as Gilbert and Gubar state, but they end their critique by saying that Dickinson “most earnestly prays: for power that can transform her ‘smallest Room’ into an Edenic, female continent of light” (649), obviously a release from any allusion to agoraphobia. My argument goes further to suggest that Dickinson was not in the end limited to praying for power but had acquired it. I find support for my argument from Adrienne Rich’s essay, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” (1975), in which Rich argues that Dickinson lived

a life deliberately organized on her terms. The terms that Dickinson had been handed by society—Calvinist Protestantism, Romanticism, the nineteenth-century corseting of women’s bodies, choices, and sexuality—could spell insanity to a woman genius. What this one had to do was retranslate her own unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities into a dialect called metaphor: her native language. (161-62)

Dickinson’s metaphors expressed all her emotions in her unique manner.

Maryanne M. Garbowsky, too, deals with the topic of Dickinson and agoraphobia in *The House without the Door* (1989), in which she juxtaposes “the medical facts of agoraphobia with the poet’s life” to “see how the agoraphobic syndrome affected Dickinson’s life-style” (22). Garbowsky turns “to representative poems within the

fascicles [to] find the record of that life: the grip of fear, the pattern of flight, and the habit of denial.” She points particularly to “fascicles written during the critical year 1862,” the year in which, she says, “we come face to face with the poet’s psychic torment: the terror of panic attack with its accompanying fears of madness and death” (22). Garbowsky, however, does not explain how Dickinson could produce lucid, lyrical poetry in the midst of a panic attack.

Albert Gelpi, whose work comes closest to the thesis of this dissertation, attempts to bring together both biographical evidence of Dickinson’s life and textual analysis of her poems and letters “to get beyond the biographical data to the design of the poet’s mind, since, as Emerson noted, the biography of genius is internal rather than external” (vii). Gelpi, who did not have the advantage of Richard Sewall’s and Alfred Habegger’s later works to assist him, admits the difficulties of analyzing the history of someone who has left behind little of her private life, “no memoirs, no essays,” and states his plan to focus on Dickinson not as “a quaint figure,” “a case study,” or “a verbal technician.” Instead, Gelpi intends to show Dickinson’s importance in the halls of American literature, “to suggest how central and radial a figure she is in the sweep of the American imagination from Jonathan Edwards to Robert Lowell, from Anne Bradstreet to Marianne Moore” (vii). Undoubtedly, the power of Dickinson’s poetry that resonates throughout American literature allows readers to participate in the wonder of a developing philosophy of spiritual communion, and her biographers provide details of her life that enlarge and enrich a reader’s understanding.

My discussion of Dickinson’s family background shows a father determined to act as an exacting head of household; without question his efforts brooked little challenge

when Emily was a girl, but Gelpi opens his portrayal of the poet when she is in her early twenties and has already spent several years of questioning about her own religious beliefs and, by association, the beliefs of her father. Gelpi says Dickinson looked upon her father as “almost, the incarnation of the Messiah whom she was defying more and more in her heart” and whom she “continued to resist in small but deliberate ways” (13).

Gelpi finds Dickinson’s life and her rebellious spirit “in its feminine way, distinctly and passionately Byronic” (40). Though Dickinson rebelled overtly, both she and Byron, says Gelpi, displayed the mutiny of “the Calvinist mind turning against itself and its Maker” (41). That seditious and confused spirit shows in a letter to Abiah Root: “I have come from ‘*to* and *fro*, and walking up, and down’ the same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he’d been . . . ” (L 36). In the writings pouring from Dickinson’s closed world, notes Gelpi, there was “something of the unsatisfied, unsatisfiable restlessness that drove Byron from place to place” (42). Dickinson, says Gelpi, reacted to the “dark side of the Romantic genius [that] moved her to insist that *she* must answer the riddles for herself or they would not be answered at all”; thus, she rejected the Calvinist church, and her rejection, Gelpi says, “was virtually complete” (45). I think Dickinson developed her own process of analyzing the constants, the changes, and possibly the future of New England Christianity. For instance, about 1859, Dickinson writes in a distinctly impious manner, “Soul, Wilt thou toss again?”—and seems to mock Divine Election: “Hundreds have lost indeed— / But tens have won an all—” (Fr 89). With scornful humor, she ends; “Imps in eager Caucus / Raffle for my Soul!” In a similar vein, perhaps two years later, she writes to Samuel Bowles after she had suffered a long winter of upper respiratory illness so severe that she was evidently

troubled by the thought of dying: “You spoke of the ‘East,’ I have thought about it this winter. . . . That *Bareheaded life*—under the grass—worries one like a Wasp” (L 220). Habegger explains that Dickinson had begun the letter with a poem that “was surely a riposte” to Bowles’s “tireless uplift” (423):

‘Faith’ is a fine invention’  
When Gentlemen can *see*—  
But *Microscopes* are prudent  
In an Emergency. (Fr 202)

Dickinson’s approval of the further investigation of situations not apparent to ordinary scrutiny seems to parallel her microscopic probing of Calvinism, which must undergo substantial change to be relevant to her again. Her inquisitive mind is no longer amenable to taking at face value the faith of her fathers, no matter what the consequences.

Just as my own research focuses on the topic, Gelpi addresses the question of why Dickinson became secluded; her reasoning, he says, “was not so much a matter of taking her stand in Amherst as Thoreau did at Walden but rather one of retreating behind the façade of Amherst and home into the private self” (164). Mentioning the word “mask” as we understand it in both a psychological and literary sense, Gelpi states that Dickinson did not know such application, but she “wanted to make sure that the mask was clearly visible” in her fourth letter to Higginson: “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person” (166). When Dickinson announces she ““would as soon undress in public, as to give my poems to the world,””

says Gelpi [Leyda 2: 482] , “she hid even the poetic mask from notice and made a few select people her “‘little *World*’ of readers” (166-67).

While Gelpi comes close to the thesis of this study, he does not emphasize the necessity of the triangular pattern I draw—namely connecting Dickinson’s seclusion, her developing an authoritative voice, and her production of poetry. Also, Gelpi stops slightly short of my view, concluding that Dickinson “negotiated with man, God, nature, and language to carry on the business of circumference” (175). Gelpi’s picture of Dickinson here shows a lesser person than I see. This study draws a tighter configuration. I see no “negotiation.” Instead, I believe that Dickinson purposefully designed her life so that she had a safe and secure home in which she could devote herself to defining her spirituality. As she awakened in herself the scholar and poet, I aver that she expanded her intellect by constantly questioning what and how she believed until she reached conclusions that formed a personal ontology that resounds with meaning for people over much of the globe today.

In particular, Dickinson explored the tenets of the Congregational Church that governed this life and the next. Human beings have an innate fear of death—the primary driving force is self-preservation. As myths have developed globally over thousands of years, people have woven intricate and diverse tales of the beginnings of the species, its place in the world, and ideas of an afterlife. In Dickinson’s Congregational Church, according to John A. Hardon, doctrine is based upon God as patriarch, His son the Prophet who interprets the Father’s directives, and followers of the Christian Church who learn and strive to obey doctrine, with the promise of an afterlife in Heaven as reward; these concepts were “substantially unchanged” since the Cambridge Platform was

adopted in 1648 (266-68). With some variations, for instance, privileging the Elect in Calvin's teachings of the Church, most Christians adhere to these basic tenets.

Unfortunately, the ideals inherent in this model of religion have been corrupted in practice and have often been lost in a hierarchy of power that has influenced Western thinking for two thousand years. The Christian Church became interwoven with the power of the State, resulting in some of the most atrocious of human actions—the Crusades, the European and North American witch hunts, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Middle Passage slave trade. All of these examples, of course, represent glaring misrepresentations of the teachings of Christianity, but they were either directly supported or at least not prevented by the power of the Church. One must certainly keep in mind that the Reformers condemned vehemently the earlier corrupt practices of the church, and the Puritans stood against all censorship and for a meaningful personal relationship with God that emphasized constant prayer and living in a state of Grace. Both of these groups sincerely sought a life of piety that would result in a community of ethical behavior. However, ethics are often overridden by power, and atrocities were committed despite the goodness of many devout people and church officials.

Dickinson questioned the hierarchy of power upon which her Calvinistic religion was based: a hierarchy that promoted, for her, a biased system under which to live, both in this life and in a possible afterlife. Dickinson was not alone in her spiritual ponderings—Unitarianism, Transcendentalism and writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller led prominent changes in spiritual direction. But Dickinson saw possibilities beyond even these offerings. I argue that, as Dickinson worked toward truth through her questions and doubts and began to formulate her own interpretation of a relationship with

Deity and infinity, she recorded in her poetry the forerunner of a new paradigm. This paradigm, a spiritual partnership among nature, God, and humanity, eventually became the parallel to one later developed by some of the foremost thinkers of the twentieth century, in disciplines such as physics, social science, biology, medicine, psychology, and economics, as well as literature. This paradigm emphasizes the necessity of looking at the earth and its inhabitants as a vast system of interdependent networks requiring a physical and spiritual connectedness to sustain existence and promote well-being.

Physicist and social scientist Fritjof Capra, in 2002, described a new concept of spirituality “consistent with the notion of the embodied mind that is now being developed in cognitive science. Spiritual experience is an experience of aliveness of mind and body as a unity.” Capra continues, “The central awareness in these spiritual moments is a profound sense of oneness of all, a sense of belonging to the universe as a whole” (68).

I argue that Dickinson came to the same conclusion 150 years ago as she formulated her ideas of spiritual connectedness. I argue further that Dickinson knew the value of her reasoning and that she secluded herself to commit much of her time to finding her “unique potential”—the development of her poetic skill to express her spiritual beliefs. Dickinson details her idea of spirituality and documents her discoveries in a way that those who study her work can appreciate and try to understand; the worldwide scholarship devoted to her poetry today upholds both its worth and its timeliness. Within that triangle of her New England home, her spirituality, and her poetry, Dickinson lived a life that she recognized as purposeful. Far from being a timid recluse, Dickinson worked through stages of doubt and belief toward a view of the relation of human beings to their world and to the cosmos that left behind mundane

burdens of sin, punishment, and overbearing patriarchy. Dickinson orchestrated a reverse bildungsroman: in that genre, young men typically journey into the world for education; Dickinson stayed at home to undergo a life-altering and maturing transformation and recorded the development of that consciousness in poetry. Dickinson's experience moved her thinking from her Calvinist childhood, roughly through age fourteen, through a growing period, ages approximately fifteen to twenty-eight, and her period of intense production, ages twenty-nine to thirty-four, that resulted in an interpretation of spirituality supported by scholars in multiple disciplines as a viable contemporary worldview. This dissertation identifies and analyzes Dickinson's experience.

#### Other Scholarly Points of View

Perhaps the first mention of preferring her own company in seclusion comes in a letter to her brother Austin when she is a student at Mount Holyoke and all her classmates who wished to do so have gone to visit a menagerie to see “the *bears* and monkeys.” Dickinson, however, stayed behind, writing, “Almost all the girls went & I enjoyed the solitude finely” (L 16). That preference for solitude became before too many years had passed one of her personality characteristics. Bingham says that her withdrawal represented “the only sane response—given her genius—which she could have made to a world in which, as she said, there was so much matter-of-fact” (*Emily Dickinson's Home* xv). No amount of matter-of-fact, or even a promised assemblage of bears and monkeys, could have satisfied Dickinson's need for discussion of spiritual matters on her plane, so she had to hold her counsel with herself and her closest friends and probe her own

consciousness. Her deliberations resulted in such poems as “The Brain—is wider than the Sky—,” in which she decides,

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— (Fr 598).

In Dickinson’s daily life, such a declaration would have seemed at least strange and probably blasphemous, certainly not the subject of normal conversation.

Renunciation in many forms has also been used to explain Dickinson’s seclusion. Richard B. Sewall, in his 1980 biography, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, stresses that anyone who looks at Dickinson’s withdrawal, “literary and psychoanalytical biographer alike,” must come to conclusions based on “the establishment of a common ground of fact” (3-4, n1). Sewall suggests that the sometimes “startling” psychoanalytic studies (perhaps referring to Cody’s theories published three years before) had not to his mind found “convincing factual basis”; he argues that facts necessary to draw conclusions about the “figure most real to those closest to Emily Dickinson” must be found “through hundreds of letters of wit and discernment and through hundreds of poems giving assurance not only of artistic mastery but of mastery and full acceptance of self” (3-4, n1). Sewall’s argument sounds appealingly sensible, since he draws a picture of the poet in control of both her life and her talent, and the reader wants to believe that Dickinson did control her life. However, this combination of circumstances as he sees it is not without its difficulties. “The problem that this situation posed for the biographer (let alone the editor and critic) was enormous,” says Sewall, “since Emily Dickinson’s life, in

a sense almost unique among poets, *was* her work” (7). Other critics agree with Sewall’s impression. Harold Bloom (2003) states quite a similar thought: “There are great figures—Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Willa Cather—who seem to have had so little of the full intensity of life when compared to the vitality of their work, that we might almost speak of the work in the work, rather than even of the work in a person” (Bloom’s *BioCritiques* xiii). These two statements tie into my thesis that Dickinson’s work and lifestyle were inseparable. For instance, Dickinson’s speaker describes what may actually refer to Dickinson’s own residence within her home in the poem “I dwell in Possibility— / A fairer House than Prose—” (Fr 466). Then she describes the employment that absorbs her: “For Occupation—This— / The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise—.” Within her family home she can create both her space and her poems.

Other critics also refer to renunciation as the reason for Dickinson’s withdrawal. In *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (1983), Suzanne Juhasz points out that “Dickinson’s endorsement of the strategy of renunciation, though neither consistent nor unambivalent, did give her a control over the shape of her life,” which directly relates to my argument (124). In her poem “Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue—” Dickinson describes her process of thought: “Renunciation—is the Choosing / Against itself— / Itself to justify / Unto itself—” (Fr 782). The renunciation, then, is what makes Dickinson her own person, one who knows that, as Juhasz says, “Renunciation may be viewed as an internal journey from one ‘place’ in the mind to another . . . from one interpretation of experience to another. Interpretation is a form of vision” (130). Recognizing the power of that “piercing Virtue” was Dickinson’s

strength—the ability to see that what she gave up, though not without pain and struggle, would eventually be not a burden of loss but a freedom to see beyond “A Presence—for an Expectation—.” Juhasz says, “Renunciation leads Dickinson to a future of her own making” (131). That future was a deliberate construction.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1986) also sees Dickinson’s renunciation of an active public life to write poetry as an empowering choice. I find a direct correlation to my own argument in Wolff’s point of view, that Dickinson expected her work to live far beyond her years. “[O]f course,” says Wolff, “she understood the quality of her work and reposed in it an unshakable trust in a ‘birth’ after death, the ‘I’ of the poetry to live forever and be forever the same” (575, n60). Wolff quotes Adrienne Rich, saying that Rich “can help to explain the origin of that compelling Voice of the poetry”; according to Wolff, Rich says, “Dickinson chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. . . . Given her vocation, she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her power, to practice necessary economies” (168). David Porter qualifies Adrienne Rich’s statement, declaring, “It is not enough to say, as Adrienne Rich does, that Dickinson ‘chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed.’” Porter is adamant in his explanation: “The language distortions, the exclusive use of the hymn form, and, most of all, the dissociation of words from things were not separate, chosen modes of art but the stylistic consequences of her seclusion. The seclusion chose the art rather than the artist the seclusion” (119). I find in Rich, Wolff, and Porter support for my point of view, that Dickinson deliberately secluded herself at home to write her poetry, poetry that she knew had life and worth. Wolff describes Dickinson’s work as “importunate and quick with energy . . . as vital

today as it was when it was breathed into being more than a century ago” (169).<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, says Wolff, Dickinson had an agenda: “[I]t was grandeur, only grandeur—and Power—that Dickinson wanted. She wanted to be America’s Representative Voice, and she wanted that Voice to challenge God Himself and wrestle for dominion” (255). Wolff does not support her statement. However, this dissertation addresses Dickinson’s power and voice that may very well represent today not only the spiritual beliefs of many Americans but also those of people in many other countries around the world, not as a means of aggrandizing Dickinson herself but as a means of disseminating knowledge through her literature. Dickinson’s power and voice are the topics of Chapter Three of this dissertation.

I find that Jean McClure Mudge, in *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home* (1975), sums up beautifully some of the more complicated reasons for Dickinson’s retreat from society, besides the freedom she felt at home, reasons that I elaborate in Chapters Two and Three, such as moments of “public opprobrium or remissness of friends”; in addition, Mudge refers to Dickinson’s home as a place evoking “memories of and communion with Austin and Sue,” and providing “latitude of time and thought” that were “perfect conditions for writing poetry” (70-71). Mudge argues that Dickinson “on the surface” led a normally active life in the early 1850s but had already decided that “I find I need more veil” (71). Mudge attributes the quote to 1852, as originally published in Millicent Todd Bingham’s *Emily Dickinson’s Home* (369), but Thomas H. Johnson dates the words, with an altered spelling, in a letter to Sue on March 12, 1853: “I find I need more vail” (L 107). In this letter, Dickinson laments that when Sue is away, “All life looks differently, and the faces of my fellows are not the same they wear when you

are with me.” Dickinson says she needs “more veil” because when Sue goes away, “the world looks staringly,” an uncomfortable confrontation for Dickinson. Mudge says she had already begun a withdrawal in her mind: “Mentally, she was in another country from most of Amherst, and she viewed a sufficient world from the secure citadel of home” (71). That withdrawal, which began in the Pleasant Street House as Dickinson play-acted at queenship, says Mudge, then turned into the “Empress of Calvary” in the Homestead; the “truly constant factor” in Dickinson’s life was “the necessity to be within the family’s door, as if to confirm the concentration on the inner life” (71). Mudge argues effectively that Dickinson’s turning away from the stares of the world to envelop herself and her developing poetry in a safe place demonstrated a wish for privacy that was “less an escape than a tactic of strategic retreat” because Dickinson felt a superiority, in herself and her family, compared to the world around her (71). Dickinson’s retreat, I argue also, was a deliberate turning from a society she wished to avoid and toward a society that would support her as she devoted time to thinking and writing.

Wolff also discusses Dickinson and spirituality in *Emily Dickinson* (1986). Wolff sees in the poem “’Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch” an effort on Dickinson’s part “to capture the perverse regularity and precision in the pattern of God’s manipulation of the creatures He has invented” (Fr 425); (354). Wolff goes on to say that the three experiences of the speaker of the poem represent “mankind’s inescapable progress toward death: death comes near, threatens the worst; inexplicably, death retreats. Over and over the ritual is enacted. The subject of the experiment cannot escape, nor can she affect the outcome (eventually, everyone dies)” (355). In her summary of the poem, I find direct support of my argument. The heroine, of course, cannot win against death,

says Wolff. “The central issue, then, is whether the speaker can find a way to convert the situation into a process whereby the subjects of God’s experiment can become more than merely passive victims.” Here I see Wolff’s viewpoint in direct opposition to that of Garbowsky. “Thus,” she continues, “the function of this narrative is to demonstrate that the speaker can at least hold an integral self together until the inevitable end and that she can wrest meaning from her own travails and convey that meaning to others” (355). Therefore, I see the “panic” attacks as an intense mental, emotional, and physical reaction to a sudden understanding of personal mortality rather than agoraphobia, and I argue that Dickinson stayed home from a reluctance to waste the precious finite hours of her life in superficial social contact and instead recognized the need for privacy to explore the turmoil within.

Paula Bennett, in *My Life a Loaded Gun* (1986), addresses the topic of power arising from solitude when she says that Dickinson’s decision to assume a “solitude of self” showed that she had “come to terms with herself, with both her strengths and her losses, and . . . knew how to balance one against the other in order to be faithful to the ‘Mystery’ she served within” (93). Bennett discusses Dickinson’s maturation based on this “solitude of self” that allowed her to discover “the consciousness from which her deepest feelings sprang” (92). Only when Dickinson had touched the depth of those feelings, says Bennett, “only when she fully owned herself was she able to come completely, volcanically alive and only in this autonomy did she find her power” (92-93). Bennett refers to “Lad of Athens, faithful be / To Thyself, / And Mystery— / All the rest is Perjury—” (Fr 1606). But Dickinson’s solitude was not entirely a positive condition. It led her to a “cold land,” says Bennett, that was also “a land of power, glory, and

dominion and for Emily Dickinson that was enough” (94). I find Bennett’s assessment of Dickinson’s struggle to understand her decision and establish that domain similar to my idea of her forming for herself a home within her father’s house, where she had complete authority—“power, glory, and dominion,” in solitude, yes, but in control.

These critics and biographers and others bring up valid reasons to attempt to explain Dickinson’s actions. However, no one has discovered the pattern that I propose, that Dickinson purposefully engineered her way of life to reach a definite goal: she combined her home, her voice, and her spiritual probing to leave behind a message of cosmic awareness for her readers.

### Dickinson and New England Spirituality

The European settling of New England includes the forebears of Emily Dickinson, who exemplified the tenacity of the human spirit as they emigrated from their homeland to the wild beauty and harsh conditions of the new land, a tenacity that Dickinson later exhibited throughout her life. Basically, the early New England colonists fell into two groups, the Pilgrim Separatists, who arrived in Plymouth in 1620, and the Puritans, who came ten years later to Massachusetts Bay. According to historian Charles M. Andrews, the Pilgrims chose to emigrate from England to practice their faith without a bishop or communion though they still considered themselves loyal subjects of the crown. Puritans, on the other hand, wanted to escape the authority of the crown and set up their own political system, but they continued to recognize the Church of England as their spiritual mother. In their basic faith, both groups were Calvinists, firmly believing in the “dogma of foreordination and the total depravity of man” (379). Since the

geographical focus of this dissertation rests in that part of the Connecticut River Valley later known as Amherst, Massachusetts, and surrounding communities, I examine the Puritan shaping of that geographical area and determine how its ideology helped to mold the spiritual thinking of the poet Emily Dickinson. Then, I explore the way in which the Second Great Awakening enveloped Emily Dickinson and analyze her reaction to it. Finally, I look at Dickinson's life to show the way in which Dickinson arranged her days in a triangle of faith, home, and poetry that allowed her to produce the body of work that offers readers a literary record of her journey. I also take selected works from the last twenty years of her life, in which she wrote poems that were significant but fewer in number than in the years of her peak period in her early thirties.

In their faith, the immigrants to the shores of New England believed they had a formidable ally—their God. Feeling that they had a God-given right to do so, New Englanders spread across the landscape, establishing their own communities as they displaced the native peoples of the region. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was the offspring of a Puritan tradition determined to maintain a system based on authoritarian government; in this case, governmental authority lay in the hands of the church that followed the doctrine of John Calvin. Calvin's method of bringing souls to their righteous reward, though based upon self-determination, admitted liberty of thought and action only if one gave oneself to Christ, a premise against which Emily Dickinson later balked. The religious makeup of America had changed in the nineteenth century. By the time Dickinson was born in 1830, says Anne C. Rose in *Voices of the Marketplace* (1995), "Methodists and Baptists were gaining members," and there were small groups of Catholics, Jews, and atheists; Unitarians, in particular, "questioned the value of sudden

conversion” (1). By 1860, when Dickinson was beginning to write poetry seriously, Rose says, “Religious patterns had radically changed. . . . Catholicism was the largest American denomination” [because of Irish influx], the Jewish population had increased tenfold, and “sources of controversy” included also Mormons, Transcendentalists, Adventists, Abolitionists, Communitarians, and High Church Episcopalians (1).

The influence of Unitarians had perhaps the most noticeable effect on Calvinism. An example was Andrews Norton, who, says Lawrence Buell, was “the leading Unitarian exponent of the ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible—that is, the interpretation of scripture as a historical document, the creation of a particular milieu rather than the infallibly inspired word of God” (33). Dickinson spent much of her life questioning accepted beliefs, for instance in the poem that begins “How Human Nature dotes / On what it can’t detect.” The ending of her poem questions orthodox Christian teaching: “Where go we— / Go we anywhere / Creation after this?” (Fr 1440).

By the early nineteenth century, New Englanders had turned from restrictions of Calvinism to expansive new thought in politics, economics, literature, and theology. A God of benevolence and love gradually challenged the stern Calvinist God who, though offering salvation through grace, still enacted punishment and retribution. Calvinism reeled against the onslaught of Unitarian conviction and purpose, followed by the consciousness of Transcendentalism. “The concept of a higher Reason is the heart of what came to be called Transcendentalism,” says Buell. He continues,

Those who recognized such a faculty sometimes called it by different names, such as “Spirit,” “Mind,” “Soul,” and they also differed in the claims they make for it. For some Transcendentalists it was simply an

inner light or conscience; for others it was the voice of God; for still others it was literally God himself immanent in man. (5)

Women writers—poets, novelists, essayists—gave voice to the half of the population that had largely been muted in American history. Magazines and books carried ideas of women who both upheld and questioned political, economic, and religious tradition and often lobbied for the rights of all.

I do not presume to conduct here an exhaustive theological argument, nor—I suspect—did Emily Dickinson. Instead, I will examine Dickinson’s poetry, correspondence, and reported behavior to show evidence that she followed her questing spirit. She left behind the Calvinism of her early training, embraced the revolution of Unitarianism, acknowledged the reason and intuition of Transcendentalism, and then moved beyond these influences to fashion her own outlook on divinity in what Dominic Luxford (2004) calls “the realm of the supersensible, numinous or extra-intuitive” (68). Dickinson chose with determination her spiritual path; she explored not only the doctrine she had been taught, but also the new ideas brought to her attention through her reading and discussion with friends and her own rapidly developing intellect. I argue that she just as deliberately restricted the center of her day-to-day life, sharply curtailing her excursions into society.

Dickinson practiced the self-searching of her Puritan forebears; however, just as she complied diligently with some tenets of Calvinism, she resisted others emphatically. She searched her thoughts and her soul to assess her relationship with God, but the God whom she finally found and her relationship with divinity would have astounded her

Puritan ancestors. Allen Tate (1959) offers an early and colorful reaction to Dickinson's relation to Puritanism:

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. Her poetry is a magnificent personal confession, blasphemous and in its self-revelation, its implacable honesty, almost obscene. It comes out of an intellectual life towards which it feels no moral responsibility. Mather would have burnt her for a witch. (211)

Dickinson reduced the supernatural to a moral issue, as I will address in later chapters, only after years of internal struggle, most of it conducted within her own home.

### Dickinson, Power, and Truth

While Dickinson lived in close company with her family, she nevertheless carved out a life of her own of which they were largely unaware. Although undeniably privileged in the community and accustomed to material comfort in her father's home, Dickinson was bound to a life that revolved primarily around providing for the comfort of the males of that household. Dickinson's duties as girl and woman in the middle parts of the nineteenth century made demands upon her time; therefore, in many ways the free expression of her natural intelligence, talent, and curiosity meant curtailing her wishes to think and write and instead spend time and energy on ordinary household tasks. "The path of duty looks very ugly indeed—and the place where *I* want to go more amiable," she writes at the age of nineteen to her friend Jane Humphrey (L 30). In a letter to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson), Emily, who is at that time age twenty-one, writes plaintively, "Why

cant I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?—don't I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law?" (L 94). Though here Dickinson speaks of wanting to be in Baltimore just to see Sue, her underlying statement expresses the impossibility of having her intellectual capabilities recognized. Without practicing an overt exercise of power, she began shortly afterward to live her life in a dominion of her own making that enabled her to become a spiritual poet. The poem "God gave a Loaf to every Bird—" expresses the power of the persona who has recognized that her "crumb"—the writing of poetry—is a gift of immense proportion, compared to the full loaves given to "the Rich." The persona hoards the crumb: "I dare not eat it—tho' I starve— / My poignant luxury—," and decides finally, "I deem that I—with but a Crumb— / Am Sovereign of them all" (Fr 748). Dickinson's persona stands firm in possession of her small portion because with it she has the power to produce poem after poem while the "Rich" in this poem, "An Indiaman—An Earl—," consume their gifts and have nothing left, no power to regenerate their portion. Beth Doriani declares, "Her crumb is small, but it is from God. . . . In Dickinson's poem, the speaker, of course, 'dares not eat' her little crumb for food; it signifies something greater than mere food. . . . She celebrates her crumb of power and privilege" (177). Another later poem explains the importance of husbandry of that crumb: "Who goes to dine must take his Feast / Or find the Banquet mean— / The Table is not laid without / Till it is laid within" (Fr 1219). Dickinson gains power in poem after poem by laying her own table "within."

Though Dickinson exhibited an awareness of duty and responsibility to family and faith, she also began to sense, even as a teenager, an unconventional duty and responsibility to herself. Millicent Todd Bingham calls this momentous struggle

Dickinson's "lifelong battle for personal integrity and right adjustment to the will of her Maker," the study of which, Bingham says, will reward scholars with "deeper insight into the wellspring of her genius" (*Emily Dickinson's Home* 40-41). That struggle could be resolved only if Dickinson retained her autonomy. Therefore, I argue that Dickinson empowered herself in a manner that differed from that of many of her contemporaries in Amherst in three ways: first, Dickinson chose to remain in her father's house; second, she recognized the validity of her own thinking; third, she appropriated a voice of authority. Dickinson never married; instead, she virtually empowered herself to become the head of her own cerebral household, a household of one, when she kept to her private room within her father's house. Though she interacted with the family and participated in a number of domestic tasks, she also spent many long nights and quiet days alone. She writes to Austin in December 1851, "Dont tell them, *will* you Austin; they are all asleep soundly and I snatch the silent night to speak a word to you" (L 66). The practice occurs often because in the same letter Dickinson writes of at times rousing her sister to enjoy her "discomfiture at the *bare idea* of morning"; as a result of Dickinson's glee, Vinnie "frequently suggests the propriety of having me transported to some barbarous country." In her poetry, too, Dickinson refers to choosing to be alone, as in "The Soul selects her own Society—": "Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing— / at her low Gate— / Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling / Upon her Mat—" (Fr 409). The persona can refuse to receive even an Emperor—she is her own monarch. Beth Maclay Doriani, in *Emily Dickinson: Daughter of Prophecy* (1996), points out that, in her opinion, Dickinson's choice to renounce marriage "was not a passive capitulation for Dickinson but her way of self-preservation, a conscious effort to retain power" (162). In her dissertation, "Emily

Dickinson and the Poetry of Silence,” Charlotte Louise Nekola offers a possible explanation: “Retreating to a room in a house instead of joining a community which praised selflessness as highest virtue for a woman perhaps was a way of creating a world in which a voice could learn to speak for itself” (qtd. in Doriani 162). Thus, as I see it, Dickinson assumed autonomy at home.

Next, in addition to regulating her physical space, Dickinson gave herself permission to think and to recognize the validity of her own ideas; in her poem “I’m ceded—I’ve stopped being Theirs—,” the persona denies her infant baptism that was given her “without the choice,” “But this time—Adequate—Erect— / With Will to choose—or to reject—,” she will choose her “Crown,” the recognition of her own ego strength that can decide for herself what to believe and what to accept (Fr 353). Resisting one form of religion opens the door to the inquisitiveness of Dickinson’s nature, and in an unorthodox move, she gives herself permission to explore her own power and to record that power. In *After Great Pain* (1971), John Cody likens her search to Freud’s psychoanalysis half a century in the future and marvels at her powers of “self-observation and unnerving intuition” (7,6).

Dickinson appropriated for herself a voice of authority to speak as she wished in her poetry, though she tempered that power by speaking “slant.” From her center in her room, she gave of herself to her family and friends what she decided to spare. But in her private space, she lived a life of the intellect, a life devoted to contemplating and writing about the puzzle of life and the certainty of death and the human need to analyze both. Dickinson recognized the power of the words in which she expressed those monumental concepts. But she most likely had no idea that her philosophy would appeal to so many

people today. Sewall reports that, according to Joseph Lyman, she writes, “We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly [,] that words were cheap & weak. Now I don’t know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire” (*Lyman Letters* 78). Sewall adds, “For her, words had an existence, a power, an autonomy of their own” (76).

Dickinson cautions that one must use words with care, as in the poem “A Man may make a Remark—”: “Let us deport—with skill— / Let us discourse—with care— / Powder exists in Charcoal— / Before it exists in Fire” (Fr 913). And Dickinson’s idea of the power of a word to establish itself she expresses in this poem:

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day. (Fr 278)

The power of words appears strongly in Dickinson’s poetry. In the poem “A Word dropped careless on a Page,” Dickinson predicts the capacity of the written word to influence the reader long into the future: “A Word dropped careless on a Page / May stimulate an eye / When folded in perpetual seam / The Wrinkled Maker lie” (Fr 1268). In the poem “A Word made flesh is seldom,” Dickinson declares, “A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die” (Fr 1715). In these three poems, Dickinson seems to acknowledge that poetry lives long after its author is dead, and perhaps her poetry will,

also. Wolff addresses Dickinson's association of words with power. Wolff describes the "immensely complex" relationship of Dickinson with her "Lexicon": "Its most direct and lasting influence was to reinforce and expand the conviction that Words were Power: not merely a force to be exerted in the time-bound, quotidian world, but a direct link between God and mankind that would allow any human to reach into the transcendent" (92).

Dickinson assumes what may be considered the ultimate in control of words when she renames God in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "They [her family] are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their 'Father'" (L 261). Harold Bloom (1985) states that Dickinson's philosophy becomes "a profound and shockingly original cognitive act of negation" (Modern Critical Views 5). Such an act characterizes the development of personal power through words that will be addressed more fully in Chapter Three.

In addition to adopting the power to govern her life, Dickinson also committed herself to finding truth in matters of spirituality. As her intellect unfolded, Dickinson examined and set aside the limiting aspects of Calvinism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism, keeping for herself the methodical analysis of religious thought that enabled her finally to grasp and explain her version of the truth. Despite having moments of despair and pride and arrogance, Dickinson rejoiced in the discovery of the pure awe and wonder of life and of her relation to infinity. Many people in her time may have listened and given credence to her thoughts—Emerson, for example, if he had read her work. However, Dickinson's own choice to remain private resulted in a limited discussion of her conclusions, though her poem, "Strong draughts of Their Refreshing Minds," indicates an acute appreciation of other writers (Fr 770). Though Dickinson

chose not to be celebrated during her lifetime, the contents of those works may have a significance today, which will be addressed more fully in Chapter Five. Bill Moyers (1998), in his interview with Joseph Campbell that became *The Power of Myth*, asks Campbell if he still believes, as he had once written, “that we are at this moment participating in one of the very greatest leaps of the human spirit to a knowledge not only of outside nature but also of our own deep inward mystery.” Campbell, says Moyers, “thought a minute and answered, ‘The greatest ever’” (xviii). Dickinson’s work adds dimension to this alleged awakening of spiritual discoveries.

This dissertation examines her letters and poems to identify her spiritual development, primarily through her first thirty-five years, and to argue that her voice rings true to a world quite receptive to her message. Possibly Dickinson herself felt that statement would one day be true, as she indicates in the poem “This is my letter to the World”:

This is my letter to the world,  
That never wrote to me,  
The simple news that Nature told,  
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed  
To hands I cannot see;  
For love of her, sweet countrymen,  
Judge tenderly of me! (Fr 519)

Dickinson carefully preserved the poems, which now can be used to document her journey and identify her spiritual development in a voice that rings true and resonates in a contemporary world. At the time of her writing, however, Dickinson guarded her accumulating perceptions carefully:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind— (Fr 1263)

As a poet, Dickinson understood the primary need to express truth, but, as I believe the following poem shows, she knew that the truth as she saw it would astonish her contemporary listeners, thus the need for a gradual revelation. In the poem “'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—,” Dickinson’s speaker alludes to the overwhelming effect on those “who know,” an effect that stuns the speaker, so how can those who do *not* “know” deal with the truth of the speaker’s revelation? The third stanza reads, “The Truth, is Bald, and Cold— / But that will hold— / If any are not sure— / We show them— prayer— / But we, who know, / Stop hoping, now—” (Fr 341). Hope and prayer ultimately have no effect on truth in this poem, a concept that may indeed have bewildered many nineteenth-century readers, but Dickinson could not ignore the truth as she saw it or refrain from expressing it. At this early point in her poetry, I think

Dickinson has lost the concept of a comforting Heaven and has not yet found a reassuring substitute in the larger design that she is exploring.

American poet Mark Van Doren (1961) asserts that the function of poetry, as Socrates said of oratory, “is to tell the truth” (36). The poet, Van Doren declares, could express “ideas that make ideologies look pale and hollow by comparison” (151). The poet, he says, creates his own dignity “in the mind, by slow and painful stages, amid the total darkness of other men’s refusal to make the attempt at all. But once it is created,” continues Van Doren, “. . . in an artist whose ambition is otherwise unbounded—and whose skill—it becomes the final excellence of which the rest of us had dreamed. It could even change again the changing world” (151). Van Doren speaks here in 1961 of poets in general and from his experience as one who has lived through the Second World War and is in the midst of the flux of reconstruction. Nonetheless, he speaks of a definite, and perhaps yearned-for, possibility of positive change. Poetry has always had the power to excite, to move, and to inspire the listener or reader; Dickinson, a skillful poet with unorthodox vision and a passion for truth who spent her life creating her personal dignity, does today excite much attention from a world-wide population of not only scholars, but also laymen who find a satisfying quality in her work. The result of her spiritual probing, as expressed in her poetry, bypasses “pale and hollow” ideologies of which Van Doren speaks and, as I see it, contributes to “one of the greatest leaps of human spirit” that Campbell anticipates.

## Dickinson, Calvinism, and the Second Great Awakening

Dickinson chose to remove herself from the enthusiasms of the Second Great Awakening; as such, her behavior represented a minority action. Primarily among the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, says William G. McLoughlin (1978), both men and women joined reform movements that effected a “profound national transformation,” at the core of which “lay the question of free will” (113). As Dickinson was an avid reader, was a church-goer in her first decades, and was exposed to the conversation of an educated circle, she was undoubtedly aware of the conflicts of her time. She, too, turned toward nature as a source of understanding, and she questioned from the position of one who exercises free will to decide the validity of answers.

Dickinson examined minute parts of her world with intense avidity as she tried to piece together an understanding of the universe: “Some things that fly there be— / Birds—Hours—the Bumblebee— . . . There are that resting, rise. / Can I expound the skies? / How still the Riddle lies!” (Fr 68). Her method was similar to that of Jonathan Edwards, who displayed an “ardent approach to the natural world,” says Albert Gelpi, because “one had to know the universe as matter, one had to know objects as concrete things, before phenomena could be seized intuitively as ‘images, or shadows of divine things,’” the title of one of Edwards’s sermons (154-55). Dickinson, too, moved from concrete images to divine extrapolation as she employed the language of her spiritual heritage. Doriani says, “As an early means by which she learned of prophetic empowerment,” the sermons of conservative ministers who followed Edwards “motivated and inspired Dickinson” (44). McLoughlin names Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher, and Nathaniel W. Taylor as the three most influential ministers of the time (109). Doriani

adds, “They offered her a prophetic voice to imitate, and they enabled her to develop her own wise poetic voice as she shaped her poems to be brief homilies that communicated truth as she saw it” (44). Dickinson thus used her ear for language and her talent for phrasing to imitate and adopt the power of authority to articulate the divine.

Dickinson may have been profoundly influenced by one of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons, perhaps the most famous sermon in American history, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards, says John Hardon, “was consumed by the sovereignty of God, the fateful brevity of life and its eternal issues” (259). Gelpi says that Jonathan Edwards “is perhaps the writer whose temper . . . most closely resemble[s] hers” (107). Though Edwards’s sermons rang with fire and brimstone, a description we associate with exhortations of the period, and terrorized his listeners, George McMichael (1998) says Edwards was a compassionate man who meant instead to call men and women to a sense of their sins as he saw them. Edwards wanted to “arouse their yearning for an inner sense of God’s spirit . . . to prepare them to receive God’s grace,” says McMichael (186). In *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty* (1979), Karl Keller argues that Dickinson was affected by such rhetoric. Dickinson’s “vital dependence on Puritan torments and the concurrent rejection of Puritan claims on her faculties,” says Keller, “make a major ambiguity in Dickinson.” Such is the affinity of Dickinson and Edwards, he says, that “knowing him, we learn her needs and her denials, a tense syntax that produced much of her best poetry” (68). Dickinson’s struggle to understand her inner sense of God’s spirit occupied her intensely during the religious revivals in Amherst, discussed further in Chapter Four.

To clarify her own feelings, Dickinson examined Edwards's sermon. Keller describes Edwards as a "security and a stimulus" for Dickinson because he was "tough, definite, sure of sin and damnation" (80). Dickinson, says Keller, "needed that pit to symbolize the dark side of herself and to use as a launching pad for her own poetic/spiritual soarings" (80). Doriani does not entirely agree about the "need"; she says Dickinson "prophesied not simply as an exercise in rebellion against her religious heritage (she sometimes did that) . . . but to revitalize faith and spirit" (185). I think, because her poetry vacillates from joy to seeming despair, that Dickinson's use of any symbol depended upon her mood—on dark days, dark thoughts were unavoidable, and on days of inspiration, she could let her spirit soar.

Similarities are noticeable between Dickinson and Edwards in Portion #4 of Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" and Dickinson's poem "A Pit—but Heaven over it—" (Fr 508). Edwards writes in 1741,

The wrath of God burns against them; their damnation does not slumber;  
the pit is prepared; the fire is made ready; the furnace is now hot, ready to  
receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is  
whet and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.

( qtd. in McMichael 200)

Dickinson also makes use of the image of the consuming Pit, mentioned more than a dozen times in the Bible; she describes in this poem an all-too-human and frail response to its awesome maw:

To stir would be to slip—

To look would be to drop—

To dream—to sap the Prop

That holds my chances up.

Ah! Pit! With Heaven over it!

Whereas Edwards exhorts his hearers to prepare to accept God's grace and be ready at any moment to leave this world to enter the spiritual plane, Dickinson, in her practical and analytical way, divides and classifies the periods of human life in this poem, according to Joanne Feit Diehl, as the speaker tries to identify her place between Heaven and the Pit. "The circuit of the pit (the path around it)," says Diehl, "is marked by the stages of life: the seed = birth, summer = maturity and the tomb of death. The cycle of life itself walks on the edge," she states, "with no possibility of escape except a heaven that remains tantalizingly beside, abroad, and above it" (157). In Dickinson's intense analysis of the persona's plight, I see in this poem no Christian sense of a giving up to God the earthly life and embracing an eternal existence with a sense of joy and reverence. Instead, Dickinson's persona can concentrate only on one thing: "The depth is all my thought." Diehl describes the precarious situation: "She is left with awe and the abyss, extremes that cause her to guard each step she takes as she rounds the circle" (157).<sup>2</sup> This consciousness of existence Dickinson constantly juxtaposes with consciousness of death, and the question of continuance or cessation of consciousness. "Dickinson," says Gelpi, "makes the cultivation of consciousness her religion. . . . Religion and consciousness are one and the same" (108). As she contemplated these questions, Dickinson drew within herself to address more fully the sublime in her everyday life.

Though the spirit of Jonathan Edwards, both his exhortations and his compassion, still lived in memory in Massachusetts into the nineteenth century, many people in New

England moved away from a Calvinist conviction of innate human depravity and toward the teaching of a sense of innate human goodness. The teachings of the Unitarian Church provided a point of view that fulfilled a need for many people. “Calvinists saw true religion as necessarily containing elements of terror and psychic violence,” says Alfred Habegger, while “Unitarians stood for serenity, a life of rational virtue” (10). Dickinson searched for serenity, a peace of knowing; however, Unitarianism did not give her the answers she sought, and her search continued. For instance, she reads Emerson and sends his book, *Representative Men*, as a gift to Mary Higginson (L 481). One reason for her continued questioning may have been the continued influence of Calvinism in the form of what Doriani calls “the Puritan legacy [that] retained a powerful presence in Dickinson’s locale, even into her adult life” (43-44). Then, says Buell, “the more radical Transcendentalists,” whose movement sprang from Unitarianism, affirmed “that the utterance of art is (potentially) as spiritual as that of the Bible” (29). Undoubtedly, Dickinson became drawn to the Transcendentalist philosophy. Dickinson’s relationship to Unitarian and Transcendental philosophy will be addressed in Chapter Three as part of her development of personal power.

The Second Great Awakening and the intensity of the evangelical fervor that swept New England in the mid-nineteenth century impacted Dickinson greatly; it laid most of the groundwork of her religious upbringing and provides a viewpoint from which to analyze some of her greatest poetry. Doriani sees the Second Great Awakening as a continuation of “[Jonathan] Edwards’s efforts to adjust Calvinism to meet the exigencies of the times, including Unitarian departures from orthodoxy” (187). These departures, says Buell, include “a rationale, for the first time in New England history, for the intrinsic

value of belles-lettres . . . as inherently valuable by virtue of their beauty and emotional power” (29). Unitarians held the resulting revealed religion “at least in theory,” continues Buell, “higher than natural religion” (29). The movement to infuse the churches of the Connecticut River Valley region with renewed religious lifeblood concentrated not upon Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, says Doriani, but upon “the role of human volition in the salvation process,” a reinterpretation of Calvinism by theologians Lyman Beecher and Nathaniel Taylor, and a shifting of attention from the patriarchal role of God to the role of the individual’s faith, which then became the “center” of the revivals (187). McLoughlin says that Beecher and Taylor “began cautiously to reinstate or reinterpret the doctrines of Calvinism” (111). According to McLoughlin, as Beecher and Taylor interpreted religion,

Revivalism was a means used by God to help man. . . . God’s Word preached by “a man of God” is an offer from God of Grace. We *can* believe on faith. We *can* strive to enter in at the gate. Man is a self-determining force in nature; that is the essence of his humanness and of his divinity (118).

The difference between Calvinism and the new interpretation lay in the path of human endeavor, not dependence upon Christ as a vehicle of grace.

