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EMILY DICKINSON: POET OF REVOLT

by

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of the requirements for the degree
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INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson was born in the mid-nineteenth century (1830) into a society which insisted on conforming to accepted patterns of behaviour, that of Amherst, Massachusetts. Since the purpose of this thesis is to show that a study of her revolt contributes to the understanding of her poetry, it is necessary to understand the society against which her rebellion was directed.

There was little interchange of ideas between Amherst and Boston and Concord. What happened as a result of this cultural and intellectual isolation is known to any student of American culture. Boston and Concord under leaders like William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson were experiencing a metamorphosis from extreme conservatism to a liberalism which shattered vestigial Puritan and Edwardian concepts of God as a wrathful judge, man as a depraved creature, and salvation as something for a chosen few. Apparently it did not reach Amherst until some time after Emily Dickinson had cut herself off from society.

Not only was Amherst society content to be religiously orthodox--which meant being Congregational--but social patterns were also well established and as closely conformed to. Boys approaching manhood prepared themselves for the ministry by attending Amherst College and Andover

Seminary, for law by attending Amherst College and Harvard University, and for medicine by attending Amherst College and Harvard University. If not inclined professionally, the young man stayed home to add to the income from his father's profession. Young ladies went to schools where they would be trained to be religious and ornamental. After their schooling they were expected to marry, to teach until marriage, or to stay in their father's home. Amherst College and Andover Seminary were centers for the perpetuation of orthodox Congregationalism. Filling the Amherst Congregational pulpit for thirteen years of Emily's life was Aaron M. Colton,¹ who had studied at Andover while Professor Edwards A. Park was reaffirming there the Edwardean elements of the Congregational creed.²

Emily Dickinson was surrounded by this religious and conventional society. Her father exemplified the typical Amherst lawyer and politician, and the rest of the Dickinson family can hardly be considered anything but average Amherst citizens. Just why Emily should have been the one atypical Dickinson and the only important unconventional figure in Amherst is impossible to say. Certainly fate could not have chosen a more articulate spokesman to express non-conformist

¹ Whicher, This Was A Poet, pp. 7, 9.

² Walker, A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States, p. 255.

views.

Apparently Emily attended a district school from her sixth to her eleventh year, from which she entered Amherst Academy. By 1847 she had graduated to Mary Lyon's Mount Holyoke Seminary or, as it was sometimes called, South Hadley Female Seminary. She withdrew before 1849 without finishing her education.

During her early school years, no recorded experiences set her mind against convention. However, while at Mount Holyoke Seminary during the Christmas season of 1847, Emily experienced the first sharp emotional crisis of her life. Beginning in October of that year Miss Lyon and her staff began to exert pressure to coerce those students who had not yet joined the church to repent and become Christians. In general, it was a period of emotional strain in the College resulting from lengthy prayer meetings and evangelical oratory. Emily steadfastly refused to be won over. The climax came when Miss Lyon proposed to the students, en masse, that Christmas be observed as a fast day. When the proposal was put to a vote, Emily was the only girl to express her displeasure by standing. Although Miss Lyon redoubled her efforts to win over the impenitents, they were wasted on Emily, for she expressed herself as a non-conformist to the Congregational religious pattern. After this trial, Emily became indifferent to finishing her

studies. She was the only member of her family never to join the Congregational church.

Amherst legends suggest that love affairs occurred between 1850 and 1880. The compression in her letters of these years, the shift from common to unusual images, and the epigrammatic quality of them suggest an emotional crisis. Though there is no concrete evidence of a love affair, it is conjectured that Emily Dickinson experienced a deep love three different times. Whether her love was intellectual or emotional, there is no way of knowing, though tradition indicates that it was emotional. According to legend, one suitor was B. F. Newton, her father's law clerk whose attentions Edward discouraged by discharging him. Another was Leonard Humphrey, who may have been the suitor driven from the Dickinson house by the irate father.³ The third was Charles Wadsworth, a minister from Philadelphia.