Dickinson explored that center, the faith of the individual, exhaustively and then decided that her business was “Circumference” (L 268); she stretched her mental capacity as far as it would reach to try to understand not just mundane matters but her interactive relationship to the universe. David Porter says that Dickinson attempts “to colonize realms beyond the boundary of the senses” through “trying to express a complex idea by

a single term” (35, 60). The topic of Circumference receives much attention in Chapter Four.

Dickinson’s search for expression of just the right terms drove her continually. She questioned religious teachings and sorted through what she believed and what she rejected. Keller says that Dickinson’s resisting the Edwardsian revival, the Congregationalist reaction to Unitarianism, in Amherst in her youth possibly “stirred almost all of her poems—debating, debunking, restating, reforming, replacing that movement” (72). Dickinson often resisted with humor, as in “Papa above!” when she writes, “Papa above! / Regard a Mouse / O’erpowered by the Cat!” (Fr 151). “Papa,” reduces power and terror, both necessary forces to contend with, to familiar domestic terms, so Dickinson approaches God with confidence rather than awe. Dickinson even assumes the voice of God in one of her earliest poems: “Trust the loving promise / Underneath the mould, / Cry ‘it’s I,’ ‘take Dollie,’ / And I will enfold” (Fr 41). Taking a stance for a personal unorthodox experience, Dickinson declares, “A transport one cannot contain / May yet a transport be— / Though God forbid it lift the lid— / Unto its Ecstasy!” (Fr 212). Searching her soul leads her away from Edwards’s parameters and toward a more autonomous decision-making process as she refines her ideas of spirituality.

In some poems, Dickinson stands both propriety and piety on their heads with a voice of humorous authority, as in the poem beginning “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church” (Fr 236). “I keep it, staying at Home—” she writes, completely violating the principle that demands Sabbath presence within a sanctified edifice. Instead, she has “an Orchard for a Dome,” and adds perhaps the height of tongue-in-cheek language in all her

poetry: “God preaches, a noted Clergyman—.” In place of the “Surplice” that “some” wear, the speaker declares, “I just wear my Wings—.” The poem ends with a declaration of comfort and confidence in her own sense of spirituality: “So instead of getting to Heaven, at last— / I’m going, all along.” “Getting” to Heaven “at last” indicates a final goal; “going, all along” represents a personal, conscious choice to live her version of Heaven on earth. Dickinson’s progress toward serenity depends upon her own ingenuity and the developing certainty of an alternate Heaven.

### Dickinson, Spirituality, and Poetry

Because the development of Dickinson’s spirituality and poetry both stimulated and depended upon each other, I find that they may be discussed concurrently to good advantage. Therefore, in this section I draw upon critics and biographers who refer to both, but I keep in mind that my argument poses a triangle linking Dickinson’s reclusiveness, her spiritual development, and her poetic output as a combination of facets that permitted her to reach intellectual heights. The results of that intellectual output contribute today to a paradigm of spiritual involvement that turns from the patriarchal paradigm of obedience to power and toward a belief based on personal relationship with the physical world and metaphysical universe.

Richard Sewall looks upon Dickinson’s withdrawal as a reaction to the spiritual crisis occurring in New England in which the younger Dickinsons, at least Austin and Emily, could not find the “sustaining power” of the doctrines of the church that their elders had depended upon (237). Sewall describes Dickinson’s refusal to leave home and attend church regularly as “a sign of more than mere reclusiveness,” having “openly

confessed a scorn of doctrines” (238). Dickinson writes to Mary Haven on February 13, 1859, “Mr S[eelye] preached in our church last Sabbath upon ‘predestination,’ but I do not respect ‘doctrines,’ and did not listen to him” (L 200). Sewall declares, “She took it upon herself to fill the void left by these rejections with all the verbal resources she could muster. She would triumph by the word—her own Word” (238). Sewall points to the “clear and powerful” truth of Dickinson’s “I shall know why—when Time is over—” (Fr 215); (243), in which she writes that “Christ will explain each separate anguish / In the fair schoolroom of the sky—.” Anticipating the lesson to be learned at that future time gives her absolutely no comfort to endure the present and “the drop of Anguish / That scalds me now—that scalds me now!” (Fr 215). Habegger says of this poem, “What the speaker hopes is that when she gets to heaven and Christ tells her of the agony of His abandonment, she will at last be able to stop thinking about her own” (408-09). Sewall says her “lyric outburst” is “a measure of the growth of the poet in breadth of vision and in organizing power” (243). Clearly, the beginnings of Dickinson’s spiritual discoveries were not characterized by the resigned acceptance of life’s painful moments, and Sewall recognizes the force that Dickinson very early on starts to muster to express her agony. In her search for answers that would take the place of the lost faith in doctrine, I argue, Dickinson turned to understanding the truth within her. Sewall concludes also, “Certainly it was Emily Dickinson’s constant aim, her life action, to make her ‘truth’ clear.” Sewall describes Dickinson’s “continual effort to expand, deepen, clarify, and be ever more precise.” To achieve those ends, says Sewall, Dickinson “tried her hand again and again at similar materials, sometimes forging new meaning, sometimes adding little or even slipping back (the curve is not always up), but in general continuing her course

toward what she called ‘Circumference’” (240). Sewall’s presentation of the truth, vision, and organizing power of Dickinson provides a picture of a profoundly deliberate reasoning in her choice to remain at home.

Dickinson’s actions once again reveal her Calvinist background. As Karl Keller analyzes Dickinson’s spiritual struggle, he sees a direct correlation between Dickinson and Jonathan Edwards (95). Doriani also emphasizes the teachings of Edwards: “The centrality of a personal conversion, a quest for affective piety, and the renunciation of self to gain spiritual reward remained key tenets well into Dickinson’s era” (“Edwards, Jonathan” 95). Keller, however, points to a reversal in the area of influence that characterizes Dickinson’s thinking. Dickinson, says Keller, was “stultified by doctrine, and so her faith was a matter of persuasion but not conviction. . . . Duplicity became the fundamental principle of her personal Christianity, entertaining opposition constantly, orthodox and heretic” (95). I think perhaps Dickinson was not “stultified” but rather *stimulated* by doctrine. In order to define a conceived problem and move forward to a conclusion of one’s own, one often decides against what has been propounded as the norm or the accepted point of view. For Dickinson, doctrine represented that norm against which she could formulate her own perceptions of change. Dickinson herself declares, “On subjects of which we know nothing, we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble,” in letter to Judge Otis P. Lord (L 750). Obviously, her beliefs alter as she works through the problem.

However, Keller continues, “In her poems, Emily Dickinson clearly simulates the process of awakening: going down into the pit, finding security there, balancing her fears and hopes, preparing herself for glee, and then emerging through language to her little

epiphanies” (95). Finally, Keller argues that Dickinson drew so heavily upon a “common imagery,” perhaps related to childhood and cultural religious experiences, that she was actually able to “create in Edwards a forebear—a telescope to his star” (96). To reduce such a journey in the end to “little” moments of revelation hinging upon Edwards’s words negates Dickinson’s own discoveries and ignores Dickinson’s basic antipathy toward Edwards.<sup>3</sup> Habegger points out that Dickinson saw Edwards as “the ultimate purveyor of Calvinist terror” (101). To support his statement, Habegger links a Watts hymn damning liars to a lake of fire and brimstone with a note to her nephew Ned’s teacher and Dickinson’s early reading of the *Sabbath School Visiter* and its “insidious link between God and bears.” According to Habegger, the note juxtaposes Jonathan Edwards’s statement, “All Liars shall have their part,” and the request from Jesus, “And let him that is athirst come,” drawing, says Habegger, a “contrast between the terrors of the moral law and Jesus’ message” (100-01). Dickinson’s spirituality did not look backward to Jonathan Edwards; instead, it leaped forward to the realm of “Possibility” that transcended nineteenth-century Amherst.

Part of the strength of Dickinson’s poetry, in addition to its spiritual content, is the tone and vocabulary that she adopts to express herself, her language forceful in style when compared to the sentimental poetry of many of her female contemporaries. As an example of powerful voice, Rich cites “He fumbles at your Soul” (Fr 477) and “He put the Belt around my life—” (Fr 330). Both of these poems, says Rich, “are about the poet’s relationship to her own power, which is exteriorized in masculine form, much as masculine poets have invoked the female Muse” (165-66). Rich suggests a valid point,

particularly since the ending of the last stanza of the second example indicates also the withdrawal that marked Dickinson's life:

And deal occasional smiles  
To lives that stoop to notice mine—  
And kindly ask it in—  
Whose invitation, know you not  
For Whom I must decline?

The poem that Rich says epitomizes the “possession by the daemon” of poetry, in which the poet Dickinson “perceives herself as lethal weapon,” is “My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” (Fr 764); (173). In particular, a look at the last stanza is helpful:

Though I than he—may longer live  
He longer must—than I—  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without—the power to die—

Rich says, “The poet experiences herself as a loaded gun, imperious energy; yet without the Owner, the possessor, she is merely lethal” (174).<sup>4</sup> Rich continues, “Should that possession abandon her—but the thought is unthinkable: ‘He longer *must* than I.’ The pronoun is masculine; the antecedent is what Keats called ‘The Genius of Poetry’” (103). Rich establishes quite clearly that Dickinson has found the voice of authority.

Since Dickinson's finding that voice is so central to my argument, I turn again to Gilbert and Gubar for further analysis. In the poem “My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” Gilbert and Gubar suggest, “The irony of the riddling final quatrain, moreover, hints that it is the Gun and not the Master, the poet and not her muse, who will have the

last word” (609). “The Master,” they say, “has the ‘power’ (for which read ‘weakness,’ since power in this line means not strength but capacity) to die, while the Gun, inhumanly energized by rage and flame, has ‘but the power to kill’—only, that is, the immortality conferred by ‘its’ own Vesuvian fury” (609). Where Rich sees the poet’s voice of authority, Gilbert and Gubar see the poet’s voice of rage: “Her voice, we realize, speaks sentences of death that she herself conceives,” since Dickinson as poet attains a masculine authority that, according to Simone de Beauvoir, has rendered human superiority “not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 610). Gilbert and Gubar argue that Dickinson, by rejecting and transcending the conventional forms of nineteenth-century women’s poetry, becomes “her own weapon,” one that does have the power to transcend her own mortality. Rich and Gilbert and Gubar arrive at very nearly the same conclusion though the latter point of view is more dramatic. Joanne Dobson, in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence* (1989), argues that in this poem “the imprint of the conventional is not eradicated from either her subject matter or her style, both of which sometimes show reactive strategies designed to make expression safe and sometimes exhibit outright conformity” (4). Dobson sees “My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” as a “poem that defies understanding,” a poem of “expressive anxiety” that may have an “irrecoverable” meaning (123-24). Dobson concludes that the poem is “an embodiment of the expressive dilemma faced by any woman writer of Dickinson’s time and place,” since the culture taught women that anger, ambition, and sexuality—characteristics found by many readers in the poem—were “unnameable” (125). These characteristics of Dickinson’s poetry will also be addressed in Chapter Four.

As the foregoing critics demonstrate, the authoritarian voice that Dickinson assumed diverged widely from the norm. In Dickinson's own wording, she had to tell the truth "slant." Beth Maclay Doriani sees "slantness" from the standpoint of Biblical *prophecy* and says that the Book of Proverbs "may be the most significant single rhetorical influence on Dickinson's art" (*Emily Dickinson* 238). Doriani says that even though Dickinson drew on *prophecy* "to challenge aspects of evangelical dogma," one can read further reasoning in her choices:

Understanding Dickinson's poetry as *prophecy* explains her choice of "slantness" or indirection as a poetic technique, as she, like the scriptural prophets, positioned herself on the margins of her community yet directed her words to it. Like Isaiah and Christ before her, she spoke to "those who have ears to hear" and seemed to write her poetry out of an inner compulsion to speak truth. (*Emily Dickinson* 238)

Doriani's point of view describes Dickinson's basic needs as a prophet and poet: to speak; to speak truth; to speak truth that must of necessity be veiled. Fulfilling those needs became her life's purpose.

At the age of twenty-three, Dickinson had already begun her quest for enlightenment on immortality, relying in the end greatly upon her own intuition when "insufficient" solutions continued to surface and men of learning provided less scope than Dickinson herself had developed. Using Dickinson's poems and letters, Alfred Habegger focuses on what he also refers to as Dickinson's "combined religious-poetic quest" (313). Nearly a year after the death of her dear friend, Benjamin Newton, Dickinson addresses a letter to Edward Everett Hale, pastor of the Unitarian Church which Newton attended in

Worcester, Massachusetts. Troubled over the thought of Newton's last hours and the state of his soul, Dickinson requests, "Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home, I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven" (L 153). Dickinson did not know, says Habegger, that Newton was attended on his deathbed by the Reverend Alonzo Hill, a "specialist in dying" (314). Habegger takes exception to the general explanation of her Victorian interest in deathbed last words: "This benign cultural explanation misses the point: her fixation on questions of death and immortality, her desperate search for men who *knew*" (314); still searching for contacts who could improve her understanding, she sent another letter a few years later. "Perhaps you forget a Stranger maid, who several springs ago—asked of a Friend's Eternity," she writes, "and if in her simplicity, she still remembers you and culls for you a Rose, and hopes upon a purer morn, to pluck you buds serener—please pardon her, and them" (315). In her letter, Habegger draws a correlation between Dickinson's spiritual turmoil and the beginning of her life's work: "If the 'buds serener' mean the poems she had begun to make, the passage (itself iambic) hints at the sequence by which she converted an obsession with heaven into her work as poet" (315). With great attention to detail and exhaustive analysis, he examines Dickinson's letters and poems, showing how she progressed from the little "maid" of Amherst to a force in American literature. As such, his scholarship greatly aids my purpose.

Dickinson's study of the hierarchy of power, presented to her by her religious and social background and expressed in her enormous talent for words, gradually helped her to understand her own perceptions of the relationship between human beings and deity. To further her understanding, Dickinson carefully chose to immerse herself in a restricted

community of influential family members and friends who would—even if they were not aware of the circumstances—support her decisions and actions. As the above critics and biographers make evident, the process of becoming a poet carried its own burden of pleasure and pain, triumph and doubt.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the childhood of Emily Dickinson, including a discussion of the influence of the church and its place in the community. Using the available historical studies and biographies of the Dickinson and Norcross families, I examine their status in their communities and their influence on Dickinson's upbringing. I look at Dickinson as a child at school and examine her early writings, up to about age fifteen, particularly to her brother Austin and to several close friends. I argue that though Dickinson exhibited an awareness of duty and responsibility to family and faith, she also began to sense an unconventional duty and responsibility to herself. Millicent Todd Bingham calls this momentous struggle Dickinson's "lifelong battle for personal integrity and for right adjustment to the will of her Maker," the study of which, she says, will reward scholars with "deeper insight into the wellspring of her genius" (40-41). In her poetry and letters, Dickinson records that struggle as well as the insight she gains.

Chapter Three covers that portion of Dickinson's life in which as a growing young woman of already prodigious intellect and education, ages approximately fifteen to twenty-nine, she grows increasingly resistant to the tenets of Calvinism, and expresses her thought processes in her actions, letters, and poems. Resisting one form of religion opens the door to the inquisitiveness of Dickinson's nature, and in an unorthodox move, she gives herself permission to explore her own power and to record that power. I examine in depth Dickinson's wide reading and her widening circle of friends and

acquaintances. I examine as well her privileged background and easy accessibility to stirring speakers who also fed her questioning. At this point in her life, Dickinson meets Benjamin Newton, an important early contact, who encourages her to explore the writings of Unitarians such as Emerson and Thoreau who are themselves trying to move the public toward a Transcendental view of America linked to a spirituality of nature. I argue that Dickinson begins to choose carefully how and with whom she spends her time, restricting herself to home as she leaves behind early restrictions in thinking and begins to write of a new universe of awe “Beyond the dip of Bell.”

Chapter Four addresses the most productive of Dickinson’s years as a poet, ages approximately twenty-nine to thirty-three, and examines Dickinson poems that Mudge says are “heightened with tragic anguish which may turn to apparent triumph” (176). Jack L. Capps (1966) says Dickinson uses Emerson “as an antidote” to Calvinism at this time and applies many of Emerson’s teachings in her poetry and in letters to family and friends (127). The chapter explores Dickinson’s examination of God as a divine being (referring to her early teaching) and her relationship to that concept in her poetry and in her letters as she argues against tradition. It traces Dickinson’s spiritual development as she uses the aspects of religion that suit her purpose, and analyzes the poems that show her growing understanding of her own power. The chapter emphasizes the triangle that forms the cohesive strategy of her life, a combination of exploring spirituality, secluding herself at home, and writing poetry.

Chapter Five focuses on the study of Dickinson today. My thesis argues that Dickinson has made a significant contribution to literature and to understanding of spirituality. Dickinson’s poetry and letters show that many of her ideas of spirituality

resonate with readers all over the world and have led to widespread interest among people of all faiths because her focus on immortality includes every moment of daily life and a connection to the earth that is in agreement with contemporary views of many philosophers, physicists, and laymen alike. Dickinson converted her obsession with heaven into an understanding of her personal place as a human being, and therefore that of individuals in contemporary society, in the rhythm of the universe. Alfonso Montouri and Isabella Conti (1993) analyze the result of enabling the worship of power: “As a society we have reached a paradigm dead end: The dominator system has revealed its own destructive paradox” (18). Social theorist Riane Eisler explains the current dilemma facing us: “As both technology and society have grown more complex, the survival of our species has become increasingly dependent on the direction, not of our biological, but of our cultural evolution.” Furthermore, Eisler says, “Human evolution is now at a crossroads. Stripped to its essentials, the central human task is how to organize society to promote the survival of our species and the development of our unique potentials” (186). My idea of Dickinson’s part in a cultural change is discussed in Chapter Five.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> When Dickinson wrote to Higginson to ask if her poems “breathed,” she had already begun to write poetry; she was not a complete neophyte.

<sup>2</sup> Building upon Diehl’s statements, I offer further clarification in a previous publication. See McChesney, “A View from the Window: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson.” “The abyss itself, harrowing though it may be, attracts Dickinson throughout her life. She dips into and out of the chasm, ‘the deeper part of the mind,’ declares Diehl, ‘to which she descends and from which she emerges through the act of writing poems’ (158). The abyss that threatens existence, then, is a focal point of Dickinson’s poetic genius.” (56).

<sup>3</sup> Until his last belittling adjective, Keller was quite convincing. But his terminology negates Dickinson’s power. For example, in “The Admirations—and Contempts—of time—” Dickinson writes, “The Dying—as it were a Height / Reorganizes Estimate / And what We saw not / We distinguish clear—And mostly see not / What We saw before—” (Fr 830). What the speaker sees now “’Tis compound Vision— / Light—enabling Light— / The Finite—furnished / With the Infinite—,” in other words possibly the finite brain becomes furnished with the infinite capacity to understand the energy of the universe. “Convex—and Concave Witness—,” says the speaker, “Back—toward Time— / And forward— / Toward the God of Him—.” By no means could such a concept be called a “little epiphany.”

<sup>4</sup> Both Thomas H. Johnson and R. W. Franklin date this poem circa late 1863 (396, 723). At this point in her life, Dickinson is about thirty-two years old and in the midst of her strongest literary output, in full possession of personal power.

CHAPTER 2  
DICKINSON'S CHILDHOOD:  
HOME, CHURCH, AND POETIC VOICE

How does one gauge the effects of family influence and environmental pressure upon an individual's development, and how much of that development can be attributed to the genetic traits of the person herself? The question of Nature versus Nurture has been debated for centuries; but perhaps another factor, the person's own awareness, can exert more influence than other elements of one's makeup. In order to comprehend Dickinson's early spiritual development, critics usually look first to the religious customs within the immediate and contiguous surroundings of the Dickinson family—that is, Amherst, Massachusetts, and nearby New England towns and cities. Then, they examine the religious mindset and practices within the family itself and find a person whose personality and intellect allowed her to diverge from the spiritual practices of her family and embrace the reality and validity of her own spiritual point of view. To express that point of view, Dickinson developed a poetic voice within her home environment. Dickinson, who was born into a time of flux and change in the spiritual beliefs and practices of New England, began early in life to display a questing spirit that looked beyond the conventions of her religious upbringing. In addition, the financial comfort of her family and emphasis upon education, plus hours of personal leisure, provided for Dickinson a privileged background that allowed her to expand her natural affinity for nature and support her questing spirit to try to understand the purpose of existence. I argue that Dickinson's background eventually allowed her to formulate her own

ontological argument. Her education and the position of her father in the community as treasurer of Amherst college, civic leader, as well as Massachusetts and United States Congressman, also provided the forum in which Dickinson could develop and thrive, surrounded by some of the most profound thinkers and influential citizens of her time, who were both frequent visitors and in many cases family friends. If Emily Dickinson had been a man, she may very well have been one of our country's most eminent statesmen, in light of her intelligence, drive, and family background. Limited as she was to the woman's sphere, however, Dickinson designed her life to follow her passion. The opportunity she devised to explore her own intellect within her social circle laid the groundwork for developing her poetic voice; the Congregational Church and the religious practices of her family gave her a structure against which to frame her point of view. Furthermore, I argue that in addition to her genetics and environment, Dickinson's belief in her intuition opened pathways of reasoning that have brought her into the twenty-first century as one whose work resonates on a par with a circle of scientific, literary, sociological, and theological thinkers concerned with a changing paradigm in human history.

#### Conflict of Spiritual Interest in the Connecticut River Valley

To review briefly, by the time Dickinson was born in 1830, new interpretations of spirituality based on the introduction of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism had found support in the Amherst area, but resistance to change leaned quite heavily toward keeping Calvinistic values alive in the community and within the family. Those values included continuing the precept that man was by nature depraved and that only in passionate

examination of one's daily fitness before God could one hope for the salvation of one's soul. In the end, the devout understood, salvation may have been denied at birth. It was the unfairness of that hopelessness, the knowledge that one could live an exemplary life and still be denied one's heaven, against which Dickinson wrote many of her poems and that led her finally to her own spiritual interpretations.

The movement toward New England Transcendentalism on one hand found a ready following, but on the other hand, it outraged those who clung to traditional theology. "Historically," says Lawrence Buell, "New England Transcendentalism can be viewed as one of many instances of the widespread religious ferment which took place in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. As a self-conscious movement," he continues, "Transcendentalism served as an expression of radical discontent within American Unitarianism (which, in turn, was a liberal movement within Congregationalism), arising from objections to Unitarian epistemology and the Lockean psychology upon which it was based" (4). The changing New England philosophy thus saw human beings as participants in God's creation, not as sinners with often no hope of earthly solace and heavenly peace. Enlightenment had reached America: Buell explains, "The concept of a higher Reason is the heart of what came to be called Transcendentalism" (5). The Romanticism sweeping Europe and the rising focus on the idea that human beings had intrinsic worth rather than inborn degradation found ready acceptance in the newly burgeoning American Republic.

Such thinking diverged widely from the concept of the innate depravity of human beings and the prospect of being left out of the Elect, but the new ideas fit well into the old pattern of thought in the Amherst area. The new Transcendentalism, based upon

Unitarianism and led by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, found much favor and following throughout New England. Vernon Parrington says, “The Unitarians had pronounced human nature to be excellent; the transcendentalists pronounced it divine” (374). No longer did fear of not measuring up necessarily govern one’s life; instead, one could look forward to the possibility of experiencing joy while developing one’s potential in an atmosphere of beauty and appreciation of individual thought in music, art, literature, and religion. Even as a young teenager, Dickinson evidenced in her letters awareness of these matters, which follows shortly.

The developing sense of the worth of the individual that flowered in the young country promised a new relationship with God, one that erased the long-held reliance upon fear. Alfred Habegger says, “Unitarians stood for serenity, a life of rational virtue, a view of Jesus as a model for imitation rather than a divine Savior” (10). No one who held true to the old beliefs could stand for such blasphemy, but too many people felt drawn to Unitarianism, what Habegger calls “the broad conservative reaction” against Calvinism, for the orthodox to continue to have the last word in any community (11). As a result, tension between religious factions stimulated a concerted effort to reassume the values of Puritanism and led, according to Habegger, to “the development of new institutions—Sabbath Schools, societies for distributing Bibles and tracts and commissioning missionaries, and powerful advocacy campaigns for temperance, Sunday closing laws, and other reforms” (11).

One of these new institutions was Amherst College, in which three generations of Dickinson men immersed themselves with vigor and spirit. Dickinson’s position as a daughter of a founding family gave her a rare opportunity to absorb the intellectual

atmosphere and use it to her advantage. Richard B. Sewall says the college “gave her something to match her spirit with, and sharpen her wits on, throughout her life” (33). Thus, the stimulation of the lively exchange of ideas associated with administration, faculty, tutors, and students of the college surrounded Dickinson from a very early age and throughout her growing years. What she believed as a child, what she perceived as she grew, and what she determined as truth stemmed in great part from the exposure to Amherst College and its initial and changing reaction to Unitarianism.

To combat the weakening of the Calvinistic virtues within the population, local ministers and influential parishioners promoted a series of revivals to draw people back to the fold. Dickinson speaks of “great change” and “this strange time” in a letter to Abiah Root, writing of revivals in her young adulthood. Alluding to the attitude of Abby Wood, one of their friends who had recently professed a turning to the church, Dickinson writes, “She has told you about things here, how the ‘still small voice’ is calling, and how the people are listening, and believing, and truly obeying” (L 36). That “still small voice” of conscience had been bred into New Englanders for centuries. In Amherst, religious revival was a well-planned force aimed at bringing Puritan consciousness back to daily life and daily examination of an afterlife. Dickinson experienced her own emotional conflict during that time of examination of conscience. The subtle and overt forces that encouraged her to give herself to Christ were met by Dickinson’s questions that had gone unanswered by the church, questions that she could not ignore.

## Dickinson's Relationship to her Parents

The good intentions of her father shaped Dickinson's childhood in ways that she later expressed in her poems. By all accounts, Edward Dickinson was a good example of a man who lived on shaky religious ground. Not having had a true call of conscience to devote himself to Christ, Edward, though active in church government as a parishioner, did not join until the Great Revival of 1850 (Leyda 1: 178; Wolff 104). Edward Dickinson nonetheless governed his family with religion at the fore. Jane Donahue Eberwein says that Edward Dickinson "experienced domestic piety" and "carried out his roles in parish administration right at home" ("Ministerial" 6). Although he did not feel a call to join the Congregational Church until he was nearly fifty years old, Edward ruled himself and his family with a fierce sense of piety and righteousness. Morning and evening prayers and strict attendance at church were the norm and upholding the sanctity of home his most personal duty. Habegger notes that Edward called for cooperation from his children to make the home run smoothly: "'Be kind to your good mother,' Edward frequently reminded his children; 'she has to work very hard to take care of you'" (Leyda 1: 46); (80). Edward's language often sounds unlike the norm, which was much more forceful and controlling. Edward Dickinson, though firm in his dealings with his children, was also a warm-hearted and caring father.

In the modified Calvinist tradition, Edward Dickinson belonged to that group of solid citizens upon whom the community depended for strength, morality, and steadfastness. At home, those qualities manifested themselves in the personality of a man who believed without question in his own authority; however, says Jean McClure Mudge, his "constant devotion to home . . . matched, and perhaps in its own way exceeded, his

wife's" (35). In a letter to her brother Austin, who had gone away to Boston to teach for a year in public school, "the Endicott School in the North End of Boston" (Johnson, *Letters* 112), Emily writes on June 8, 1851, "Father's prayers for you at our morning devotions are enough to break one's heart—it is really very touching!" (L 42). As a father Edward Dickinson combined that sense of caring with a rather stern mien. Dickinson seems to have idolized her father and depended upon his leadership.

Dickinson's observant and intelligent mind weighed and sifted the roles that her parents adopted at home and in the community, and she began to make her own observations and rely upon their validity. Edward was concerned that Emily be "one of the best little girls in town" (Leyda 1: 39), which shows interest in his daughter's development for two reasons, on her own behalf surely, but also as a reflection of his stewardship of his household. Habegger notes messages in letters from Mrs. Dickinson that include short lines indicating that Dickinson misses her father when he is away from Amherst and shows "how conscious the girl was of her family's entire dependence on Edward, powerful and all-sustaining and much-loved and frequently, necessarily, absent" (115-16). Edward's wording in a letter directed at Dickinson in 1838, when she was only seven years old, separates Emily from Austin and Lavinia as one who demonstrates, says Habegger, "an advanced moral and emotional development" and needs no threat of disciplining when her father gets home to keep her on track (115). These small bits of communication provide an impression that Dickinson loved, respected, and honored her father and that Edward loved and appreciated his daughter—perhaps in a conventional way, but most likely with true feeling.

Dickinson describes her father in a letter to Higginson after Edward Dickinson's death: "His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists" (L 418); no one has definitively interpreted that remark. Dickinson's relationship with her father shaped her earliest ideas of authority, against which she later rebelled. For instance, Dickinson was accustomed from her earliest days to morning Bible readings: Edward read a chapter a day during family prayers when he was at home (Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home* 31; Sewall 694). Wolff says that Edward Dickinson's "rich speaking voice surely intensified the Bible's message for Emily Dickinson" (72). Though one cannot be sure how much she actually read the Bible herself as a very young child, she owned, according to Sewall, an 1843 copy of the King James Version, inscribed to her, probably a gift from her parents, as was customary in the community (694). Dickinson's extant letters, which begin at age eleven, contain continual Biblical references.

In Amherst, as Emily Dickinson was growing up, her father Edward Dickinson became one of the town's most prominent citizens. Polly Longworth describes the respect paid to Edward Dickinson upon his death: "the entire town closed down the day of Edward Dickinson's funeral; a nine-man delegation attended from the legislature" (70). Leyda provides a portion of the obituary published by Samuel Bowles in the *Springfield Republican*: "He was a Puritan out of time for kinship and appreciation, but exactly in time for example and warning" (2: 224). Austin Dickinson writes of his father that he was "proud of being of Amherst soil, of the sixth generation born within the sound of the old meeting-house bell, all earnest, God-fearing men, doing their part in their day toward the evolution of the Amherst we live in . . . leading every forward movement, moral or material" (qtd. in Gelpi 6). Emily Dickinson, as one of the next

generation “born within the sound of the old meeting-house bell,” eventually rejected its summons. Edward Dickinson participated in local, state, and national politics, the volunteer fire brigade, town planning, organization and management of the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad. He helped to build a new church, close Amherst’s drinking establishments, and promote temperance leagues. Edward Dickinson also denounced women’s suffrage participants. His daughter, living in the same house with him all her life, chose her own way to enfranchise herself. Gelpi calls Edward Dickinson a “distinguished Treasurer of the College, state legislator, and congressman,” who “worked unstintingly for responsible action and for business and civic improvement” (7). Edward Dickinson, says Sewall, “was elected Representative to the General Court of Massachusetts in 1838. He was twice elected State Senator (1842 and 1843).” Moreover, Sewall continues, Edward “was a delegate to the National Whig Convention in Baltimore and (the peak of his political career) was elected later that year to the Congress of the United States as Representative from the Tenth Massachusetts District” (52). He died in Boston after having been reelected to the state legislature (Sewall 67). In all his years as a public servant, Edward Dickinson did not lose touch with Amherst College, as his forty-year association indicates. Truly a man of his age, Edward upheld not only civic duty but also spiritual conviction. However, he was far removed from the spirituality that his daughter cultivated at home.

Though Mrs. Dickinson was the only parent who was a member of the church when Emily was a child, the Dickinsons were representative of the Congregational society, in which, says Habegger, “the husband had the secular power but no religious voice; the wife, vice versa” (80-81). However, it was not Mrs. Dickinson’s voice that

rang with authority during Bible readings, nor indeed at other times. Judging by Edward's letters, he always displayed an attitude of interest in his children's health and activities and continually gave advice or orders that showed him as someone who undeniably loved his children and felt a deep commitment to their physical well-being. Theodora Ward (1967) describes Edward as "a devoted father who was the figure of security and authority" but who used that authority only to show concern and not to act as a dictator (5). The popular view of Edward's stern deportment, reinforced by the available pictures of the man, may not provide the true picture of his relationship to his children. He embodied that strange blend of religion, authority, and gender roles that informed Dickinson's poetry, as she attempted to find answers to matters of faith and assume her own voice of authority.

Emily Norcross Dickinson's sense of duty toward home and family began within her childhood home in Monson, where her mother, Betsey Fay Norcross, modeled the role of housewife and mother for her daughter. Betsey's obituary, written by her pastor, Alfred Ely, praised her domesticity: "Humble and retiring in her disposition, it was in the bosom of her family, and among those who observed her in domestic life, that her prudence and affectionate regard to the happiness of all around her appeared most conspicuous" (qtd. in Habegger 27). The application of domestic arts included attending to the spiritual guidance of her children. Betsey Norcross's piety extended to the community as well. Habegger gives a detailed description of the Monson Praying Circle and its "single largest contingent," which was made up of Betsey Norcross and "women belonging to the Norcross clan by birth or marriage" (28). Most young women are more like their mothers than they would like to admit, and Emily Norcross's upbringing

mirrored that of her mother. Small wonder that she, too, should have stepped into the mold of a person devoted to her home, “my *dear dear* home,” as she said in a letter to her sister concerning a return to home after a term at school (Habegger 37). That intense involvement with home Emily Dickinson shared with both her mother and her mother’s mother, but there could have been differences in the way spiritual teaching was transferred, not from grandmother to daughter, but from mother to daughter. Dickinson’s mother suffered attack from some literary critics, particularly John Cody, who asserts that Dickinson matured as she did and lived her life deprived of a mother’s love and attention. Perhaps lack of attention in spiritual matters also was one of the reasons why Emily Dickinson sought and relied on her own counsel.

In most matters, practicality and hard domestic work seem to have governed Dickinson’s mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, who carried out her responsibilities within her family with minute attention and maintained, according to Mary Elizabeth Kromer Bernhard, “an orderly, immaculate house and a kitchen where delectable food was prepared” (“Dickinson, Emily Norcross” 73). She was well fitted to manage the household of Edward Dickinson, having been schooled in domestic arts by her mother, FBetsy Fay Norcross (Bernhard, “Dickinson, Emily Norcross” 71). Intellectually, her accomplishments include, as Sewall notes, having been educated at boarding school in New Haven as well as taking an array of courses and attending cultural programs in Monson (76). Edward adopts a rather “condescending” tone in a letter to his fiancée, says Sewall, as Edward mentions those activities and wishes to “possibly give [Emily] some useful hints as to the best course to be pursued in making so many studies profitable, at the same time.” Then, Edward enumerates, “Let us examine a little—

singing school—Chemical Lectures, Historical Lectures—Bible Class—Concerts—  
Missionary, Charitable, & Female Bible Associations—Cent [?] and Tract Society” (76).  
Dickinson’s later remark that “my mother does not care for thought” seems to refer to a  
different person than the young Emily Norcross who pursued such a variety of  
challenging interests before her marriage. One of the reasons for Dickinson’s remaining  
at home, Richard Sewall says, was “the greatest tribute that Emily paid her mother,” that  
“she never wanted to leave the home that Mrs. Dickinson helped create” (89).

Those biographers and critics who closely examine the background and life of  
Emily Norcross Dickinson differ in their reports of her influence upon her daughter.  
Sewall says, “She apparently fitted without friction into the traditional pattern of  
dominant husband and sweet submissive wife, with both recognizing a still higher  
authority, Duty—to each other, their children, their community, and God” (78). Bingham  
virtually dismisses her as “a self-effacing wife and mother” who “served chiefly as a  
carrier of Dickinson traits” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 4). Cynthia Griffin Wolff, however,  
disagrees vehemently, pointing to a letter from Mrs. Dickinson to her husband on June 1,  
1831, in which she writes, “I have retired to my chamber for a little space to converse  
with you, with my little companion on the bed asleep” (Leyda 1: 17); (52). Wolff  
maintains that Edward Dickinson was away from home so often that Mrs. Dickinson had  
constant intimate contact with her daughter and “exists most directly and vividly in her  
daughter’s style of communication, her use of language, and her attitude toward words—  
their power and their limitation” (52). As Dickinson spent her life developing the power  
of words, with her mother constantly in the background, she perhaps also patterned her  
life against her mother’s traditional model of feminine behavior. Sewall credits Mrs.

Dickinson, who may have lacked “wise talk and literary encouragement,” with being “a central figure in establishing the milieu in which [Dickinson’s] genius came into its own” (89). Mrs. Dickinson’s creating a gracious home in which her daughter could cultivate her intellect undoubtedly provided the physical comfort necessary for mental application. However, her sense of duty to that home, apart from caring for the family’s material needs, may certainly have limited the time in which she interacted with her children.

Healthy emotional development of a child depends upon constant positive interaction with the mother, an interaction that may have been lacking in Dickinson’s infancy and early childhood. Wolff describes the brief period before and after Dickinson’s birth, when her mother lived through several emotional upheavals: the death of her brother Hiram on February 26, 1829; Austin’s birth on April 1; a visit to her critically ill mother, taking her newborn son with her, in June; her mother’s death in August; taking in boarders a year later, when she was five months pregnant with Emily; moving to one half of the Homestead in the fall of 1830; Emily’s birth in December; her father’s remarriage in January 1831 (50-51). These circumstances could adversely affect a young woman, even one who appeared to be used to coping with crises.

However, the young Miss Emily Norcross who coped with crises in her father’s house was quite a different person from the young Mrs. Edward Dickinson, who was responsible for her own family and household while dealing with the distress of her mother’s death, and who may have caused serious problems in the child Emily’s development. In the normal course of events, mothers comfort daughters. But Dickinson’s mother had no one to turn to who could ease her pain; she certainly could not turn to her mother-in-law, Lucretia, who lived just a few steps away, if one relies on John

Cody's description of her as "a self-pitying and demanding woman" of whom "there is no indication" that she was ever friendly with her son's wife (48). Unfortunately, there is no evidence to the contrary as yet. Cody remarks that Mrs. Dickinson's stress most likely "induced a state of mind inimical to the mood of relaxed, primitive, happy absorption in the new baby which we are now aware is so critical for the emotional well-being of the baby" (49). As a result of something that "went awry" in the early bonding stage between Dickinson and her mother, says Wolff, there may have been an apparent disruption in their necessary nonverbal communication, the eye contact that establishes a sense of self and safety in the infant and forges a bond in a silent language between mother and child (52, 53).

Failure to form such a bond during this period of development, Wolff continues, may cause characteristic problems, such as an "insufficiently confirmed" sense of self, difficulty in sustaining intimate relationships, fear of separation from loved ones, and even the view of the world as a "dangerous place, governed by an indifferent or hostile God" (53). As a result of such a loss of silent dialogue to the infant Dickinson, Wolff sees a "central paradox of Emily Dickinson's use of language" that had to replace the loss "that nothing can ever fully remedy," leading to "a unique sovereignty" of words in the life of the child Emily (54). Some of her words were distant, sad, and bleak in their description of loss. As Higginson later relates to his wife, Dickinson told him, "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled." She also asked, "Could you tell me what home is [?]" (L 342b). At the time, she was thirty-nine years old and living at home with her family, including her mother. These isolated

remarks have given readers a negative view of Dickinson's mother that may not be entirely accurate. Habegger argues,

Until the late 1980s biographers tended to heap the Norcrosses with derogatory epithets. . . . Cody, the pioneering psychoanalytic biographer, called the poet's mother "emotionally shallow, self-centered, ineffectual, conventional, timid, submissive, and not very bright." Such judgments no longer seem advisable following the research of Mary Elizabeth Kromer Bernhard and Martha Ackmann (27, n1).<sup>1</sup>

Cody's assessment seems quite limited, considering Mrs. Dickinson's education and accomplishments as noted above. Continued careful research uncovers bits of sparse information that add to the overall profile of Dickinson's mother.

When Dickinson was just two years old, her sister Lavinia, the last of the Dickinson children, was born under difficult circumstances. A decision was made then that may have had a serious impact on Dickinson's emotional development, particularly her relationship with her mother. Habegger explains that Mrs. Dickinson fared poorly after Lavinia's birth, and Edward was in a financial bind. According to Habegger, the family was "at risk": "Caught between his reduced income and a large mortgage, Edward sold his half of the house back to Leland and Nathan on May 13. Nine days later the partners made the entire place over to General David Mack, Jr." (83). "To ease the situation," says Habegger, two-year-old Emily was sent to stay with her Aunt Lavinia Norcross, Mrs. Dickinson's unmarried sister, at the Norcross family home in Monson (83-84). The situation may have been eased for her parents, but removing a very young child from her mother's presence can cause emotional trauma and alienation, with long-

reaching effects. Wolff says, “That Mrs. Edward Dickinson was often depressed and tearful is a matter of record; one can only surmise that this personal anguish interfered in her relationship with her infant. It was not a failure of love, one can speculate, but of communication” (57). One may have expected separation anxiety, especially following the gallop through a tumultuous thunderstorm that began the visit; Sewall mentions a “fierce thunderstorm,” described by Lavinia Norcross : “Elizabeth felt inclined to be frightened some—she said ‘Do take me to my mother’” (qtd. in Sewall 323). Lavinia also reported to Dickinson’s parents that the child was later active and content, enjoying the piano, behaving well in church, and endearing herself to all those around her. Tellingly, however, though Dickinson spoke of her mother, father, and brother Austin, she did not ask to see them (Habegger 85-86). Leyda says, “The only person she spoke of missing was ‘little Austin’” (1: xl). Dickinson, in her temporary home in Monson, had lost all contact with her immediate family for a month, a relatively extended length of time for a toddler and one likely to have left emotional repercussions. Chapter Three will develop further Dickinson’s journey to understand her own psyche, her empowerment of self over circumstance, and her eventual closeness with her mother.

A frugal correspondent, Mrs. Dickinson leaves behind little written evidence of her personality and philosophy as a mother; however, she writes to her husband, “The little children are deeply interested in evry [sic] thing their dear Father sais [sic] of them, they send much love. I get along better than I expected with them without your aid. Still I should truly be happy of a little of your assistance” (Leyda 1: 41). Mrs. Dickinson’s mention of her husband’s assistance is quite clearly in assurance of his help when he is at home; thus, the Dickinson household was run by cooperation between the parents. When

the children are older, however, reports indicate that Mrs. Dickinson became a busy, harried, engrossed, exhausted housekeeper totally absorbed in keeping her family safe and cared for but perhaps too busy to show them overt affection while so caught up in her tasks.

In her extant letters, Dickinson mentions her mother, but most of the references are factual and lacking in any expression of affection, either given or received. In one of her earliest known letters, Dickinson writes to Austin in a matter-of-fact manner, “Mrs— Washburn was very much pleased with the Eggs mother sent her,” and then, “Mother happened to look out of the window and she saw him [Austin’s rooster] laying on the ground” (L 2). The next reference to her mother occurs three years later in a letter to Abiah Root, dated September 25, 1845: “Mother thinks me not able to confine myself to school this term. She had rather I would exercise, and I can assure you I get plenty of that article by staying at home. I am going to learn to make bread to-morrow” (L 8). A prolific writer and one able to express herself succinctly, Dickinson speaks of her mother here only in terms of domesticity. Sewall does provide Dickinson’s tender memory of her mother:

A deeper tenderness and a fuller understanding came when Emily had outgrown her youthful condescension. A late reminiscence sums up what she learned from her mother: “Two things I have lost with Childhood—the rapture of losing my shoe in the Mud and going Home barefoot, wading for Cardinal flowers and the mothers [sic] reproof which was more for my sake than her weary own for she frowned with a smile” (88).

[This undated material comes from Leyda's "Supplement" chapter (2: 477).] Intellectual pursuits, reading, and lively exchange of ideas seemed not to be part of their daily interaction. "My Mother does not care for thought," Dickinson writes to Higginson on April 25, 1862 (L 261). Jean McClure Mudge comments that Mrs. Dickinson must have "made time for thought, or else her brother's wedding gift, three volumes of Cowper's *Poems*, would have been strangely inappropriate" (30). Mudge suggests that Mrs. Dickinson may have found time to read those poems to her children, perhaps influencing Dickinson's later absorption in verse (31), but by the time Dickinson became old enough to be aware of her mother as an individual person, Mrs. Dickinson had "become largely encapsulated in wifely obligations and domestic chores" (33).

Whether or not she read poetry to her children, Mrs. Dickinson did, however, make an effort to influence their spiritual lives. Emily Norcross Dickinson became a member of First Church in Amherst in 1831 (Leyda 1: 17; Wolff 86). One of the few occurrences in Dickinson's life that "can be precisely dated," notes Habegger, is her first attendance at the Lord's Supper (119). When the members of the church stayed to take communion after regular services, the non-professed Christians, including Edward and the Dickinson children, would leave before communion. On January 7, 1838, when Edward was attending to duties at the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Mrs. Dickinson kept Austin and Emily with her "during the communion season," as she reported in a letter to her husband (Leyda 1: 39-40). Mrs. Dickinson's action may have afforded her the pleasurable experience of imagining her children as true church members when the time came for their declaration of faith, which would not have been possible if their father had been present to walk them out of the congregation.

The tenor of Dickinson's relationship with her mother unfolds in her letters as she moves into her teenage years and toward adulthood. In a letter to Mary Bowles about August 1861, Emily writes laughingly, "Mother would send her love—but she is in the 'Eave spout,' sweeping up a leaf, that blew in, last November" (L 235). Regardless of what Mrs. Dickinson is actually doing, her daughter's jest paints the image of a woman who goes to extremes in finding something to do that is useful; writing personal notes may not qualify. The occupations of the two females at the time points out a significant discrepancy in value of time spent. In a letter to her brother, Dickinson passes on a message: "Mother wants me to tell you if there's anything else you would like, that you must let us know and we will send it to you by the first opportunity—also to send your washing home every time you can find a chance, and your clothes shall be well taken care of" (L 104). Another mention of Mother's concern with clothes crops up two weeks later (L 109). Mrs. Dickinson's concern, as well as her propensity to avoid writing, surfaces shortly thereafter: "Mother sends her love, and says she thinks very often she shall certainly write to you, but she knows that we write so often she thinks we say all there is, and so she recollects you, but says nothing about it" (L 114). In a rather comic vein, Dickinson describes again their mother's efforts to write: "Mother was much amused at the feebleness of your hopes of hearing from her—She got so far last week once, as to take a pen and paper and carry them into the kitchen, but her meditations were broken by the unexpected arrival of *Col Smith* and his wife, so she must try again—I'm sure you will hear from her soon" (L 128).

"Soon" may have been a long time coming as Mrs. Dickinson continued to follow her dutiful path that was so involved in jobs and things and visitors. These recordings

come after Dickinson is old enough to correspond regularly and give tidbits of her mother's thoughts and actions. When Dickinson was a small child, one can picture her mother with three children born within four years and a husband who was often absent transacting civic affairs. Habegger describes Emily Norcross's "exceptionally responsible girlhood," necessitated by caring for mortally ill family members, that resulted in her "mature character: a fanatical insistence on household order; a melancholy, inexpressive, relatively inelastic spirit" (31-32). Overloaded with duty, often alone with her children, entertaining her husband's acquaintances, carrying out church activities, Mrs. Dickinson may indeed have distanced herself from her children as she tried to cope with overwhelming demands and too little time to fulfill them. Cody takes a very negative view of Mrs. Dickinson's personality. He sees inadequate mothering and suggests that Dickinson's compliance as a child represented a hidden anger that, when suppressed, showed up later as a series of "neurotic symptoms" (53). Certainly, Dickinson eventually expressed her controlled anger in her poetry, as discussed in Chapter Three. However, Dickinson writes in the month after her mother's death of a poignant discovery: "We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother—but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child, the Affection came" (L 792). Thus, her memory of her mother's faults is tempered at last by a very mature and forgiving attitude as Dickinson herself grows older.

No correspondence from Dickinson survives to describe her first ten years. There is little record from any other quarter; however, one can try to understand her childhood by examining her home life and its shaping of her personality, her drive, her values. Dickinson was born when her family lived in the east half of the Homestead, and they

remained there for nearly the first ten years of her life, until her father bought the house on North Pleasant Street (Sewall 322). Sewall describes Edward Dickinson as a “die-hard” Whig, and Dickinson was reared in the culture that, as Roger Lundin says (1998), “prized patience and self-mastery” (644, 2). Dickinson paints an image of repression and triumph, two characteristics of her life that arise again and again, as the child deals with limitations thrust upon her in the following poem:

They shut me up in Prose—  
As when a little Girl  
They put me in the Closet—  
Because they liked me ‘still’—  
  
Still! Could themselves have peeped—  
And seen my Brain—go round—  
They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
For Treason—in the Pound—  
  
Himself has but to will  
And easy as a Star  
Abolish his Captivity—  
And laugh—No more have I— (Fr 445)

What was Dickinson’s persona rebelling against in the poem? To say that the speaker struggled against the strictness of her Calvinist forebears would be too simplistic a statement, especially since there is no explicit reference in the poem. But the persona of

the poem does express rebellion against the language, the “prose” that tries to keep her “still” and that she gleefully and easily circumvents and abolishes in producing the poem itself. “Patience and self-mastery” will not keep either the persona or the poet in captivity; instead, Dickinson practices those Calvinistic virtues to lead to the truth as she sees it.

### Early Influence of Grandparents

Dickinson’s heritage taught her the traditional and familiar concept of Heaven through the Dickinson family in Amherst and the Norcross family in Monson. In addition to faith, their lives were based on ambition, service to community, and commitment to family. Dickinson’s grandparents lived in a time of theological and social alteration in Massachusetts. The old Puritan point of view had undergone changes by the early nineteenth century. Anne C. Rose says, “Puritanism split into Liberal and Orthodox factions during the First Great Awakening of the 1740s. It was a division that reflected the increasing difference between city and country” (*Transcendentalism* 4). Conservative Amherst then evolved quite differently in the next few generations from liberal Boston. Lundin suggests that changes in the country were aimed at forming a society based upon the efforts of sincere citizens, such as the Dickinsons and Norcrosses, who would feel duty-bound to engage in civic life as a matter of course. Yale President Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards, describes how religion enhances both personal and public life: “By rendering him just, sincere, faithful, kind and public-spirited, from principle. It induces him voluntarily, and always, to perform faithfully in the several duties of social life” (qtd. in Lundin 12). Both of Dickinson’s grandfathers adhered to the expectation

that church members and parishioners should be leaders in civic affairs, but their efforts resulted in far different outcomes. The backgrounds of Dickinson's grandfathers influenced Dickinson's upbringing because both men, though engaged in a commercial world, still depended upon the Congregational Church as a bulwark of life, which they supported with their time, energy, and money; Dickinson experienced the church as a constant.

Samuel Fowler Dickinson died when Dickinson was just seven years old, but his granddaughter's personal relationship with orthodoxy was affected by his efforts to establish and support Amherst College and his fierce adherence to "the determination of the Connecticut Valley people to resist the heretical influences from the East [Harvard Unitarians]" (Sewall 34, n9). Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes, "Largely through his efforts the granddaughter who had been born under his roof would see the world as he had seen it, learn of God in the old-fashioned ways—speak the words not of an increasingly mercantile and secular society, but of her Puritan forebears" (80). Her father's morning reading of the Bible, says Wolff, brought home to Dickinson "the accents of Grandfather's day," a language that Dickinson would learn "more perfectly" at the Academy and later during her studies at Mt. Holyoke, a language that Dickinson embraced with a purpose. "Eventually," says Wolff, "she would use it to write poetry" (80).

Samuel Fowler Dickinson's personality drove him such that, according to Richard Sewall, "[Samuel] very soon established himself as a leading citizen, a pillar of the church, and a distinguished lawyer" (33). However, says Alfred Habegger, "He never acquired the calm and powerful reserve traditionally associated with a pillar of the

community” (8). Samuel’s impatience to have things his way is evidenced by a report from his daughter, Elizabeth Dickinson Currier, who says, “Going to court at Northampton, he would catch up his green bag and walk the whole seven miles. *I cannot wait to ride*” (qtd. in Habegger 8). Samuel exhibited what Habegger calls an “embattled drive” that “gives us our first sight of the resolute will to be great that his granddaughter would quietly assert some sixty years later” (8). Elizabeth Dickinson Currier recalls that he allowed himself “but four hours of sleep, studying and reading till midnight, and rising at four o’clock” (qtd. in Habegger 8). Emily Dickinson often remarks in letters to family and friends that she is awake and writing long into the night while other family members sleep; she seems to have shown evidence of her grandfather’s “embattled drive,” but her focused energy had very different consequences. Samuel fowler Dickinson left Amherst in 1833, according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “exhausted and despairing,” feeling that “he had been publicly and irrevocably disgraced, and he wanted exile” (30). He died in Hudson, Ohio, in 1838, “in despair, convinced that his great sacrifice had been in vain . . . his dream of one last Jerusalem to bring God’s message to a New World wilderness” (Wolff 35). Though Samuel was not able to secure that home for his children, his son Edward eventually reacquired the Homestead and provided for his daughter Emily a place for the complexity of her own religious zeal to manifest itself.

Dickinson’s grandfathers were both prominently involved in their communities. A study of the Dickinson and Norcross men, particularly concerning their participation in civic affairs, seems to reveal a sense of duty, a desire for command, and a wish to mark their stamp in events of history. Dickinson may be seen to share all these characteristics.

According to Habegger, both of Dickinson's grandfathers, Samuel Fowler Dickinson and Joel Norcross, helped to establish private academies and supported the Congregational Church in their hometowns (11, 26). This combination of interest in religion, economics, and politics echoes the influence of Puritanism upon the Congregational Church in nineteenth-century New England, what Habegger calls "the system in which a town was both a religious and a political corporation" (10-11).

Joel Norcross, Dickinson's maternal grandfather, in contrast to Samuel Fowler Dickinson, lived a prosperous life. According to Sewall, Joel Norcross was one of the most substantial farmers in Monson (76, n3). Mary Elizabeth Kromer Bernhard notes that Joel was a "civic leader" and a "conspicuously successful entrepreneur" who was "sharp-minded and astute," and also "a major figure in the Monson textile industry" ("Norcross, Joel" 213). In addition, Joel Norcross was "one of the promoters and builders of the Petersham and Monson Turnpike from the Connecticut line to New Hampshire, and stockholder and director of the Western Railroad (in Massachusetts)." His civic duties included acting "as county commissioner, as Monson coroner, and twice as selectman" (213). Edward Dickinson turned to his father-in-law for advice, perhaps relying on Joel Norcross's reputation and experience far more than that of his own father. Jay Leyda notes that in March of 1830, Edward writes to Joel Norcross for advice on choosing a residence (1: 13), and on September 7, 1835, he writes to his wife, who is visiting in Boston with her father: "Tell yr father I wish he would speculate a little for me in *Maine land*'—as I can't go, myself, until October, at the earliest" (1: 30). With Joel Norcross to lean upon, Edward Dickinson was able to keep a stable home for his family, the home in which Emily Dickinson lived and wrote for most of the years of her life.

Joel Norcross, though he did not see his granddaughter very often in later years, was with her for more than a month during the period when his daughter Lavinia cared for Dickinson when she was two years old. Lavinia writes to Dickinson's mother that Grandfather Norcross accompanied them to church: "She behaved very well—Once in a while she would speak loud but not to disturb any one—she sit between Pa & me—he would slap her a little occasionally when she was doing wrong—not to hurt her or make her cry—" (qtd. in Sewall 324). Habegger records the incident with a variation, saying, "Joel would 'pat' her—though not, Lavinia specified, 'to hurt her or make her cry.' ('Pat' has entered the record badly misread as 'slap.')" (85). Three thoughts come to mind immediately, regardless of which term was intended: first, Joel Norcross expected his granddaughter to attend church; second, he expected her to behave in church; and third, he was fond of her. Dickinson mentions Grandfather Norcross once in her letters, when she is eleven years old: "[W]e expect Grandpa Norcross and Uncle William up here this week" (L 2). Dickinson does not explain further, but even if she does not explicitly mention Joel's influence, one can infer that he remained a power in her life.

Even though Samuel Fowler Dickinson died when Dickinson was seven years old (Sewall 28), and Joel Norcross died when she was fifteen (Leyda 1: 108), the conviction of their religious beliefs as the path to a righteous life on earth and a secure afterlife were conveyed to their children, Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross. As heads of their families, the grandfathers passed down to Dickinson their belief in the Bible as the word of God. Because Dickinson's childhood was so steeped in the language of her grandfather's teaching, she uses Biblical phrasing constantly in her correspondence. For instance, as a young teenager, Dickinson writes to Abiah Root and interjects into the

missive elementary soul-searching of the Puritan, though her tone may sound more playful than pious: “After receiving the smittings of conscience for a long time, I have at length succeeded in stifling the voice of that faithful monitor by a promise of a long letter to you” (L 5). A short time later, Dickinson writes again to her friend, saying, “I am sorry that you are laying up Hattys [sic] sins against her. I think you had better heap coals of fire upon her head by writing to her constantly until you get an answer” (L 7). Johnson notes that the phrase “heap coals of fire” had become so common that Dickinson may not have meant it to be a purposeful allusion to scripture (*Letters* 19n).<sup>2</sup> Knowing that the language of the directive was commonly in use cannot erase the purpose of the reference, particularly since Dickinson is so familiar with the Bible.

There is evidence that the language of sin and damnation did later become disturbing to Dickinson. For instance, she writes to Josiah G. and Elizabeth Holland of a visiting minister who preached a sermon on “Judgment Day,” an “awful sermon” that Dickinson says “scared me” (L 175). At the time, Dickinson was a young woman of twenty-three; how much more frightening the subject may have been to the young child hearing the words that foretold only “perdition” for those “who behaved improperly.” By the time she writes to Higginson at the age of thirty-one, however, as referred to in Chapter 1, she has distanced herself from the fears of perdition and has removed from the words of her early religious training their power to evoke terror: “They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their ‘Father’” (L 261). At the time, Emerson and others were preaching “Obedience to the Spirit,” says Buell; they argued that “the spirit is always calling us, if we would only listen,” and perhaps many people had difficulty then in heeding the “Father” (119-20). Struggling to

deal with the Biblical language that threatened separation from family members who believed and also threatened the annihilation of the souls of non-believers, Dickinson gropes for an ontology that reduces the effects of fear and increases the importance of awe in her dealings with spiritual identity.

Dickinson's grandfathers differed radically from each other in financial acumen; Samuel Dickinson engaged in "increasingly dubious" schemes (Wolff 26), and Joel Norcross was the most solid and substantial businessman in Monson (Habegger 25-26). However, both men championed the cause of education. In Amherst and Monson, respectively, Dickinson's grandfathers worked to establish and support institutions of learning. Samuel Dickinson was "deeply involved" in the founding of Amherst Academy in 1814 and Amherst College in 1821 (Sewall 34, xvii). Joel Norcross, according to Habegger, was a "chief" benefactor of Monson Academy, incorporated in 1804 (26). Obviously, a devotion to not just education but higher learning and also a fair amount of exercise of personal power characterized these two men and influenced Dickinson's life.

The founding and administration of Amherst Academy and Amherst College involved the Dickinson family intimately and deeply impacted the development of Emily Dickinson, but probably did not lead her to follow a traditional religious path. The college filled a need in the community for an institution of higher learning, one that could stand in opposition to the influence of Harvard College, which was, says Sewall, "too liberal in its theology for the pious" because of its Unitarian teachings (34). The reaction to Unitarianism in Amherst was a moral issue. Habegger says the growth of Unitarianism "dismayed Calvinists" who clung to the concept of "human depravity as so absolute that a divinely initiated regeneration was required" which had been challenged

by the emerging form of spirituality that “left a large space for human goodness” (10). Space for goodness later gave Dickinson much leeway for contemplation and internal discussion as she wrestled between “perfect confidence in God & his promises” and “the world [that] holds a prominent place in my affections” so that she says to Abiah root, “I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die” (L 13). The establishment of Amherst College, says Sewall, made Amherst “a stronghold of orthodoxy” that “both reflected and shaped the character of the community” (34, 33); the college also afforded Dickinson an example to frame her own spiritual ideas against as she questioned orthodoxy, and example that Sewall says was “daily in her consciousness” (33).

Dickinson’s grandmothers, Lucretia Gunn Dickinson and Betsey Fay Norcross, were reportedly quite unlike in both their personalities and their actions; Dickinson, in her usually mild manner, home-loving ways, and active circle of friends, may have been indirectly influenced more by her maternal grandmother. Dickinson’s paternal grandmother, Lucretia Gunn Dickinson, on the other hand, formed relationships with difficulty, according to her daughter Catherine. Catherine wrote to her brother Edward on May 12, 1835, from Cincinnati, where her parents moved, perhaps to get away from overwhelming financial struggles in Amherst. “Mother is not willing to stay here & I *wonder* not . . . she has no other very particular friends here of course—because she is not apt to form acquaintances or attachments” (qtd. in Leyda 1: 28). Habegger says that such a remark “may mean either that she was withdrawn or that she was unfriendly” (8); in any case, Lucretia Gunn Dickinson’s sparse record of her social interactions leaves little indication of her personality. Lucretia had a reputation as someone of a rather “tart

disposition,” according to her great-granddaughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi (qtd. in Habegger 9). In a letter to her son Edward, written after her husband’s death, Lucretia says, “Catharine wrote me not long since the reason why she does not make me a Home, it is because her Husband does not like *Old Folks* [;] it is likely the same reason operates throughout the family” (qtd. in Habegger 106). Lucretia states her opinion; she does not ask Edward if it is true. For whatever reason, her children do not rush to welcome her. According to Karen Dandurand, Lucretia died after living “for at least the last six months of her life” at the home of her sister, Clarissa Gunn Underwood, “[w]hen none of her children offered her a home” (“Dickinson, Lucretia Gunn” 76). Although a religious person, Lucretia did not join Amherst’s First Congregational Church until twenty years after her husband, a reversal of the situation in her son Edward Dickinson’s household (Habegger 9). Lucretia’s disposition naturally impacted Edward Dickinson, who in turn at times presented a stern mien to his children.

Lucretia Dickinson does not fare well in other biographical literature; according to Wolff, Lucretia had a reputation for “her outspokenness and difficult disposition,” a sentiment that Wolff and other critics always mention but find little evidence to support other than Martha Dickinson Bianchi’s anecdote about her great-grandmother (Wolff 25, 551).<sup>3</sup> As Karen Dandurand reports, Lucretia was the second of ten children and the mother of nine (“Dickinson, Lucretia Gunn” 76). As discussed above, she was also married to a man of widely reported zeal and drive. Therefore, her life was most likely physically demanding in the extreme. In addition to ordinary domestic duties, Lucretia labored to accommodate her husband’s activities during the building of Amherst College. Habegger says that Samuel obliterated “the line between the world at large and domestic

life,” causing “intense domestic pressure” when he required his wife and daughters to board the workers (13, 12). Lucretia writes to her son, Edward, “They have completed the College[;] our affairs are still in a crazy situation” (Habegger 12-13). Near the end of her life, Lucretia sends a pair of hand-knitted stockings to her granddaughter Lavinia, Dickinson’s sister, along with a note: “I am sorry they do not look better [because of uneven yarn], hope the size is about right I had no measure but my own judgment & if they fit Austin or Emily better than you, if you will send a measure, or come yourself I will try again” (Leyda 1: 58). The language here is from an apparently caring grandmother. It is one of the few documents demonstrating a softer nature.

Dickinson’s maternal grandmother, Betsey Fay Norcross, was a factor in the development of Dickinson’s attachment to home and family and was a prime example of proper religious deportment. Betsey Fay Norcross garnered admiration for her exemplary life, as evidenced by her obituary in the *Hampton Journal and Advertiser* on September 26, 1829, a year before Dickinson was born. Written by Reverend Alfred Ely, her minister at the First Congregational Church of Monson, the notice describes Betsey Fay Norcross as “pious, amiable, and useful” extolling her “prudence, and affection, [and] regard to the happiness of all around her” (qtd. in Leyda 1: 11). Though the language of her obituary may have been only conventional, Betsey’s involvement in charitable work does show concern for others. According to Habegger, Betsey was active in the “First Female Praying Circle” in Monson, a group mentioned earlier in this chapter that was dedicated to evangelism, including support of revivals and missionary work (28). Habegger also says that the Monson Praying Circle was still active when Dickinson refused to join a religious revival at Mount Holyoke. Habegger suggests that Hannah

Porter, co-founder with Betsey Fay Norcross, “seems to have organized an informal circle of concern around the future poet. It is probable that the Circle, still very much alive, made the stubbornly unconverted young woman a focus of prayer and pressure” (30). Habegger also traces “vital continuities” that passed from Betsey Fay Norcross to her daughter Emily, the poet’s mother, then to Dickinson herself. “Prominent among them was a strong and exclusive adhesiveness to house and family” and an “unusually ‘retiring’ domesticity” (27-28). Dickinson may not have been influenced by the “domesticity,” but she did adopt a “retiring” way of life.

All in all, one of Dickinson’s grandmothers perhaps epitomized the ideal of the nineteenth-century mother; one perhaps did not, but had to offer instead a firmness that ensured survival. Dickinson had no chance for intimate contact with her home-loving grandmother, who died the year before Dickinson was born (Sewall 76), but she saw the results of Betsey’s influence in her own home every day. Dickinson also had only a minimal relationship with Grandmother Lucretia, though Karen Dandurand notes that Dickinson “undoubtedly had some contact during the last two years of Lucretia’s life,” perhaps while visiting with her Aunt Catherine at the home of Kingsley and Clarissa Gunn Underwood, Lucretia’s sister (“Dickinson, Lucretia Gunn” 76). Such visits seem likely, especially as Lucretia seems to think that a visit from Lavinia to measure stockings would be possible. Each of her grandmothers, then, impacted Dickinson’s life, either directly through personal contact or indirectly through influence of parents. As her own life unfolded, Dickinson devised an agenda that not only incorporated aspects of traditional roles as a woman, both at home and at church, but also provided for her a positive alternative to those roles, which she followed with firm resolve.

These parents and grandparents, who embodied all that had come before them in the generations of religious and secular activities in their communities, comprised the early forces that influenced the spiritual upbringing of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson continued to address spiritual matters and analyze the ongoing development of her spirituality. Dickinson critiqued her own background, judged the truth of the spiritual content of the religion practiced in her community, rejected what seemed to her harmful to spiritual health, and formulated her own concepts of the purpose of life, the immediacy of death, and an eternity that encompassed the totality of her belief in a oneness with time, space, and matter, as in this poem:

Forever—is composed of Nows—

'Tis not a different time—

Except for Infiniteness—

And Latitude of Home— (Fr 690)

### Dickinson at School

Dickinson's school days show the continuity of teaching at home, at church, and in the schoolhouse that formed and then set the parameters of Dickinson's life until she built her own. Dickinson's early attendance at school is not at present recorded, but Habegger suggests that she probably attended West Center District School about half a mile from the Dickinson Homestead at age five, where she "learned to read, write, spell, and do simple arithmetic" (96). Habegger bases his assumption on Edward Dickinson's election to Amherst's General School Committee, resulting in a logical commitment to public education (97). Habegger mentions letters from Edward Dickinson warning that

Emily—but not always her brother or younger sister—must often be kept at home in bad weather. During such times, the Dickinson children were to “keep school” at home (Habegger 97-98). Keeping school at home may have had several outcomes later in Dickinson’s life. First, she became accustomed to independent learning. Next, she had access to the Edward Dickinson’s private library, discussed in Chapter Three, and was not limited to a few appointed textbooks. Third, long, snug winter days with no need to face the elements emphasized Dickinson’s impression of home as a preferred place to be.

Dickinson enjoyed excelling at school, when she could attend; attendance was not mandatory, and her parents often kept her home when illness threatened. For about seven years, Dickinson attended Amherst Academy, co-founded by her grandfather and steeped in studies “that met the test of orthodoxy” (Habegger 139). Habegger depicts the school’s “austere and forbidding” characteristics: “Prayer began and ended the day; teachers were authorized to administer ‘private or public admonition or degradation’; students were given long poems in blank verse that met the test of orthodoxy—Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, William Cowper’s *The Task*” (139). Though such a school may seem grim to a student today, Habegger argues that the Academy “seems to have been a good place for a prodigiously gifted girl who needed the freedom to be herself” (140). In developing that freedom, Dickinson studied three or four years of Latin, which graces her poetry with style and terminology. Habegger mentions “extreme dislocations of standard English word order” (140-41). This distinctive wording set Dickinson apart from her contemporaries and led the way for her command of language applied to her poetry.

One of Dickinson's former teachers at the academy, Daniel T. Fiske, later remembered Dickinson as "a very bright, but rather delicate and frail looking girl; an excellent scholar, of exemplary deportment, faithful in all school duties; but somewhat shy and nervous" (qtd. in Mudge 30). Dickinson's continuing delight in learning may not have shown in class as excitement, but she conveys her enthusiasm as she describes her studies at the Academy to Abiah in a letter of May 7, 1845: "They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany. How large they sound, don't they? I don't believe you have such big studies" (L 6). Again, the reader can hear that wish to be slightly superior, even if the writer jests, and a sense of self-satisfaction that resurfaces a few lines later: "I have written one composition this term, and I need not assure you it was exceedingly edifying to myself as well as everybody else." Perhaps of major interest, Dickinson intersperses her news of school with a boasting report of her physical appearance and romantic anticipation: "I am growing handsome very fast indeed! I expect I shall be the belle of Amherst when I reach my 17<sup>th</sup> year. I don't doubt that I shall have perfect crowds of admirers at that age. Then how I shall delight to make them await my bidding, and with what delight shall I witness their suspense while I make my final decision." Though she immediately dispels the image by saying, "But away with my nonsense," one can imagine the spirited young girl who may indeed have looked forward eagerly to such scenes of attention from beaux and to a life of marriage and children after making her "final decision." In retrospect, however, that "final decision" that Dickinson awaits with such "delight," emphasized with twelve first-person pronouns, led her in another direction entirely, to a life of continued self-expression.

## Dickinson and Early Spiritual Studies

Next to home, and probably vying with school as a source of proper instruction, church played a significant part in the education of young Dickinson. Habegger notes that the hymns Dickinson learned in early childhood probably came from Isaac Watts's eighteenth-century *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* and describes hymn number 18, "Against Scoffing and Calling Names." Forty-two children who called the prophet Elisha "bald-head" promptly felt God's wrath when the deity "sent two raging bears, / That tore them limb from limb to death, / With blood, and groans, and tears" (100). Elisha actually was bald. Thus, Dickinson learned early that making fun, even when telling the truth, could have disastrous consequences; nevertheless, truth telling—sometimes with caustic humor—became her aim in life. Later, one of her famous poems strikes a point of order: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (Fr 1263). Dickinson at about age thirty writes in a letter to Louise and Fanny Norcross, "I believe the love of God may be taught not to seem like bears," which may be a reference to that remembered hymn (L 230). If a childish scoffing resulted in being torn apart by bears, Dickinson may have seen the need to couch her own opinions, which could be interpreted as "scoffing" at orthodoxy, in terms of ambiguity or "slantness."

Church teachings were reinforced at home with reading of accepted religious material in the same vein as the slaving bears. When Dickinson was about six years old, according to Leyda, her father sent to his children a subscription to the *Sabbath School Visitor*, an evangelical magazine for children, edited by Asa Bullard, Dickinson's uncle by marriage to her Aunt Lucretia (1: 35). Habegger, who spells the periodical ending in "*er*," says the stories in the publication during that year include gory tales of

children dying in ghastly fashion and emphasize suffering, separation, and moral endings that do nothing to alleviate the painful situations (101-03). Any child with an imagination could picture the scenes with terrible clarity. The *Visiter* also denounced the works of Shakespeare, Scott, and Byron as “utterly worthless” (103). Since Dickinson was probably not engrossed in these authors at that age, the critique would not have affected her. However, focus on hopeless pain, including separation from parents, may have bothered her immensely. Habegger claims that Bullard “was the key agent in spreading the fear of death and damnation among children of her generation” (101). Undoubtedly, Edward meant only to instruct his children to follow pious ways. He writes to his wife, “I tho’t it would please them” (Leyda 1: 35). But the startling gruesomeness of the portrayal of the deaths of young children illustrates how disturbing good intentions can be.

As discussed earlier, New England theology had undergone complicated changes since the days of William Bradford in the seventeenth century and Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth. Lundin describes the atmosphere as “a curious mix of Whig republicanism and evangelical moralism” that “framed the religious debate in her home, church, and village” (13). When Amherst College was dedicated, ten years before Dickinson’s birth, speaker Noah Webster declared that the college intended to train ministers to establish “the empire of truth.” That truth, he said, would guide people to a way of life that would “[raise] the human race from ignorance and debasement; to enlighten their minds; to exalt their character; and to teach them the way to happiness and glory” (qtd. in Lundin 14). To that institution Samuel Fowler Dickinson dedicated his life, and it was also supported by his son Edward, who served as Treasurer of the College

for most of his adulthood. Though her family's interaction with Amherst College influenced her academic training, Dickinson's religious beliefs diverged from the stated purpose of the founders of the institution. George Frisbie Whicher (1992) says, "The sayings of Holy Writ were not sacred to her unless they proved true when tested by her own experience" (154). For Dickinson the process of "seeing New Englandly" no longer limited itself to the single lens of Calvinistic "truth," and she would find a far different truth that would lead her to a different perspective about her place in this world and perception of glory in the hereafter.

Countless conclusions have been drawn about the dearth of information available on Dickinson's early years. Sewall conjectures that Dickinson's "model behavior," attested to by her Aunt Lavinia, may be the cause of that lack of factual matter (325). "Extraordinary children usually make themselves felt at once," he says. He points to the childhood of Helen Fiske (Hunt Jackson), a contemporary of Dickinson, who by the age of six, according to her mother, was "quite inclined to question the authority of everything; the Bible she says she does not *feel* as if it was true" (qtd. in Sewall 325). Dickinson, on the other hand, prompted no such reports that survive from friends or relatives, leading one to believe that perhaps she continued to display the model behavior so admired by her Aunt Lavinia. Habegger also notes no mention by any of Dickinson's relatives of a tendency toward the genius that would develop throughout her life. This dearth of cognizance, he says, "was all too typical of late-Puritan, small-town New England families in their insensitivity to extraordinary abilities in their children, especially those of an imaginative or artistic turn" (326). If Habegger is correct in his assumption, how many more difficult times that intelligent, sensitive, curious, and

expressive child faced as she moved toward her horizon. Overcoming the obstacles in her path, however, undoubtedly honed her talents as recognition, acceptance, and support probably could not have done. Another look at her poem “They shut me up in Prose—” shows the inner strength and spirit of a poet dealing with and surmounting adversity, and doing so with a sense of humor, triumph, and disdain that would not be denied or suppressed:

They might as wise have lodged a Bird

For Treason—in the Pound—

Himself has but to will

And easy as a Star

Abolish his—Captivity—

And laugh—No more have I— (Fr 445)

### Dickinson’s Early Writing

Dickinson’s letters, the earliest written to her brother Austin when she was about eleven years of age, reveal a lively sense of humor, strong family ties, an interest in the community, an active imagination, and a nearly complete lack of punctuation. Only her characteristic dash separates—or combines—her ideas. Dickinson describes to her thirteen-year-old brother chickens that grow so fast she is “afraid they will be so large that you cannot perceive them with the naked Eye when you get home” and assures him that “you cannot think how odd it seems without you.” Dickinson writes of a temperance dinner that “went off very well the other day.” She tells Austin of a “great fixing up” of

“Mt Pleasant Buildings,” and shares a bit of gossipy news: “Sabra is not running after” Charles Richardson, who has returned to Amherst and is apparently working in “Mr Pitkins store” (L 1). Altogether, Dickinson displays a keen sense of what is going on in the world around her, particularly for her age, and has no compunctions about speaking her mind in a forthright manner.

Dickinson’s personality and interests also come through quite clearly in her letters. Her second letter, dated May 1, 1842, mentioned earlier, devotes much space to a description of activities and health of domestic animals, as well as the news that Charles Richardson has given Sabra Howe “a handsome present of a gold ring.” In this letter, Dickinson writes for the first time, “I want you to answer this letter as soon as you can,” a request common to the times that dominated her correspondence all her life. She also mentions approval of Austin’s taking the Latin lexicon because she has found one to borrow (L 2). At age eleven, then, she is studying classical language. In her third letter, to Jane Humphrey, Dickinson mentions studying “History and Botany” and listening to a presentation during “Speaking and Composition,” the author of which she found “the silliest creature that ever lived I think.” In addition, Dickinson assures Jane, “My Plants grow beautifully” (L 3). These three letters, written over a period of less than a month, paint a warm picture of a girl who displays intelligence and wit and expresses herself forcefully. Naturally, she speaks of the habits and happenings of home, but she also infuses her writing with consciousness of and affection for others; she has been “looking for a letter” from Jane and says, “I miss you more and more every day, in my study in play at home indeed every where I miss my beloved Jane.”

Dickinson's mention of growing plants, rather than perhaps a "garden" of potatoes or green beans, reveals her personal status as a child with leisure to indulge cultivating plants for beauty, not consumption, and symbolizes a life style that would later allow her not only to continue to produce plants and flowers, but also find time to write poetry. Though her family experienced financial reverses as well as prosperity, the children knew in general a life of well-being. As a child of a prominent professional family, Dickinson was always fed, clothed, educated, and prepared for a life of comparative comfort. Although her mother continued to fill her own hours with seemingly unending domestic tasks, hired help often took over the heaviest of duties, and Dickinson had ample time to pursue her own interests. Caring for her plants and flowers became a large part of Dickinson's life from her early years; digging potatoes did not. Dickinson wrote the above letter to Jane Humphrey at the age of eleven. An early mention of flowers appears in a May 7, 1845, letter to Abiah Root: "I have been to walk to-night, and got some very choice wild flowers. I wish you had some of them" (L 6). Flowers figured significantly in her poetry and in her musings on relationships and on the nature of life itself. In "Flowers—Well—if anybody," Dickinson stands speechless in the presence of indefinable experience, humbled by such beauty and perfection:

Flowers—Well—if anybody  
Can the ecstasy define—  
Half a transport—half a trouble—  
With which flowers humble men:  
Anybody find the fountain  
From which floods so contra flow—

I will give him all the Daisies  
Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces  
For a simple breast like mine—  
Butterflies from St. Domingo  
Cruising round the purple line—  
Have a system of aesthetics—  
Far superior to mine. (Fr 95)

The flowers produce more feeling in Dickinson than she can handle; she envies the butterflies from exotic climes that can keep flowers company as a matter of course, a “far superior” philosophy than that within her “simple breast.” Dickinson spends most of her life trying to understand, capture, and savor the ecstasy of existence that includes such sublime characters as flowers and butterflies.

In the above-mentioned letter to her friend Abiah Root, Dickinson also writes of preserving flowers: “Have you made you an herbarium yet? I hope you will if you have not, it would be such a treasure to you; ’most all the girls are making one” (L 6).

Habegger describes Dickinson’s own herbarium: Dickinson assembled “four or five hundred specimens of flowers, wild and cultivated,” labeled with the scientific name, the whole presented “in a neat and artistic arrangement” (154).<sup>4</sup> Not only does the herbarium display learning, but also it attempts to capture and hold a bit of the ecstasy of the flower, which Dickinson would later try to do in poetry.

A long and chatty letter that fourteen-year-old Dickinson sends to Abiah is indicative of Dickinson's correspondence and shows in great detail the society in which she moves, a wide circle of family, friends, neighbors, townspeople, and acquaintances who enrich her life, unlike the select circle to which she eventually restricts herself. Her friends are mostly on the same level as she, with the same advantages. She mentions many individuals who travel and enjoy diverse experiences. Dickinson, who often displays attachment to her teachers, speaks of "Miss Adams Our dear teacher," and she discusses a number of other relationships, mostly revolving around courtship, marriage, and children (L 7). The reader understands quite clearly that Dickinson belongs in her financially comfortable, educated, animated society. From the lively interest she shows in romantic alliances at the time, one can expect that Dickinson will probably continue to do so.

In addition, in this letter Dickinson expresses an awe for authority as she faces school examinations; Dickinson will later develop an internal authority upon which she can rely with confidence, but as a young teenager, she still must face that outside force that has such immediate power over her. She is "determined not to dread" the testing: "Yet in spite of my heroic resolutions, I cannot avoid a few misgivings when I think of those tall, stern, trustees, and when I know [sic] that I shall lose my character if I don't recite as precise as the laws of the Medes and Persians."<sup>5</sup> Dickinson refers to Daniel 6:8, "Now, O king, . . . sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians which altereth not." No one could have predicted from the hesitant tone of this letter the course of the poet's later years, when she began to make up her own laws. One line, however, from a letter to Abiah Root written six months earlier, does in a

way foretell the future. Dickinson apologizes to Abiah for not sending a note by way of Sabra, then dismisses the thought because her letter would probably have been lost among many from other friends. In such a case, writes Dickinson, “my letter if I wrote one, would seem no smarter than any body else, and you know how I hate to be common” (L 5). The fourteen-year-old seems never to have lost that wish to rise above mediocrity, particularly in use of the written word.

### Dickinson and the Effect of Home

All aspects of home had a tremendous effect upon Dickinson and upon her writing. In the period of her life addressed here, until about the age of fourteen, Dickinson lived in two houses: the Homestead, where she was born and in which she lived for nine years, and the house on North Pleasant Street (formerly North Street). In 1855, Edward Dickinson repurchased the Homestead, Dickinson’s residence for the rest of her life. As a young child, as all children do, Dickinson explored the confines of her home and related to the various physical areas that later became symbols to her of the experiences and emotions associated with them. Jean McClure Mudge says that the “signal importance” of the house on Pleasant Street was “its influence informing Emily’s ideas about the idyllic possibilities of home, despite moments of despair and frustration which she suffered there,” concepts that molded “her spatial awareness with singular force. When Emily wrote Austin, ‘Home is a holy thing . . .’ she was speaking of the Pleasant Street house” (4-5). That remark to Austin comes in a letter when Dickinson was twenty years old and still living on Pleasant Street: “Home is a holy thing—nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it’s [sic] blessed portals. I feel it more and more as the real

world goes on and one and another forsake, in whom you place your trust—here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden” (L 59). Living in Eden had its distinct drawbacks, according to Mudge, because of its geography: “The Amherst town cemetery was adjacent to her father’s property and funeral corteges passed by the back or north side of the house in full view from indoors. One of Emily’s earliest references to death, in 1846,” says Mudge, “is to that of someone whom she did not know, a Negro infant, whose funeral procession she observed and then referred to as a cause for her ‘dark ideas’” (45); (L 9). Death as a part of human experience was preceded by more personal awareness, says Mudge, commenting on the death of Sophia Holland, Dickinson’s friend, who died in 1844 (45). Dickinson writes to Abiah Root, “[A]fter she was laid in her coffin & I felt I could not call her back again I gave way to a fixed melancholy” (L 11). Any funeral cortege, then, may have brought back Dickinson’s sorrow.

In contrast to her attachment to the house on North Pleasant Street, Dickinson remembers the Homestead of her childhood in a letter to Austin on September 23, 1851, in which she mentions “the ancient mansion”: “I am glad we don’t come home as we used, to this old castle. I could fancy that skeleton cats ever caught spectre rats in dim old nooks and corners” (L 52). She adds, “and when I hear the query concerning the pilgrim fathers—and imperturbable Echo merely answers *where*, it becomes a satisfaction to know that they are there, sitting stark and stiff in Deacon Mack’s mouldering arm chairs.” A few years later, the Dickinson family moved back to the Homestead, without Deacon Mack’s armchairs, but perhaps to encounter once more the ghosts of the Pilgrim fathers. Dickinson’s later years in the Homestead are addressed in

the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, as they represent a time frame not applicable here.

One most important factor of “home,” whichever house it was at the time, must be emphasized: both of Dickinson’s parents valued the idea of home itself. Emily Norcross Dickinson, as mentioned earlier, learned from her mother a love of home. Edward Dickinson also felt the same, as indicated by his letters when he was absent from Amherst. He writes to his wife from Boston on January 17, 1838, when Dickinson is seven years old, “Home is the place for me—& the place of all others to which I am most attached” (qtd. in Leyda 1: 41). On March 14, he writes, “I enjoyed my visit so well, at home, that it is almost a *privilege* when I think of it, now it is over, that I was sick, so far as seeing my family is concerned” (qtd. in Leyda 1: 47). These statements show a person who, though he speaks of his own emotions, bases them upon the presence of his family and their togetherness, a theme common to the period and one that Dickinson’s writing also addresses, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Though both parents involved themselves in the day-to-day rearing of their children, the attention they lavished, though not a negative oppression as described early in this chapter, had both a controlling and a restricting effect on the Dickinson children, and Dickinson’s reaction to her upbringing had a serious effect on the way she lived her life. Habegger notes, “There was so much guarding, so many precautions, that even as the parents tried to create the perfect shelter they instilled a great anxiety in its very heart” (91-92). One of Dickinson’s earliest poems, “Through lane it lay—through bramble—,” provides a grim picture of the supposed perils facing children away from the safety of their parents’ walls:

Through lane it lay—through bramble—  
Through clearing and through wood—  
Banditti often passed us  
Upon the lonely road.

The wolf came peering curious—  
The owl looked puzzled down—  
The serpent's satin figure  
Glid stealthily along—

The tempests touched our garments—  
The lightning's poinards gleamed—  
Fierce from the Crag above us  
The hungry Vulture screamed—

The satyr's fingers beckoned—  
The valley murmured "Come"—  
*These* were the mates—  
*This* was the road

These children fluttered home. (Fr 43)

Danger—from human, natural, or mythic sources—obviously lay in wait on the way to sanctuary. But was "home" a sanctuary? The narrator does not say; nor do the children suffer any mishap on the road. The "Banditti" passed on apparently without threat. The

wolf and owl were only “curious” and “puzzled.” The serpent, though stealthy, accosted no one. The storm touched but did not harm. The Vulture “screamed” but did not swoop. The satyr and the valley only indicated but did not pursue a faintly disturbing enticement. Why, then, does the poem portray a sense of underlying anxiety, either real or lightly mocking? Perhaps the children have been totally immured in the suggestion or even the insistence that only at home can they find safety, so their actual peaceful coexistence with others upon the road does not penetrate their consciousness; thus, the children may experience unexplainable uneasiness.

Dickinson relates another revealing woods scene from childhood in which she was warned not to learn about, enjoy, and adapt to the environment, but to avoid it and hug the safety of home; she writes to Higginson, “When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shyer of me, than I could be of them, so I hav’nt [sic] that confidence in fraud which many exercise” (L 271). Fraud comes in many guises and once uncovered ensures that other warnings are never heeded with the same naïve sense of duty to trust and believe: if adults can lie about Goblins, what else that they say could be false? How can a child tell? Dickinson may have based her lifelong search for truth upon her finding of “Angels” instead of “Goblins,” trusting her own discoveries where and how she finds them, without need of guidance or obedience to censure.

Dickinson may have felt what is called today “hovering,” when parents, for whatever reason, feel both obligated and privileged to oversee and interfere with every aspect, every thought, and every action of their children, leaving them no room to grow

and use their own intellects to decide the course of their lives. As a result of such parental action, Habegger says, “The children, Emily most of all, perfected the art of living separately in close proximity” (92). Dickinson, enforcing her natural wish for privacy, gradually mapped out a plan to carve her own space, a home within a home, in which to grow. Extensive discussion of Dickinson and home follows in Chapter Three.

Now, the question that began this chapter may again be addressed: in addition to one’s genetic makeup and one’s cultural surroundings, is there perhaps also a surge of independence of mind that transcends these two factors, a surge that cannot unfold unless Nature and Nurture both combine in a particular manner? In Dickinson’s case, I argue for such a third factor, an impetus that took her beyond daily limitations to unbounded exploration of spiritual possibilities expressed in a poetic construct. Psychologist Kathleen Stassen Berger argues, “No developmental path is set in stone,” because “people’s lives are not determined by their genes” and “early experiences can be overcome” (528). Glimpses of Dickinson’s earlier years reveal snapshots of a young girl who absorbs her environment with the critical and opinionated spirit of one who will make decided choices concerning relationships, thoughts, and actions as she matures. Boxed in mentally by long generations of Puritan and Calvinist encoding and boxed in physically (albeit by her own design) by her position as daughter in a nineteenth-century patriarchal household, Dickinson very early in life begins to identify, question, and redefine the parameters of the spiritual framework that her upbringing had built around her.

The following chapter delves into the beginnings of Dickinson’s evolving personal sense of power that she recognized and fostered under the confining

circumstances she experienced at home and at school. As hindsight shows, however, that confinement allowed her poetic talent to ripen as perhaps no other circumstance could do and has contributed today not only to a literary body of work but also a paradigm that promotes consciousness and awe of the power of being.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Martha Ackmann for a more compassionate image of Dickinson's relationship with her mother. Habegger notes, however, that the report is thirdhand and thus perhaps lacking in credibility (713).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "heap coals of fire" is from Proverbs 25:22 and Romans 12:20 and describes the job of the lucky young boy who carried a crock of coals on his head from the community fire kept going all night to each household in the village. Thus, the boy's head and hands would be comfortably warm (*The New Jerusalem Bible*. Susan Jones, gen. ed. New York: Doubleday, 1985.) The phrase here means to warm the subject with such goodwill that pleasurable results follow.

<sup>3</sup> Many critics and biographers, including Sewall, Cody, and Habegger, refer to Lucretia's sour disposition without giving support for the position.

<sup>4</sup> Sewall says, "Now in the Dickinson Room of the Houghton Library, Harvard, the herbarium shows a fine sense of composition, as well as a concern for precise Latin nomenclature which she probably did *not* get from her mother" (86).

<sup>5</sup> As Dickinson faces her examinations, she has in mind the unalterable law that would send her home if she failed. Habegger states, "What loomed over her was not the teachers, always on her side (until she went to Mount Holyoke), but the patriarchal trustees. It was *the law* the young perfectionist was anxious about as she prepared for the academic contest in a community that put mind first and body second. That, and knowing she would be measured against her own sterling past performances" (153-54).

## CHAPTER 3

### DICKINSON'S DEVELOPING PERSONAL SENSE OF POWER

In poetry's gallery of diverse ways of thinking, diverse aspirations, and diverse desires, we come to know periods and nations far more intimately than we can through the misleading and pathetic method of studying their political and military history. From this latter kind of history, we rarely learn more about a people than how it was ruled and how it was wiped out. From its poetry, we learn about the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations.

— Johann Gottfried von Herder  
(qtd. in Gallagher and Greenblatt 6)

Thomas H. Johnson gives no space in the introduction to his three-volume work *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* to the poet's formative years as a writer. Instead, he begins by analyzing Dickinson's correspondence with T. W. Higginson when she was thirty-one years old, as she inquired whether the four poems she had enclosed in a note to him "breathed" (L 260). Exploring the development of Dickinson's journey to that point in her life shows how she reacted to the burgeoning of her own intellect, illustrated by her documentation of that process. This chapter focuses on the poems and letters Dickinson wrote from ages approximately fourteen to twenty-nine, 1844-1859, as well as extant correspondence among family members and friends, which provide a picture of a dutiful daughter who begins to give credence to her own intelligent thinking. Within the confines of family and society that assigns limitations to the female role, based on centuries of religious and secular tradition, Dickinson struggles with a sphere of propriety that she eventually shapes to fit her ideas of behavior and thought. Richard B. Sewall speaks of the "Puritan inheritance" of Dickinson that she "could no more escape . . . than she could escape breathing the air of her native Amherst" (20). Inherited tradition, however, faced definite challenges in the new United States of America as the Industrial

Age unfolded and a spirit of independence gained a strong foothold, supported and spread throughout the country by the prolific numbers of newspapers and other periodicals.

Though her range of experience may have been limited as Dickinson lived through her late twenties and onward, she had already had a full public life, and she managed then to create an equally full private life through her limited personal visits and extensive personal correspondence.

Dickinson responded to the age; her development during the time period between 1844 and 1859 clearly shows three interacting forces, a triangle that worked to inform her life and her writing: first, Dickinson examined the Calvinist teachings of her Congregational childhood, compared with other philosophies, such as Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, and her own developing spirituality. Next, she acknowledged the worth of her own perceptions of spirituality and expressed them in her own voice, assuming a command of language to enforce and strengthen that voice. Third, Dickinson experienced a growing reluctance to leave home as she continued to explore her growth as a spiritual thinker and a poet. Each of these facets of her life could not have evolved as it did without the presence of the other two; as she planned and took advantage of the whole of the triangle of favorable circumstances combined during these fifteen years, Dickinson explored and documented her struggle to make sense of the answers she was forming to the immense questions of life, death, eternity, and also to understand herself as a poet. That struggle, as the next chapter explores, resulted in a body of literature that resonates in today's world.

## Spirituality

The first arm of the triangle that informed Dickinson's development of personal power, the rejection of her family's and the community's Calvinist teachings, resulted in a wider personal view of the possibilities of spirituality. An initial investigation of Dickinson's religious background reveals a less than pious girl who began to refute the teachings of her church openly. Though, as Jane Donahue Eberwein says, "few belief systems could have seemed more stable than Calvinist Christianity in the Connecticut Valley of Dickinson's youth" ("Is Immortality True?" 68), the appearance of stability belied the truth. The power of the granite-like ethic of Calvinism, based on the depravity of man and the certainty of an elite elect, had gradually softened to support the emerging concept of innate goodness of all human beings as proposed by Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. In the wake of those intrusive ideas, New England Calvinism was still enmeshed in the fabric of daily life. For example, Eberwein notes that all four Amherst churches active at the time of Dickinson's birth were based on two-hundred-year-old Puritan tradition ("Is Immortality True?" 68). The church was beginning to lose its righteous grip, however, which left space for Dickinson to question the tenets of her family's faith and begin to formulate answers of her own. As she assumed the authority of an individual voice, Dickinson continued to recognize and enforce her own point of view, and privilege her thoughts above her early teachings. As she did so, Dickinson no doubt echoed the experience of many Americans. Vivian Pollak suggests that Dickinson appeals to many readers because she "represents the rebellious, antinomian strain in American culture and the courage to be oneself" (*A Historical Guide* 4). That courage continued to strengthen as Dickinson matured from a young teenager to a young adult.

Unlike most Americans, however, Dickinson began to express her thoughts in a literary mode that led to her lifelong avocation, her spiritual convictions, and her famous reclusiveness.

On September 25, 1845, at age fourteen, Dickinson writes to a close friend of many years, Abiah Root, a long, chatty letter typical of her correspondence, including a paraphrased Biblical reference, “faith without works, which you know we are told is dead,” and another paraphrase, this time from Shakespeare, “autumn with the sere and yellow leaf is already upon us” (L 8). Johnson states that this letter is the first milieu in which either of these two sources, which he calls Dickinson’s favorites, appears (*Letters* 23n); Johnson prefers to discount the phrase “heap coals of fire” as a figure of speech rather than an actual allusion to scripture (L 7; *Letters* 19n), which I addressed in Chapter Two. These earliest literary and scriptural allusions, while not at all unusual in the correspondence of educated persons in the nineteenth century, do represent a solid grounding in an exhibition of both faith and language, the tools that Dickinson continued to use and perfect throughout her life.

In another letter to Abiah, Dickinson holds to one serious subject, discussed with heartfelt attention from beginning to end. In the letter, one hears a statement that marks a spiritual struggle: “I was almost persuaded to be a christian [sic]” (L 10). Before long, according to Dickinson, that feeling passed. “I soon forgot my morning prayer,” she says, “or else it was irksome to me.” As a result, Dickinson boldly declares, “I cared less for religion than ever.” Though she is at the time only fifteen years old, the phrase “less than ever” indicates a situation of fairly long standing. Two lines later a contrary statement appears: “I feel that it is impossible for any one to be happy without a treasure

in heaven,” and also, “I shall never be happy without I love Christ.” Here one can see a basic philosophical struggle: the vehicle by which Dickinson has been taught to love Christ and gain the serenity of heaven, her Calvinist religion, has become both irritating and distasteful to her. Dickinson finds no peace in her predicament; instead, she describes to Abiah “an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world can never fill.” Dickinson’s perverse reaction to the yearning to accept the comfort offered and yield to the religious temptation, however, keeps her from acting upon the impulse: “I am continually putting off becoming a Christian [sic]. Evil voices lisp in my ear— There is yet time enough. I feel that every day I live I sin more and more in closing my heart to the offers of mercy which are presented to me freely.” Dickinson then mentions the revival meetings of the previous year, saying, “but I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might again be deceived and I dared not trust myself.” The wording that Dickinson uses—“I might again be deceived”—teases the reader because there is no record to show when Dickinson had been previously “deceived,” or in what manner, to what degree, and with what result. One can hear Dickinson’s troubled voice as she listens to her own conscience; for her own reasons, she cannot follow the custom of her society and the teachings of her family to profess a yielding to Christ. Also, the phrase “Evil voices *lisp*” suggests a coaxing, child-like source not yet fully developed but already enticing to its listener (emphasis added). The intrusive, insidious thoughts tempting her, according to her upbringing, can come only from a harmful and forbidden source. However, the source whispers something that her mind wants very much to hear, regardless of the taboos against entertaining the fascination.

Although Dickinson feels “ungrateful” to live on “Christ’s [sic] bounty” while rejecting a commitment, she nonetheless refuses to be persuaded. Indeed, as she writes to Abiah, Dickinson recognizes that she is “still . . . in a state of enmity to him & his cause.” That single word “still” again shows a conflict of some duration. There follows in this letter an extremely long monologue devoted to questions of death, eternity, making peace with one’s maker, yielding to Christ, and allusions to heaven and hell, ending with Dickinson’s declaration of feeling “deeply the importance of attending to the subject before it is too late.” Thomas H. Johnson says all of these allusions and phrases “are such as would be heard almost weekly from the pulpit” (*Letters* 30n). Again, one may wonder if Dickinson is once more leaning blithely on a familiar vocabulary while occasionally letting slip her true feelings in words such as “irksome” and “enmity,” which show clearly the strength of her resistance to convention.

Questions of spirituality commonly formed the basis of conversation and letters in nineteenth-century communication, and in Dickinson’s next letter to Abiah she plunges deeply into her personal struggles and doubts. Many of Dickinson’s friends “have found a Saviour” while she herself has “shed many a tear” and “wished that I had found the peace which has been given to you” (L 11). Regardless of the pleadings of friends and warnings against removal from the “Holy spirit of God,” Dickinson cannot commit herself to the service of God—not, however, without trepidation: “I felt my danger & was alarmed in view of it, but I had rambled too far to return.” She has “rambled” slowly and steadily too far away from God—but toward what? Dickinson continues, “[E]ver since my heart has been growing harder & more distant from the truth & now I have bitterly to lament my folly—& also my own indifferent state at the present time.”

These last clauses show much contradiction. If Dickinson is moving away from “truth,” perhaps it is not the same truth that she seeks and can believe in and can soften her heart toward. If she bitterly laments her folly, she can certainly change her mind, to the undoubted delight and approbation of her friends. However, her “indifferent state” prevents her from further action, particularly action that will turn her toward the church. Dickinson applauds Abiah’s declaration of faith; she rejoices that Abiah has “consolation from on high” to bear the death of a friend, but she cannot say the words that will bind her. What more does she want? The answer to that question unfolds bit by bit in the next decade. As Dickinson searches for her spiritual truth, she retains many of the characteristics of her early training. In 1892, six years after her death, Arthur Chamberlain writes in the *Commonwealth* of Dickinson’s staunch Calvinism as displayed in her obvious “hatred of cant and sham,” though his argument is based on reading of limited evidence (qtd. in Bingham, *Ancestors’ Brocades* 196). No matter how Dickinson rejects the religious aspects of Calvinism, the integrity that she learned early to respect remains a part of her even when it is unpalatable or terrifying, as she demonstrates in “’Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—” (Fr 341). In the third stanza, Dickinson writes,

The Truth, is Bald, and Cold—

But that will hold—

If any are not sure—

We show them—prayer—

But we, who know,

Stop hoping, now—

The speaker of the poem cannot fall back on the pillar of prayer to support the mind in the presence of the “Bald, and Cold” truth. At this point Dickinson is caught in the grip of disbelief but has found no consolation that will help her deal with the truth as she sees it.

As her soul-searching continues, fifteen-year-old Dickinson expresses to Abiah a partial answer to why she’s reluctant to make her “peace with God” (L 13). Dickinson writes, “I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections.” Then, without equivocation she declares, “I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die.” Here, Dickinson no longer admits any regret about her decision, though she does ask Abiah to pray “that there may be room for me in the shining courts above.” The lack of penitent language and the open declaration for the world, at odds with expected pious speech, indicate that Dickinson has made some personal decisions, decisions that do not conform to the mold expected of a fifteen-year-old daughter of generations of staunch Calvinists.

When Dickinson leaves home to attend school in South Hadley, she writes to Abiah in January 1848 of a main focus of attention at Mount Holyoke: “There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety” (L 20). The observation comes after reference to a woman recently widowed, and Dickinson is obviously ruminating on the thought of death. Dickinson then forthrightly states her own position while reassuring Abiah of her continued contemplation of the matter: “I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject.” Immediately, however, she leaps from gravity to lightheartedness: “Do you not think we have had some delightful weather for winter &

does it not remind you of spring?" One can almost see a swift withdrawal from the topics of dying and religion as Dickinson turns her thoughts to the ever-renewed cycles of nature.

Though Dickinson does not yet directly state that she feels pressure to conform to the religious fervor prevailing at Mount Holyoke, she sarcastically reveals to Austin the atmosphere at the seminary as she describes receiving his latest letter:

The result of my deliberation [of proper procedure] was a conclusion to open it with moderation, peruse it's [sic] contents with sobriety becoming my station, & if after a close investigation of it's [sic] contents I found nothing which savored of rebellion or an unsubdued will, I would lay it away in my folio & forget I had ever received it. (L 22)

Dickinson refers to "rebellion" and "unsubdued will" in words that sound like rote repetition of admonitions. Dickinson further reports that she found "it concealed no dangerous sentiments," so she "with great gravity deposited it with my other letters & the impression that I once had such a letter is entirely obliterated by the waves of time." The elaborate phrasing sounds too studied for the reader to believe without question, particularly since Dickinson often wrote to her brother in hyperbolic phrasing. Then, in the same letter to her brother Dickinson asks him to judge her admirable actions; her tone reveals her personal attitude toward concepts she associates with her learning at Mount Holyoke: "Are you not gratified that I am so rapidly gaining correct ideas of female propriety and sedate deportment?" Dickinson's words, probably tongue-in-cheek, as was much of her correspondence with her brother, recalls her father's articles written for the *New-England Inquirer*, Amherst's first newspaper, which he helped found in late 1826,

according to Habegger (47). Edward's essays concerning proper female behavior listed many desirable attributes, including a "willingness to yield to the opinions of persons of superior wisdom" (qtd. in Habegger 47). Though Dickinson ostensibly draws her brother's attention to her acquisition of proper deportment, even at the age of seventeen, she shows a marked independence of thought that will only continue to strengthen.

At Mount Holyoke Seminary, girls were trained by Mary Lyon, says Habegger, to become "an influential corps of wives, teachers, missionaries" (197). The seminary had an astonishing record of religious revivals and a very high conversion rate; speaking at Mary Lyon's funeral in 1849, Heman Humphrey declared that in one year everyone had expressed hope and in another year only three girls remained undeclared Christians (Habegger 198).<sup>1</sup> Dickinson had entered her first term and been assigned to a group, based upon her willingness to declare her life, in a public forum, for Christ. Habegger reports that there were three separate groups of religious description: the first group had professed, the second "had a hope," and the third "consisted of students who did not yet 'have a hope' and were thus 'impenitent.'" This was Dickinson's group (199). Despite the efforts of Mary Lyon and Hannah Porter to effect a conversion, according to Habegger, when Dickinson returned home in August 1848 for good, "Mount Holyoke Seminary had not achieved what it was supposed to" (212). Dickinson had resisted a public religious conversion. Whicher says that at the Seminary "she discovered, finally and irrevocably" that "she could not confine her religious feeling to the channels that were marked out for her"; instead, says Whicher, Dickinson "gropingly [sought] out her own path. Hers was to be a career of exploration, not of far-off islands, but of the desert places in the human soul" (70). I address that exploration in detail in this chapter.

After her return to Amherst from Mount Holyoke, Dickinson engaged in a flurry of reading that led to further decisions concerning her spiritual condition. Always an avid reader, she found herself stirred by *Picciola* (L 27), a novel in which Johnson says a “political prisoner in the stronghold of Fenestrella” finds a small plant growing between the stones of his prison courtyard and “transforms his philosophy and changes his fortunes” (*Letters* 77n). Dickinson writes to William Cowper Dickinson, who sent her the novel, and likens her situation to that of the prisoner: “I’m a ‘Fenestrellan captive,’ if this world be ‘Fenestrella,’ and within my dungeon yard, up from the silent pavement stones, has come a plant, so frail, & yet so beautiful, I tremble lest it die.” The plant, she continues, is “mysterious,” and “sometimes I fancy that it whispers pleasant things to me—of freedom—and the future.” Dickinson may well feel like a captive who nonetheless will not give up hope of finding a spiritual freedom that she can believe in, toward which her heart moves just as the small plant turns toward the sun. Dickinson had also read *Jane Eyre*; Eldridge G. Bowdoin writes on a note from Dickinson, “On returning *Jane Eyre*. The leaves mentioned [in Dickinson’s note] were box Leaves, sent to me in a little bouquet” (qtd. in Johnson, *Letters* 77n). Dickinson’s note to Bowdoin reads, “If all these leaves were altars, and on every one a prayer that Currer Bell might be saved—and you were God—would you answer it?” (L 28). *Jane Eyre*, of course, resisted the societal forces that tried to confine her to a limited existence while insisting, moreover, that she thank God for the charity of those who oppressed her. Jane’s eventual freedom of choice in planning the unfolding of her life while holding to her ethics reinforced Dickinson’s own choices. At the end of Charlotte Brontë’s novel, Jane chooses to return to Mr. Rochester and marry him, ignoring the course that St. John

Rivers presses upon her as his idea of the path God has chosen for her to follow. An intelligent, independent woman, Jane has retained her sense of self and chosen the course of her life. The impact of the book upon Dickinson is clear from her allusion to it thirty-four years later in a letter to Elizabeth Holland, in which Dickinson wishes Mrs. Holland's eyes were well enough to read "'Emily Bronte'—more electric far than anything since 'Jane Eyre'" (L 822). At the time she originally reads the book, when she is not yet twenty years old, she chooses to search for her own spiritual reality, not accepting the path to God spelled out for her by Mary Lyon at Mount Holyoke but following her own intuition.

I see here a turning point in Dickinson's approach to faith, which may actually have begun about two years earlier. Just about the time Dickinson left for Mount Holyoke, Benjamin F. Newton became a law student in her father's practice, where he remained from 1847 to late 1849, and as Dickinson says, his impact upon her and her spiritual life was substantial. "The first of my own friends," Dickinson called him when she learned of his death in 1853, perhaps meaning the first association apart from family friends or perhaps the first of those friends to die (L 110). Newton had given her an edition of "Ralph Emerson's poems—a beautiful copy" (L 30). In Amherst at that time, says Whicher, there were few people "who did not regard him [Emerson] askance," but Dickinson was "one of the rare souls in whom the urge of the Puritan seeker was not stifled," and for these people "Emerson was a fountainhead of living waters" (89, 90). Newton also spent time with her in deep discussion of spirituality. Dickinson explains in a letter to Edward Everett Hale that Newton had taught her "what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublimer lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again,

nobler, and much more blessed—” (L 153). This phrasing, says Habegger, records “a seismic lurch in her sense of things, a shift from Calvinist depravity and discipline to the immanent dignity of life and the validity of human intuition” (218). Dickinson’s poem “I dwell in Possibility—” offers her philosophy in that house that is “fairer” than any provided for her by the “Prose” of doctrine: under the “Everlasting Roof / The Gambrels of the Sky—” she has but one job to do: “For Occupation—This— / The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise—” (Fr 466). Dickinson does not pray or beg to enter Paradise, which represents the writing of poetry; she grasps and pulls Paradise to her as a right of belonging.

Since Dickinson had already had a keen appreciation of literature and nature before she met Newton and was absorbed in the study of faith, the connections among the three ideas of literature, faith, and nature all seem particularly important. Newton made a great impression upon her, which suggests that the material he provided and the substance of their conversations and letters fulfilled some need within her. The exploration of these themes as she lived out her life in her father’s house led Dickinson from the Transcendentalism of Emerson and his colleagues to the development of a further leap of faith when Emerson’s philosophy did not suffice to answer her questions. When Newton gave Dickinson a copy of Emerson’s poems and shared with her his own ideas as a visitor “much in [the Dickinson] family,” he showed her “an alternative perspective,” Eberwein says, to her “‘no hope’ condition when most of those she loved best chose Christ” (“Is Immortality True?” 87). Eberwein describes Emerson’s viewpoint, which Newton most likely discussed with Dickinson: “Emerson defied orthodoxies that prevented people from seeing nature freshly and tapping into the

universal spiritual force he preferred not to identify with any personal deity” (87). From another point of view, Whicher notes that Emerson was a “social critic,” imagining what politics, religion, education, trade, and “other mutual relationships of men” could be like “if they were directed toward the fullest development of individuals and inspired by a sense of the godlike powers of man” (200). Dickinson, says Whicher, “on the contrary, had no world but her house and garden. She was above economics. Society in the large held no place for her” (200). Nonetheless, Dickinson found her chosen world adequate for the study of literature, faith, and nature.

In an atmosphere of religious changes in New England, Dickinson had been struggling against orthodoxy for several years, and her mind was open to new images and possibilities, particularly to the possibility that the resistant voice within her had validity and merit. Dickinson’s delight in the unsuspected workings of her mind is revealed in a letter to Jane Humphrey on April 3, 1850: “I have dared to do strange things—bold things, and have asked no advice from any” (L 35). This statement is one of the first indicators of Dickinson’s intellectual independence. “I do not think I am wrong,” she continues, though what she has done (or thought) has been so radical that, she says to Jane, “I could make you tremble for me, and be very much afraid, and wonder how things would end”; however, Dickinson seems to have acquired a purpose—“life has had an aim”—and that purpose depends upon a belief. “I hope belief is not wicked,” Dickinson pauses to say. Then at the end of her letter, Dickinson refers to “our ‘Theologian,’” who Johnson says is James P. Kimball (*Letters* 96n). Johnson mentions that a friendship between Dickinson and Kimball had probably “cooled” (*Letters* 85n); Dickinson declares to Jane that “something surer, and higher” has made her forget Kimball, “and I

sometimes laugh in my sleeve.” Sewall says that in this letter “she seems to be stating her belief in *this* world (as opposed to the otherworldly concern of the Revival), her belief in human nature (the ‘Columnar Self’), and her joy in the prospect of a poetic vision—a vision of a world that she as poet could create—that has made all things new for her” (396). Apparently such a realization happened, and Dickinson glories in the possibilities of the prospect.

Other readings, though, may intrude upon such a point of view. For instance, Shira Wolosky states, “It is very tempting to see Dickinson’s retreat into the self as an accession to power, making limitation into expansion, intensity into extension, constricting circles into infinite circumferences” (134). This argument, says Wolosky, has been “fully made” by Jane Donahue Eberwein (141n). Basing her claim on the description of the “Granitic Base,” Wolosky declares the language of the poem to be “desperate” and “self-defeating,” and she sees Dickinson’s “selfhood” undergoing “a downward metamorphosis from motive, sentient, conscious being into inorganic stone” (135). On the contrary, I see the “Granitic Base” of “Conviction” as a firm, quiet support for the self who, with “Rectitude,” stands “not far off” from God, “Though none be on our side.” The persona here offers the conviction of the rightness of her thinking even though the “Columnar Self” rises serenely above the common sway in her beliefs.

Gradually, Dickinson expresses her growing certainties in a concrete manner in her letters. Wolff says the previously mentioned hints to Jane are followed in the next month by a letter to Abiah, in which “the tenor of Dickinson’s rebellion became stronger” (103). Dickinson describes her own attitude toward her friend Abby’s conversion, which does not convince Dickinson that she wants to follow her friend’s spiritual path: “I am

one of the lingering bad ones.” Dickinson also writes that she has “come from ‘to and fro, and walking up, and down’ the same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he’d been” (L 36).<sup>2</sup> Her agitation represents a momentous decision-making process. “Electing blasphemy here,” says Wolff, “Dickinson has turned the Biblical text [of Job] against itself, choosing for herself the role not of an accepting Job, but rather of rebellious Satan, who had challenged God’s ability to extract faith from creatures that must bear the afflictions of their terrible Creator” (103). And how was Dickinson going to express her rebellion?

The “something” that gave Dickinson a new inner strength was quite likely expressing her awakening views in poetry. Sewall suggests, “She had found a way, through the language of figure and metaphor, to protect herself and to work around and ultimately transcend all that was frustrating her emerging view of life.” He adds that there is “ample evidence that by the time she wrote the riddling letters to Abiah and Jane (she was nineteen) she had begun to write poems” (396). As an example of her delight in her newly acquired language, in her “Valentine” letter of 1850, Dickinson writes a paean to friendship that includes, “I am Judith the heroine of the Apocrypha, and you the orator of Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> That’s what they call a metaphor in our country. Don’t be afraid of it, sir, it won’t bite” (L 34). The editor of the *Indicator*, in which the Valentine was published, remarked, “I wish I knew who the author is. I think she must have some spell, by which she quickens the imagination, and causes the high blood to ‘run frolic through the veins’” (qtd. in Johnson, *Letters* 93n). Dickinson continues to experiment with word and thought and indulges in “fancies which I let blossom,” as she writes to Abiah (L 39). Her fancies are certainly not the calming influence of the devout Christian, and she acknowledges

that they may be “unwise,” yet she prefers them to the security of a professed life: “The shore is safer, Abiah,” Dickinson writes in the same letter, “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! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I’m afraid he don’t [sic] love me *any!*” The struggle to understand what she believes and the intense occupation of sifting truth from implied dross Dickinson later describes in the poem that begins,

We play at Paste—  
Till qualified, for Pearl—  
Then, drop the Paste—  
And deem ourself a fool— (Fr 282)

We gather the artificial ideas of life that surround us in our youth until we are “qualified,” until we have accumulated the necessary skills and attributes, the power that allows us to differentiate between “Pearl” and “Paste” and to focus then on the genuine.

The Shapes—though—were similar—  
And our new Hands  
Learned *Gem*-Tactics—  
Practicing *Sands*—

The “Shapes” of the ideas are “similar: a religious afterlife typically promises everlasting glory in return for faith. But Dickinson’s “new Hands” have learned a new touch by sifting through the common, over-abundant material of orthodoxy: a relationship with life and afterlife that offers true gems of understanding.

In her continuing discovery of alternatives to orthodoxy, Dickinson experiences for herself revelations that contemporary thinkers, such as physicist Brian Swimme, argue today. Swimme describes awakening oneself to the beauty of the universe, as Dickinson has done:

The history of life can be understood as the creation of ever more sensitive creatures in a universe where there is always another dimension of beauty to be felt and savored. Think of yourself that way, as a supreme power of sensitivity surrounded by magnificence. The paradox is this: the greater your sensitivity, the more unbearable the tension. . . . The glory of the human is also the difficulty of the human. (79-80)

Dickinson has begun in her early twenties to recognize a connection to Nature that actually goes beyond mere appreciation and awe and becomes a core experience that she recognizes as divine. Her poem beginning “Of all the Sounds dispatched abroad,” celebrates the “phraseless Melody” of the wind, “Whose fingers Comb the Sky— / Then quiver down—with tufts of Tune— / Permitted Gods, and me” (Fr 334). Wind is not simply blowing air; it is, to one sensitive to the truth of her own interpretation, a function of the magnificence of creation, and she can hear clearly its message. Dickinson extrapolates being able to hear the significance of the wind to projecting herself into the middle of the creation. She is not waiting for death to take her to Heaven; she is experiencing the glory of knowing herself as an active, living participant in the splendor of the living universe. Dickinson spends the next ten years further investigating other facets of the “Inheritance” that is “inner than the Bone— / Hid golden, for the whole of Days” (Fr 334) and firming her impressions of her accumulated thoughts on life and

immortality. She identifies the universal spiritual force with deity within herself, a part of human life “inner than the Bone,” thus basic and innate and not needing any church decree to grant permission for her to appropriate it.

Dickinson may be compared to Emerson in this regard, but Emerson concentrated on a more public application of self-reliance and intuition as a means of moral improvement of society. James McIntosh says that Emerson “helped make poetically minded New Englanders aware that they faced an ‘abdication of Belief,’ while at the same time he claimed to give them the wherewithal to deal with it—the self-reliance, the intuitive faith in spirit” (16). As an example, one can refer to Emerson’s essay called the “Divinity School Address,” delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, on July 15, 1838, in which Emerson says, “The pulpit in losing sight of this Law [of Moral Nature], loses its reason, and gropes after it knows not what. And for want of this culture, the soul of the community is sick and faithless” (1: 117-51). Dickinson, however, distanced herself from any question of morality, exploring what James McIntosh calls “a literature of process, evanescence, and uncertainty even more thoroughgoing and radical than Emerson, while her conception of it is less programmatic” (16). Lilach Lachman draws a further contrast: “Rather than the classical emphasis on God as a missing center, and Emerson’s interpretation of Man as a fixed, unified, and transcendental core, Dickinson’s business is to record, situate, and re-locate the fragmented subject in shifting points along the boundary between the void and the circuit world” (7). Turning from the restrictions of Calvinism was the first arm of the triangle that Dickinson structured to discover within herself that divine relationship that reached beyond her physical world.

## Dickinson's Search of Belief to Develop Voice and Poetry

The second part of this chapter deals with Dickinson's continued spiritual questioning that leads her to assume an authoritative language, the second arm of the triangle that informs this study of her development of personal power. Her distinctive diction begins at an early age and continues to grow until she has acquired the power of expression that enables her to craft her poems with surety and style. In her earliest known personal correspondence, a letter to her brother Austin when she was eleven years old, she demonstrates a style of writing that displays her personality as clearly as does her adult writing. Even at that age, Dickinson writes of very mature matters: "[T]he temperance dinner went off very well the other day," she writes; "Mr Jones has found in looking at his policy that his insurance is 8 thousand dollars instead of 6 which makes him feel a great deal better than he did at first; Mr Wilson and his wife took tea here the other night[;] they are going to move Wednesday—they have made out to get one of the Mt Pleasant Buildings to its place of destination [sic] which is a matter of great rejoicing to the public" (L 1). In these examples, one can hear that Dickinson probably listens closely to her father's speech and is quite aware of the happenings in her hometown. Dickinson's schoolwork also shows an attention to language. When Dickinson was twelve, according to the remembrance of Daniel T. Fiske, one of her teachers, her "compositions were strikingly original: and in both thought and style seemed beyond her years" (qtd. in Habegger 152).<sup>4</sup> Dickinson impressed her contemporaries as well. One of her friends, Emily Fowler (Ford), remembers Dickinson as "a humorist" (qtd. in Whicher 175). George Frisbie Whicher says that Ford's recollection of Dickinson's contributions to Amherst Academy's "manuscript magazine known as *Forest Leaves*" does not support

exact dating, “but what she says of the nature of Emily’s work is probably accurate and is of considerable interest” (175). Ford says, “Emily’s contributions were often in the style of a funny little sermon, long since vanished, which went the rounds in the newspapers for two years and was recited from Lyceum platforms and declaimed in village schools” (qtd. in Whicher 176). Though Whicher admits that no copies of such writings are extant (177), the flavor of the writing that Ford describes compares to the letters that Dickinson writes to Austin in the same time period.

The love of language and the play of words delighted Dickinson from early on and mark most of her writing. For example, Dickinson writes to Abiah Root on February 23, 1845, “We’ll finish an education sometime, won’t we? You may then be Plato, and I will be Socrates, provided you won’t be wiser than I am” (L 5). Even a simple telling of catching up on a sewing chore becomes a major story in Dickinson’s words. Explaining that she had missed the start of fall term at Amherst Academy in 1846 and has decided to apply herself to helping her mother with “household affairs,” Dickinson writes to Abiah, “I found a quantity of sewing waiting with open arms to embrace me, or rather for me to embrace it, and I could hardly give myself up to ‘Nature’s sweet restorer,’ for the ghosts of out-of-order garments crying for vengeance upon my defenceless head” (L 14).

Dickinson’s decision to join in domestic pursuits undergoes much revision as her use of time focuses less on chores and more on contemplation and writing, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dickinson manipulated language and chose words with care and precision to express as clearly as possible her thoughts and feelings. As an example of those feelings, Dickinson writes eloquently to Abiah on January 12, 1846, “The New Year’s day was

unusually gloomy to me, I know not why, and perhaps for that reason a host of unpleasant reflections forced themselves upon me which I found not easy to throw off” (L 9). Dickinson identifies in this letter a struggle that was to occupy her life, searching her behavior in true Calvinist fashion and identifying her shortcomings: “How many things have we omitted to do which might have cheered a human heart, or whispered hope in the ear of the sorrowful, and how many things have we done over which the dark mantle of regret will ever fall!” Dickinson’s language here eloquently voices the concerns of her troubled conscience.

However, one may look upon Dickinson’s protestations as almost an outpouring of pragmatic platitudes, which she repeats almost by rote, just as she seems to utter the rote precepts of Calvinism. Dickinson analyzes her own wording of another letter to Abiah on May 16, 1848, in which she says, “You know it is customary for the first page to be occupied with apologies” (L 23). Thus, though she speaks of proper subjects at proper times, perhaps her reasons are not altogether in line with her actions, and the acknowledgement of an *acceptable* pattern of thought may actually be the beginnings of *resistance* to “proper” thinking and resultant “proper” behavior. One may say so particularly because the bulk of Letter 9 then leaps from a detailed listing of Christmas presents to the “delightful weather for a week or two” that “seems as if Old Winter has forgotten himself”<sup>5</sup>; description of a German language class and music lessons; the comings and goings of Amherst residents; “a number of additions to the society of girls my age”; and an invitation to Abiah to “ride over to A. this beautiful sleighing.” After the prosaic opening of her letter and the disjointed mention of having just seen “a funeral procession go by of a negro baby,” Dickinson fills the pages with people and happenings

that pour from her pen as from her lips. Obviously, Dickinson's soul longs for something that she cannot yet define, though she already feels keenly its lack. For her, if her "dark" thoughts do not refer just to the color of the baby's skin, perhaps a deeper discussion of the significance of the baby's death would have been more "proper."

However, Dickinson is undergoing a conflict and is trying to sort out in her mind the language to resolve the clash between societal norms and personal sensibilities. Dickinson adds in the second letter, "and I must not depart from the beaten track for one of my own imagining" (L 23). Her wording shows that dutiful adherence to the beaten track is on her mind. Habegger notes that the attitude Mount Holyoke "chiefly encouraged was not detached critical judgment, but intense commitment: to religion, daily lessons, the rules" (192-93). The religion, the lessons, the rules emphasized the accepted thinking and accepted language. Johnson provides another paragraph that he says "is probably part of this letter" (67n), in which Dickinson suddenly expresses a profound misgiving: "I tremble when I think how soon the weeks and days of this term will all have been spent, and my fate will be sealed, perhaps. I have neglected the *one thing needful* when all were obtaining it, and I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter."<sup>6</sup> Of course, Abiah understands the "one thing needful," but Dickinson writes explicitly, "I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian." Dickinson's misgivings show that the gathering of a powerful voice was not a firm, progressive journey. Her doubts plague her at times and inject a plaintive note of a very young woman's struggle to find herself. She mentions here that "it is hard for me to give up the world," and when she speaks of a desire to be good, she says, "I fear I never can." Her

language implies that the accepted meaning of “the world” is *not* “good,” and though she expresses doubt and even apprehension, Dickinson turns away from the cant and toward her certainty.

Her language shows a distinct force as she writes a long and rambling letter to her “Dearest of all dear Uncles,” Joel Warren Norcross. Dickinson chides him for neglecting to send a promised letter, though he has found time to write to Edward Dickinson: “War Sir—‘my voice is for war!’ Would you like to try a duel—or is that too quiet to suit you—at any rate I shall kill you—and you may dispose of your affairs with that end in view” (L 29). Generously, she offers a palliative: “You can take Chloroform if you like—and I will put you beyond the reach of pain in a twinkling. The last duel I fought didn’t take but five minutes in all.”

Dickinson is developing a voice of authority though the only way she can express authority, because of her age and gender, is in endearing and playful wit. Dickinson controls the action, and her uncle in her imaginary scene has little power to resist his inevitable annihilation. “How do you sleep o nights—and is your appetite waning? These are infallible symptoms.” She will dispatch him because she chooses to and can accomplish the deed, an indication if only in jest of her assuming not only male autonomy, but also a dictatorship. This tone of power and self-confidence, though it begins to show itself slowly, does permeate Dickinson’s poetry. For example, at approximately age twenty-eight, Dickinson’s persona speaks of owning her garden, when a “rival Claim” of God “Disturbed these amenities.” Bristling at the audacity of the claim, she threatens legal action (Fr 101). As a member of a family of attorneys, she understands legal language and due process, both parts of the male sphere. The realm of

politics, denied to women as supposedly beyond their capabilities and sensibilities, also appeals to Dickinson. As mentioned earlier, she writes to Sue in mock indignation and frustration, “Why cant *I* be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?—dont I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law?” (L 94). Such circumstances most likely fueled Dickinson's push to sharpen her faculties and focus her intellect and language skills on her own purposes. Another poem that shows a growing sense of projecting herself beyond constraints is the previously mentioned “They shut me up in Prose—” (Fr 445). Physical confinement will not equal intellectual confinement as Dickinson speaks of the futility of lodging “a Bird / For Treason—in the Pound—.” The bird, she says, has only “to will / And easy as a Star / Abolish his Captivity— / And laugh—No more have I—.” The speaker can project herself into the cosmos and look down upon captivity as laughable, unable to constrain, absurd.

Still speaking with determination in the poem that begins “Should you but fail at—Sea,” Dickinson displays an increasing sense of personal power as she writes that she will “*harass God*” until He lets the subject of her poem enter Paradise (Fr 275), obviously expecting victory. Dickinson sends the poem in a letter to Samuel Bowles, who had been suffering from a long bout of illness (Habegger 426-27). Habegger warns against dismissing the poem “as pointlessly hypothetical and vaunting” because Dickinson here “lifted herself into power, boldness, creativity. If she could save Mr. Bowles, she would appropriate not only his range and command but God’s as well” (429). I see in this short poem, only thirty words, a steely determination and strength that Dickinson shows on behalf of a beloved friend whom she loves and wants to protect. Striving to reassure a friend, she puts herself into a position of strength that Habegger sees as “exercise,

*practice*” for the future. Habegger notes, “Dickinson belonged to that select group who find their way to supreme mastery by being as generous as they are daring and egotistical” (429). Dickinson’s promise to Bowles not only shows her heart and compassion, but also makes an outrageous statement of her sense of personal worth.

Dickinson required of herself the ability to formulate language that would portray an understanding of God and divinity based on a sense of self-worth that allowed her to approach deity as a young woman capable of intellectual leaps of tremendous scope, searching for meaning, not as a cringing supplicant who pleads for forgiveness of sins, particularly Original Sin. Dickinson approaches God on her own terms. Thus, the concept of sin is a question ignored as trivial when compared to her search for humankind’s relation with the universe. Calvinist emphasis upon sin simply does not signify. Whicher says that Dickinson’s attitude toward sin “was thoroughly unorthodox” because “it was repugnant to her to think of human nature as ‘sown in corruption’” (162). James McIntosh states his interpretation of Dickinson’s point of view even more forcefully: “If an omnipotent God is the author of pain and death, then to accuse humankind of sin is a stupendous impertinence. On other religious questions Dickinson may be glad to entertain inconsistencies; in her disdain for the doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity she hardly ever wavers” (47). McIntosh offers as support for his claim Dickinson’s poem that begins “Sown in dishonor”! [sic] (Fr 153). He refers to the second stanza that argues, “‘Sown in corruption’! / Not so fast! / Apostle is askew!” The power to challenge an apostle is a heady acquisition. Whicher also declares that Dickinson’s “confidence in the truth of revelation, though still formally affirmed, had become hollow at the core” (163). Dickinson refuses to accept accusations of guilt

handed down for centuries as a given; instead, she continues to search for the words to express her own revelation.

In her search for a valid spiritual base, Dickinson had ample opportunity to examine liberal religious movements in nineteenth-century New England, including Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. In the Connecticut River Valley, Unitarianism had been gaining foothold and credence since the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. According to Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards, Unitarianism as originally formulated was “dry and rationalistic in the extreme. It had little concept of religion as a deeply felt psychological experience, and attempted to approximate the spirit of scientific inquiry in its approach to the Bible as the word of God” (109). Besides denying the Trinity, as their name implies, Unitarians believe Jesus was a man, not divine, and Christianity “not a series of creeds or definitions, but a way of life” (109). Based not on doctrines, say Horton and Edwards, but on five “statements of faith,” the Unitarian religion holds to the principles of the Fatherhood of God, Brotherhood of Man, Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by character, and the Progress of mankind onward and upward forever (110). Major differences between Calvinism and Unitarianism, therefore, become clear. For instance, Horton and Edwards continue, Unitarians believe that since the Bible was written by men, it is not infallible; Jesus died as punishment for his teachings and not to redeem the sins of humanity; sin involves morality in human relationships, not offense against God; the Bible “is read for ethics rather than for theology”; and “the church is a purely human institution, and no one church has any monopoly on the means of salvation” (110). Bingham says of Unitarianism, “[B]y emphasizing toleration and salvation through righteousness alone it undermined that very

fear of God and of punishment for wrongdoing upon which orthodox Congregationalism depended.” Thus, she says, the Unitarian renounced “some of the foundation of his belief, such as the doctrine of everlasting damnation, which throughout New England still had a practical potency” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 37). According to Lawrence Buell, Unitarians drew

a closer analogy between religious and aesthetic experience than Orthodoxy would allow. The main impetus behind the Unitarian departure from Orthodoxy—the shift from a Calvinist view of human nature as depraved to an Arminian view of man as improvable—also helped to produce a climate of opinion more favorable to the arts . . . and to view the arts as a means of evangelism rather than as a threat to religion. (26)

In addition, says Buell, “As William R. Hutchison explains, though the ‘nominal center’ of the Unitarian movement was the rejection of the doctrine of the trinity, the ‘practical source’ was the objection to the Calvinist view of human nature” (26n). Dickinson’s attitude toward Original Sin, as McIntosh emphasizes in the passage quoted above, thus seems to parallel a Unitarian point of view as she questions the possibility that simply by virtue of being born, human beings are automatically damned from the outset.

Though Dickinson may have agreed with many of the precepts of Unitarianism, she did not completely adhere to its rational approach but held to the continued soul-searching of her Puritan background. She writes to Jane Humphrey,

The halt—the lame—and the blind—the old—the infirm—the  
bedridden—and superannuated—the ugly, and disagreeable—the perfectly

hateful to me—all *these* to see—and be seen by—an opportunity rare for cultivating meekness—and patience—and submission—and for turning my back to this very sinful, and wicked world. Somehow or other I incline to other things—and Satan covers them up with flowers, and I reach out to pick them. (L 30)

In another contemplative mood she writes to Abiah Root: “*God* is sitting here, looking into my very soul to see if I think right tho’ts. Yet I am not afraid, for I try to be right and good, and he knows every one of my struggles” (L 31). All of these efforts of self-examination help Dickinson to decide what her own mind tells her is right and true, and if her struggles result in choosing flowers over virtue, perhaps God is still pleased. God becomes a familiar, not a fearsome deity, particularly when Dickinson speaks of spring: “Spring is the Period / Express from God. / Among the other seasons / Himself abide, / But during March and April / None stir abroad / Without a cordial interview / With God” (Fr 948). This simple poem illustrates the basis of Dickinson’s developing strength, her quiet ability to change omnipotence into acquaintance in a mutual respect for and appreciation of the beauty of the natural world.

There is direct evidence that Dickinson appreciated some Transcendentalist thinking as well as Unitarian views. In addition to the volume of Emerson’s verses that Ben Newton gave her, Dickinson also thought enough of Emerson’s *Representative Men* to send a volume to Mary Channing Higginson for Christmas in 1876. Johnson notes that the book was personally inscribed: “To M C H from Emily Dickinson Christmas, 1876” (569n). In the accompanying letter, Dickinson writes, “I am bringing a little Granite Book you can lean upon” (L 481). In New England parlance, granite represented the

soundest of foundations, and Dickinson expresses clearly her faith in the strength of Emerson's writing. Jack L. Capps argues that Dickinson "was conscious of her fondness for Emerson's writings and of her frequent use of Emerson quotations in letters, yet she seems to have been unaware of the way in which the poetic materials that she gleaned from him reappeared in her own verse" (118). Dickinson's writing was even publicly mistaken for Emerson's. "Success is counted sweetest," one of the ten poems published in Dickinson's lifetime, appeared in *A Masque of Poets* on November 20, 1878; a review in Boston's *Literary World* declares, "If anything in the volume was contributed by Emerson, we should consider these lines upon 'Success' most probably his" (Leyda 2: 302-03).<sup>7</sup> This particular reception of the poem emphasizes the strength of Dickinson's voice and intellect; she was forty-seven years old when the poem was published in the volume of anonymous poetry.

In addition to Emerson, Dickinson refers sparingly to the Transcendentalist thinking of Thoreau and Theodore Parker in her letters, but she does so with apparent affection and appreciation. She writes to Higginson and mentions his gift to her of his *Short Studies of American Authors*, which includes a critical sketch of Thoreau; she calls the book "Magic" (L 622). Also, a letter to the Norcross cousins remarks, "The fire-bells are oftener now, almost, than the church-bells. Thoreau would wonder which did the most harm" (L 691). The comparison shows a sense not only of understanding Thoreau's philosophy, but also a calm matter-of-factness in discussing such a perceived controversy—Dickinson's sentence contains no exclamation point or further comment. Her affection for Thoreau shows in a letter she wrote to Sue asking, "Was the Sea cordial? Kiss him for Thoreau—" (L 320). Dickinson also mentions the philosophy of

Theodore Parker, which appears quite pleasing to her. After receiving a book as a Christmas present in 1859, Dickinson writes in reply to Mary Bowles, “I never read before what Mr Parker wrote. I heard that he was ‘poison.’ Then I like poison very well” (L 213). Johnson notes that the book was probably *The Two Christmas Celebrations* (359n). Habegger also says the book “is thought to have been” that publication, which speaks of the humanity, not the divinity, of Jesus (377). Shortly before his death, Edward Dickinson gave his daughter Octavius Brooks Frothingham’s *Theodore Parker*, which she offered to Higginson because she felt “unwilling to open” it (L 449). Though there is no mention of discussion of Parker’s views between father and daughter, the choice of title shows that her father may have been well aware of her opinions.

Dickinson mulls over the need to express her opinions in writing versus the need to behave as expected of her when she writes to Jane Humphrey: “The path of duty looks very ugly indeed—and the place where *I* want to go more amiable—a great deal” (L 30). Vinnie is away, Dickinson explains, and she is left to carry on with housework: “my two hands but *two*—not four, or five as they ought to be—and so *many* wants—and me so *very* handy—and my time of so *little* account—and my writing so *very* needless.” One can hear in the staccato listing the frustration of a young woman (aged nineteen here) who chafes at the evaluation of her worth and who believes that her time may be much better spent following her own agenda. Dickinson has abandoned entirely the pretense of rules of congenial letter writing: there are no apologies at all on the first page. Instead, she unburdens herself to a friendly ear. Recoiling from the usual advice given to young women when they feel rebellious, Dickinson ticks off on mental fingers, “mind the house—and the food—*sweep* if the spirits [are] low—nothing like exercise to

strengthen—and invigorate—and help away such foolishness—work makes one strong, and cheerful.” But Dickinson does not *want* to give up her “foolishness” or to work at what she considers drudgery only to gain strength to continue to drudge.

With such an attitude, Dickinson recognizes, she is beyond the pale and is a potential threat to more virtuous womankind. She could express such ideas to Humphrey, whom Agnieszka Salska describes as “one of Dickinson’s earliest friends” who “may be regarded as Emily’s most important literary correspondent before Susan Gilbert” (150, 151). After graduating from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary at the end of the same year that Dickinson attended, Humphrey spent a year as preceptress of Amherst Academy (Salska 151). Dickinson rejoices that Humphrey is happy and “out of the way of the tempter,” whom Dickinson identifies as herself. Then Dickinson states her purpose explicitly: “I didn't mean to make you wicked—but I was—and am—and shall be.” Another declaration follows: “I love to be surly—and muggy—and cross.” The expressing of her own point of view shows a person of strong character who continues to fuel her reluctance to conform to decorum. Since action follows thought, one can soon see the results of Dickinson’s battle with traditional behavior. Her indignant stance shows later in the poem beginning “Of Course—I prayed— / And did God Care? / He cared as much as on the Air / A Bird—had stamped her foot— / And cried ‘Give Me’—” (Fr 581).

At this point in her life, emotions seething and feeling trapped in her circumstances, Dickinson is open to new experience and thought. The rest of her letter to Humphrey continues her examination of spirituality: “If every prayer was answered, there would be nothing left to pray for—we *must* ‘suffer—and be strong.’ *Shall* we be

strong—wont [sic] suffering make weaker this human—.” She also reveals her voice, and her activities at home as the letter details a whirlwind of social engagements, including a “frolic” of music, charades, conversation, supper, and “walking around *indefinitely*,” from which she returned home at 2:00 A.M., all of which pleased her immensely. She also darts an aside at the Sewing Society, which has begun to meet again, although she says, “I don't attend. . . . I am already set down as one of those brands almost consumed, and my hardheartedness gets me many prayers.” The situation seems to trouble her not at all; she wastes no time in a discussion of yearning to be good. After her signature at the end of the letter, one sees a reference that may begin to account for the self-satisfaction of her tone: “I had a letter—and Ralph Emerson’s Poems—a beautiful copy—from Newton the other day. I should love to read you them both—they are very pleasant to me. I can write him in about three weeks—and I *shall*.”

In Dickinson’s extant correspondence, one must wait almost exactly four years to understand the import of her reference to Benjamin Newton and the importance of their relationship, which offered her an opportunity to discuss matters of spirituality with an adult in a personal setting where her voice could be heard. She writes to the Reverend Edward Everett Hale in a letter mentioned above after Newton’s death from tuberculosis; as a law clerk in the office of Edward Dickinson for two years, Newton was “much in the family” writes Dickinson (L 153). She explains her attachment to the young man: “I was old enough [eighteen] to admire the strength, and grace, of an intellect far surpassing my own, and it taught me many lessons, for which I thank it humbly, now that it is gone.” Dickinson separates the intellect from the man at first, distancing intimacy, and then she uses more personal language: “Mr Newton became to me a gentle, yet grave Preceptor,

teaching me what to read, what authors to admire” (L 153). Dickinson’s statement reveals both an appreciation for Newton’s intelligence and attention as well as openness to new ideas.

Many critics and biographers, among them Sewall, Wolff, and Habegger, name Newton as the person she refers to when she writes to Higginson, “My dying Tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet” (L 265). Newton may also be the “friend, who taught me Immortality—” to whom she refers in another letter to Higginson (L 261). Dickinson may have come to some significant conclusions about faith during her association with Newton and displayed considerable literary talent that made him encourage and support her. She writes to Higginson in 1876, “My earliest friend wrote me the week before he died ‘If I live, I will go to Amherst—if I die, I certainly will’” (L 457). Habegger argues that this is a “last and somewhat obscure reference” to Newton (221). Habegger says that Newton was “convinced of immortality—hers as poet, his as spirit” (222). He argues further,

Dickinson’s evangelical roots went too deep for her to transform herself into a Romantic of the Wordsworthian or Emersonian type. The early liberalism and serenity and strong masculine entitlement of these two poets were not hers for the taking. Newton gave her a vision of vocation and mastery, but the path would be long, uncertain, and painful, taking her through a wilderness her tutor could not have foreseen. (222)

I agree that Dickinson’s journey to acquire and employ the entitlement of her voice, considered a masculine trait in her culture, was long and arduous, and it resulted in poetry markedly different from theirs. In the collection of her poems, however, Johnson dates

only three poems before 1853, the year of Newton's death. Dickinson writes to Edward Everett Hale, "During his life in Worcester, he often wrote to me," and she says she replied to Newton's letters (L 153). Johnson notes, "None of the correspondence between Emily Dickinson and Newton has ever been found, and the assumption therefore is that important letters revealing the development of Emily Dickinson as a poet have long since been destroyed" (283n). Unfortunately for those who study Dickinson, this gap in her history remains enormous and disheartening.

Dickinson's new ideas led to increasingly thoughtful writing. The power of writing often evolves from a strong background in reading, and in Dickinson's case her already fairly diverse education was enhanced by her father's substantial personal library. As a graduate of Yale, Edward had a classical education, which was available to his children. According to Jack L. Capps,

There remain in the Dickinson Collection at Harvard a sufficient number of books identifiable as his to establish the quality of his taste. Emily grew up among the books his library provided. Some of the works bearing his signature are Pope's *Homer*, *Don Quixote*, *Paradise Lost*, twelve volumes of *The Spectator*, *The Works of Lord Byron* in four volumes, Cowper's *Poems*, Crabbe's *English Synonymes*, *Franklin's Essays and Letters*, and an eight-volume edition of Shakespeare. (12)

In addition, says Capps, Edward had presented to his daughter "volumes he considered appropriate for a parent to recommend, and inscribed them to his daughter. They included her Bible, which he gave her in 1844, Huntington's *Christian Believing and Living*, Sprague's *Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter*." Edward Dickinson's

gifts also included “Herndon and Gibbon’s *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon*, and Mrs. Badger’s magnificently illustrated folio volume of *Wild Flowers*” (14). Edward also provided a number of uninscribed volumes that Capps conjectures were meant “for family consumption”; Capps suggests that the family library also contained books that Edward “spoke of disparagingly but did not remove” from the home (14). Dickinson refers to these books in a letter to Austin on April 2, 1853: “[Father] gave me quite a trimming about ‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘Charles Dickens’ and these ‘modern Literati’ who he says are *nothing*, compared to past generations, who flourished when *he was a boy*” (L 113). Her father’s mixed message may reveal his own sense of societal change: he holds on to old ideas but provides examples of the new; he blusters in traditional terms but tacitly allows a moving away from tradition. Father and daughter seem to understand each other very well.

Dickinson speaks often in letters and poems of reading, and her writing expresses the sense of pleasure and power in words. She writes to Abiah that she has little time for reading at Mount Holyoke, but when she was last at home, she says, “I had a feast in the reading line, I can assure you. Two or three of them I will mention: *Evangeline*, *The Princess*, *The Maiden Aunt*, *The Epicurean*, and *The Twins and Heart*” (L 23). In her poetry, Dickinson marvels at the impact of the written word: “There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away / Nor any Coursers like a Page / Of prancing Poetry—” (Fr 1286). Not only do words transport, she says here in the poem, they do so with power and grace. Books also comfort: “Unto my Books—so good to turn— / Far ends of a tired Days . . . I thank these Kinsmen of the Shelf” (Fr 512). Books liberate as well: “He ate and drank the precious Words / His Spirit grew robust—” begins one poem, ending,

“And this Bequest of Wings / Was but a Book—What Liberty / A loosened spirit brings”  
(Fr 1593).

Whicher lists a number of early books and periodicals available to the Dickinson children, including “such historians as Hume, Macaulay, Motley, Bancroft, and Prescott; the works of American statesmen, Hamilton, Jefferson, Webster, John Adams; the British essayists, including Carlyle, Macaulay, Sydney Smith, Wilson, and Jeffrey” (207). In addition, the household regularly “took” newspapers such as the *Springfield Republican*, which Whicher declares, was “next in importance to the Bible in determining the mental climate of Emily Dickinson’s formative years” (170). Such was the reputation of the newspaper, says Whicher, that “[i]n many Connecticut Valley households it enjoyed an authority almost equal to that of the Scriptures” (170). This remarkable influence Whicher attributes to the talents of editor Samuel Bowles, who “was remorseless in his war on excess verbiage” (170). Under his leadership, the *Republican* was noted “for epigrammatic sentences that snapped like a whip and sometimes cut like a knife” (Whicher 171). Dickinson says of the *Republican*, “I read in it every night” in a letter to the Hollands (L 133). Josiah G. Holland was also a *Republican* editor. Journalism, at least good journalism, gets to the meat of the story and covers all particulars. Dickinson enjoyed Bowles’s style; she writes later to Sue, “You remember his swift way of wringing and flinging away a Theme, and others picking it up and gazing bewildered after him” (L 908). Dickinson became acquainted with Samuel and Mary Bowles when Bowles visited Sue and Austin at the newly built Evergreens in 1858 (L 189; Leyda 1: 354). Johnson refers to the relationship as “an association that became intimate for all members of the Dickinson family” (332). Dickinson had been writing poetry for several

years since the period in which Ben Newton apparently saw potential in her. Dickinson's appreciation of good writing, including that of Samuel Bowles, informed her own style as she developed her poetry to read as crisply as her mind could wish.

Though Dickinson begins to rely more completely upon her own interpretations as she finds her voice, doubting the truth of doctrine has not yet overcome a lingering longing for a state of grace. Six months later, Dickinson writes to the Hollands about her unconverted state: "The minister to-day, not our own minister preached about death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly—and somehow the sermon scared me" (L 175). That sense of fear, coupled with Austin in her thoughts, as well as the previous two letters that show she wants to share pleasant spiritual experiences with Austin, together portray an air of yearning not at all like her earlier scoffing. The letter continues, "[F]ather and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole was true, and I would not for worlds have them know that it troubled me, but I longed to come to you, and tell you all about it, and learn how to be better." Dickinson relied on the Hollands in matters of faith, and on that particular Sunday, disturbed by the "solemn" sermon, she reveals how she avoids discussion of such topics at home when Austin is not there.

Dickinson's relationship with Elizabeth Holland fulfilled a need for someone with whom she could express herself freely and without censure. In addition to being a "close, sympathetic female [friend]," says Stephanie A. Tingley, Mrs. Holland was also someone with whom Dickinson could "[share] many of her poetic aspirations and inspirations" (183). With Mrs. Holland, says Tingley, Dickinson "creates a self-confident, authoritative persona, a poet who, although seemingly reconciled to relative obscurity

during her lifetime, feels free to articulate her fervent hopes for immortality and posthumous fame” (184). The two women shared a similar affliction, serious eye problems, and Tingley argues that their unfortunate circumstance “provides Dickinson with the impetus she needs to explore her poetics of deprivation, her theory that suffering inspires poetic expression,” as she “tells Elizabeth over and over” (L 369, L 265). Referring to the poem beginning: “Before I got my eye put out,” Tingley says that Dickinson uses the loss of sight as a metaphor for the “general vulnerability” and “limitations” experienced “by all women in mid-Victorian culture” (Fr 336). In addition, she suggests that the “physical disability both [Dickinson] and Elizabeth Holland endure is symptomatic of a far-reaching cultural and spiritual malaise” (189). Sharing both the disability and the malaise bonds the two women and enables Dickinson to reach out to Holland as a recipient of poems that assay exploration of spirituality and find an eager listener.

The single poem that both Johnson and Franklin date in 1853 stands as an example of the inner strength that Dickinson has begun to develop. “On this wondrous sea / Sailing silently / Ho! Pilot, ho!” she begins (Fr 3). The persona of the poem addresses a Pilot, a guide who steers the craft expertly among shoals to mooring, who sails silent on the “wondrous sea.” After asking if the Pilot is familiar with “the shore / Where no breakers roar—,” the persona declares that she [?] will then become the guide: “Thither I pilot *thee*—Land Ho! Eternity! / Ashore at last!” Dickinson encloses this poem in a letter to Sue, who was visiting in Manchester, New Hampshire (L 105). The speaker of the poem is confident that she knows how to follow the charts to the destination and expects to arrive safely.

Few letters survive from 1855 and 1856, and none can be definitely dated in 1857 (Johnson, *Letters* 314): in 1858, after the move back to the Homestead and her mother's lingering illness, Dickinson has begun a gradual withdrawal from society. Dickinson first mentions her mother's poor health in 1856; Johnson says it "lasted for several years" (L 182; 324n). As a result of Dickinson's withdrawal, writing to friends becomes more and more her passion. W. Clark Gilpin suggests, "This simultaneity of separation and presence became the principal preoccupation of her distinctive discipline of solitude: the letter." Dickinson's letters, says Gilpin, were "composed precisely to establish a connection, a connection that employed memory to compensate for loss or separation and, thereby, to transform solitude" (36). In her letters, Dickinson often adopts breezy conversational language to describe somewhat solemn circumstances. In 1858, shortly before her twenty-eighth birthday, she writes to Samuel Bowles, "God is not so wary as we, else he would give us no friends, lest we forget him! The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superseded I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally" (L 193). In addition, in a letter to Sue, Dickinson writes, "*You* may tell, when 'the seal' is opened; *Mat* may tell when they 'fall on their faces'—but I shall be lighting the lamps then in my new house—and I cannot come" (L 194). Johnson explains, "The allusion . . . is to Revelation 7.11: 'And all the angels . . . fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God'" (*Letters* 341n). Dickinson, having constructed a new house of faith, will be too busy providing her own light to fall on her face in someone else's Heaven to worship someone else's God.

Also in 1858, Dickinson began to spend time in private, collecting her poems in an organized manner that evidenced their significance to her. According to Franklin,

Dickinson adopted a fashion in the form of folded leaves called “fascicles.”<sup>8</sup> Lavinia Dickinson found her sister’s bound poems after Dickinson’s death. Franklin says of the find, “The most prominent part of the manuscripts that Lavinia Dickinson found in May 1886 was the fascicles, her sister’s own form of bookmaking: selected poems copied in ink onto sheets of letter paper that she bound with string. ‘I found, (the week after her death),’ Lavinia wrote to a friend five years later, ‘a box (locked) containing 7 hundred wonderful poems, carefully copied’” (7). Habegger says that Dickinson “assembled her manuscript books or fascicles with the same neat care as she had her herbarium a dozen years earlier” (353). One difference, he speculates, was that the fascicles were meant to be completely private, unlike the herbarium, which was “designed to exhibit as well as preserve.” However, “not having one explicit statement as to what the massive project meant to her,” says Habegger, “we guess” (353). Clearly, Dickinson’s clean copies of her work were vitally important to her and may not have been discussed in the family before her death. Lavinia’s own statement says that she was unaware of her sister’s writing. Habegger argues, “Although Dickinson sent hundreds of poems to friends, she revealed to no one, not Sue, not even Vinnie, the existence of these fascicles, which remained strictly behind the ‘vail’” (353). Content, of course, comes to mind immediately as a possible reason for such secrecy since both Sue and Vinnie were more orthodox thinkers, but we have not enough proof to say for sure.

Particularly because Dickinson was the only person in her household who was not a church member, however, perhaps she would not like to have had “Going to Heaven!” perused and discussed while she was at hand (Fr 128). The poem begins innocently enough:

Going to Heaven!  
I don't know when—  
Pray do not ask me how!  
Indeed I'm too astonished  
To think of answering you!

However, the last stanza contains an ambivalence of thinking that distances what the speaker says she believes from a poignant appreciation of what others *definitely* believe:

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.

One might expect that in this context *God* would be described as “mighty,” but Dickinson reserves the adjective for the “Autumn afternoon.”

When Dickinson is in her late twenties, her letters to friends also begin tentatively to reveal her approach to writing poems. “It’s a great thing to be ‘great,’ Loo,” she writes in January 1859 to her cousin Louise Norcross, “and you and I might tug for a life, and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and we all can listen. What if we learn ourselves, some day!” (L 199). In this bit of foreshadowing of the eventual path of her life, Dickinson

may be allowing herself to hint at the talent she knows is within her—at this time, she has already written about fifty poems, is already learning to “sing.”

Frustrated by the limitations she has largely imposed upon herself—aching to be a poet, but trapped in a daily existence a house in which “Father has decided it is all pretty much *real life*”—Dickinson at times yearns for full expression of the voice that she is developing: “To learn the Transport by the Pain— / As Blind Men learn the sun!” (Fr 178). Her distress continues: “To die of thirst—suspecting / That Brooks in Meadows run!” As she writes and learns, she can feel a world of fulfillment coming closer, not the once-contemplated satisfaction of surrendering to Christ, but for her the more gratifying life of a poet. “To stay the homesick—homesick feet / Upon a foreign shore—”; this shore could represent a common literary convention or—perhaps not an obvious reading—this shore could be the house in which she stands alone as a protester against beliefs of her mother and Lavinia with whom she has constant contact. “Haunted by native lands, the while— / And blue—beloved air!” The air Dickinson aches to breathe is the air of the realm of poetry.

This is the Sovereign Anguish!

This—the signal woe!

These are the patient ‘Laureates’

Whose voices—trained—below—

Ascend in ceaseless Carol—

Inaudible, indeed

To us—the duller scholars

## Of the Mysterious Bard!

Here Dickinson seems to have opened herself to the possibility of joining the glorious company of poets as a means of expressing her spirituality; however, she dwells in a circle of minds caught in a net of religious thinking that she has long ago dismissed, so she cannot speak openly of her discoveries. Beth Maclay Doriani says the speaker of the poem “sees the brightness of the blissful vision after enduring pain,” which in a way still binds her to her past because, says Doriani, “In Edwards’s tradition, power was gained through pain and suffering; as Dickinson puts it, ‘Power is only Pain—’ (#252, line 10)” (173). The next two lines read, “Stranded, thro’ Discipline, / Till Weights—will hang—.” John Cody interprets the poem thus: “as poetry gives rise to pleasure so pain gives rise to poetry”; he argues that Dickinson’s sense of power came from the pain associated with loss “rooted in her unhappy relationship with her mother” that is “woven into strands” through the quality of discipline derived from her father (497). Furthermore, Doriani says of Dickinson, “For her, as a woman prophet in a culture reluctant to admit such speakers, the statement is particularly incisive: she knows firsthand the pain of nonrecognition” (173). I see a combination of these two different approaches because at the time of writing this poem, Dickinson was still relatively young, about thirty years old. Wherever Dickinson’s pain came from, she used it in a disciplined fashion to write.

Franklin numbers 183 poems and Johnson records more than two hundred letters that Dickinson wrote before the age of thirty, all of which demonstrate her growing maturity and developing relationships in clear and powerful language (1: 216; 369). Sue, in particular, was close to Dickinson, as is evident in the poem that begins “One Sister have I in our house, / And one, a hedge away. / There’s only one recorded, / But both

belong to me” (Fr 5). Dickinson also writes passionate letters to Sue, for instance, this early one from April 1852:

Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to you, and to bring you back to me, long enough to snatch one kiss, and whisper Good bye, again. I have thought of it all day, Susie, and I fear of but little else, and when I was gone to meeting it filled my mind so full, I could not find a *chink* to put the worthy pastor; when he said “Our Heavenly Father,” I said “Oh Darling Sue”; when he read the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm, I kept saying your precious letter all over to myself, and Susie, when they sang—it would have made you laugh to hear one little voice, piping to the departed. I made up words and kept singing how I loved you, and you had gone, while all the rest of the choir were singing Hallelujahs. (L 88)

The breathless quality of this correspondence cannot disguise its near blasphemy and shows not only Dickinson’s feelings for Sue but also her unabashed dismissal of religious propriety. Again, as in her letters to Abiah, Dickinson speaks quite openly here of her diminishing piety.

In addition, Dickinson goes so far in a poem to departing Summer “The Gentian weaves her fringes—” as to end with the benediction “In the name of the Bee— / And of the Butterfly— / And of the Breeze—Amen!” (Fr 21-23). Perhaps reverence for nature’s creatures and Sue supersedes scripture. Dickinson may indulge here in a bit of overstatement, but the question remains.

Dickinson continues to strengthen her writing as she captures the power of passion in a number of intense poems. The feelings of the speaker pour out: “Heart! We

will forget him! / You and I—tonight! / You may forget the warmth he gave— / I will forget the light!” (Fr 64). The intensity of attachment seems to need two entities who combine to allay the anxiety, as the speaker goes on: “When you have done, pray tell me / That I may straight begin! / Haste! lest while you’re lagging / I remember him!”

Emotion also surfaces poignantly in Dickinson’s poem about the price of ecstasy: “For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy” (Fr 109). Such an economy of words Dickinson uses to produce a magnitude of meaning. Her pain finds voice again in “A *Wounded Deer*—leaps highest— / I’ve heard the Hunter tell— / ’Tis but the Ecstasy of *death*— / And then the Brake is still” (Fr 181). Wolff says that Dickinson refers here to “that Elizabethan commonplace, the trope of Hunter and Deer for courtship” and Shakespeare’s use of “the Elizabethan pun for sexual climax—‘death’” (205). Wolff notes further that death as a result of feminine sexuality was too often a realistic end in nineteenth-century Amherst for both mother and baby, as Dickinson knew well (205). Writing poems about intense physical and emotional involvement enables Dickinson’s self-expression to continue to evolve.

As Dickinson crafts her poems, her persona may face questions similar to the ones she faces in the disposition of her personal life, sometimes couched in the language of religious beliefs. At approximately age twenty-nine, her agitation over not knowing concrete answers to her uncertainties shows in this poem:

I shall know why—when Time is over—  
And I have ceased to wonder why—  
Christ will explain each separate anguish  
In the fair schoolroom of the sky—

He will tell me what 'Peter' promised—  
And I—for wonder at his woe—  
I shall forget the drop of Anguish  
That scalds me now—that scalds me now! (Fr 215)

Here Dickinson's persona relates her own pain to that of Jesus, who has been betrayed. Though she does not reveal the circumstances, she leans with confidence on the idea that she still has something to learn from Christ in the "schoolroom." The poem ends with a phrase of stunning force that anchors the poet in the speaker's moment, her moment of unexplained "anguish," and still connects her to mortality and immortality. Peter's unkept promise, and the pain it caused Jesus, opens her heart to his pain and reminds the reader of Dickinson's early faith—a fine example of the complexity of Dickinson's art and its sometimes unresolved issues. The original manuscript of the poem in R. W. Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* shows handwriting that lightly applies pen to paper at the beginning as the poet muses. Emotion seems to intensify, however, and the last line of the manuscript, "Scalds me now!" possibly reveals the speaker's passion as the pen is applied with force that leaves a darker line, emphasizing her pain (163). Franklin dates the poem about 1860 (*Manuscript Books* 150). However, Franklin does not comment on Dickinson's handwriting in that poem.

Dickinson's talent for writing and her determination to express that talent seem to have intensified in her late twenties. Franklin notes that Dickinson devised her "own form of bookmaking: selected poems copied in ink onto sheets of letter paper that she bound with string" that Mabel Todd called fascicles; these fascicles did not bear

Dickinson's name, nor were they labeled, numbered, or titled, says Franklin (*Poems* 7). In addition, he notes, "There may have been a major stocktaking in 1858, a sifting and winnowing of her entire corpus" that resulted in "her first fascicle, a group of four sheets with twenty-seven poems" (*Poems* 11, 10). Franklin argues further that the fascicles "may have served privately as publication, a personal enactment of the public act than, for reasons unexplained, she denied herself" (*Manuscript Books* ix). Those manuscript fascicles, together with dozens of scraps and bits of paper covered with her writing, Dickinson wrote as if following Emerson's edict: "Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, 'It is in me, and shall out'" (3:1-42). Dickinson writes of religious fervor and doubt, personal triumphs and despairs, simple days of spring, and complex nights of terror as she depends upon the growing power of her poetry to support the growing power of her intellect.

### Home as Choice

To the first two sections of this chapter, the rebellion against traditional Calvinism and the development of a strong voice that begins to appear in Dickinson's poetry and letters, I add here the last part: the influence of home that completes my idea of an influential triangle that informed Dickinson's growth of personal power. The portion of her life discussed here, age fourteen to approximately the age of twenty-nine, holds many clues with which I identify Dickinson's strategies in arranging her home life to suit her purpose. In this time period, ending approximately 1860, Dickinson concentrated upon

her family, her garden, her friends, and her writing. She also apparently had an intense love and a “terror,” both of which remain unnamed and uncertain today but which helped to shape her essence. Though, too, many critics have suggested that during Dickinson’s childhood her mother was distant and her father excessively severe, which I shall address in this section, Dickinson did feel free to explore her own feelings and the differences between the outward teachings that she was expected to absorb and obey and the inner revelations that her intellect convinced her were true. Within the sphere of home, she began to write poetry of depth and passion, and no examination of Dickinson’s life would be complete without determining how she adapted to and used the elements of her home to support her choice to remain there for life. Dickinson’s real or perceived relationships with her immediate family members, attachment to physical space, activities with friends within the community and at school, and exposure to the many visitors who frequented the Dickinson household significantly formed her image of home.

### *Parents*

Basic, of course, to home and its influence on Dickinson is her relationship with her parents. Both her mother and father came from families prominent in their communities, as discussed in Chapter Two. Generations of New England stock had developed Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson into persons who valued thrift, hard work, and reverence for education and the church. Though the Dickinsons lived in town, they had ample room for a garden and simple livestock to provide food for the family, which was prepared at home. Even with the eventual help of a maid and day laborers, all

the children had chores to do. Dickinson spent her leisure hours, however, in a vocation of her own choosing.

From the extant records, Dickinson often indicates a strained relationship with her mother. Higginson writes to his wife after a visit to Dickinson in August 1870 that Dickinson had remarked, "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled" (L 342b). This remark seems pointed since Dickinson's mother was with her daughter on an almost continual basis. However, Habegger warns that Dickinson's "later retrospects were apt to be pungent, extreme, and free of context, not so much reporting as transforming the original facts" (76). Though Dickinson's remark should not be ignored, says Habegger, the "shocking claims" that occasionally erupt must not obscure the fundamental facts of "the parents' devotion to their firstborn daughter and that daughter's attachment, adhesion, to them" (76). Wolff conjectures that Mrs. Dickinson may have been a "kindly and solicitous woman without, however, the capacity to comprehend the wants of those in her house," and a mother "who contrived, nonetheless, to frustrate her daughter and make her *feel* as if she 'never had a mother'" (58). Wolff says that Mrs. Dickinson also suffered from "tearful withdrawals and obscure maladies" that isolated her from her children, which resulted in an "abiding sense of emotional separation" (64). Thus, though there was love between mother and daughter, it was love restricted by reserve that made Mrs. Dickinson unable to share a physically affectionate or emotionally supportive daily interaction with her children. That reserve required Dickinson to develop and rely upon her own strengths and perceptions.

Though Mrs. Dickinson may not have been a physically demonstrative parent, as indicated by her daughter's cold remark to Higginson, she still held a place in her daughter's heart. As a teenager, Dickinson exhibits feelings for the mother/daughter relationship: upon the death of a friend's mother, Dickinson writes, "[S]he [Helen Humphrey] misses her mother very much. I pity her very much[;] she must be so lonely without her mother" (L 6). On another occasion, Dickinson remarks about a friend who has married, "I think she must be missed much in Southwick, & her mother and sisters must be very lonely without her" (L 8). A later letter shows a lighthearted reference to her mother, as Dickinson writes to Austin from South Hadley: "Tell mother, that she was very thoughtful to inquire in regard to the welfare of my shoes. Emily [Norcross, her cousin and roommate] has a shoe brush & plenty of blacking, & I brush my shoes to my heart's content" (L 16). Dickinson sounds quite comfortable in her relationship with her mother, even though the exchange concerns only shoes, not an obvious message of love. Vivian Pollak gives a reason for Mrs. Dickinson's reticence: "[H]ers was not a strongly articulated personality, and she never achieved a clearly defined identity" (*A Poet's Parents* 217). "My mother does not care for thought," Dickinson explains to Higginson (L 261), probably indicating an uncomfortable situation for Dickinson since she does not care for housework, and the two women thus had little in common.

Mrs. Dickinson was, however, known for her culinary skills and housekeeping, and Dickinson recognized that her mother exercised these talents to express inaudibly her love for her family. Dickinson mentions food preparation often in letters to Austin. On July 27, 1851, she writes to her brother, "Mother makes nicer pies with reference to your coming" (L 49); on November 14, 1853, she writes again to Austin, "Mother got a great

dinner yesterday, thinking in her kind heart that you would be so hungry after your *long ride*, and the table was set for you. . . . And we had new custard pie, too, which is a rarity in days when hens don't lay, but mother knew you loved it" (L 141). Dickinson refers to special treats in Austin's honor, but the whole family benefits from her mother's efforts. In a family of decidedly articulate individuals, Mrs. Dickinson apparently takes little part in discussion, devoting herself to housework, cooking, and all the other mundane affairs that allow her witty and vivacious family to live comfortably and carry on with the driving forces of their lives. In Dickinson's case, avoiding her mother's company during such times sometimes became her goal; she writes to Sue, "They are cleaning house today, Susie, and I've made a flying retreat to my own little chamber, where with affection, and you, I will spend this my precious hour" (L 93). This statement contradicts Bingham's assertion, "Her duties could not be slighted. She must not be lured away from the task at hand by pencil and paper" (*Emily Dickinson's Home* 119). Dickinson does not speak of any kind of guilt or any expectation of her participation in the work of the moment, and the "flying retreat" seems to be a predictable happening when Mrs. Dickinson is well enough to attend to domestic duties.

While Dickinson does not directly give her mother credit, she and her mother did share a love of growing flowers and an appreciation of excellent fruit; Dickinson's appreciation, however, did not necessarily extend to full participation in processing the produce of their horticulture. Sewall asserts, "The herbarium that Emily kept as a girl must have owed something to the encouragement and guidance of her mother, who loved flowers and kept a fine garden" (86). However, Dickinson writes to Austin on July 27, 1851, that their "amazing" garden is under the care of Old Amos, who "weeds and hoes

and has an oversight of all thoughtless vegetables” (L 49). Mrs. Dickinson may thus have limited herself to the production of a cutting garden and plants to beautify the house both inside and out. Bingham adds a comment about the Dickinson orchard: “Mrs. Dickinson was on the fruit committee of the Cattle Show and her figs were mentioned more than once in the local newspaper” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 114). The household orchard also produced beautiful and bountiful crops, as Dickinson describes to Austin, praising the large and lovely peaches, “ripe round grapes for kings,” and “very fine” apples (L 53). But Dickinson again removes herself from the necessity of dealing with a domestic chore that her mother takes care of: “I am all alone, Austin,” she writes, explaining that she “*will*” answer his letter. She then explains that today’s reply is possible because “Father has gone to New York, Vinnie to Northhampton, and mother is cutting out apples in the kitchen” (L 116). Why is Dickinson not cutting apples with her mother? Growing flowers for esthetic enjoyment may fulfill a need that the drudgery of processing apples does not. Writing becomes more important than helping her mother, and the phrase “all alone” describes both women as Dickinson’s mother slices away in the kitchen.

Even if Dickinson may have at times avoided her mother’s company, there is evidence of her expressing affection for her mother. While Dickinson is away at school at Mount Holyoke, her parents pay her an unexpected visit, which she describes in a letter to Abiah:

I was at my window, when I happened to look towards the hotel & saw  
Father & Mother, walking over here as dignified as you please. I need not  
tell you that I danced & clapped my hands, & flew to meet them for you

can imagine how I felt. I will only ask do you love your parents? . . . I could not bear to have them go, but go they must & so I submitted in sadness. Only to think Abiah, that in 2 ½ weeks I shall be at my *own dear home* again. (L 18)

Dickinson speaks of both her parents here with equal love and totally without reserve. She also relates to Austin an event in March 1852 when a young male visitor's calling on Emily visibly annoys Edward Dickinson. His daughter dismisses the young man and retreats "to the kitchen—where I find mother and Vinnie, making most desperate efforts to control themselves, but with little success" (L 79). Thus, Mrs. Dickinson was also capable of moments of mirth, and her daughter appreciated them. The combination of affection, occasional brief periods of fun, but a great deal of reserve and withdrawal add up to a mother who is consistently a presence in Dickinson's life, but not an overly intrusive one. In the daily company of her mother, Dickinson finds a role model of domesticity who supports the various civic activities of her husband, cares for her home and children, and attends church regularly, a role model that Dickinson eventually refuses to follow.

Edward Dickinson and his daughter shared a special relationship that also affected her deeply. Dickinson speaks often of him with respect and awe. In the letter of October 21, 1847, to Austin, she writes, "Tell father I thank him for his letter & will try to follow its precepts" (L 16). Following Father's teachings and taking care of his wants occupied Dickinson from a very early age because he expected such attention from his daughter and all his family. Bingham says, "No one openly opposed his decisions, least of all his family. He knew what was right and what was wrong and that was the end of it." The

family situation was not just one-sided, however. Bingham goes on to explain, “But if he was indispensable to his family, they were his own reason for being” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 3). Concerned for Dickinson’s financial needs when she is away at school, Edward apparently offers cash because Dickinson sends this message by way of a letter to Austin: “Tell Father, I am obliged to him much, for his offers of ‘picauniary’ assistance, but do not need any” (L 17). On Dickinson’s visit home during Thanksgiving vacation in 1846, the family returns after 10:00 P.M. from an evening of social activities, and Edward asks for a traditional nineteenth-century performance in well-to-do households: “Father wishing to hear the Piano, I like an obedient daughter, played & sang a few tunes, much to his apparent gratification” (L 20). Dickinson’s obedience and concern for her father also show later in a letter to Mary Haven in which Dickinson says, “I do not go out at all, lest father will come and miss me, or miss some little act, which I might forget, should I run away” (L 191). Edward Dickinson himself, however, was very often “away,” and his absences affected Dickinson quite profoundly. As discussed in Chapter 2, Edward’s election to political office often called for his presence in Boston or Washington, and his law practice and civic affairs took much of his time so that even when he was at home, he was often unavailable to his family, according to his daughter. In the letter to Higginson that describes her mother, Dickinson also speaks of her father, who is “too busy with his Briefs—to notice what we do” (L 261). Though he is often out of sight, however, Edward does care about his family: Dickinson explains in the same letter, “He buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them—because he fears they joggle the Mind.” That statement shows an ambivalent attitude toward his daughter’s

intellect but one that nevertheless provides Dickinson with concrete evidence of her father's interest.

Dickinson's relationship with her father could at times be uneasy or even volatile. One letter from Vinnie to Austin on March 30, 1852, describes a confrontation in which Dickinson is "screaming to the top of her voice" at her father's actions, a situation that decidedly displays Dickinson's ability to express her opinion even if it differs from Edward's. Vinnie writes, "Oh! dear! Father is killing the horse. I wish you'd come quick if you want to see him alive. He is whipping him because he did'nt look quite 'umble' enough this morning. Oh! Austin, it makes me so angry to see that noble creature so abused. Emilie is screaming to the top of her voice. She's so vexed about it" (qtd. in Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home* 235). Apparently "Emilie" does not fear any repercussions from her own lack of 'umble' behavior, though Vinnie does not make clear whether or not her father hears the screaming. Dickinson shows great empathy for her father's feelings when she describes to Austin their father's trip to Washington in June 1852. She writes, "[H]e says he meets a great many old friends and acquaintances, and forms a great many new ones—he writes in very fine spirits, and says he enjoys himself very much. I think it will do him the very most good of anything in the world, and I do feel happy to have father at last, among men who sympathize with him, and know what he really is" (L 95). But uneasiness in her relationship with her father crops up again about a year later, when she writes to her brother, "I dont [sic] love to read your letters all out loud to father—it would be like opening the kitchen door when we get home from meeting Sunday, and are sitting down by the stove saying just what we're a mind to, and having father hear. I dont know why it is, but it gives me a dreadful feeling" (L 116).

Privacy of thought and communication has obviously become important to her, as she demonstrates more and more clearly in her letters, poems, and actions.

Though they clashed at times, father and daughter shared a characteristic determination to pursue their passions, and Dickinson appreciated her father's devotion to his projects, just as she set about with determination to complete her own. As an example of firmness of purpose, Edward Dickinson, in addition to devoting his life to education and other civic duties, helped to form a corporation and fought diligently to raise money to secure railway service through the town; the venture finally succeeded in February 1852 (Leyda 1: 232).<sup>9</sup> Dickinson responded to her father's accomplishment with a letter to her brother Austin: "Since we have written you, the grand Rail Road decision is made, and there is great rejoicing throughout this town and the neighboring; that is Sunderland, Montague, and Belchertown. . . . Father is realy [sic] *sober* from excessive satisfaction, and bears his honors with a most becoming air" (L 72). Her poem "I like to see it lap the Miles—" describes her adaptation of the mechanical device to fit a more comfortable bucolic framework that transforms the engine into a horse that finally stops "docile and omnipotent / At its own stable door—" (Fr 383). Habegger says, "The poem nicely represents the huge destabilizing forces of the industrial revolution, not omitting the shanties and blasted bedrock, yet the conclusion, with its safe return home, has a naïve and reassuring pastoralism" (292). Here, the projects of both father and daughter blend: Edward has his railroad, and his daughter neatly uses the moment to compose a poem. By likening the new and powerful innovation to an obedient steed, Dickinson domesticates the engine and metaphorically closes the barn door on it, thus exerting her own power and maintaining control. Dickinson's loyalty to her father shows strongly

when she says, “Such old fellows as Col’ Smith *and his wife*, fold their arms complacently, and say, ‘well, I declare, we have got it after all’—*got it*, you good for nothings! and so we *have*, in spite of sneers and pities, and insults from all around; and we will *keep* it too, in spite of earth and heaven” (L 72).

Dickinson reacted in an unusual way also to the actual event when the railway cars made their way through Amherst in June 1853; though she distances herself physically from the celebration attendant to the coming of the railroad, Dickinson makes sure she sees her father’s part in the commemoration and describes the day to her brother. No matter the reason for her not joining the crowd, she would not deny her father her attention. She writes again to Austin, “Father was as usual, Chief Marshal of the day, and went marching around the town with New London at his heels like some old Roman General, upon a Triumph Day. . . . Carriages flew like sparks, hither, and thither and yon, and they all said t’was [sic] fine.” Dickinson herself did not take part in the festivities: “I spose it was—I sat in Prof Tyler’s woods and saw the train move off, and then ran home again for fear somebody would see me, or ask me how I did” (L 127). Though she feels uneasy and uncomfortable, she still observes and participates vicariously in her father’s triumph. Habegger sees a parallel dichotomy between Dickinson’s pleasure in her father’s determination to effect rail transportation to Amherst and her dependence on the home he provides for her (292). Because she documents her father’s appearance in such exalted phrases, I see a bit of hyperbole, of course; but underneath the exaggeration, Dickinson displays an appreciation of the town’s acknowledgement of her father’s status, which automatically enhances her own. At the time, she was twenty-two years old and

was already exhibiting signs of withdrawing from company, calmly but with determination.

Mother and father together, emotionally inaccessible, perhaps, but nevertheless providing a quiet, supportive bond, establish a home for Dickinson that allows her to formulate an intellectual climate of her own. Dickinson has no worries about food or shelter; she has company when she wishes; she carries on a voluminous correspondence with friends and family; she can find time and privacy for herself often enough that she assembles a collection of poems that her family may know very little about since there is no evidence of any discussion of the topic between Dickinson and her parents. Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, in short, supply an environment that contributes substantially to the development of Emily Dickinson's sense of entitlement.

#### *Siblings: Austin and Lavinia*

The closeness among the Dickinson siblings provides Dickinson with perhaps her most stable feeling of home and one that enables her to expand her personal power. Dickinson, her older brother Austin, and her younger sister Lavinia supported each other throughout their formative years, and the contact among them, particularly between Austin and Emily, is documented in the many letters extant. Mother and father may be distant, even though present, but brother and sister can be counted on, their similarities and differences blending into a supportive whole, at least in the years following immediately after their school days, before Austin married.

Dickinson's only brother, William Austin Dickinson, was one of her dearest companions, whom she looked to for companionship and a shared intellectual relationship. According to Sewall, Austin was the person most like Dickinson "in temperament, taste, sense of self and of the world" (91). Indeed, they had such a bond that, Sewall says, "It was Austin and Emily against the world, a relationship of infinite importance to both" (91). Dickinson applied herself to her brother's needs with a sense of earnest care that shows in scores of letters to him. Dickinson could also speak and write to Austin with an abandonment that acknowledged his understanding, as is demonstrated in Dickinson's mention of their private conversations in the kitchen after church. There was no need for restraint in either their conversation or their correspondence, and that freedom fostered her growth. Dickinson's style sometimes left her brother puzzled, however. She writes to him in June 1851,

I feel quite like retiring, in the presence of one so grand, and casting my small lot among small birds, and fishes—you say you don't comprehend me, you want a simpler style. Gratitude indeed for all my fine philosophy! I strove to be exalted thinking I might reach you and while I pant and struggle and climb the nearest cloud, you walk out very leisurely in your slippers from Empyrean, and without the *slightest* notice request me to get down! (L 45)

Unlike her interaction with her father, Dickinson writes openly of her closeness to her brother. After Austin has stopped at Mount Holyoke with a package of food from home, Dickinson writes to him, "I watched you until you were out of sight Saturday evening . . . I cant [sic] tell you now how much good your visit did me. . . . I want to know when you

are coming to see me again, for I wish to see you as much as I did before” (L 16).

Dickinson admonishes him to adhere to their plans for their next visit: “I am anticipating much in seeing you on this week Saturday & you had better not disappoint me!! for if you do, I will harness the ‘furies’ & pursue you with a ‘whip of scorpions’” (L 17). She evidently has no qualms about voicing her feelings in strong and humorous language.

Powerful language often figures prominently in Dickinson’s correspondence with her brother. For instance, in a letter Dickinson sent to Austin from South Hadley, mentioned previously in this chapter, she examines her “unsubdued will” in a scathing commentary on life at Mount Holyoke. Habegger comments, “With Austin, she feels free to *sound* ungodly, to ‘savor of’ rebellion and an unsubdued will” (206). On the other hand, Dickinson often writes to her brother of religious matters in traditional language, as when she describes Professor Park’s sermon referred to earlier (L 142). The combination of adhering to tradition and rebelling against it fed Dickinson’s emerging sense of self. She writes to Austin, “I will write while they’ve gone to meeting, lest they stop me, when they get home. I stayed to Communion this morning, and by that way, bought the privilege of not going this afternoon, and having a talk with you, meanwhile” (L 80). Her preference to avoid church and write to Austin instead seems quite clear. Dickinson speaks openly to her brother about spirituality but only hints to him of her early writing of poetry. She acknowledges Austin’s literary efforts and then mentions her own in a letter on March 27, 1853: “Now Brother Pegasus, I’ll tell you what it is—I’ve been in the habit *myself* of writing some few things, and it rather appears to me that you’re getting away my patent, so you’d better be somewhat careful, or I’ll call the police!” (L 110).

Though she does not confide in Austin further about her growing voice in poetry, Dickinson makes a pertinent comment to Austin about the difference between their immediate family and other people, even relatives. Speaking of her cousins, Dickinson says, “The Newmans seem very pleasant, but they are not *like us*. What makes a few of us so different from others?” (L 118). The difference that Dickinson shared with immediate family gave her a sounding board removed from the rest of the world, against which she could test and develop the growing power of her convictions. Speaking of a relationship that developed over the years, Bingham says that there were “deep currents of mutual understanding between Austin and Emily. Their congeniality flowed from many sources” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 101).<sup>10</sup> Though we do not have Austin’s actual words to his sister, a letter he sent to Martha Gilbert on May 11, 1852, speaks passionately of his spiritual concerns: “I ask myself, Is it possible that God, all powerful, all wise, all benevolent, as I must believe him, *could* have created all these millions upon millions of human souls, only to destroy them? That he *could* have revealed himself & his ways to a chosen few, and left the rest to grovel on in utter darkness? I *cannot* believe it” (qtd. in Bingham, *Emily Dickinson’s Home* 242). Considering the close relationship of Austin and Emily, such topics were probably part of their discussions as well. Though Dickinson did not join the Congregational church and her brother eventually did, the conversations between them strengthened both their love for each other and their intellectual bond, which supported Dickinson’s personal growth even if her brother never knew the extent of the development of her poetry.

Dickinson and her sister, Lavinia Norcross Dickinson, the last member of the immediate family, shared a daily relationship that enabled Dickinson to rely on her

sister's support, which eventually resulted in Lavinia's taking on more and more of the practical matters of the household and allowing her sister private time. By 1860, says Bingham, "the pattern of the family had crystallized" (413). After Emily's death, Lavinia gives this description of the family dynamics:

As for Emily, she was not withdrawn or exclusive really. She was always watching for the rewarding person to come, but she was a very busy person herself. She had to think—she was the only one of us who had that to do. Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I had the family to keep track of. (qtd. in Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home* 413-14)

We do not know at precisely what time these characteristics became clear. Though Lavinia may not have known the extent of Dickinson's writing, Lavinia understood her sister's need to work through her thoughts and quite amiably enabled the process.

Dickinson's early letters do not give much space to Lavinia, but one can hear that the sisters are much together in the messages that Dickinson relays to her recipients, particularly to Abiah Root: "Lavinia just now interrupted my flow of thought by saying give my love to A." (L 5); "Sabra, Viny, Abby and all the Girls send much love to you" (L 8); "Viny wishes not to be forgotten in her share of love" (L 9); "Viny sends her love to you" (L 10); "Viny says, give my love to Biah—as she always calls you" (L 11). Dickinson writes frequently to her brother, but letters to her sister in the early years are absent, most likely because they were not often apart, though both sisters spent time away at school. At home they could and did enjoy each other's company. Lavinia recollects searching out wildflowers with her sister: "[W]hen we were little children we used to

spend entire days in the woods hunting for treasures” (qtd. in Habegger 158). Their early years, then, offered time for Dickinson and her sister to spend many pleasant hours and build a close bond upon which Dickinson relied.

Dickinson expresses her affection for Lavinia and unhappiness at separation from her in letters to others. She writes to Austin in 1848 from Mount Holyoke, “You cant [sic] think how disappointed I was to know that Viny was not coming until next week, for I had made all my plans to welcome her on Friday of this week instead of next. But it will be better the longer it is in coming I suppose” (L 22). Another separation prompts this comment to Uncle Joel Norcross: “Vinnie has been to see you—she wrote what splendid times she had. We are very lonely without her—hope to linger along till she comes home” (L 29). In like manner, Dickinson writes to Emily Fowler (Ford) at a time when Johnson notes that “Lavinia was making one of her customary visits to Boston” (*Letters* 218): “The day is lone to me, because I have no Vinnie, and I think of those today who never had a Vinnie, and I’m afraid they are lone” (L 98). By 1859, the absence of Lavinia causes a more desperate tone: “My mother’s only sister has had an invalid winter, and Vinnie has gone to enliven the house, and make the days shorter to my sick aunt. I would like more sisters, that the taking out of one, might not leave such stillness. Vinnie has been all, so long, I feel the oddest fright at parting with her for an hour, lest a storm arise, and I go unsheltered” (L 200). Since Dickinson is the elder sister, the need for “shelter” in times of strife may seem odd; however, the statement only emphasizes the calm and strength that Dickinson finds when Vinnie is at home. Wolff sees a strong correlation between the presence of Dickinson’s siblings at home and her personal sense of ease: “Perhaps it is not too much to say that Emily Dickinson could feel

that she was securely *herself* only when Austin and Vinnie were there to listen and respond to her meditations or to share the complex sense of humor that never required explanation—fixed poles to steady her through difficult hours” (110). Within that trio, argues Michele Mock (1998), Lavinia was the sibling closest to Dickinson, who referred “reverentially” to her sister as “all” (L 110). Mock describes Lavinia as a person of “genuine humor, incisive intellect, furious devotion” (“Dickinson, Lavinia Norcross” 74). All of these characteristics could be used to describe Dickinson herself. Lavinia’s role in her sister’s life gradually became one of the protector who stood between Dickinson and the world to prevent its intervention in the production of thought and writing; Lavinia enabled poetry.

In her remarkable discussion of Lavinia, “Partnership in Possibility: The dialogics of ‘his efficient daughter Lavinia and his poetess daughter Emily’” (1997), Michele Mock draws a picture of intellectual closeness between the sisters that contradicts previous impressions that only Austin shared cerebral conversations with Dickinson. Though much of Mock’s essay is beyond the chronological scope of this chapter, she does open a discourse valuable to readers of Dickinson history, particularly when discussing the “partnership” of the sisters: “Lavinia’s dialogic role was instrumental to the body of Dickinson’s works,” argues Mock (70). Noting that “Vinnie has historically been silenced within a confining series of stereotypic and totalizing images,” Mock asserts, “They spoke and wrote to and for each other; the presence of each woman as an empathetic other encouraged the event of ideas, the means whereby each voice incited the other” (72). Thus, Lavinia’s role in the production of his sister’s poems is much broader than had been previously recognized.

Dickinson and her sister differ in their acceptance of orthodoxy but continue to respect one another. Away at school at the age of sixteen, Lavinia feels moved by the same pressures to accept Christ that her sister rejects. In a letter to her brother, Lavinia writes, “How beautiful [sic] if *we three* could all believe in Christ, how much higher object should we have in living! To glorify that great *being*, than to gratify our own selfish desires. Does Emilie think of these things at all? Oh! That she might! . . . I feel so *desirous*, that My Dear Brother & Sister should become Christians” (qtd. in Bingham, *Emily Dickinson’s Home* 96). Though both Austin and Lavinia did join the church and Dickinson did not, Lavinia nevertheless respected her sister’s choice not to join her siblings in adherence to the church but to “think.” Arranging home as her place to think became one of Dickinson’s primary goals, and her sister aided her in achieving that object. Bingham cites Lavinia’s own description of home: “Within the citadel each member lived an ‘absolute monarch,’ as Lavinia said, in a world of his own” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 5). Whicher explains Lavinia’s devotion to her sister: “She indulged Emily in her desire for polar privacy, sparing her the slightest inconvenience. . . . Thus Lavinia held the world at bay, while Emily confronted eternity” (38). Dickinson did not confront eternity on the same grounds as her sister, but the parallel worlds they shared and the effort her sister put forth on her behalf smoothed the path immensely for Dickinson and her meditations.

### *Two Houses*

Dickinson lived in two homes in her lifetime, the house on North Pleasant Street and the Dickinson Homestead, in which she was born and to which she returned to live

out the rest of her life; the physical and emotional aspects of life in each of these houses contributed differently to the development of her sense of personal power. She lived on North Pleasant Street from the ages of nine to twenty-four, when, Leyda reports, the family returned to the Homestead (Leyda 1: 61). The Dickinson homes were characterized by order, spaciousness, care, good food, and a welcome atmosphere, due in large part to Mrs. Dickinson's talents and effort; the Dickinson children helped their mother with household chores as they grew older. The Dickinsons entertained frequently; thus, a progression of visitors, mostly educated, engaging, and influential in society, both enriched and annoyed Dickinson, a topic addressed shortly. The conversation and correspondence she so loved also added immeasurably to her experience, both as an individual and as a writer. This portion of this chapter examines her development of personal power during ten years on North Pleasant Street and five years following the move back to the Homestead. As Dickinson matures, the tone and content of her letters show major milestones in her life: questions about immortality, relationships begun and lost, poems written. Throughout her letters, Dickinson shows how her life plays out against the one constant, the sheltered roof of home where she sharpens her sense of who she is and the person she must become.

#### *The House on North Pleasant Street*

The North Pleasant Street house was a great deal larger than the half portion of the Homestead that the Edward Dickinson family had inhabited when Dickinson was born, giving the children not only increased personal space, but also a greater sense of individualism. Sewall offers Edward's scathing description of his family's part of the Homestead: "half a house, & a rod square for a garden" (323); in contrast, Bingham

describes the new dwelling on North Pleasant Street: “[I]t was a substantial house built of wood. . . . There was ample space at the rear for a garden and back of that an orchard” (63). It was the new house, says Sewall, “that Austin described in the late 1840s to Joseph Lyman as the ‘mansion’ over which he and Emily presided as ‘lord and lady’ during the absence of their parents. And so it must have seemed to them after the crowded life of their early childhood” (322). Home as a concept so affected Dickinson that she referred to it in a letter to Perez Cowan as “the definition of God” (L 355). The combination of physical aspect, family, and opportunity to write poetry was to her a completeness that enabled and sustained her chosen life.

The North Pleasant Street home very early on also included the garden that allowed Dickinson to expand a love of flowers into an established horticultural skill. At age fourteen, she writes to Abiah on September 25, 1845, that she plans to pick the prettiest flowers from the garden before she goes to bed “and cheat Jack Frost of so many of *the treasures* he calculates to rob tonight. . . . I would love to send you a bouquet if I had an opportunity. . . . The last flowers of summer. Wouldn’t it be poetical[?]” (L 8). Dickinson has also begun to raise house plants in winter; she describes to Abiah her “large stand of plants to cultivate” in January of 1846 (L 9), maintaining an indoor garden with great pleasure while snows rage outside, another example of cheating nature of its power and establishing her own wishes.

The combined physical aspects of home and presence of family are precious to Dickinson. She writes to Austin from Mount Holyoke, “My visit at home was happy, very happy to me. . . . Home was always dear to me . . . but never did it seem so dear as now. . . . I think of the blazing fire, & the cheerful meal & the chair empty now I am

gone. I can hear the cheerful voices & the merry laugh & a desolate feeling comes home to my heart, to think I am alone” (L 22). Coming home from Mount Holyoke for good, however, does not offset the loneliness because the family circle is not complete. Vinnie is away at boarding school, leaving Dickinson to feel the loss she describes to Jane Humphrey: “[T]hat I’m very lonely is too plain for me to tell you—I am *alone—all* alone. She [Vinnie] wrote that she’d heard from you—and had written you herself—did she say she was homesick?” (L 30). At first Dickinson seems completely devastated only because she misses her sister’s company; however, perusing the rest of the letter, referred to earlier, reveals that Dickinson has had to take over all her sister’s household chores as well as her own and is venting her dissatisfaction with the situation. “Home” is dear, “housework” is not.

Home also includes Dickinson’s involvement in family activities, sometimes lighthearted, sometimes quite serious, but all affecting her development. In the same letter (L 30), Dickinson admiringly relates that Austin “was reading Hume’s History . . . and his getting it through was the signal for general uproar,” followed by the recounting of the frolic previously mentioned. No such celebrations, at least none recorded, follow Dickinson’s accomplishments, a notable lack that may have stirred in her a sense of competition, a need to be noticed. Questions of spirituality continue, as ever, to occupy family members. At the time of Austin’s triumph, Vinnie is experiencing a more sober period in her religious-minded atmosphere at school. Dickinson writes to Jane Humphrey, “Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him [Christ], and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless” (L 35). Adding to Dickinson’s discomfort is her mother’s illness. In May 1850, she writes to Abiah, “We are sick hardly ever at home,

and don't know what to do when it comes" (L 36). Again one hears the frustration of enduring Vinnie's absence since Dickinson has to attend to cooking by herself, "from necessity, and from a desire to make everything pleasant for father, and Austin." That good-natured thought disappears in a wave of perhaps comic frustration two pages later: "Father and Austin still clamor for food, and I, like a martyr am feeding them. Would'nt you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance, and declaring by 'Omar's beard' I never was in such plight." Then suddenly Dickinson stops herself dramatically: "*My kitchen I think I called it, God forbid that it was, or shall be my own—God keep from what they call households, except that bright one of 'faith!'*"<sup>11</sup> An extended stint of intensive domesticity has enabled Dickinson to focus on a preference to spend her time on matters of contemplation, not housework.

When Dickinson was a teenager and even long after she returned from Mount Holyoke, her family hosted a wide variety of visitors, many of them prominent in education and politics, who enriched her life. Edward Dickinson entertained a number of acquaintances as well as friends and family. He was a prominent public figure involved in business, Amherst College, and civic affairs, as well as Massachusetts and national politics; Mrs. Dickinson was a devoted housekeeper. That combination of a wide social circle and a good table guaranteed frequent company. According to Joseph Lyman, a school friend of Austin's who visited long and often, Mrs. Dickinson "was a rare and delicate cook in such matters as crullers and custards and she taught the girls all those housewifely accomplishments" (qtd. in Sewall 87). Thus, appreciative visitors meant that extra effort was required from everyone. Habegger describes Dickinson's knowledge of

her father's affairs primarily as a matter of "ongoing labor of entertaining invited clerics, judges, governors, and such" (288). There were lighter moments, too. In just one letter, Dickinson writes of the "girls 'Musical'" that met at the Dickinson home on a Tuesday evening; Dr. Brewster, who came to tea; Sue who visited "most every day"; Emily Fowler who visited the previous afternoon; Rufus Cowles, who called "last evening"; and Thurston, Benjamin, and Mary Aiken, who were in town (L 113). Other letters describe "the usual rush of callers" (L 145); riding with Emmons (L 150); going home from meeting with Sue and staying in her room for a while; calling on Emily Fowler and having her visit; calling on Mary Lyman; seeing Sue every day; and entertaining John Emerson for the evening (L 165). Such activities were part of the usual routine of Dickinson's life in her late teens and early twenties. Austin's Senior year, says Habegger, "had so much zest for her" because of the number of young men, fellow students and tutors, who called on his sisters (he lists fifteen names on "a short list over the years") (215n).

Then, when Dickinson was in her early twenties, her friendship with Josiah and Elizabeth Holland blossomed and her attachment to Elizabeth quickly became one of the most important of Dickinson's life. Sewall describes Dickinson's friendship with the couple, saying it was "as if the Hollands had opened up a new world, or at least a world where the eyes of Amherst and her family were not on her and where, to use [Dickinson's phrase], she felt on holiday" (597). Both Emily and Lavinia visited the Hollands' home, once in September 1853, and once the following September (Sewall 595). There, the Dickinsons greatly enjoyed literary conversation, laughter, music, and singing. The Hollands, says Sewall, "must have seemed the perfect married couple" to the Dickinson

sisters, “whose own home, much as they professed to love it, resounded infrequently with such delights” (596); though the Dickinson home received many callers, there is little indication that Edward Dickinson and his wife were a demonstrative couple. Tingley uses the poem ending “Her heart is fit for *home*— / I—a Sparrow—Build there / Sweet of twigs and twine / My perennial nest” to explain the affinity between the two women and the protection of her heart and her poetry that Dickinson felt in Elizabeth’s friendship (Fr 121). Tingley says, “Dickinson describes Elizabeth’s love for her as a safe haven, a nest for her sparrow self,” where, by extension, “the poet may find shelter and comfort in her friend’s nest, or loving heart and home” (193). As she writes to the Hollands from the privacy of her room, Dickinson is able to discuss serious religious questions against that background of ease and acceptance so different from her own home.

In her mid-twenties, Dickinson begins to restrict her participation in calling on friends and acquaintances and going about town in general; instead, she begins a gradual withdrawal from society that eventually results in a complete break as she turns to writing. Dickinson makes a point in her letters to speak of curtailing her outings. She writes to Abiah, who has asked Dickinson to visit, “I don’t go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand. . . . Should I ever leave home, which is improbable, I will with much delight, accept your invitation” (L 166). John Cody says, “It is obvious that Emily is beginning to think of herself as peculiar, out of step with the times and with her former circle of friends, and as an object of curiosity to her contemporaries” and that she “was well embarked on her lengthening retreat from life” (243). However, this letter, mentioned earlier in this chapter, marks Dickinson’s distancing herself from Abiah’s way of life, not just from her company. According to Johnson, Abiah married the Reverend

Samuel W. Strong later in 1853, and this last letter from Dickinson contains “a finality to the last paragraph which suggests that this letter terminated the correspondence between them” (*Letters* 299n). Dickinson’s own life has found a new direction that diverges from that of the pious Abiah. A letter to Sue also remarks, “We go out very little—once in a month or two, we both set sail in silks—touch at the principal points, and then put into port again—Vinnie cruises about some to transact the commerce, but coming to anchor, is most that I can do” (L 176). Dickinson’s protestations are not always an accurate reflection of her actions: she makes a trip to Washington in 1855 and travels to Boston for eye treatments in 1864 and 1865. However, Dickinson gradually withdraws from everyday social life as she arranges her days to fit her preference and need to write. Dickinson constructs what Habegger says is “a very private box: the elements of the poet’s situation” (326). Dickinson is just turning twenty-four at this time, and within that “box” she will hone her talents as a poet.

### *The Homestead*

In the years from 1855 to 1860, Dickinson deals with the deaths of friends, the move from the Pleasant Street house back to the Homestead, her mother’s health problems, the marriages of many of her contemporaries, including Austin and Sue, and the continued pressures of sorting out her religious beliefs, all of which contribute to her spiritual decisions, her poetic voice, and her retreat within her home. The upheaval of leaving the house she loves on Pleasant Street and moving back to the Homestead proves traumatic to Dickinson. The process seems to unnerve her so, especially since it coincides with her mother’s long illness, that she writes to Mrs. Holland, “I am but a simple child and frightened at myself. I often wish I was a grass, or a toddling daisy,

whom all these problems of the dust might not terrify” (L 182). The process of gaining her personal power and overcoming those problems of the world was not a smooth or always satisfying one. Dickinson’s discussions about religion were a mixture of solemnity, love, and sometimes whimsy; around August 1856, she writes to the Hollands, “If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below—and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that *I* have seen—I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous” (L 185). Just how much Dickinson feels a part of her own world, she expresses a few lines later: “Pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world *insane*, and love me if you will, for I had rather *be* loved than to be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven.” That constant question of life/death/afterlife continued to weigh heavily on Dickinson, and she spent much thought and energy pondering the topic that “is no schoolboy’s theme!” (L 184). Austin joined the First Church in 1856, leaving her the last member of the family to hold out, which Habegger says Dickinson considered “fraternal abandonment” even many years later (337). Dickinson sifted alone through dogma, experience, and contemplation, searching for the answers that had not yet formulated in her consciousness.

Little evidence remains to document her life during the years 1856 and 1857. Many of her friends had married and moved away, resulting in declining correspondence because Dickinson often ended communication when her friends married. Austin and Sue had moved right next door into the newly built Evergreens, so long letters were unnecessary. Habegger points out a particularly pertinent explanation for Dickinson’s lack of extant correspondence at the time: “Most important,” he says, “her continuing

shift from reportorial to lyric modes tended to throw another veil over her life, the thickest one yet. To an extent, she disappeared into her poems, which, in 1858, apparently without telling anyone, she began preserving in small, neatly copied, hand-sewn booklets” (328). Those secretly compiled booklets, her fascicles, represented a life largely unknown to anyone in her household, though their existence marked Dickinson’s dedicated journey to fulfill her need to write. “Increasingly,” says Habegger, “her bulletins would come from a place no one we know had seen or visited” (328). Dickinson’s withdrawal was becoming a reality.

Dickinson sometimes sends reports to various recipients, mentioning unnamed trials and tragedies at home. In early summer 1858, as near as can be determined, according to Johnson, she writes to her Uncle Joseph Sweetser: “Much has occurred, dear Uncle, since my writing you—so much—that I stagger as I write, in its sharp remembrance” (L 190). Her words allude to difficulty not only in writing about the incidents, but also a groping for strength to understand and deal with her problems. Description of dealing with the vicissitudes of life crops up constantly in Dickinson’s letters to friends. For instance, when asking to borrow some books from Mary Haven, Dickinson adds, “I should love to pass an hour with you, and the little girls, could I leave home, or mother. I do not go out at all, lest father will come and miss me. . . . Mother is much as usual. I know not what to hope of her” (L 191). Both her mother’s poor health and her father’s supposed wanting to have Dickinson close by emphasize the nearly cloistered feeling of home to Dickinson at the time. Her sense of being needed, at least as she demonstrates here, seems acute. She describes to Mrs. Haven the “very full” hours, from which she “might snatch here and there a moment” from her responsibilities.

Nonetheless, Dickinson continues to “snatch” time to write in these early days of her poetic production, about 1858.

At the Homestead, Dickinson begins to write the bulk of her poems, and “home” expresses a number of ideas as she further restricts her social activities and increases her literary output. She writes feelingly of “home” after the traumatic move from North Pleasant Street back to the Homestead, and the yearning for the place she so loved cannot be ignored. “They say that ‘home is where the heart is,’” she writes. “I think it is where the *house* is, and the adjacent buildings” (L 182). “Home” later became more settled and useful as a bulwark against intrusion. Amy J. Pardo argues, “Dickinson may have used ‘home’ in an effort to impart order to her world and thus control it” (146). Pardo notes that such a “complex image” needs evaluating “in individual poems and letters,” of course, and offers several examples. For instance, the poem that begins “One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—,” Pardo says, “begins with the image of a home that symbolizes the self in order to delve fully into the dissolution of consciousness” (Fr 407). Had Dickinson experienced extreme anxiety about her home itself, she would not have been able to produce artistic work there; the anxiety in that case would have led to immobility. Instead, home was a place where Dickinson gathered her personal forces to deal with anxiety—from whatever source. I agree with Pardo, who, contrary to the critics who support the theory of Dickinson as an agoraphobic, sees “little in her poetry [that] suggests such personal anxiety involving her home” (146). In contrast to the nineteenth-century use of “home” as a “conventional” domestic scene, says Pardo, Dickinson did not conform to the idea that “home should be created and then watched over by the mother as moral center of the family” (146). Dickinson neither establishes a home and family of

her own nor mentions a dependence on her mother for moral guidance. On the contrary, Dickinson has successfully arranged space within the Homestead; she removes herself from the family when she wishes and is out of reach of the conventional practices of calling upon individuals and receiving calls. Within that space she creates her own world as she explores the topic of immortality and produces the poems that give voice to both her insecurities and her certainties.

In the time period between her mid-teenage years and her late twenties, Emily Dickinson finds the power of her voice. Dickinson decides what aspects of her Calvinist heritage she cannot adhere to; she begins to formulate her ideas in a distinct poetic form; she adapts to the intensity of her father and the self-effacing presence of her mother; she also gathers her brother and sister close to her in that “holy” place she calls home where she synthesizes all the elements of her first three decades into a significant surge of poetry. The first of the concerns in this chapter, Dickinson’s spirituality, flourishes in a display of personal power that allows her to consciously move away, both physically and emotionally, from the orthodoxy of her childhood and move toward a personal sense of the divine. Salska says of Dickinson’s letters to Abiah Root, “The sequence belongs to Dickinson’s most important youthful correspondence. . . . [The letters] offer glimpses of the depth and intensity of her religious concerns as the poet-to-be struggled for honest self-definition” (254). Dickinson’s struggle takes her beyond the limits of Calvinism as well as the influences of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Perhaps not altogether unique in her outlook in a time of much soul searching and changes in theological interpretation in nineteenth-century New England, Dickinson differs from many of her

contemporary thinkers; she leaves behind the Calvinism of her early years, bypasses the Transcendentalists, and asserts her own voice.

Dickinson's powerful poems include during this time period such strikingly balanced pieces as "Success is counted sweetest," one of the few poems published in Dickinson's lifetime, as discussed earlier (Fr 112). One of her best known poems, it garners universal praise from critics across the years. The poem demonstrates Dickinson's early command of subject, syntax, and style. Whicher says of this poem, "Not a word could be spared and not a word is out of order" (203). Sewall calls the poem "an example of her work at its formal best," and Habegger states that it was a "rightly famous poem, distilled with such mastery from its maker's experience" (557; 372). All three critics recognize and openly praise the poem's power. One cannot help wondering what Dickinson would have thought of their comments. In her world, such accolades were reserved for the males in her family. Few people today study the writings of Edward and Austin Dickinson; whatever new scraps may be unearthed carry weight most particularly as they relate to Emily. In the end, that is the truest proof of the power of her poetry.

Family also helped Dickinson to mature as a powerful woman even if the expression of that power sometimes remained private. Living intimately with the force of Edward Dickinson's personality, his daughter recognized his "lonely" life and her place as one who could and would accommodate his wishes, though she may have chafed under his outward control.<sup>12</sup> Polly Longworth says that Dickinson's "early fear of her father and her resistance slowly shifted to a mutual respect" (69). Longworth also says, "The father-daughter relationship was symbiotic. Edward provided the home and

protection she needed in order to write. He was sympathetic to strange restrictions that hobbled her social interactions, having already met her symptoms in his wife” (69). Mrs. Dickinson’s “symptoms” did not mask her concern for her children and genuine affection for them, as discussed earlier. As Dickinson matured, Mary Elizabeth Kromer Bernhard notes, she and her mother experienced “a major divergence” in religious thinking “with the senior Emily committed to a conventional Congregationalism, and Emily destined to confront lifelong tensions of faith versus doubt” (73). That divergent thinking, while on the surface a drawback, could also have provided Dickinson with a provocative daily reminder of the orthodoxy she questioned and could have fueled her production of poetry.

Dickinson’s relationships with her brother and sister provided the closeness and communication that her relationship with her parents lacked. Throughout their youth and until Austin married, Dickinson kept up a consistent and lengthy correspondence with him while he was away at school and teaching. The sibling relationship was especially strong between Dickinson and her brother, according to Marcy L. Tanter, who calls Austin “the most significant” person in her life (82). Tanter says that Austin “seems to be the only person other than Colonel Higginson to whom Emily wrote directly that she desired to be a poet” (83). That exchange was discussed earlier in this chapter. The fact that Dickinson could say such a thing to her brother, even in a light-hearted tone, reveals the trust that she felt in him. Austin’s presence as a trusted older brother contributed to her faith in herself and gave security to her strength of purpose. The three Dickinson siblings drew together in what Bernhard describes as a “boldly unitary” front facing their parents (73). Their affection as children and young adults enabled each to interact with the others and grow in an atmosphere of wit, humor, and mutual support.

Dickinson, always intrigued by time and space, embraced both in a deliberate move to arrange and enhance her environment as a means to support her poetry; by the time she was thirty, it seemed that she had arranged her life to reside permanently in her father's house. Dickinson's seclusion has caused tremendous controversy. As discussed in the early part of this chapter, critics and biographers propose a variety of theories, but all seem to agree that seclusion and poetry were linked. I feel that Dickinson's style does definitely evolve from her seclusion, and I see the seclusion as a conscious choice, developed over time to achieve the desired results. Home became not only the place where she was safe, but also the place where she developed the sense of who she was, what she believed, and where she taught herself to express those beliefs. Home became the place where her strongest sense of self and the power of her voice joined to become the poet Emily Dickinson; Dickinson's poetry explored a cosmology that differed from that of her contemporaries, a cosmology that we read and appreciate today. This chapter has focused upon the development of Dickinson's personal power; the next will address the most productive years of her writing, approximately 1860-1865.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The college was so steeped in conversion that, says Habegger, “Heman Humprey was amazed the college had had ‘*eleven* revivals in *twelve* years’ and that so few students had remained unsaved” (198).

<sup>2</sup>See Job 1:7, and 2:2.

<sup>3</sup>A reference to Acts 14:10-12, especially verse 12 when Paul is called Hermes [Mercury].

<sup>4</sup>Fiske is responding to Mabel Loomis Todd’s request for information fifty years after his association with Dickinson. Habegger notes that Fiske provides “the most rounded and dependable portrait on record of Emily as schoolgirl. Fiske must have been a keen observer, as the impression he gathered and then retained for half a century accords in every particular with contemporary evidence” (152).

<sup>5</sup>Contrast this home celebration with Dickinson’s Christmas at Mount Holyoke. Johnson notes after Dickinson’s description of her joyous Thanksgiving at home (L 20), “No Christmas recess customarily was granted at this time in New England schools and colleges, for the season was still associated in the orthodox Congregational mind with other Christian orthodoxies which were strongly disapproved” (*Letters* 60-61).

<sup>6</sup>Dickinson quotes Luke 10:42.

<sup>7</sup>See Karen Dandurand’s “New Dickinson Civil War Publications” for a complete listing and discussion of the ten poems published during Dickinson’s lifetime.

<sup>8</sup>“To assemble a fascicle she stacked several copied sheets on top of one another. She started out in 1858-59 consistently using four sheets per book and ended in 1863-64, when she ceased binding, with a norm of six” (*Manuscript Books* xi). These fascicles may not have been the first known collections, however. In spring of 1853, Dickinson writes to Henry Vaughn Emmons, “Since receiving your beautiful writing I have often desired to thank you thro’ a few of my flowers, and arranged the fairest for you a little while ago, but heard you were away. . . and if ’tis ever mine to gather those which fade not, from the garden we have not seen, you shall have a brighter one than I can find today” (L 119). In another letter she writes, “Thank you, indeed, Mr Emmons, for your beautiful acknowledgment, far brighter than my flowers; and while with pleasure I *lend* you the little manuscript, I shall beg leave to claim it, when you again return” (L 121). Franklin conjectures, “If these notes refer to the same group of poems or to others that were similar, the form in which she presented them to Emmons was a fascicle sheet: multiple poems (‘arranged the fairest’) on a ‘little manuscript’ that she lent him” (*Poems* 9). The construction, says Franklin may have been similar to “Forest Leaves,” mentioned earlier in this chapter (*Poems* 9).

<sup>9</sup>Leyda refers to the following newspaper article:

*From the Express, Feb. 6:*

AMHERST AND BELCHERTOWN RAILROAD.

THE STOCK ALL TAKEN—ROAD UNDER CONTRACT!!

Hon. Edward Dickinson made a few remarks. He recounted the first meeting for agitating railroad matters in this vicinity, held in Sunderland, nearly eight years ago, and faces gathered there, and some present on this occasion, had grown familiar to him from seeing them at meetings held for a similar purpose, since that time . . . [sic] He pressed upon the stockholders the necessity for promptly meeting the first assessment, which would be called for in March.

A SALUTE of ten guns was fired in this town on Thursday afternoon, in honor of the completion of the Railroad subscriptions and the contracting for its construction. We'll have another bout when the road is built! (232)

<sup>10</sup>Dickinson writes at a later time, "Austin and I were talking the other Night about the Extension of Consciousness, after Death and Mother told Vinnie, afterward, she thought it was 'very improper'" (L 650).

<sup>11</sup>The phrasing shows Dickinson's easy reliance upon scripture in everyday communication.

<sup>12</sup>In L 457, Dickinson writes of "my Father's lonely Life and his lonelier Death."

## CHAPTER 4

### MOVING FROM CENTRE TO CIRCUMFERENCE:

#### THE ONTOLOGY OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

Understanding a form of life, or anyway some aspects of it to some degree, and convincing others that you have indeed done so, involves more than the assembly of telling particulars or the imposition of general narratives. It involves bringing figure and ground, the passing occasion and the long story, into coincident view.

—Clifford Geertz (51)

In her late twenties, Emily Dickinson began writing prolifically of her principles, puzzles, and point of view that sometimes delighted, sometimes tormented her. In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on June 9, 1866, she mentions her “Flood subject,” immortality (L 319), which begins to occupy her thoughts and stimulate her energies in the time period addressed in this chapter. The period includes what R. W. Franklin calls her “intense push from mid-1862 to early 1864” (*Poems* 28). This period represents the height of her literary output, as far as dating can be reasonably established. Her eventual “major unsolved question,” states Gary Stonum, “is whether death and the possibility of immortality will mark a transforming perfection of the self’s power, a direct continuation of it, or some diminution or termination” (177-78). As Dickinson plunged deeper into her writing to begin to come to grips with these immense themes and work toward the philosophy that Stonum describes, she withdrew more and more fully from society, secluding herself in the Homestead. In the security of her family home, she faced her fears and frustrations and taught herself to fashion her triumphs in words. In full flood, during her early thirties, the poet continues to explore a relationship with God and to grasp the meaning of eternity. She limits her social contacts for the most part to a select

handful of family and close friends in whom she has confidence. At times, she is exultant, sure of her conclusions; at times, she despairs, either because of the uncertainty or of the bleakness of her thoughts. As may be imagined, the cloistered life she chooses causes Dickinson to live within her mind to an unusual degree, her thoughts unrelieved by physical social interaction and outside distractions. But Dickinson uses the situation she has engineered to her advantage. Joanne Dobson says, “Her domesticity not only offered her a culturally acceptable identity definition, it also allowed her the extreme seclusion she evidently needed in order to protect herself from irrational anxieties induced by normal social contact” (46). In Dobson’s argument I find support for my point of view. As a result of her behavior, Dickinson’s strategy becomes her strength; she arranges protection, she relieves anxiety, and she frees herself to write.

The years discussed in this chapter usually described as the peak of her poetic endeavor are approximately 1861-65. This chapter addresses that period, plus a few isolated instances leading up to and beyond it, in which Dickinson produced poems that push her thinking to its limits and reveal a personal evolutionary approach to spirituality. Dickinson still cherished the teaching of her friend and mentor Benjamin Newton; she explored the reason and intuition of Unitarians and the Transcendent relationship of Emerson and his followers to the wonder of the natural world. However, Dickinson moved beyond the revelations of both of those philosophies, the principles of which she began to discover for herself, to find answers to her own place in the universe, searching for a way to her own philosophical truth. For example, Dickinson writes in the poem “You’ll know it—as you know ’tis Noon,” “By intuition, Mightiest Things / Assert themselves—” (Fr 429). As she followed that path, her thinking and her writing became

thoroughly interdependent and intertwined; thus, though they may be separated into tentative categories, the two often overlap and must be discussed together.

Moving far from the sin- and guilt-ridden burden of Calvinism, and continually questioning the power of the church's influence, Dickinson sought a path of beauty and belonging in the natural world and an understanding of the power of the balance of the universe. Her journey melded her spirit with time and space, while at the same time transcending both as she sought the meaning of eternity. In her isolation at home, Dickinson searched for, found, and expressed oneness with her world that few poets have ever accomplished. Karl Keller says, "Because the direction of her enthusiasm was inward and because she had no overwhelming interest in communicating her beliefs to others, she had no need to be explicit about them; they were assumptions to her anyway, and so she turned to write about her own experiences of the world" (60). Dickinson's writing did not indulge in exhaustive theological argument; nor will this dissertation. This study shows, through examination of Dickinson's poetry, correspondence, and behavior, that she pursued a spiritual path that for the most part left behind her early Calvinist training, briefly embraced Unitarianism and acknowledged Transcendentalism; then, she developed into an outlook on divinity uniquely her own, to repeat Dominic Luxford, in "the realm of the supersensible, numinous or extra-intuitive" (68). Dickinson's reliance upon her own spiritual answers enabled her to formulate a Truth that she expressed in her writing.

While Dickinson chose with determination her spiritual path and explored not only the doctrine she had been taught, but also the new ideas brought to her attention through her reading, discussion with friends, and her own rapidly developing intellect,

she just as deliberately restricted the center of her day-to-day life and sharply curtailed her excursions into society. I argue that Dickinson could successfully explore her spirituality and express that unfolding in poetry only if she restricted her physical world; she struggled to attain a relationship with God while withdrawing from active participation in the formal religious practices of her family and community. In addition, I argue that Dickinson fully understood the power and scope of her talent, as she probed the human consciousness in her own manner and spent at least the last twenty years of her life within her father's home and garden to concentrate on the immensity of being.

#### Dickinson's Continued Resistance to Calvinism

Dickinson's defining of her spiritual world was of necessity predicated upon her Calvinistic upbringing, as described in Chapter Three. Though Dickinson begins to trust her beliefs in her mid-twenties, leading to the productive years ahead, she has had only a short period of time in which to do so, and her long years of absorbing doctrine cannot be sloughed off but must undergo intense examination. Keller suggests, "Perhaps because the Puritan zeal ran so high, she came to certain a priori conclusions that made her yearn for orthodoxy yet resist its restricting pressures" (51). Keller enumerates the Five Points of Calvin's Synod of Dort of 1618-19 that he says "are represented—and often reverently—in Emily Dickinson's poetry": Innate Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints (50). To me, the reverence of these points as well as spirited resistance to them underscore much of Dickinson's poetry and correspondence and provides the oppositions that intrigue readers. The "introspectiveness" of Dickinson's nature, says Keller, gives her poetry "an

energy: the fascination with one's spiritual innards as a way of divining cosmic will, the obsessive curiosity with the indications of one's spiritual worth, the determination to discover the grounds of being" (58). As an example of his analysis, Keller points to this poem:

Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature—  
Gravitates within—  
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it—  
But it stir—alone—  
  
Each—it's difficult Ideal  
Must achieve—Itself—  
Through the solitary prowess  
Of a silent Life— (Fr 790)

The introspection evident here, I think, shows a maturity of reflection upon the nature of the development of the mind in its awareness of solitude. Keller sees more of a religious purpose in Dickinson's meditation. He argues that Dickinson's "fascination with religious conversion" was a "reiterative rehearsal of (and compensation for) the opportunities to convert missed in her youth. As a result," he continues, "she was for the rest of her life an enthusiast with designs on her own soul" (59-60). However, says Keller, Dickinson's "individual expression" and "her skill with poetry" allow her to create "a freedom for herself within the form of her belief" (60). At this point, though I do not see the same religious connections as Keller, he makes a good point. For example, he calls attention to the poem "We grow accustomed to the Dark—" as an illustration of

“man’s alienation from God” that shows Dickinson’s “Puritan assumptions” couched in free expression (61). In the poem the speaker gives an analogy of watching a neighbor say goodnight and then move away home with a lantern. The speaker then takes small “uncertain” steps, “For newness of the night—,” but soon finds firm footing. To make her point, which in this poem is quite direct and unclouded, the speaker explains the analogy:

The Bravest—grope a little—  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead—  
But as they learn to see—  
  
Either the Darkness alters—  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight—  
And Life steps almost straight. (Fr 428)

The speaker, searching within as she has been taught, sometimes falters and becomes bruised, but soon she begins to find her footing in her mind, and “Life steps almost straight”—“almost” because she sees “almost” clearly.

Dickinson’s Calvinist background shows in her “perfect confidence in God & his promises” that she expresses as a girl (L 13); however, those promises undergo much scrutiny as she gradually gives herself permission and power to fashion her own answers to questions of life and death. For example, she states quite simply and emphatically, using no apparent persona to obscure her voice,

To be alive—is Power—  
Existence—in itself—  
Without a further function—  
Omnipotence—Enough— (Fr 876)

That certainty of a personal omnipotence occurs when Dickinson is about thirty-two, and she begins to work out possibilities and probabilities of an afterlife. The poem begins, “Conscious am I in my Chamber, / Of a shapeless friend—”; by the end of the poem, Dickinson declares through “intuition” and “Instinct” that the “friend” is “Immortality” (Fr 773). Not once in five stanzas does she discuss doctrine; she does, on the other hand, explore the validity of her own intuition as she reasons.

Dickinson shows happiness and sorrow, triumph and fear, exultation and despair, not in a regular progression from childhood to maturity, but in waves that surge and recede, sometimes carrying her to dizzying pinnacles, sometimes leaving her to wallow in confusion and doubt. Though she writes numerous poems dealing with Nature and man, in the manner of the Transcendentalists, she continues the questioning within herself, reaching conclusions that result in a view differing from the Transcendentalist outlook on the essence of humanity and divinity. Her poem “A loss of something ever felt I—” describes “A Mourner” who “walked among the children,” a persona so young that no one can detect her mindset, yet who is able to experience the pain of being “Itself the only Prince cast out—.” Then, in the present, the speaker muses, “I find myself still softly searching,” but she has a “Suspicion” that she is “looking oppositely / for the site of the Kingdom of Heaven—” (Fr 1072). The idea of discovery surfaces boldly, not “softly,” in the following poem, which is undated:

There is a solitude of space  
A solitude of sea  
A solitude of death, but these  
Society shall be  
Compared with that profounder site  
That polar privacy  
A soul admitted to itself—  
Finite infinity. (Fr 1696)<sup>1</sup>

The persona of this poem conducts a discussion of soul and eternity without mention of God. The omission demonstrates how far Dickinson's thinking diverges from the norm.

However, Dickinson also contrarily expresses belief in God in many of her poems. For instance, in the poem that begins "I know that He exists," she refers to God who "has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes" (Fr 365). The speaker says that God's purpose is to "make Bliss / Earn her own surprise!" But there is a niggling worry that death may claim the speaker before she discovers the "Bliss," in which case God's "jest" may have "crawled too far!" Dickinson sometimes writes with barely contained passion as in the explosive surge of ownership of knowing in the poem "Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*" (Fr 401). When the soul reaches understanding, writes Dickinson, it soars from the forge in "the light / Of unanointed Blaze"; in other words, the soul develops without the need for baptism. Even the smallest village, says the speaker, has its blacksmith, or minister, who rings the anvil to forge souls, but the "finer Forge / That soundless tugs—within—" needs no communal or pastoral help to refine the "impatient Ores" that eventually "Repudiate the Forge" to soar beyond church and even beyond

Maker. Then, the strength of her certainty wavers again in the poem “At least—to pray—is left—is left—,” in which she implores, “Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth— / Hast thou no Arm for Me?” (Fr 377). Dickinson's ambivalence shows a very human need for support in the moments when her own convictions vacillate.

Dickinson was very much a writer of her time even though the content of some of her poems may have diverged widely from subjects dealt with by many of her contemporaries. James McIntosh suggests that Dickinson shows “signs of a kinship she has with other key American writers of her period and before it, of their common religious and poetic sensibility.” For instance, says McIntosh, she displays “a readiness to employ temporally conscious abstractions with Emerson” (31). A comparison between the philosophies of Dickinson and Emerson appears in the next section of this chapter, which deals with Dickinson’s development of her voice and its expression in poetry.

Dickinson grappled poetically with themes on a grand scale. One of the early poems in Dickinson’s most prolific period targets the topic of “Circumference,” which had already begun to occupy her thoughts most fully. The poem begins,

I saw no Way—The Heavens were stitched—

I felt the Columns close—

The Earth reversed her Hemispheres—

I touched the Universe—

And back it slid—and I alone—

A Speck upon a Ball—

Went out upon Circumference—

Beyond the dip of Bell— (Fr 633)

There is no way for the speaker to find salvation in Heaven—Calvinism is closed to her; then, her world turns upside down, and when she touches the Universe, it opens up even further, and she rises from earth to the edge of understanding, far beyond the call of her early training in church.<sup>7</sup>

Dickinson describes her personal spiritual quest to Higginson in July 1862: “My Business is Circumference” (L 268). That “cryptic utterance,” says Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “has fascinated and puzzled her readers” (194-95). Dickinson seems to anticipate an amused reaction from Higginson: “Perhaps you smile at me,” she says. “I could not stop for that,” she continues, and then she earnestly requests “instruction” in dealing with the wonders of “Dawn” and “Sunset,” feeling in their presence like “the only Kangaroo among the Beauty.” Dickinson asks for Higginson's help in understanding the unknowable. Wolff refers to Charles Anderson, who says,

The most startling use of the term [circumference] occurs in a late letter: “The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference” [To Mrs. Holland in the fall of 1884 (Johnson, *Letters* 849)]. This pronouncement is not so much baffling as unexpectedly bold. Set beside her own boast, “My Business is Circumference,” it seems little short of blasphemous. Her poems are to accomplish something the Bible does not? (55, 57)

According to Wolff, Anderson then lays out a limiting logic to explain the solution: “The immediate leap into God is impossible, the poet cannot be like the aurora. He must go back to the earth, the human experience of pain and suffering, and work out from there toward the divine reality” (195). But Wolff counters, “Dickinson would answer that the

poet *can* leap into God's realm. So long as God cares to demand our obedience and worship, He is ensnared in the very 'Design' that seems to separate the finite world from His realm of infinity and eternity" (195). Not only can the poet face God, Wolff argues, "insofar as she can locate the crucial areas where God's majesty requires mankind's cooperation, the poet can accomplish something the Bible does not: she can repossess language, using it to expose God's tyranny." That language gives the poet immense power. "As Representative for us all," says Wolff, "she can develop a Voice—a posture, a set of values, a tone of address—that will counter God's attempts to dominate us" (195). Richard B. Sewall suggests that Dickinson uses the word "Circumference" to signify "bold expansion and awesome achievement" (663). He also says that "she probably meant (in 1862) her purpose [was] 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" (700). The need to find and express the essence of human life becomes Dickinson's quest.

Dickinson knows that to find Circumference and express its meaning, a feat of oracular mysticism, she has to separate herself from the tenets of Calvinism that she refuses to accept. She cannot move into the realm of her own truth until she turns from, as Kenneth Murdock says, "predestination, the absence of free will, and the arbitrary division of mankind into the elect and the damned, [and] the conviction that Heaven and Hell are the ultimate realities" (19). She must immerse herself in the certainty of her conviction, moving from the Centered focus on God within to the Circumference of the "Possibility" in which she dwells. Dickinson's "Possibility" may take a curious twist, however, as she shows in the following poem:

I reckon—when I count at all—  
First—Poets—Then the Sun—  
Then Summer—Then the Heaven of God—  
And then—the List is done— (Fr 533)

Dickinson's hierarchy of importance rearranges the conventional order of things as she has been taught to rate them, but she adds an even bolder statement in the poem:

But, looking back—the First so seems  
To Comprehend the Whole—  
The Others look a needless Show—  
So I write—Poets—All—

To describe “the Heaven of God” as “a needless Show” leads to the speaker's reordering the cosmos and emphasizing the thought that “Poets,” from her point of view, encompass all that is needful.

In the second half of the poem, however, the speaker looks at the poet's accomplishments not as a triumph in competition with God but as an awesome offering to the reader:

Their summer—lasts a Solid year—  
They can afford a Sun  
The East—would deem extravagant—  
And if the Further Heaven—  
  
Be beautiful as they prepare  
For Those who worship Them—

It is too difficult a Grace—

To justify the Dream—

The speaker stands stunned before the poet's gift. Gary Stonum (1990) describes the speaker's reaction: "If the poet's spectacles represent truth rather than just imaginative fecundity," he says, ". . . their spectacles would acquire ontological validity and also finality or conclusiveness, thereby directing us to a truth that obviates any response but acceptance" (12). This poem represents the inclusive force of Dickinson's poetry; the speaker/reader becomes a part of the poet's presentation.

#### Dickinson's Increasing Power of Voice and Poetry

Shortly after her Mount Holyoke school days, while in her early twenties, Dickinson not only continues to struggle with questions of faith, but also begins to write in stronger language, the second part of the influential triangle of resistance to Calvinism, the power of her writing, and her attachment to home. An early indication of Dickinson's embracing the writing of poetry shows metaphorically in a letter she sent to Jane Humphrey, in which Dickinson speaks of a "gold thread . . . a long, big shining fibre . . . which will fade away into Heaven while you hold it, and from there come back to me" (L 35). Richard B. Sewall says, "[S]he begins to exploit more and more, even with trusted friends like Abiah and Jane, her powerful new protective weapon of metaphor. Hence the golden dream, the snake, the flowers of Satan, the gold thread, and the beautiful tempters" (396). Dickinson's language expresses a self-confidence that becomes more and more pronounced as she grows older. After her tirade, "God keep me from what they call *households*," she writes to Abiah, "Don't be afraid of my imprecations, they never

did anyone harm, and they make me feel so cool, and and [sic] so very much more comfortable!” (L 36). Thinking of oneself and one’s own comfort while storming about the home in the midst of domestic responsibilities is decidedly un-Victorian behavior; however, it is behavior that does show Dickinson’s independent thinking. Extending that behavior, Dickinson writes to Austin that she went to see Sue one day after tea, then visited Emily Fowler and did not return home until nine o’clock, when she “found Father is [in?] great agitation at my protracted stay—and mother and Vinnie in tears, for fear that he would kill me” (L 42). Dickinson sounds almost merry; there is no sign of repentance or contrition.

Dickinson’s language in her letters shows development prefacing the deluge of poetry to come. Even description of an ordinary task such as covering the garden against frost turns into a metaphor: “I’ve shrouded little forms and muffled little faces, till I almost feel maternal” (L 180). As another example, she writes to Austin of their father’s relationship with William Howland, who worked in Edward Dickinson’s law office, in a lilt of rhyme and meter: “[T]hey go along as smoothly as friendly barks at sea—or when harmonious stanzas become one melody” (L 52). Dickinson’s colorful language reveals a foul mood, and a talent for imagery and humor as she writes to Sue after Dickinson has completed a long morning’s work in a soiled and shabby dress: “I do feel gray and grim, this morning, and I feel it would be a comfort to have a piping voice, and broken back, and scare little children” (L 73).

Throughout her life, Dickinson strives to form in language her own sense of the world around her and of the world of afterlife that humans who believe in it try so hard to understand. She uses the aspects of religion that suit her purpose, but she does not shy

away from or hesitate to admit to a growing understanding of her own power. One small line in the poem, “If she had been the Mistletoe,” written when she was about twenty-eight, indicates Dickinson’s divergent thinking: “Since I am of the Druid” (Fr 60). Druids predated Christians in Western Europe, their earth-based spirituality led by priests who were poets and prophets, a strong contrast with New England Calvinist traditional thinking. The poet and prophet in Dickinson had begun to burgeon. Her beginnings show trials, however, and her spirit struggles toward freedom: “I never hear the word ‘escape’ / Without a quicker blood,” she writes at about age twenty-nine. “I never hear of prisons broad / By soldiers battered down,” she continues, “But I tug childish at my bars / Only to fail again!” (Fr 144). Those failures do not keep the persona down for long, but her questioning still has no answers: “There are that resting, rise. / Can I expound the skies? / How still the Riddle lies!” (Fr 68). Immortality’s essence still eludes her grasp. In her effort to understand, Dickinson takes on the riddle of existence as well as the riddle of life after earthly existence, but the enormity of the task proves both daunting and elusive.

For instance, her poem “These are the days when Birds come back—” shows a movement away from the Transcendental symbiosis of man and nature, whose fraudulent “sophistries” the speaker wants so much to heed (Fr 122). “Almost thy plausibility / Induces my belief,” she says, and Wolff comments, “[H]ow cruelly nature allows us to deceive ourselves into precisely such expectations” (109). The poem ends,

Oh Sacrament of summer days,  
Oh Last Communion in the Haze—  
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake—  
Thy consecrated bread to take  
And thine immortal wine!

Here Dickinson diverges widely and perhaps even blasphemously from traditionally devout language and churchly focus; her communion wish denies any human trappings linking her to a communion with Jesus and God; instead, she merges completely with nature. Wolff says that Dickinson uses the “sonorous music of the verse” to disabuse us of “false hopes and beliefs. Thus the poem itself becomes Dickinson’s own ‘Sacrament’: each time it is read, poet and reader are magically brought together. Christ had offered Heaven; the poet offers truth” (309). Dickinson replaces the promises of Nature and Christ with the poet’s truth, though this third option may not be as palatable to readers as the other two.

The dichotomy between Dickinson’s religious upbringing and her personal intellectual development shows here. The poem draws critics, says Robin E. Calland, “to the tension between the experienced aspect of the speaker who pronounces Indian summer a sham and the credulous aspect that interprets the season as a sign of Nature’s promise of immortality, akin to Jesus’ promise at the Last Supper” (284). “Critics generally agree,” Calland continues, “that the speaker invokes Christian sacrament knowing the impossibility of Nature’s ever extending immortality; however, they disagree about why she does so” (284). It is possible that Dickinson’s developing view of the universe may have included a definite intimation of the immortality of life recycling in Nature. Dickinson’s wording, however, may not have offended the readers

of the poem. Karen Dandurand argues, “The publication of this particular poem in 1864 challenges the assumption that Dickinson’s casual use of religious imagery seemed sacrilegious to her contemporaries. Certainly the *Drum Beat* editor, a prominent Congregational minister, did not find her pantheistic communion ritual offensive” (“New Dickinson Civil War Publications” 21). Indeed, favorable reception of the poem also could stem from the word “child,” as readers slip back into the seasons of childhood and the mystical awareness of the ephemeral quality of Indian summer, suspended between the dog days of August and the snows of November, days that in New England are rare and treasured. But Dickinson’s production of the poem rested upon her developing voice, not upon public reception.

In an unusual circumstance concerning Dickinson’s poems, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—” (Fr 236), which has a similar theme to the poem discussed above, was published in the *Round Table* in the same month, on March 12 (Leyda 2: 86). According to Susan Rieke, the “playful tone” of the speaker of this poem contrasts sharply with the irony at the poem’s core, which represents “a powerful critique of nineteenth-century institutional religion and a clear example of, among many things, Dickinson’s independence of accepted thought and belief” (268)<sup>3</sup> Dickinson may get her powerful message across to the reader in the two poems above because she addresses their topics in a light-hearted manner, perhaps calculated to carry the message of the speaker in an unthreatening but cogent style. Each poem also conveys a celebratory tone appealing to general readers. Dickinson usually exhibited the independence that Rieke mentions only in correspondence and conversation with intimates, not the general public,

but the public was definitely familiar with and appreciative of the limited number of poems in print. For instance, Karen Dandurand argues:

The significance of Dickinson being published in the *Round Table* has been underestimated because its identification as a weekly conducted by her cousins has led to the assumption that it was not an important journal. In fact, it had a wide circulation, and leading newspapers throughout the country quoted and commented on it reviews and articles and reprinted poems it published. (“New Dickinson Civil War Publications” 26-27)

In addition, says Dandurand, “The reprints of two of the Brooklyn publications that have come to light are significant not only because they multiply the circulation of Dickinson’s poems, but because they indicate further editorial interest in publishing them” (27).<sup>4</sup>

As an example of contemporary interest in Dickinson’s work, according to Dandurand, at the meeting of the New England Woman’s Club on Monday, November 29, 1875, T. W. Higginson read “to crowded rooms from ‘port-folio poems’—such as could only be privately enjoyed in this way—& wh. seemed to be highly appreciated by those who were thus enabled to hear them,” as reported in the club’s journal (“Dickinson and the Public” 266). A listing of the club’s membership in the mid-1870s, according to Dandurand, “reads like a compendium of notable women in nineteenth-century New England,” and included Julia Ward Howe, Louisa May Alcott, Ednah Dow Cheney, Kate Field, Annie Fields, Mary Peabody Mann, Abby W. May, Maria Mitchell, Lucretia Mott, Louise Chandler Moulton, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Harriet Hanson Robinson, Lucy Stone, Adeline D. T. Whitney, and Anne Whitney (267).

The roster also listed prominent males as “honorary members,” says Dandurand, men such as Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, George Ripley, and John Greenleaf Whittier as well as several women “best known by their association with their more famous husbands: the wives of Oliver Wendell Holmes, N. P. Willis, and Henry James [and] Lidian Emerson and her daughter Ellen” (267). Dandurand also points out that Leyda recorded Higginson’s report of the afternoon readings to his sister Anna: “I read some of E. Dickinson’s (not giving the name) & their weird and strange power excited much interest” (Leyda 2: 39; “Dickinson and the Public” 266). “Though there is no record of which poems he read,” says Dandurand, “the more than fifty poems Higginson had by 1875 included five of the ten that had appeared in print” (268). Thus the poems to which listeners attributed a “weird and strange power” could have included “Success in counted sweetest,” “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” “Blazing in gold, and quenched in purple,” “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church,” and “A narrow fellow in the grass,” all of which, according to Dandurand, had been published by 1875 (277 n28). Though Dickinson at that time was forty-four years old, the poems dated from about 1859, when she was twenty-eight (Johnson *Poems* 35).

Dickinson’s tone and syntax show an increasing articulation and precision, thus an increasing strength, as she explores concepts of longing and appeasement, as in the following poem:

Water, is taught by thirst.

Land—by the Oceans passed.

Transport—by throe—

Peace—by its battles told—

Love, by Memorial Mold—

Birds, by the Snow. (Fr 93)

In each line, longing is identified by a lack, and the lack is expressed in minimalist fashion that displays extreme drama. Just as scholars learn to discern the importance of what is not said, Dickinson teaches herself to understand the enormity of a concept by identifying with the terrible nature of its loss. Such language demonstrates a singular power of interpretation and communication. Dickinson continues the pattern in “I should have been too glad, I see—,” in which the speaker declares, “’Tis Beggars—Banquets—can define— / ’Tis Parching—vitalizes Wine— / ‘Faith’ bleats—to understand!” (Fr 283). Calvinist “Faith,” the accepted approach, falls short of helping the speaker to understand the power of the sequence of thought and “bleats” helplessly in the presence of a more powerful expression of perception. Turning from the bleating, Dickinson teaches herself to produce a succinct language to give tongue to her inner voice.

Wanting to develop her poetic voice, but trapped in a house in which “Father has decided it is all pretty much *real life*,” Dickinson at times yearns to express herself clearly in the voice that she knows she is developing but that comes too slowly to allay her frustration. Like a fledgling painter who approaches the canvas hoping to produce a masterpiece, Dickinson writes poem after poem, some gems, and some less memorable. Though the following poem can be considered an example of imagery common to the time, Dickinson's persona does address abstract situations that seem to represent, in her case, a poet who feels at the very take-off point of a surge of talent, wondering if she will actually achieve the pinnacle that she can sense is possible; the poem begins, “To learn the Transport by the Pain— / As Blind Men learn the sun!” (Fr 178). Her torment

continues: “To die of thirst—suspecting / That Brooks in Meadows run!” Tantalizingly close she can feel a world of amazing satisfaction. “To stay the homesick—homesick feet / Upon a foreign shore—”; this shore could be the house in which she stands alone as a protester against belief. “Haunted by native lands, the while— / And blue—beloved air!” Arguably such reading may seem to lean heavily on fitting the lines to a preconceived pattern, but the accumulation of imagery does parallel the events in the author's life. She inhabits her father's house. She recognizes the innate need to express herself not just adequately but with force and effectiveness. The air Dickinson aches to breathe may be the air of her “native land,” the realm of poetry:

This is the Sovereign Anguish!

This—the signal woe!

These are the patient ‘Laureates’

Whose voices—trained—below—

Ascend in ceaseless Carol—

Inaudible, indeed

To us—the duller scholars

Of the Mysterious Bard!

She longs to soar as one of a company of poets, but she dwells in the Dickinson Homestead with her mother and father and sister. Dickinson cannot speak of matters of theology because these members of her family all belong to the Congregational Church and continue to adhere to a type of spiritual thinking that she has long since thrown off.

Therefore, both her speech and her writing, as they concern spirituality, are limited greatly to being developed in the privacy of her own company.

Though Dickinson knows what she refuses to believe in dogma and begins to compile her thoughts in poetry of numinous expression, she continues to struggle late in her twenties with the outlines of what she has worked out as a viable point of view on immortality. Alfred Habegger gives an account of what he describes as Dickinson's "struggling to devise a nonorthodox 'hope' of her own" (355). Using one of Dickinson's earliest poems, "Adrift! A little boat adrift!" Habegger analyzes the metrical pattern to show that she uses common meter to set up the basic situation:

Adrift! A little boat adrift!  
And night is coming down!  
Will *no* one guide a little boat  
Unto the nearest town? (Fr 6)

After a second stanza in the same orthodox meter, he says, Dickinson breaks free of the pattern, as she does in other poems, to direct attention "to the moment of transition from mortal life to immortality" as the boat "Retrimmed its masts—redecked its sails— / And shot—exultant on!" This poem, he argues, "is a clever performance that neatly wraps up matters still at issue for the writer" (355). On to where, one does not yet know; thus, such a facile conclusion, as mentioned earlier, does not truly represent Dickinson's reasoning. At this point in the family saga, says Habegger, Austin has chosen conversion, but Emily chooses "not affirmation, as in 'Adrift! A little boat adrift!' but mystery" (356). Thus, though Dickinson has turned her mind toward the imagined and desired ending of her journey, she has not yet found the pathway to navigate with

certainty toward the goal; she has not yet found the words to express her growing image of the universe.

As Dickinson continues to grapple with the thought of death, she concentrates more and more upon truth, knowing instinctively that, for her, truth is the basis of all her ponderings, the stability upon which she can build. In her poem “I like a look of Agony,” she explains clearly and grippingly her concept of truth:

I like a look of Agony,  
Because I know it's true—  
Men do not sham Convulsion,  
Nor simulate, a Throe—  
  
The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—  
Impossible to feign  
The Beads upon the Forehead  
By homely Anguish strung. (Fr 339)

Typically, Dickinson does not comment upon the situation; she presents it as a tableau: she unites truth and death; she portrays the truth in death to let the reader experience the scene through her eyes and draw conclusions.

The effort to face truth squarely, to try to piece out a pattern of existence, often causes Dickinson her own moments of anguish. Also, transcribing her thoughts into written word may cause an added pain. Sometimes, the reader may have to turn to the end of her life, where Dickinson gathers words to explain circumstances. For instance, after receiving a sympathy note from her Norcross cousins upon the death of Judge Lord,

she may describe the process of producing poetry as she writes, “I work to drive the awe away, yet awe impels the work” (L 891). Poetry is both a *force* of creation and a *product* of creation. Understanding the process, however, does not always make accomplishment trouble-free, as the following poem demonstrates:

It is easy to work when the soul is at play—

But when the soul is in pain—

The hearing him put his playthings up

Makes work difficult—then—

It is simple, to ache in the Bone, or the Rind—

But Gimlets—among the nerve—

Mangle daintier—terribler—

Like a Panther in the Glove— (Fr 242)

Nothing can cause more terrible pain in the human body than trauma to a nerve, so it follows that “Gimlets” gouging the neural pathways of the soul will also cause pain of horrible proportions. Trying to formulate and define the parameters of the soul while enduring the pain of confusion must be a formidable task indeed.

Emerson, writing in his journal in 1859, denies the ability of a woman to even conduct such a search. Speaking of forceful expression, he declares, “Now & then, rarely comes a stout man like Luther, Montaigne, Pascal, Herbert, who utters a thought or feeling in a virile manner, and it is unforgettable. Then follow any number of spiritual eunuchs and women who talk about that thought, imply it, in pages & volumes” (qtd. in Porte 484). Then, Emerson divorces his current knowledge of female writing from the

possibility of having produced any memorable thought. Emerson's words seem quite callous, actually, because he had spent much time in the company of Margaret Fuller as they both contributed to and edited the *Dial*, which Lawrence Buell describes as "the best known Transcendentalist periodical" (21). Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and Fuller, according to Lawrence Buell (1973), wrote in a "religio-aesthetic cast" suited to the *Dial's* subtitle: "A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion"(21). How then can Emerson describe in his journal in 1859 the "[g]reat bands of female souls who only receive the spermatic aura & brood on the same but add nothing," which seems to dismiss Fuller's talents and dedication to art (qtd. in Porte 484)?<sup>5</sup>

Dickinson obviated Emerson's point of view with ease. In her poetry and in her letters, Dickinson constantly discussed, debated, and challenged male points of view and promoted her own original ideas of truth with confidence and authority, regardless of pain, as explored in Chapter Three. More than a decade later, in 1869, Higginson invited Dickinson to Boston to hear Emerson read a paper at Mrs. Sargent's home on the third Monday of the month, followed by a meeting of the New England Woman's Club (L 330a). But by that time, Dickinson no longer traveled from home. Thus, two of the great literary minds of the nineteenth century were never to share and compare their philosophies—who knows with what result?

In her poetry, Dickinson moves beyond Emerson's Transcendentalism to a farther-reaching philosophy, one that relies on the self in relation to time and matter, a metaphysical relationship that embraces nature but also goes beyond the material world. Karl Keller declares, "[W]hen she has at it with Emerson's man-versus-nature obsession, she plays a turncoat in his camp, seeing what Emerson calls a tragic breach in the integral

scheme of nature as a fortunate situation forcing man to make his own games in the great, new dark” (159). Dickinson differs from Emerson because she sees beyond even his views by further transcending the limitations of “inner vision” in her poems. Michelle Kohler writes that Emerson “posits transparent, disembodied vision as one means to metaphorical language” (29). “Dickinson’s visual metaphors, in contrast,” says Kohler, “often resist the equation between human sight and meaningful unity with nature, and many of her poems explicitly deny the disembodiment that facilitates a conceptual equation between sight and discovered meaning” (29).<sup>6</sup> Kohler’s point of view makes sense because to me Dickinson’s engagement with the process of locating meaning makes her a participant in, not a receiver of, poetic inspiration. Kohler seems to say the same thing: “Dickinson’s demonstration of the fact that notions of vision are constructed through the metaphorical use of language reverses Emerson’s argument that vision is the *source* of metaphorical language” (34). Kohler argues further that “by carrying out her critique through grammar and metaphor, [Dickinson] draws our attention specifically to linguistic representations of vision and metaphors in which the physical act of vision functions as the figure for the ‘discovery’ of union, knowledge, and poetic language” (37). As a poet, then, Dickinson struggles to put into words what she has helped to create. She does not merely channel an inspired thought or vision into words; she moves *from herself* to the source of inspiration and brings back *to herself* the idea that she then formulates into a concrete description of the experience.

Emerson, too, opens his mind to the infinite, but he seems to accept an ethereal gift passively. Emerson writes earlier in the century, “Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute

natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite.”<sup>7</sup> Dickinson describes the conquering of the darkness in the poem “The Admirations—and Contempts—of time—” (Fr 830) and carries Emerson’s transcendental vision of man as the “creator in the finite” to a higher degree of understanding:

’Tis Compound Vision—  
Light—enabling Light—  
The Finite—furnished  
With the Infinite—  
Convex—and Concave Witness—  
Back—toward Time—  
And forward—  
Toward the God of Him—

What the speaker sees now, in other words, is the possibility that the finite brain becomes furnished with the infinite capacity to understand the energy of the universe.

I see in this poem a continuation of thought that may be based on Dickinson’s reading of Milton and Wordsworth and that could show the extent of her point of view. Claire Colebrook juxtaposes two closely related lines: Milton closes *Paradise Lost*, “The world was all before them” (1667) and Wordsworth, whom Emerson visited in Europe, paraphrases Milton in *The Prelude*, “The earth is all before me” (1850); (qtd. in Colebrook 10). Familiar with the writing of all three men and engaged in her own statements of spirituality, Dickinson, through her persona, seems to speak from a position of unfettered awareness. Having thrown off the limitations associated with Calvinism

and social custom, she seems to look beyond earthly bonds and say in the above poem, “The unfolding of spirituality is all before me.” Colebrook states that many contemporary critics argue “great poetry takes place when a poet abandons their [sic] hopes for salvation within history and instead turns to the compensations of imaginative or poetic resolution” (14). She points to M. H. Abrams (1971), “who argued that the best Romantic poetry was written when poets abandoned historical and political hopes for change and embarked upon purely aesthetic and spiritual resolutions” (14). In Dickinson’s retiring from society and her subsequent poetic output, I see just such a search for spiritual resolutions. Dickinson concentrates on her relationship to the infinite to explore her need to understand and embrace metaphysical concepts.

Dickinson provides a moment of spiritual scrutiny in her poem “The Brain—is wider than the Sky—,” and she deftly draws in the reader as a participant in the experience:

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—

For—put them side by side—

The one the other will contain

With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—

For—hold them—Blue to Blue—

The one the other will absorb—

As Sponges—Buckets—do—

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— (Fr 598)

Here, the speaker relies upon her intuition and finds a parallel between the capacity of her understanding and divinity. The difference between Syllable and Sound, according to Suzanne Juhasz, is “the difference between undifferentiated power and language as a specific form of that power” (27). In the comparison, she says, “Dickinson finds her brain and God to be equivalent” (27). Dominic Luxford says this poem

shows the internalization of God, in the form of His divine inspiration, followed by the externalization of Him: Dickinson’s “language as a specific form of that power.” What we as readers experience, then, is the externalization of that first encounter with the divine. The final step: By reading [this poem], we internalize that externalization, and therefore we mime Dickinson’s original internalization of His power; we have taken Dickinson’s initial place as the subject experiencing the sublime object.  
(7)

Dickinson not only fulfills her quest to experience the divine but also provides the poem as the vehicle through which the reader shares the experience. Luxford sees Dickinson’s purpose as seeking to understand the artistic forces within her. “The combination of Dickinson’s religious skepticism with her intense spiritual awareness,” he says, “encourages us to believe that the ‘he’ of [this poem] represents an effort to externalize God, the unknown and unknowable source of her remarkable creative power” (8).

However, Dickinson here has already explored the question, says Luxford, and implies “that the source of something’s effect does not actually come from an external stimulus, but instead from within the experiencing subject”; then, he says, as mentioned above, “she takes us with her to that realm—the realm of the supersensible, numinous or extra-intuitive” (9). In this realm, Dickinson explores the brain that to her was “wider than the Sky,” and writes the poems of discovery. When she engages the reader in the process of experiencing divinity, she addresses a concept that most people wonder about; some repeat by rote the religious training they have received and think no more about the subject. Others question and find no answer. As Dickinson words her poems, a careful reader can participate with her in the discovery of meaning and can apply that meaning to a personal philosophy. Just as she asked Higginson for instruction to understand “Dawn” and “Sunset,” not wanting to face them in an uncomprehending, awkward state, she formulates poetry that helps the reader to understand the wonders of existence. Dickinson changes the unknowable to an experience of human capability so that we, as well as “the only Kangaroo among the Beauty,” can indeed take part fully in “Dawn” and “Sunset” as participants of equal luminescence. I see the entire process as her greatest legacy.

In addition to the ongoing exploration of divinity, Dickinson’s writing expresses the pain that tried the faith of the nation during the Civil War. Dickinson begins to send her convictions in condolences, such as the closing of this letter to Louise and Fanny Norcross when Frazer Stearns is killed in March of 1861: “Let us love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do” (L 255). With not a single mention of paradise, “So our part in Frazer is done,” writes Dickinson, “but you must come next summer, and we will mind

ourselves of this young crusader—too brave that he could fear to die. We will play his tunes—maybe he can hear them.” Again, one perceives Dickinson’s language expressing the stark reality, tempered perhaps with hope, but totally lacking platitudes of faith.<sup>8</sup> In this letter, Dickinson mentions a “minie ball,” and says, “I had read of those—I didn’t think that Frazer would carry one to Eden with him.” “To Eden,” she says, to the perfect, peaceful garden, not to Heaven.

Late in 1861, Dickinson experiences a shattering event or circumstance that seems to have been the catalyst that drove her to an enormous surge of writing. Truth of a portentous and catastrophic nature comes to Dickinson in what she calls a “terror—since September,” which she writes about to Higginson in April of 1862 (L 261). Though several theories have been proposed, no one can say for sure exactly what happened in her life to cause what many critics describe as a nervous breakdown. Johnson attributes a small number of letters, sixteen in all, to the year, and only one—to Edward S. Dwight with condolences for his wife’s death—is dated September. However, in a “Master,” letter—one of several that Dickinson directed toward an unknown recipient—she begins, “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?*” (L 233). Obviously, the passion Dickinson expresses here shakes her composure profoundly, and her wounds are deep. Speculation names Samuel Bowles, Charles Wadsworth, or even Susan Gilbert Dickinson, among several others, as possible recipients of Dickinson’s ardent attentions, the “Master” to whom she writes. No one knows, but the unattainability of the person upon whom she focuses her affection and the subsequent renunciation of an attachment

may cause Dickinson to despair. In the very next letter in Johnson's collection, Dickinson mentions to Louise and Fanny, "Think Emily lost her wits—but she found 'em, likely. Don't part with wits long at a time in this neighborhood" (L 234). Dickinson's confusion, even if flippant, shows clearly that at the moment she seems unsure of both the losing and the finding, but she understands the danger of being without her wits for any length of time. Although perhaps depending upon a too-literal interpretation, one may wonder why Dickinson fears losing her wits in her "neighborhood," why she does not feel safe unless she is on guard. If she is in error and has indeed not "found 'em," then she could be facing a true emotional peril.

Dickinson communicates exactly that sentiment in subsequent letters to Higginson, which express a profound experience that shook the poet to the core. In her solitariness, however, she can find no solace except that which she provides for herself: "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" (L 261). Though the image of the whistling boy is conventional, her own version of "singing" sustains her. The paragraph contains mention of losses, including a possible reference to Benjamin Newton: "When a little Girl,<sup>9</sup> I had a friend, who taught me Immortality—but venturing too near, himself—he never returned—Soon after, my Tutor, died—and for several years, my Lexicon—was my only companion" (L 261). We do know now that during those years, Dickinson used her Lexicon to construct her poetry, which became her basic support, so she is not telling Higginson the entire truth. The following month she writes again to Higginson and gives him a further glimpse of the actual purpose of her writing, to relieve the "palsy" when "troubled": "My dying Tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet, but

Death was much of Mob as I could master—then—And when far afterward—a sudden light on Orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention—I felt a palsy, here—the Verses just relieve—” (L 265). In this letter, Dickinson thanks Higginson for his critique of her poems, including her “spasmodic” and “uncontrolled” presentation, which she politely acknowledges, but for which she does not apologize. She then asks Higginson if he will be her “friend” and “Preceptor” and willing to read the poems that she produces. Her request, following the side-stepping of his already stated assessment, seems to ask if Higginson will accept her with her faults, perhaps in spite of them.

Though the wording of the letter asks for a leader, and Dickinson says she will ask if she “told it clear,” she promises no revision of poems to suit his taste, no reorganization of habits to suit his sensibilities. She will simply continue to do “what I do” and would like to include Higginson in her circle. In later letter, she does say, “I will be patient, constant, never reject the knife,” which indicates promised compliance with Higginson’s critique (L 316).

The absorption in the act of creating poetry, the vocation that Dickinson depends upon at this time to relieve her troubles, brings its own problem, the fear that there will never be enough time to express everything swirling within the poet’s brain. Millicent Todd Bingham sees a possibility to explain Dickinson’s horrible unease as “the terror that haunts the creative thinker lest there may not be time before the final curtain falls in which to put down on paper the thoughts pounding within him” (*Emily Dickinson’s Home* 413). Bingham goes on, “Keats put this sense of pressure into a mighty sonnet— ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be / Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain . . . ’” (413-14). Alluding directly to Dickinson’s “terror since September,”

Bingham writes, “The effect of shock after shock throughout many months, against the background of fratricidal strife [Civil War], is enough to explain her distress” (420).

Critical discussion of Dickinson’s distress provides many other theories as well. Vivian Pollak suggests that Dickinson “explained her terror” to Higginson in early June 1862, as the loss of Newton (*A Historical Guide* 14), or perhaps as “an event . . . that Dickinson experienced as a death” (15). Habegger disagrees. Dickinson’s terror, he says, “was a recognition of something permanent: the disconnection between her heart’s absolutism and the realities of life. Painful and transforming, it brought a final sense of isolation, abandonment, rejection” (436). If Habegger is correct, and I think he is, Dickinson may have experienced an immobilizing trauma, understanding a condition that she could not change, that she found nearly impossible to endure, and that only poetry could salve.

Though Habegger and Pollak offer different reasons for Dickinson’s suffering, the result remains the same—she wrote through her pain. Heinz Ickstadt speaks of Dickinson’s “rigorous exploration of the limits of consciousness on the verge of extinction or of a total collapse of meaning” as seen in the poem beginning “Finding is the first Act,” which ends, “Finally, no Golden fleece— / Jason—sham—too” (Fr 910); (60). In this poem, though Dickinson suffers, she does not hesitate to articulate her conclusion in a staccato statement. Suffering only emphasizes the need to express reason for the suffering.

Writing to friends becomes more and more Dickinson’s passion and method of visiting, in place of physical contact, and she continues to use breezy language to describe somewhat solemn circumstances. To Samuel Bowles, she writes, “God is not so wary as we, else he would give us no friends, lest we forget him! The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded [sic] I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally”

(L 193). Dickinson's "Heaven in the hand," a metaphor for a treasured relationship, precisely describes the value she places on friendship. In addition, in a letter to Sue, Dickinson writes, "*You* may tell, when 'the seal' is opened; *Mat* may tell when they 'fall on their faces'—but I shall be lighting the lamps then in my new house—and I cannot come" (L 194). Johnson explains, "The allusion . . . is to Revelation 7.11: 'And all the angels . . . fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God'" (*Letters* 195n). Dickinson, having constructed a new house of faith, will be too busy providing her own light to fall on her face in someone else's Heaven to worship someone else's God. Whicher explains, "[H]er bump of reverence was small. . . . The sayings of Holy Writ were not sacred to her unless they proved true when tested by her own experience" (154).<sup>10</sup> Dickinson's familiarity with the Bible gave her an enormous reserve to draw upon as examples of situations to illustrate meaning in her letters, and her ready wit provided ample play on words to suit her mood and purpose. But she took nothing as axiomatic simply because it was scriptural.

### Two Major Characteristics of Dickinson's Poetry

While Dickinson addresses the discovery and scrutiny of the soul, she develops two distinctive characteristics of her poetry: first, one of the most powerful characteristics of her poetry, a device Jay Leyda calls the "omitted center," a concealment of the obvious (1: xxi); second, the necessity to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" (Fr 1263). Dickinson adopts these processes as her plan of self-preservation and the preservation of her poetry. In a discussion of her spirituality, a close examination of these two characteristics is necessary to understand the heart of her thinking and writing, as well as her decision to

avoid publication yet preserve her poems.

Dickinson guarded her poems with care, sharing them frugally with family and friends; Leyda says Dickinson used the omitted center even in her letters “to increase the privacy of her communication,” relying on veiled allusions that the recipient would understand immediately but that increase the problems of today’s readers “in piercing that privacy” (xxi). For instance, Leyda offers Dickinson’s correspondence with Judge Otis Lord and her Shakespearean quote, “And very Sea-Mark of my utmost sail.” Leyda says that “she knows that he will feel the warmth of the unquoted line: Here is my journey’s end” (1: xxii). This type of shorthand made communication even more intimate than that provided by the ordinary letter.

Dickinson’s use of the omitted center in her poetry also allows her to address the topics central to her passion not only in the guarded riddles that she loves, but also with the use of a poetic device that becomes a defining characteristic of her art. Leyda analyzes the strategy: “Many of her best poems (perhaps especially the best ones) screen their kernel from a superficial reading,” but, he warns, one must avoid the “very real danger” of using Dickinson’s device to insert any meaning that the explicator chooses “by showing more and more of the real background” of the poems (1: xxii). I see the stratagem of the omitted center as a means of understanding the poem in context, within Dickinson’s historical point of view in each instance, which provides the reader with a much greater accuracy in determining possible meanings. Dobson says Dickinson may have developed the omitted center because “[u]nnameable experience requires cautious articulative approach,” and Dickinson’s use of such a device “indicates an overpowering need to speak of something that must be omitted from the text” (123). Dobson uses the

poem “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” to emphasize her point, deciding that trying to determine the poet’s intention results in “something in the nature of an exercise in futility” (Fr 764). The poem, Dobson declares, may represent anger, ambition, sexuality, “or some intertwined combination of the three,” and calls the poem “Dickinson’s expressive anxiety at its height” (123). The combination of passion and frustration in withholding the articulation of that passion typifies the best of Dickinson’s poetry.

I perceive that anxiety as involving the intensity of her unfolding spirituality and the need to conceal her insights, even from those close to her, in poems with omitted centers. The omitted center, I find, is a deliberately constructed device that holds Dickinson’s most heartfelt concerns and positions. However, David Porter calls the absent center “a void . . . that vacancy at the heart of her consciousness.” Porter says, “Emily Dickinson is the only major American poet without a project” (152). Walt Whitman, for instance, wrote and revised *Leaves of Grass* almost interminably. Dickinson, on the other hand, wrote of diverse subjects in scattered bits. However, I cannot fully agree with Porter because I find that the omitted center is in itself a major project, which Dickinson devised and perfected as a deliberate act of cognition and intent. Porter elaborates his point of view: “Dickinson found herself without the support of a comfortable, unexamined Christian design,” which sounds absolutely straightforward. He continues, “Fundamentally, it was the loss of outside authority, and for Dickinson this loss of an ordering power was particularly vivid and personally disabling” (155). In addition, Porter mentions in passing Dickinson’s withdrawal, saying, “Dickinson was a child of that confusion” that marked “part of the disintegration

underway in the culture” (155). And amidst that confusion Porter places Dickinson. Porter's point of view seems to mark Dickinson as a receiver of circumstance, whereas I see Dickinson's active *appropriation* of authority. Porter notes that she did produce “words of power and surprise,” but that these words represented only “the irrepressible will to speak” to express a “frenetic consciousness” (158). He does not mention the possibility of design that I see in Dickinson's work; instead, he sees the device as a failing: “Lacking a project that would allow her to confront experience let alone organize it, Dickinson did not . . . even embrace the God of the organized Church” (166). I see instead Dickinson's purpose in using the omitted center to explain the turning away from the God of the organized Church.

In her poem “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” she expresses quite clearly a second important characteristic of her poetry, the necessity to veil the truth: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant— / Success in Circuit lies / Too bright for our infirm Delight / The Truth's superb surprise / As Lightning to the Children eased / With explanation kind / The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—” (Fr 1263). The slanted truth lay in Dickinson's “absent center”; I find it when I search her poetry for the “explanation kind” that will “ease” the spirit as a quiet clarification of the wonders of lightning comforts frightened children. Those who do not search slowly, do not approach Truth “gradually,” may be “blind” and thus miss the point entirely.

“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant” to me is the essence of Dickinson's poetry. The message she has to reveal does not fit a traditional concept of spirituality, thus cannot be presented to a nineteenth-century audience in a straightforward manner. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, however, looks upon the poem “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—” from

a traditionally Biblical point of view and maintains that the “‘blinding’ gift of enlightenment” that confounded Paul “who had not yet been converted to the teachings of Christ” was the same “‘*blinding* truth of God, that Dickinson was urged to accept almost two thousand years after the Redeemer had come and gone” (153). Wolff continues, “Whenever an individual had been converted, her *sight* would be ‘adjusted’ so that she could ‘*see*’ the evidences of God’s promises throughout creation” (153). I think Wolff’s turning Dickinson’s words to suit “God’s promises” is a problematic reading of content that limits Dickinson’s vision. Wolff does, however, say, “The poet purges God’s language, even as Jesus purged the merchants from the Temple, and the poet sings Truth” (159). But in this instance I see a different “Truth.”

As Dickinson builds her poems around the omitted center and slanted truth, she goes through a process of questioning many of the teachings of her church. Death intrigues Dickinson and causes her to express her anguish, but she does so in terms that sound blasphemous in comparison to doctrine learned in her childhood. In the poem “Some, too fragile for winter winds,” she describes the graveyard and the little children who lie there: “Early aged, and often cold, / Sparrows, unnoticed by the Father— / Lambs for whom time had not a fold” (Fr 91). Since Dickinson had long before learned that God was supposed to notice every sparrow that fell and Jesus gathered the little children as a shepherd did his lambs, her words ring heavily and poignantly; they lack a certainty of the cushion of faith that would mitigate the sense of loss. At about the same time (c. 1859), Dickinson’s persona speaks of someone who died who “Took up her simple wardrobe / And started for the sun” (Fr 154). Though Dickinson does in the same poem mention “Angels” and “gate,” the person does not move toward heaven, but toward the

blazing star. Heaven as a concept of a serene celestial home does not exist in this poem; the image of a consuming energy does. The concept of sun related to power surfaces often in Dickinson's writing. Wendy Barker says, "Dickinson writes of disappointment and loss in terms of sunlight," and in this case, the sense of loss to a higher power seems to fit (23).

The themes of death and heaven continue to weigh upon Dickinson's consciousness, and she contemplates her own demise in the poem that begins, "I think just how my shape will rise— / When I shall be 'forgiven'—" (Fr 252). The quotation marks around "forgiven" perhaps denote a feeling of questioning the need for forgiveness, the traditional meaning of the word possibly not applicable to the situation. Dickinson ponders in this poem her position as "The 'Sparrow' of your Care—"; however, her last stanza displays the struggle within her to adhere to old teachings and the final decision to rebel:

And so I con that thing—"forgiven"—  
Until—delirious—borne—  
By my long bright—and *longer—trust—*  
I *drop* my Heart—*unshriven!*

At first glance, the format of the poem shows words common to Calvinistic speech in quotes that may represent something other than true feeling. In the last stanza, after careful perusal of the concept of "forgiven," the speaker prefers to depend upon a "*trust*," rather than upon doctrine. The last word, emphasized with both italics and an exclamation point, seems to represent very strong feeling in the belief of the speaker's own thought process and resultant decision. Taking Leyda's advice and searching known

happenings in Dickinson's life at the time, about 1861, to show more of Dickinson's "real background," as Leyda says, I find a note to Sue that, Johnson conjectures, hints at a tension developing between Dickinson and Sue "when the infant Ned began to absorb Sue's attention" (*Letters* 381n). Though Johnson's interpretation of the note may not pertain directly to the poem, possibly Dickinson does ask forgiveness of Sue for some misunderstanding. In the end, however, Dickinson's persona seems to rely on the trust in the relationship to support the bond; whatever the situation that prompted the poem, she drops the necessity of forgiveness and turns a discussion of faith into one of earthly devotion.

At approximately the same time, Dickinson produces "I've known a Heaven, like a Tent— / To wrap its shining Yards— / Pluck up its stakes, and disappear—" (Fr 257). This Heaven leaves "No Trace—no figment of the Thing / That dazzled, Yesterday." Instead, it is "Dissolved as utterly— / As Bird's far Navigation / Discloses just a Hue—." Certainly, "Heaven" could mean the subject of the Master Letters, but it could just as easily mean the Heaven of Dickinson's childhood that has vanished: "A plash of Oars, a Gaiety— / Then swallowed up, of View." Redemption, also, seems to have suffered in her estimation. She writes in one of the so-called Master Letters supposedly sent to a lover (recipient unknown), "I heard of a thing called 'Redemption'—which rested men and women. You remember I asked you for it—you gave me something else. I forgot the Redemption [in the Redeemed]" (L 233). That Dickinson can arrange and rearrange words such as Redemption and Heaven to suit herself demonstrates an appropriation of personal power, contrary to expectations of propriety, both male and female, in the mid-nineteenth century, and shows a mind able to formulate concepts of spirituality that she

was not taught.

Dickinson also speaks freely of her interpretation of scripture in a letter to her cousin John L. Graves in late April 1856 that gives readers a bit of foreshadowing of the way her late twenties will unfold: “It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal—when air and earth are *full* of lives that are gone—and done—and a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection!” (L 184). In the same letter she exclaims: “To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and *next* time, try the upper air—is no schoolboy’s theme!” Habegger asks parenthetically if the last remark may be “a glance at her poems?” and their emphasis on mortality (348). Apparently Dickinson’s preoccupation with such thoughts becomes a topic of conversation with her acquaintances by 1860. She has dealt with the deaths of friends, the move from the Pleasant Street house back to the Homestead, her mother’s long illness, the marriages of many of her contemporaries, including Austin and Sue, and the Great Awakening and its pressures. The pressures of emotional happenings and the ever-present threat of mortality and question of immortality led her to constant mention of these topics in her correspondence. So pervasive was her tone, says Richard Sewall, that Joseph Lyman commented to his fiancée, “Emily Dickinson I did like very much and do still. But she is rather morbid & unnatural” (65). Habegger calls Lyman’s remark “the one contemporary account of her state of mind” and notes, “[A]s the only family member still unconverted . . . her sense of pariahhood grew more acute” (348, 349). The only person in her immediate family not a member of the church, in the midst of an intense religious revival, Dickinson must have felt a distancing of alarming proportions from those she loved, which isolated her in her own home with her thoughts as companions. In early summer

1858, according to Johnson, she writes to her Uncle Joseph Sweetser, “Much has occurred, dear Uncle, since my writing you—so much—that I stagger as I write, in its sharp remembrance” (L 190). A few lines later, she says, “God gives us many cups”; many of hers, it seems, runneth over with bitter wine.

As Dickinson firms her outlook, she writes emphatically, “I’m ceded—I’ve stopped being Theirs—” (Fr 353). The poem very nearly describes her religious upbringing and her eventual stepping away from it—a stepping away, however, with a sense of divesting herself of the unnecessary trappings of Calvinism and assuming a definite spiritual identity. The poem is worth looking at in its entirety because it shows how completely she has turned from doctrine to her choice of the spiritual thinking that will, for her, fill “Existence’s whole Arc”:

I’m ceded—I’ve stopped being Theirs—  
The name They dropped upon my face  
With water, in the country church  
Is finished using, now,  
And They can put it with my Dolls,  
My childhood, and the string of spools,  
I’ve finished threading—too—

In this stanza, Dickinson declares the ceremony of baptism as fulfillment of a childish need no longer applicable to her situation. “I’m ceded,” she says, not “I have ceded,” indicating a state of being, a state of assumed power, not an isolated behavior; she will not change or be changed back to her previous condition. In the following stanzas, she is “Called” “With Will to choose,” indicating that it is she who acts and is not merely acted

upon.

Baptized, before, without the choice,  
But this time, consciously, of Grace—  
Unto supremest name—  
Called to my Full—The Crescent dropped—  
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,  
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank—too small the first—  
Crowned—Crowing—on my Father's breast—  
A half unconscious Queen—  
But this time—Adequate—Erect,  
With Will to choose, or to reject,  
And I choose, just a Crown—

The capitalized adjectives may show here the importance of her current state; if, as it seems, she has chosen ego strength, then she pursues a deliberate path that will enable her to continue to construct her life.

One of the poems representing a sense of self that generated tremendous response upon publication is “God is a distant—stately Lover—” (Fr 615). In this poem, Dickinson toys with God's word, using her own “hyperbolic archness” to make her point:

God is a distant—stately Lover—  
Woos, as He states us—by His Son—  
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship—

“Miles”, and “Priscilla” were such an One—

But, lest the Soul—like fair “Priscilla”

Choose the Envoy—and spurn the Groom

Vouches, with hyperbolic archness—

“Miles”, and “John Alden” were Synonyme—

Cynthia Griffin Wolff appreciates Dickinson’s tone as one of “elegant urbanity” (273). Dickinson can sound urbane only because she feels comfortable speaking so. The Rev. Brooke Herford, in response to S. J. Burrows’s publication of the poem in *The Christian Register* on April 2, 1891, writes: “It is one of the most offensive bits of contemptuous Unitariansim that I have met with” (qtd. in Bingham, *Ancestors’ Brocades* 125). But does he object to the uniting of God and Jesus, or does he object to the tone of the poem? Bingham says that she cannot see “that it is any more irreverent or daring than the metaphors used in the Song of Solomon which the church has regarded as of divine inspiration, nor any worse than the metaphors representing the Church as the Bride of Christ in the Apocalypse” (125). Then, Bingham addresses the crux of the matter: “But it makes some difference whether such a poem has the stamp of traditional authority upon it or not” (125). Dickinson’s acquiring authority for herself, without asking permission or approval, defines the work.

A sense of authority legitimizes Dickinson’s intuition. In the poem “I dwell in Possibility—” Dickinson muses, describing the world of her mind; “A fairer House than Prose— / More numerous of Windows— / Superior—for Doors—” (Fr 466). Robert Weisbuch says, “Possibility is Emily Dickinson's synonym for poetry. Its house alone

affords sufficient opportunities for observation and for voyages through perceived vistas” (1). Therefore, though she does not precisely identify the “House” as the dwelling place of her spirituality, “Possibility” allows Dickinson to state what she wants in her poetry, perhaps within a “fairer House” than the prose of her Calvinistic background allows—more windows to provide the light for revelation, more doors for the entering of enlightened thought. According to Suzanne Juhasz, “Possibility is a concept: it is the idea of the imagination itself, where what has not occurred in external reality may be thought of as occurring” (“I dwell In Possibility” 105). Dickinson ends the poem thus: “For Occupation—This— / The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise—.” In the realm of possibility, Dickinson can gather as much perfection as she can hold, as much as she can understand at the moment; though her “narrow” hands may have a hard job juggling the truths she discovers, her purpose is to spread her hands “wide” to encompass “as much of a mob” of understanding as she can. Robert Weisbuch conjectures, “Because possibilities are endless, Dickinson’s poetry posits no final truths. ‘Love to your World—or Worlds,’ she corrects herself in a letter to her friend Mrs. Holland (L 521). This is a poet who will submit neither to borrowed dogma nor to any one world of her own hopeful making. She will not stop thinking” (1). And she will not stop transforming those thoughts into poetry.

At the end of her life, Dickinson writes in March 1886 to Sarah Tuckerman, who has just lost her husband, Edward, “I will not let thee go, except I bless thee,” an unusual reversal of Biblical phrasing (L 1035). Johnson notes that the letter “seems to be in the nature of a farewell”; the quotation, he says, is from Genesis 32.26, in which Jacob, wrestling with the angel, says, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me,” which

Dickinson inverts (*Letters* 898n). Sewall calls the inversion “sublime,” and suggests, “Such breathtaking authority becomes credible only in the light of the long, slow, hard pilgrimage, with every step honored and all honestly” (725). Dickinson had actually documented her concept of Jacob’s struggle when she was approximately twenty-eight years old in the poem that begins “A little East of Jordan,” and ends, “And the bewildered Gymnast / Found he had worsted God!” (Fr 145); the topic informed much of her life.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff offers a detailed discussion of Dickinson’s relationship with Jacob, who, she says, “acquired a covenant from God not through passive obedience to the Lord, but by means of active combat with Him. Moreover, Jacob was the first Biblical patriarch to win inheritance and covenant in such a way” (144). In nineteenth-century Amherst, says Wolff, Jacob’s struggle with God had “acquired new emphasis” as a model for all Christians “who sincerely strove for belief” (144). Since Dickinson did sincerely search her heart to understand as fully as possible the divine, Jacob’s triumph was very real to her. Wolff says that “from childhood” Dickinson had heard adults encourage each other “to embrace God’s will” as Jacob had. At Mount Holyoke, too, Wolff says, Dickinson “had been instructed to wrestle as Jacob” to achieve “the coveted goal of confident faith” (144). The language of physical Image of confrontation is prominent in Dickinson’s poetry. Wolff states that six of Dickinson’s poems “are explicit recastings of the moment when Jacob struggled with the Lord,” and a large number of poems contain the verbs, “wrestle,” “grapple,” and “strive,” all of which, says Wolff, indicate spiritual struggle (145). As Dickinson worked her way through her struggle to identify her faith, she found herself unable to surrender to Christ. Wolff says that, in her refusal to submit and undergo a conversion, Dickinson “set herself apart from the great

tradition of religious lyric” because she found in the world “not hopeful promises, but shabby deceptions” (146). The sense of betrayal that Dickinson experienced and her reaction to it led her to adopt an autonomy that gave her strength to turn from the need and wish to give herself up to God as a supplicant.

Instead, Dickinson cast blame upon God for his desertion of her and for her subsequent loss of faith as in the following poem:

To lose one’s faith—surpass  
The loss of an Estate—  
Because Estates can be  
Replenished—faith cannot—  
  
Inherited with Life—  
Belief—but once—can be—  
Annihilate a single clause—  
And Being’s—Beggary— (Fr 632)

As Dickinson analyzes her loss of faith, she must reorganize her thinking to replace the deficit; both analysis and results she documents in her poetry. Wolff pinpoints Jacob's struggle as “a starting point for Dickinson as an artist” (15). Just as Jacob received the “prize” from God—his status as a progenitor of kings and nations, says Wolff—Dickinson claimed her prize as a generator of life in verse (150-51). Dickinson, far from turning from belief in God, asked—and demanded—only fairness from deity. When she did not find it, she took God to task in her poems. Another example of Dickinson's inversion of authority shows in what was probably her last letter to Higginson.

Dickinson read in the *Springfield Republican* that Higginson had not given a reading at a Browning Society meeting because of illness (Johnson, *Letters* 905). Dickinson writes, “Deity—does He live now? / My friend—does he breathe?” (L 1045). In the letter, she seems to ask Higginson if he is alive, but she addresses the letter to God.

As Dickinson followed her intuition, about 1863 the “Flood subject,” immortality, became for her the single most important concept of contemplation and subject of her writing. Sewall says it was “her all-encompassing theme . . . the meaning of eternity in the light of which all things, from childhood to the grave, must now be seen” (572). She probes her feelings in poems such as the one that begins, “Because I could not stop for Death—”:

Because I could not stop for Death--  
He kindly stopped for me--  
The carriage held but just Ourselves--  
And Immortality. (Fr 479).

Sewall points out that Ruth Miller reads the poem as Dickinson's “dedication to the deepest of all themes, the one that subsumes all others in her poetry” (573n). Unlike the dramatic responses of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley when they recognized the power of poetry in themselves, says Miller, “ED couched her experience in simple, familiar terms--a carriage ride through a country landscape—but the awe and the portentousness of all three of the great Romantics are here” (573n). Describing that carriage ride, Dickinson's persona speaks as if enjoying a pleasant outing:

We slowly drove—He knew no haste  
And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility—

In a configuration that Wolff calls “the structure of narrative as an ordering force,” Dickinson's persona remarks of passing “the School, where Children strove / At Recess,” “Fields of Gazing Grain,” “the Setting Sun.” Then, like a good storyteller, she corrects herself: “Or rather—He passed Us.” One waits to see and hear the obvious ending of the journey.

Curiously, however, there is no final destination. The poem simply stops, as if by afterthought, when the speaker indicates that the action took place “Centuries” ago:

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

“Immortality” was also a passenger in the carriage, so where do the persona and Immortality eventually end up? In her dismissal of the concepts of time and Death, the poet seems to control both. Wolff says that Death “has won no victory” but “has been arrested by the artist” (276). Immortality, then, is left as the companion of the poet, who obviously, since “Centuries” have passed, continues in the frame of reference that has no time—she has conquered immortality. In a letter to Higginson, she reveals a passing thought: “I was thinking today—as I noticed, that the ‘Supernatural,’ was only the Natural, disclosed—Not ‘Revelation—’tis—that waits, / But our unfurnished eyes—” (L280). I argue, therefore, that Dickinson, a woman of strong passions, a fiercely questioning intellect, and a talent for expressing herself in writing, worked through the

terror to find a meaning connecting life and death that transcended terror, and deliberately constructed her own version of immortality, her own ontological argument.

### Dickinson's Increasing Attachment to Home

Dickinson's "terror since September" also very likely contributed to her decision to stay at home, withdrawing more and more completely from society. Leading up to that awful time, however, Dickinson continued to document instances of reticence. Two years earlier, in a letter to Mrs. Holland, Dickinson speaks of hearing the doorbell ring, "and I ran, as is my custom" (L 202). The rest of the letter describes the dramatic confrontation, apologies, and contriteness of the culprit, who is "[o]verwhelmed with disgrace," and "quite chagrined and wretched" to be found out, particularly since Austin is displeased. As time goes on, however, Dickinson avoids assiduously such drama as she withdraws further into her own society and farther into the recesses of the house. She explains to Higginson her attitude toward "shunning Men and Women"—they talk of Hallowed things, aloud—and embarrass my Dog—He and I don't object to them, if they'll exist their side" (L 271). "Their side" becomes for Dickinson a foreign place divided by an abyss from her side.

Dickinson's aversion to the company of "Men and Women" eventually includes the visits of even good friends. When Samuel Bowles returns from Europe, notwithstanding that Dickinson had written passionate letters of concern for his health, she does not walk downstairs to see him. Instead, she sends a short note of apology (L 276), followed by a longer letter that describes his memory as capable of standing alone, "like the best Brocade" and protests that she remained upstairs only so that Vinnie and

Austin could spend more time with him (L 277). Her argument sounds quite hollow, but it demonstrates that Dickinson has begun to feel more secure, and able to express her feelings, only at a distance. As she removes herself from company, she pours her heart out more fully in letters, which become the most basic means of conveying not only reports of her daily activities and her concern for others, but also examples of her poetry that she sends to special recipients.

For example, in the next letter Dickinson consoles her cousins Louise and Fanny on the death of their father, Dickinson's Uncle Loring Norcross. Dickinson herself did not attend the service, nor does she give any indication of such a possibility. Instead, she sends a poem, "It is not dying hurts us so,— / 'Tis living hurts us more" (L 278), printed as "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so—"(Fr 528). The poem affirms the huge mantle of grief that falls upon those who survive a loved one's death and likens those who remain to birds in winter after others have flown to warm southern climes. "We are the birds that stay, / The shiverers round farmers' doors," she writes, so accurately describing the condition of the Norcross cousins and the Dickinson family, who have all lost a beloved person.

Significantly, Dickinson prefaces her poem thus, "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray." This is the second time in approximately six months, according to Johnson's dating, that Dickinson has equated writing poetry to singing. To Dr. and Mrs. Holland she writes, "I found a bird, this morning, down—down—on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody *hears*?" (L 269). The bird replied, "*My* business is to *sing*." In the same letter, Dickinson writes, "*My* business is to love," and in the already mentioned letter that immediately precedes this one, to

Higginson, she declares, “My Business is Circumference” (L 268). In these three statements, Dickinson expresses Love and Circumference in poetry. Examining Dickinson’s literary background, one may look again at Claire Colebrook’s explanation of Wordsworth’s building upon Milton:

When Wordsworth begins *The Prelude*, which is an epic of his own Poetic development, he echoes the closing lines of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “The world was all before them” (Milton 1971: 642 [1667]). Wordsworth’s “The earth is all before me” (Wordsworth 1987: 495 [1850]) serves to locate the poet’s personal history within literary history.

(10)

I see Dickinson’s place in literary history as an extrapolation of these statements into her own belief, which she seems to describe as: “The unfolding of spirituality lies before me.”

As Dickinson works at unfolding her spirituality, she seeks out her own idea of the “natural order,” and carves a place for herself in the privacy of her mind and the physical privacy of her home. She examines Shakespeare, her favorite author, and the divinely ordained hierarchy of the accepted place of serf to lord, lord to king, and king to God. Dickinson knows her place in the order of her community is quite well mapped out; nineteenth-century women, though intelligent, imaginative, and productive, faced the strictures of their society and existed well or poorly according to the talents they could bring to circumvent or resign themselves to the limitations imposed upon them. Many women became famous authors; some supported their families on the proceeds of their writing, but few devoted their craft to expression of and commitment to a personal

approach to spirituality. Joanne Dobson mentions a number of women whose works Dickinson would have known, who wrote primarily to promote a moral message or to provide support for their families (27-28). For instance, says Dobson, Lydia Sigourney and Frances Osgood lived what appeared to be “immodest and free-wheeling” lifestyles as they promoted their writings; Alice Cary supported herself in New York City, and Susan Warner wrote novels to sustain her family; Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and Harriet Beecher Stowe “spoke out boldly on important public issues, such as religious and racial despotism and women's rights” (27). Dickinson has also read Rebecca Harding Davis; she writes to Susan Gilbert Dickinson early in 1861, “Will Susan please lend Emily ‘Life in the Iron Mills’—and accept Blossom” (L 231). Comfortably well off, secure in a loving family, Dickinson chose to avoid such public display of her writing. Of course, everyday life and emotions have to be dealt with: people die, domestic chores cannot be avoided, personal relationships often upset serenity. However, Dickinson keeps the big picture in mind; during the passing of common days, she indulges in uncommon intellectual exercises and produces remarkable literary results.

As Dickinson matures, she avoids the traditional woman’s dreams to pursue a differing view of her own course of life, which actually followed a Christian model and a model of nineteenth-century womanhood: the woman sacrifices herself and her wishes and subordinates them to home and family. However, Dickinson changed the outcome of renunciation, sacrificing the accepted ideal to gain the individual purpose, sacrificing the physical norm to gain intellectual freedom. In her father’s house, Dickinson can both serve the family and remain an individual.

I see Dickinson's choice to remain single as an unfolding of circumstance--she had a different agenda to complete. Adrienne Rich seems to say the same thing; she looks upon Dickinson's not marrying as "neither a pathological retreat as John Cody sees it, nor probably even a conscious decision; it was a fact in her life"<sup>12</sup> (171). Rich uses Dickinson's poems "On my volcano grows the Grass" (Fr 1743) and "A still—Volcano—Life—" to represent Dickinson, "who feels herself to be Vesuvius at home," in the power of her poetic drive (169-70), a conclusion that seems quite in order because it emphasizes that for Dickinson poetry was the consuming force in her life. In addition, Rich says that Dickinson's writing of poetry "*did* wholly occupy her mature years and possess her" and that Dickinson knew her poetry "was of a class by itself" (171). Rich argues, and I see her point as a direct support of my thesis, that Dickinson confronts her power of language and transforms that power into poetry that reverberates with meaning to a new audience. Dickinson spent her life analyzing her thoughts; she endured trials, of course, but as she matured, her poetry became her focus, and her home, to paraphrase Rich, became her writing ground.

The word "house" itself with its many connotations appears in Dickinson's writing as representative of spiritual home, intellectual home for poetry, and actual living space. In addition to all her childhood outpourings about her "dear home!" Dickinson shows an emotional attachment to home as an adult that affords the reader a complexity of engagements. As a Dickinson, she of course had to consider her family's status in Amherst. As a single woman, she was dependent upon her father's support. As a writer, though she sometimes had to do so clandestinely, she arranged her domestic day to include her "real" work. Wolff says, "The word 'House' was fraught with significance

for Emily Dickinson. The Homestead, which had been built by her grandfather, was usually named as ‘my father’s House’ in her letters, a phrase that echoes Jesus’s reference to the Heaven of God the Father” (431). That parallel seems a bit of a stretch because there is a practicality of description here. Dickinson would certainly have said “my home,” to acknowledge the security of the roof over her head, but she would probably not have said “my house,” indicating ownership of the building; therefore, “my father’s House” sounds like an everyday phrase not necessarily associated with a spiritual home.

Though she depended upon her male relatives, Dickinson did not complacently accept the almost invisible role of female in the male hierarchy at home. Instead, says Wolff, “She styled herself a usurper: through her poetry, she would lay claim to the ‘Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory’ of God’s House; by the same means, she would redeem the name Dickinson” (431). Using the poem “Myself was formed—a Carpenter— / An unpretending time,” Wolff argues, “The notion of ‘House’ brings together a number of Dickinson’s concerns: her autonomy, her authority, her right to inherit the earth, her right to possess herself of God’s heroic grandeur as well, and her right to create the poetry through which these ambitions could be realized” (Fr 475); (431). Dickinson’s passion, her purpose, and her method describe Dickinson’s world: “home” means simply everything. She expresses the definition of a spiritual home within in this poem:

The Soul that hath a Guest  
Doth seldom go abroad—  
Diviner Crowd at Home—

Obliterate the need—

And Courtesy forbid

A Host's departure when

Upon Himself be visiting

The Emperor of Men— (Fr 592)

The poem could just as easily stand for Dickinson's actually physically staying at home to entertain that "Diviner Crowd" in her mind. Joanne Dobson compares Dickinson to her contemporaries, many of whom successfully overcame society's restrictions on woman's activities. Dobson reminds readers that Dickinson's withdrawal must not be romanticized: "While isolation may well have been her particular necessary condition for creation, we must not forget that her fear and seclusion cost her dearly in personal pain and limited the range of her experience" (48). Apparently, when Dickinson weighed the costs and benefits, seclusion won.

Dickinson often mentions in her letters reasons for her thoughts and actions. She and Higginson continue to correspond, and the poet describes to him in 1862 a facile reason for withdrawing from company as well as an allusion to topics of higher conversation: "Of 'shunning Men and Women'—they talk of Hallowed things, aloud—and embarrass my Dog—He and I don't object to them, if they'll exist their side" (L 271). Dickinson obviously preferred the company of her dog and her own silent conversation. In November of the same year, she sends the previously mentioned apology to Samuel Bowles because she did not receive him upon his return from Europe. And she writes again to Higginson, who assumed "command of a Negro regiment, in

November 1862,” says Johnson, the activities of which were reported in length in the *Springfield Republican* (Letters 424n). Dickinson asks Higginson very bluntly, “Should you, before this reaches you, experience immortality, who will inform me of the Exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid Death, I entreat you—Sir—It would bereave—Your Gnome” (L 280). There are very few references to the Civil War in Dickinson’s letters, and this one indicates little concerning battles; instead, she concentrates on Higginson: “I trust you may pass the limit of War, and though not reared to prayer—when service is had in Church, for Our Arms, I include yourself” (L 280). The statement offers two oddities: first, that Dickinson says she was not reared to pray; and second, that she aligned herself with the congregation in prayer. In times of peril, apparently, church can still be a comfort to her.

Dickinson’s pleasure in receiving letters amounts to almost a religious experience as she describes in this poem:

The Way I read a Letter's—this—  
'Tis first—I lock the door—  
And push it with my fingers—next—  
For transport it be sure—  
  
And then I go the furthest off  
To counteract a knock—  
Then draw my little Letter forth  
And slowly pick the lock— (Fr 700)

Her stealthy and secretive treatment of the missive implies a great importance, something

that must be addressed in utmost privacy. Then, she adds the definitive touch:

Peruse how infinite I am  
To no one that You—know—  
And sigh for lack of Heaven—but not  
The Heaven God bestow—

Heaven, then, can appear in the shape of words of an absent loved one.

Dickinson communicates a somber mood in much of her work as she does in the poem that begins “Each Life Converges to some Centre—” (Fr 724). “Expressed—or still— / Exists In every Human Nature / A Goal—” says the persona. This goal, “Too fair / for Credibility’s presumption / To mar—,” when “perservered toward,” may not be reached on earth, “But then— / Eternity enable the endeavoring / Again.” The essence of a human being, the speaker seems to avow, lives forever. The language shows Dickinson's pulling away from orthodoxy because the “Eternity” does not encompass Heaven, but time. Her poem “Suspense—is Hostiler than Death—” in its very format causes the reader to participate in the depiction and hold his breath until the very end:

Suspense—is Hostiler than Death—  
Death—tho’soever Broad,  
Is just Death, and cannot increase—  
Suspense—does not conclude—  
  
But perishes—to live anew—  
But just anew to die—  
Annihilation—plated fresh

With Immortality— (Fr 775)

The acerbic quality of the diction, combined with the stark content, represents Dickinson in full control of her voice. She uses that voice also to castigate God in the poem that begins “Remorse—is Memory—awake—,” which ends, “Remorse is cureless—the Disease / Not even God—can heal— / For 'tis His institution—and / The Adequate of Hell—” (Fr 781).

Starting in April 1864, according to Johnson, Dickinson boarded for nearly seven months in Cambridge with her cousins Louise and Fanny Norcross while she visited Dr. Henry W. Williams in Boston for treatment of an eye ailment (*Letters* 429n). During that time, the illness curtailed her writing. The threatened her spirit and denied her the liberty of reading and writing. Proscription of the latter, at least, she occasionally ignores, as in her letter to Vinnie expressing her desire to return home; she asks, “Wont [sic] you help me be patient?” and states, “The Doctor is not willing yet, and He is not willing I should write,” (L 289). The next letter, to Higginson, explains that Dickinson writes in pencil because the doctor “has taken away my pen” (L 290). Higginson had been wounded during the war, but Dickinson’s letter speaks equally of concern for him and for herself. After returning home late in November, 1864, Dickinson suffered further trouble with her eyes and had to take a second series of treatments with Dr. Williams early in 1865 (Johnson, *Letters* 439n). During these periods, Dickinson indulged in few letters and poems until after she finally regained her home in October (Johnson, *Letters* 444n). One can only imagine her relief.

Dickinson’s involvement with eternity and immortality continued in an intense manner even after her greatest output of poetry subsided. It was in the year following her

last doctor's visit to Boston that she wrote to Higginson, "You mention Immortality. This is the 'Flood' subject" (L 319). And again to Higginson she writes, "A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend" (L 330). Obviously, Dickinson expects that the mind will endure—perhaps that her "letters to the World," though lacking her physical substance, will continue to speak for her. At the end of the letter, a short sentence speaks volumes: "You were not aware that you saved my Life." That statement emphasizes the importance Dickinson attached to Higginson's friendship, the relationship that came so soon after the "terror since September." To Perez Cowan she also speaks of existence after death: "I suppose we are all thinking of Immortality, at times so stimulatedly that we cannot sleep. Secrets are interesting, but they are also solemn—and speculate with all our might, we cannot ascertain" (L 332). That constant questioning characterized the rest of Dickinson's life.

When Higginson first visited Dickinson, because she would not travel to see him, he reports to his wife Dickinson's description of poetry: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever 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 [?]" (L 342a). And in the same letter he reveals Dickinson's statement, "Truth is such a *rare* thing it is delightful to tell it." Encapsulated in that visit, though perhaps not overtly recognizable, is the essence of Emily Dickinson: she lives within her father's house to write poems about Truth.

To conclude, by the time Dickinson neared thirty-five years of age, all three of the elements of the triangle that informed her life had blended into a cohesive whole. Dickinson struggles with Calvinism, persistently develops her voice, and stays at home to

produce her poetry. Except for necessary health treatments, that routine had become the norm for her. No one can be absolutely sure, because of lack of dating of Dickinson's poems, of the exact number of poems that she had written by the end of the year 1865. However, the total, according to Johnson and Franklin, nears eleven hundred. In the five years of her greatest productivity, addressed in this chapter, Dickinson also wrote letters that Johnson calls, "the most moving of all, for they reveal the pathos of unrequited yearning and the assurance of a mature artist who cannot expect fame in her lifetime" (*Letters* 388). In April 1862, she writes for the first time to Higginson and begins a lifelong relationship, in the beginning based on Dickinson's request for critique of her poetry. According to Johnson, she sent him four poems (403n). The second letter, however, minimizes her output, "I made no verse—but one or two—until this winter," (L 261), and the third asks if Higginson will be her "Preceptor" (L 265). There is no evidence that Dickinson either leaned upon Higginson for literary wisdom or ever took his advice. Such seems to be the fabric of her life. Dickinson was a self-taught artist who kept in touch with literary and religious communities through men such as Higginson, Bowles, Wadsworth, and Holland. Though by 1866 Dickinson had become a virtual recluse, she also gathered to her an array of family and friends with whom she continued to correspond, and with whom she sometimes visited at home to discuss subjects and people dear to her. Dickinson writes to Higginson in June 1869, in answer to an invitation to visit him in Boston, "You speak kindly of seeing me. Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (L 330). She kept herself private, not just physically in her home, but also within her mind, where she transposed the results of her

lengthy contemplations into the written work that we study today. Except for a series of notes to Sue about the wording of the second stanza of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—” (Fr 124), and discussion with Higginson about three poems to be published for charity (L 676). Dickinson seems to have collaborated with no one. She created for herself an existence in which she was supreme and where she wrestled with the utmost in human thought: ontology, the essence of being. The discussion of Chapter Five addresses the impact of the results of Dickinson’s quest on literary, scientific, religious, and secular fields today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>There is no known manuscript by Dickinson; the poem was transcribed by Susan Dickinson and first published in *The Single Hound* (1914). R. W. Franklin speculates that the last line may have been editorially added. Franklin's supposition may be correct; the final line offers a definite conclusion, not Dickinson's usual style.

<sup>2</sup>This discussion is part of a paper, "Secrets: Emily Dickinson, Calvin, God, and the Unitarian Church," that I presented at the Emily Dickinson International Conference in Trondheim, Norway, in 2001.

<sup>3</sup>Rieke says, "Dickinson sent it (with three other poems) to T. W. Higginson in July 1862; placed it as the final poem in Fascicle 9 (Appendix A); and gave it to two people, one of whom was a member of the Sweetser family who published it in *The Round Table* on 12 March 1864 as 'My Sabbath'" (267). However, Karen Dandurand points to the archaic verb form, "Requireth," which she says first appeared in Johnson and indicates that the poem may be "a vestige of an earlier version that was discarded when, in about 1859, Dickinson entered the poem in Fascicle 5." See Dandurand's explanation of the possibility that the two copies of which Rieke speaks "may have been one and the same" ("New Dickinson War Publications" 26).

<sup>4</sup>For an in-depth discussion of public knowledge and appreciation of Dickinson's poems, see Karen Dandurand's cited publications.

<sup>5</sup>Commenting on Dickinson's poem "Success is counted sweetest," which appeared in *A Masque of Poets*, Dandurand says of Emerson, "Although he did not contribute to the book, as several of his Concord neighbors did, Ralph Waldo Emerson may have taken a particular interest in "Success is counted sweetest," attributed to him by several reviewers. Though we cannot be sure that Emerson read *A Masque of Poets*, we can assume that each of the anonymous contributors to the volume would have been sent a complimentary copy, as Dickinson was" ("Dickinson and the Public" 257).

<sup>6</sup>See Michelle Kohler for a detailed discussion of Dickinson's "I watched the Moon around the House" and "Four Trees—upon a solitary Acre—"to show Dickinson's resisting Transcendental vision.

<sup>7</sup>Chapter VII, "Spirit." *Nature*. 1836.

<sup>8</sup>For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Dickinson and Stearns, see Barton Levi St. Armand.

<sup>9</sup>Habegger remarks that the reference is to Newton. "The misleading words, 'little Girl,' refer to the same age she earlier characterized as 'but a child'—her late teens. As Dickinson aged, this 'Little Girl'hood' of hers (the phrase dates from 1882), seems to have lasted longer and longer in her retrospects, eventually extending to age thirty" (218).

<sup>10</sup>Whicher says, “Like most New Englanders a century ago, Emily Dickinson was saturated in the Bible from early childhood. The use she made of it is a convenient index to the elements of Puritanism that were most valid for her.” Whicher emphasizes, “It is only fair to say, however, that the most outrageously mocking of her poems on Biblical subjects were written in a spirit of frolic and banter for a special audience, her nephew Ned. She was evidently dramatizing the boy’s resentment of over-starched piety. Such verses as those beginning: The Bible is an antique volume / Written by faded men,” says Whicher, “when encountered without explanation in her collected poems seem, and are, out of key. They were no part of her ‘letter to the world’” (254-55).

<sup>12</sup>Rich compares Dickinson’s reclusive life to that of Christina Rossetti: “both women had more primary needs. . . . Unlike Rossetti, Dickinson did not become a religiously dedicated woman; she was heretical, heterodox, in her religious opinions, and stayed away from church and dogma” (171).

## CHAPTER 5

### LIGHTING THE LAMP:

#### DICKINSON'S PLACE IN THE WORLD TODAY

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

Inhere as do the Suns—  
Each Age a Lens  
Disseminating their  
Circumference—

—Emily Dickinson (Fr 273, c. 1884)

A Call for Papers went out to academics on Monday, January 16, 2006, for a Religion and Literature panel at the M/MLA meeting to be held on November 9-12, 2006, in Chicago—the topic: The Half-life of Religious Thinking. The CFP mentions as a subject “stages in the half-life of religious thinking—points at which religious ideas must undergo shifts and readjustments to remain relevant.” The description of the papers actually describes the changes in the religious atmosphere in New England in the two hundred years: “readings of texts that revise, reshape, update, or adapt religious orthodoxy and/or religious text in an effort to make some aspect of religion (more) responsive to human needs” (owner – cfp@english.upenn.edu). Such stages occurred and reshaped the lives of followers of Calvinism who succeeded the generations of Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritans, laying the basis for the religious thinking and writings of Emily Dickinson. Her poetry represented a “confluence,” says George Whicher, of “the Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured; the Yankee or, more broadly, American humor that was just coming out of the ground; and the spiritual unrest,

typified by Emerson, which everywhere was melting the frost of custom” (153).

Dickinson may particularly appeal to today’s readers not only because her theology satisfies but also because her style offers her thoughts in a large array of varied poems that invite the reader to participate in the discussion. Whicher characterizes the quality of Dickinson’s poetry by paraphrasing her comment to Thomas W. Higginson, “Could you tell me how to grow—or is it unconveyed—like Melody—or Witchcraft?” (L 261).

Whicher says, “The secret of her style was like melody or witchcraft unconveyed, neither imitated nor capable of facile imitation. She earned it by the whole tenor of her life, and it was hers unmistakably, hers only” (224). Dickinson’s unique style, of course, draws readers to its mysteries and to its moments of startling clarity. People of all ages, education, and spiritual backgrounds can find in Dickinson’s poetry images that speak to them of both life and death. Heinz Ickstadt, speaking at the Emily Dickinson International Society’s conference at Mount Holyoke College in August 1999, says, “In her unique and distinct voice we can indeed recognize—through more than a hundred years of collective disasters, collapsed hopes, and unfulfilled desires—what one might still call ‘shared experience’ after all: the need to confront and to transcend mere self in the very knowledge of the inevitability of our dying” (67). Thus, since every human faces that inevitability, the American poet Emily Dickinson today speaks to the world.

The preceding chapters have addressed the background of Dickinson’s family and their communities, including the spiritual atmosphere in which Dickinson grew up, as well as the growth of the person and poet Emily Dickinson. In this chapter, I address the fabric of her spirituality and the way in which her poems and letters retain a power to affect today’s evolving religious sensibility in a widespread concept appealing to many

cultures. In *The Power of Myth* (1988), Joseph Campbell speaks in interviews with Bill Moyers on the subject of spirituality, of “the soul’s high adventure, the quest of mortals to grasp the reality of God” (xviii). As Moyers remembers his conversation with Campbell, Moyers says that Campbell was “criticized for dwelling on the psychological interpretation of myth, for seeming to confine the contemporary role of myth to either an ideological or a therapeutic function.” However, says Moyers, “He never seemed bothered by the controversy. He just kept on teaching, opening others to a new way of seeing” (xviii). Moyers describes Campbell as “a spiritual man,” who “found in the literature of faith those principles common to the human spirit. . . . The images of God are many, he said, calling them ‘the masks of eternity’ that both cover and reveal ‘the Face of Glory’” (xvii). Dickinson continually tried to find the face of God and see what lay behind the mask of Eternity. In her greatest struggles, she strove for understanding of Deity and the extension of time after death. Moyers relates Campbell’s statement, “A myth is a mask of God too—a metaphor for what lies behind the visible world” (xvii). Dickinson addressed a similar belief as she sought God behind what she perceived as the unsatisfactory mask of Calvinism as taught in the Congregational church. “Freud and Jung felt that myth is grounded in the unconscious,” says Campbell. He continues,

Anyone writing a creative work knows that you open, you yield yourself, and the book talks to you and builds itself. To a certain extent, you become the carrier of something that is given to you from what have been called the Muses—or, in biblical language, “God.” This is no fancy, it is a fact. Since the inspiration comes from the unconscious, and since the unconscious minds of the people of any single small society have much in

common, what the shaman or seer brings forth is something that is waiting to be brought forth in everyone. (58)

I argue that Dickinson did indeed find within herself a consciousness that can not only find ready acceptance today but that also addresses an interest in a higher concept of spirituality, particularly in the western world. Campbell gives an example: “the biblical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all speak with derogation of the so-called nature religions,” he says, and he offers as an easterner’s point of view the comment of the Zen philosopher Dr. D. T. Suzuki: “God against man. Man against God. Man against nature. Nature against man. Nature against God. God against nature—very funny religion” (56). Perhaps Dickinson’s departure from a traditional version of western religion appeals to a wide audience because it more closely relates to an eastern mode of spiritual thinking.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the language of the Bible gave Dickinson more than theology; it gave her the foundations of her poetry as well. Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes the “gift of narrative structure” (72), “the possibility for heroism” (73), and the “mythic power” of Biblical language (74). With these tools Dickinson used the language learned in her childhood to express her changing voice as an adult. For instance, in the poem “the Lilac is an ancient shrub,” Dickinson addresses Revelation from a new point of view:

The Scientist of Faith

His research has but just begun—

Above his synthesis

The Flora unimpeachable

To Time's Analysis—  
"Eye hath not seen" may possibly  
Be current with the Blind  
But let not Revelation  
By theses be detained— (Fr 1261)

Here the persona seems to be saying that we can see for ourselves daily the wonders of the universe and should not be limited by the newly written and taught "theses" of faith that may have been preceded by a more "ancient" and "unimpeachable" flora that existed before written record of human interpretation. Moving away from adherence to the limits of Revelation, Dickinson sets about providing revealing truths of her own, strong enough to fill and sustain her. James McIntosh says,

The faith expressed in "The Lilac is an ancient shrub" epitomizes the syncretic alternative religion Dickinson sometimes adopted for herself. Though in her language and imagery she draws on the Bible and on scientific terms she learned at school, her thought partially coincides with that of earlier Romantics like Emerson and Blake. Yet she did not need to go to them for the conviction that "Eden" was "always eligible." (69)

Dickinson needed no support from her contemporaries to validate her thoughts; though she read Emerson, Blake, and other romantics, she did not depend upon their writings to express her beliefs. Instead, she valued her own responses to Being. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson reports in a letter to his wife, Dickinson avows her philosophy in one sentence, "I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough" (L 342a).

By pursuing her own course of meditation, Dickinson establishes a new

foundation upon which to rest her spirituality. Willis Harman, in *Global Mind Change* (1998), addresses the significance of a similar individualistic thought process:

Lewis Mumford observes that, “Every transformation of man . . . has rested on a new metaphysical and ideological base; or rather, upon deeper stirrings and intuitions whose rationalized expression takes the form of a new picture of the cosmos and the nature of man.” Turning this statement around, the hallmark of transformation is change at the deepest level of the social structure. (9-10)

Spirituality lies at the deepest level of human society. From spiritual beliefs spring all the interactions of life and death, all our reactions to the world of our time and the people in it. As she matured, Dickinson devoted herself to the study of spirituality, moving from the emphasis on sin and atonement in Calvinism that governed daily behavior toward an awareness of the intricacy and balance of the universe that afforded her a numinous connection to Being—not in an afterlife but in the present. Campbell identifies the benefits of concentrating on the positive characteristics of religion rather than focusing upon the negativity of sin: “You see, religion is really a kind of second womb. It’s designed to bring this extremely complicated thing, which is a human being, to maturity, which means to be self-motivating, self-acting. But the idea of sin puts you in a servile condition throughout your life” (56). As late as 1885, Dickinson states in a letter to Helen Hunt Jackson, “Of god we ask one favor, / that we may be forgiven— / For what, he is presumed to know— / The Crime, from us, is hidden” (L 976, draft no. 2); (Fr 1675). And as she matured, Dickinson moved beyond the point of servility as she developed her authority in language to express her developing ontology. Wolff suggests

that “as early as 1856 . . . visionary authority had entered Emily Dickinson’s discourse” (135). Wolff continues her argument,

The infant who had fallen into words because the silent language of eye and face had failed’ the girl who had preserved autonomy by refusing the pledge of faith to a God unseen; the brilliant young woman whose father could see talents and virtues only in a son—all of these lonely, angry, defiant, ambitious “selves” came together in a “new birth”—that of the heroic poet-seer. (136)

I argue that Dickinson as seeker and seer may offer a positive view of spirituality that appeals to readers who struggle against orthodox limitations as Dickinson did and who look for answers and find them in her works.

People from many walks of life have identified our time as one in which a firm spiritual base is wanting. The cultural historian and writer Thomas Berry says,

Our traditional story of the universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purposes, and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. (123-24)

The situation today, however, has become critical. “Now the old story is not functioning,” says Berry. “And we have not yet learned a new” (qtd. in Campbell 139). Campbell says that he is in partial agreement with Berry’s assessment—“partial because there is an old story that is still good, and that is the story of the spiritual quest” (139). I

argue that the result of Dickinson's spiritual quest has produced results, now available to everyone in print, in classroom lectures, in conference presentations, even in music and on stage, that may help to construct a new paradigm, a new story. Instead of the situation that she describes in the above letter and poem to Helen Hunt Jackson, the limited pattern of puerile subjectivity of a perpetual sinner asking forgiveness of a perpetual Father, Dickinson provides her view of a mature approach to spirituality that greets Deity as a full participant in the wonders of the universe. Her Congregational Church offered Dickinson salvation and holiness if she gave herself up to Christ and the Father. She could not adopt the attitude of a penitent sinner. On the contrary, she apologizes to God for his "own Duplicity" (Fr 1467) and turns from what she sees as a limitation on spirituality and toward her own interpretation. Throughout her journey of discovery, Dickinson questions her beliefs and records her conclusions.

Dickinson's questioning brought up many instances of doubt. In the following poem, the speaker works through an exceedingly stark situation:

Those—dying then,  
Knew where they went—  
They went to god's right Hand—  
That Hand is amputated now  
And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief  
Makes the Behavior small—  
Better an ignis fatuus

Than no illume at all— (Fr 1581)

Does Dickinson say it is better for some people to follow a false hope than no light at all because with some sort of belief, they would be completely lost? Harold Bloom points out what he sees as Dickinson's purpose: "Nullifying the integrity of the flame as the poem names it denies the possibility of belief" (Modern Critical Views 150). McIntosh suggests the poem recalls "[t]he undoing of Amherst orthodoxy in her mind" and "is a condition of her expositions of experimental faith in her poems and letters throughout her career." In addition, says McIntosh, "Her transcriptions of Christian ideas and her reworkings of Christian texts are not dogmatic but experimental, heuristic, and in their own way pastoral; she is trying to create a newly religious language and reach an audience, one that begins with herself and spreads to an imagined posterity" (3). The readers of today, are Dickinson's posterity.

Globally, a growing number of people have developed awareness of a need to care for the earth as a whole. Physicist Brian Swimme draws attention to our basic situation, saying, "The planet is a rare and holy relic of every event of twenty billion years of cosmic development" (58). He elaborates:

Think about it! When you breathe, you breathe the creations of a star. All the life you will live is possible because of the gifts of that star. Your life has been evoked through the work of the heavens, do you see? The star emerges out of its own response to allurements, then evokes the life of others. The air we breathe, the food we eat, the compounds out of which we are composed: all creations of the supernova. (57-58)

Swimme follows his statement with an ebullient enumeration of the delights of the earth,

reminiscent of Dickinson's poem "What would I give to see his face?" which ends, "My *Kingdom's worth of Bliss!*" (Fr 266). In each case the authors exhibit appreciation and awe. "Nothing in all genealogical research throughout human history could have prepared us for the truth," says Swimme, "that our common family tree fills the universe" (58). In other words, as I see it, we are connected to all that we are at a basic level of existence. Therefore, as Swimme argues, "Our reverence for the holy must expand to include the whole numinous universe" (60).

To find that numinous relationship with the universe, Dickinson examined the relationship with God that she had been taught from childhood; then, she slowly developed her own concept of relationship with divinity. Her endeavor was a remarkable undertaking, not just because she reacted against accepted beliefs—most young people do that as they search for an individuality of self. But Dickinson actually fashioned her own sort of belief, based upon a new view of self and a new view of the sacred. Eternity became for her a larger concept than a typically envisioned sojourn in heaven. Her "Bliss" included creation of her own making, based upon her church teachings but not bound by them. Harold Bloom refers to "her unshakable conception of reality and awareness of human condition "that were derived from 'old-fashioned' Puritans" and gives as an example the following unfinished poem:

Paradise is that old mansion  
Many owned before—  
Occupied by each an instant  
Then reversed the Door—  
Bliss is frugal of her Leases

Adam taught her Thrift

Bankrupt once through his excesses— (Fr 1144)

As Dickinson turned from the “old mansion” and toward a newer, more personal concept of “Paradise,” she trusted her intuition, which resulted in poetry that expressed her reverence for a reordered universe, a reverence that included her sense of awe in the act of creation of poetry, as well as its relationship to the divine. “These seven lines,” says Bloom, “. . . rehearse all the major elements of the Puritan ‘vision’: the initial harmony of the universe; man’s violation of that harmony and his consequent alienation; the possibility of reunion and its fulfillment in visionary instants; the bankruptcy of life without vision” (Modern Critical Views 62). Dickinson’s embracing of universal harmony without the impediment of alienation from divinity embraced participation in her own creative force.

In the following poem, Dickinson articulates the power of that creation, the overwhelming force of the created word that mounts to a climax then dissipates and leaves behind a sense of awe that she still conceals in slantness, its meaning “hid” within the lines:

To pile like thunder to its close

Then crumble grand away

While Everything created hid

This—would be Poetry—

Or Love—the two coeval come—

We both and neither prove—

Experience either and consume—

For None see God and live— (Fr 1353)

Both poetry and love, the speaker seems to say, evoke and convey the same results and both have to be revered and hidden, just as Dickinson's own beliefs, her Truths, as she says, must be told "slant." Paula Bennett argues that Dickinson experienced a "bliss" that "marked her as the agent of her own desire and the creator of her own discourse, allowing her to reach an orgasm that was an act of poetry and an act of love together. . . . It let her 'see God' and live" (181-82). Richard B. Sewall asks, do we "hence know love and poetry only slightly? But to know them fully is to experience the ultimate epiphany—like a confrontation with God, in 'death.' Hence (another poem) the 'Truth' must be told 'slant'; it must 'dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—'" (723). Sewall suggests that Dickinson

Set herself the task—a task that developed gradually into a vocation—to mediate to "every man" the infinitely varied facets and phases of the central "dazzling" truth as it was vouchsafed her in her moments (she had a hard time defining it) of inspiration. She mediated truths of nature and human nature, sights and sounds and meanings; she lit the poet's "vital lamp"; she did the poet's (and God's) primal work of creation. (724)

Dickinson intuitively understood the place of the human condition within the cosmos. Brian Swimme argues, "When we deepen our awareness of the simple truth that we are here through the creativity of the stars . . . reverence naturally wells up within us. Then, in the deepest regions of our hearts, we begin to embrace our own creativity" (60-61). Though Dickinson did not have the advantage of knowledge of current-day physics, she

did have access to a telescope and to science courses that revealed to her an ordered universe. The wonder of that knowledge shows in her poetry. Acting from within the awareness of her creativity, Dickinson illustrated the need, the intensity, and the depth of her questioning and also the wonderment of her perceptions that so move her readers. “In its most expansive moments,” says Roger Lundin, “Dickinson’s poetry celebrates the soul’s evolution as an exercise in blessed development” (157). Dickinson’s development of the soul models possibility that may touch the sensibilities of her readers and resonate with their own perceptions.

Though Dickinson wrote her poems for the most part as offerings without explanation and often even cryptic in form, she does occasionally address posterity directly, as in the following early poem:

This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me—  
The simple News that Nature told—  
With tender Majesty  
  
Her message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see—  
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—  
Judge tenderly—of Me (Fr 519)

This “letter” indicates that Dickinson, if she is the speaker, probably intended from early on that her poems would one day be read by “countrymen,” and thus may have been written for a wide audience. As she became fully aware of the power of her poetry, she

displayed her knowledge “slant,” which she does not mention until about 1868 (Fr 1263).

I argue that Dickinson foresaw a time when her talent would be recognized and her poetry accepted by an audience who would appreciate her analysis, rational thinking, and substantial talent for expression.

Although even her intellect, of course, could not provide concrete evidence of afterlife, we do have absolute substantiation of the power of Dickinson’s art, the corpus—the body—the luminous tangible that is the starting point of this poet’s immortality. I think that Dickinson delved so fully into the human consciousness that she could see her place in her own time as few of us can ever do and that she was aware of her possible impact on both literature and interpretation of spirituality. For instance, at about the age of thirty-three, she writes,

This Consciousness that is aware  
Of Neighbors and the Sun  
Will be the one aware of Death  
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval  
Experience between  
And most profound experiment  
Appointed unto Men— (Fr 817)

Of course, anyone aware of “Neighbors and the Sun” includes very nearly all sentient beings. Once she has made the experience universal, Dickinson then narrows the focus: explaining the private nature and of the experience and also its encapsulated

comprehensiveness, Dickinson continues:

How adequate unto itself  
Its properties shall be  
Itself unto itself and none  
Shall make discovery.

On its quest, however, the soul has company of a decidedly complex nature:

Adventure most unto itself  
The Soul condemned to be—  
Attended by a single Hound  
Its own identity.

The Soul, then, not only experiences the “adventure,” but also watches, supports, protects, sustains, and learns. Not only does the reader receive an amazing glimpse of Dickinson’s reasoning, one does so in eloquent phrasing. Did Dickinson know that her message to the “World” would travel the globe and through time? She says, “A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die” (Fr 1715). I do not cite a “speaker” or a “persona” because who writes the words if not the poet? And this poet crafts the words that “breathe distinctly,” that will live.

In her lifetime, as mentioned in Chapter 4, some few of Dickinson’s words had already been published and appreciated by the reading public, had “gone through the papers.” About 1875, Helen Hunt Jackson chides Dickinson, “You are a great poet—and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud” (L 444a). And again in 1884, Jackson writes, even more forcefully, “what portfolios of verses you must have.— and it is a cruel wrong to your ‘day & generation’ that you will not give them light” (L

937a).

Eminent statesmen have repeated as crucial to today's global society exactly some of the thoughts that Dickinson expresses in her poetry. For example, Vaclav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic, gave a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on July 4, 1994, that looks to the future of the peoples of the world and to the necessity to embrace a changing attitude, to develop a paradigm of reverence that I feel supports my argument. I draw quite heavily here from his speech because he addresses as solutions to current problems so many of the principles of Dickinson's poetry as I interpret it and that have already been addressed in this dissertation. Havel suggests that a "new age in the life of humanity can be dated" from the time American astronauts landed on the moon. He mentions a "transitional period," a shift from the modern age to "something else" that "is painfully being born." Referring to the Hellenistic period, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, Havel says,

Such transitional periods are a mixing and blending of cultures and a plurality of parallelism of intellectual and spiritual worlds. These are periods when all consistent value systems collapse, when cultures distant in time and space are discovered or rediscovered. . . . [E]verything is possible, because our civilization does not have its own unified style, its own spirit, its own aesthetic. (1)

The "dizzying development" of science, Havel continues, "now appears to have exhausted its potential" (1-2), and the relationship of science to the world "fails to connect with the most intrinsic nature of reality and with natural human meaning" (2). The more we know about even our own bodies, he says, "the more we seem to fail to

grasp the spirit, purpose, and meaning of the system that they create together and that we experience as our unique ‘self’” (2). Socially and politically we are also suffering consequences of today’s situation. Havel says, “We stand helpless before [global challenges] because our civilization has essentially globalized only the surfaces of our lives” (2). Cultural conflicts show that “the end of the era of rationalism has been catastrophic,” says Havel, and we must “find the key to ensure the survival of a civilization that is global and at the same time clearly multicultural” (2).

Science cannot provide the answer to the problem, states Havel, because “it cannot deal with singularity, that is, with uniqueness. The universe is a unique event and a unique story, and so far we are the unique point of that story. But unique events and stories are the domain of poetry, not science” (4). Here, I believe, is the point at which Dickinson contributes to fulfillment of a need in today’s world. Unique in her own right, Dickinson spent her lifetime exploring the significance of “the nature of reality and with natural human meaning.” Havel draws upon two theories, the Anthropic Cosmological Principle, that humans were created to see the universe through their eyes, and the Gaia Hypothesis, that Earth is a single system, a living planet. Havel declares,

the only real hope of people today is probably a renewal of our certainty that we are rooted in the earth and, at the same time, in the cosmos. This awareness endows us with the capacity for self-transcendence. Politicians at international forums may reiterate a thousand times that the basis of the new world order must be universal respect for human rights, but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from the respect of the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature,

the miracle of our own existence. (4)

Havel is speaking of the development of a new myth, one that will acknowledge the remarkable contributions of science that will help us to understand even more clearly our place in the universe, the place that I feel Dickinson found and celebrated.

Riane Eisler describes a future of “new myths” “toward a world that will be much more rational, in the true sense of the word: a world animated and guided by the consciousness that both ecologically and socially we are inextricably linked with one another and our environment” (202). As a result of this new kind of thinking, says Eisler, “Limitation and fear will no longer be systematically taught us through myths about how inevitably evil and perverse we humans are. In this world,” she continues, “children will not be taught epics about men who are honored for being violent or fairy tales about children who are lost in frightful woods where women are malevolent witches. They will be taught new myths, epics, and stories in which . . . the power of creativity and love . . . [are] the governing principle[s].” Then, says Eisler, “both women and men will at last find out what being human can mean” (203). Being human in today’s world can mean helping to construct a consciousness of deity, wonder, and awe that, if widely adopted, could address in a positive manner all levels of human interaction.

As I have shown, in the fields of religion, literature, academics, physics, sociology, cultural history, politics, etc., many distinguished thinkers believe that a global change is in progress; that change corresponds to concepts suggested in Dickinson’s poetry. Dickinson looked both within herself and outward toward a universal connection to try to define and understand the essence of Being. The ontology of the universe, as she could understand its parts, she collected by deliberately arranging her personal life so that

she could dwell in her mind, in the home space where she was most comfortable. She could not have known how far science would take us; walking on the moon was simply not possible to imagine in Dickinson's day. But Dickinson arranged her own relationship with the skies. In her poem "the Moon was but a Chin of Gold," Dickinson assigns an anthropomorphic visage to the amiable lunar personage: "Her Lips of Amber never part— / But what must be the smile / Upon Her Friend she could confer / Were such Her silver will—" (Fr 735). Dickinson then continues the association:

And what a privilege to be  
But the remotest Star—  
For Certainty She take Her Way  
Beside Your Palace Door—

Then, Dickinson speaks familiarly of raiment and position, connecting the Moon with humanity and the cosmos:

Her Bonnet is the firmament—  
The Universe—Her shoe—  
The Stars—the Trinkets at Her Belt—  
Her Dimities of Blue—

No, Dickinson could not conceive of our advances in science, but she did know and she tells us in her poetry that touching the moon, metaphorically, was spirituality possible—was spiritually *necessary*.

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