³ This is my own identification. Although all her biographers mention Humphrey, they do not connect him with a love affair. In the poem "I never lost as much but twice, and that was in the sod," Humphrey and Newton seem to be the two lost lovers. The poem

Perhaps you're going too!
 Who knows?
 If you should get there first,
 Save just a little place for me
 Close to the two I lost! (Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 202.)

further indicates that two lovers were lost, and since both these men died young in the early 1850's, their deaths seem to refer to the two losses "in the sod."

Sometime between 1850-1860, Emily renounced the world and became a recluse.⁴ With this phase of her biography, a premise emerges which gives further insight into the understanding of her poems--that Emily Dickinson's life and poetry exhibit a constant and consistent paradox which can be explained in terms of revolt and conformity. By renouncing the world, Emily was doing what had been done for centuries, renunciation being one of the oldest conventions of escape. Thus, by shutting out the world, she was conforming to a pattern of recognized social behaviour. In the same sense she committed herself to composing poetry, a commitment, also an age-old convention. Other spinsters sublimated their griefs, frustrations, and aspirations in literary outpourings.⁵ In this instance Emily was conforming to an accepted literary custom. To carry this idea of her conformity one step further, in form most of her poetry was written in modified traditional forms. One sees, then, in

⁴ Biographical data from Whicher, op. cit.

⁵ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A Poetess," in A New England Nun and Other Stories, represents the typical old-maid who has turned to poetry to escape reality. Fred Lewis Pattee, in The Feminine Fifties, mentions Grace Greenwood, pseudonym for Sara Jane Clarke who, "marooned on the outskirts of civilization western Pennsylvania, had evolved her pen-name and had showered languishing tales upon the eastern magazines." pp. 277. Others whom he mentions are Susan and Anna Warner, two girls who were brought up in "nun-like seclusion," and Alice and Phoebe Cary. All four were spinsters. pp. 54-5, 59.

almost every phase of what may be called the external in her life, a consistency in accepting customary practices. But as one shifts emphasis from a study of the external to a study of the internal in her life, the most obvious kind of revolt is revealed. In her mind, she freed herself from her father's domination and from society's insistence that she be an obedient daughter. In her mind, she created a mystical religion, personal, formless, and inclining towards pantheism. She did not accept the Puritan deity of Congregationalism. And ironically she condemned society for doing what she--from all outward appearances--did, that is, conforming. Her life, which was a model of stereotyped behaviour, has a counterpart in the form of her poetry, which is also conventional. But again, corresponding to the freedom which came from the source within herself, the content of her poetry refuses to recognize limitations.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I wish to show that the tradition of paternal domination occasioned an attitude of rebellion in Emily Dickinson, which she could express only in poetry, she being outwardly too much of a conformist to rebel openly. Instead of freeing herself by openly rebelling against her father, Emily found freedom in liberating her poetic inclinations. Thus her poetry turned into a compensatory device whereby she gained what

conventional society denied her.

Realizing that the Congregational God was incompatible with her own somewhat mystical insights into Divinity, Emily refused to participate in customary religious services. Again her poetry compensated for what conformity could not give her. Thus the second chapter shows that she rebelled against orthodox religious patterns, first by condemning them, and second by creating her own formless, mystical devotion. Her personal religion, as it is expressed in poetic form, compensated for what she did not like in the orthodox patterns.

The final chapter is concerned with Emily Dickinson as an artist--in what ways her poetry is in itself a rebellion against accepted verse-making. When Emily chose to do so, she could write poetry which scans like any stereotyped piece of verse. The content of such a poem, however, is apt to belie the form. By thus inserting her unconventional utterances into a formal framework, Emily gave us a unique kind of poetry which has endured while the verse of even the most popular of her female contemporaries is rarely included in collections of poetry.

This research was undertaken to show that Emily Dickinson's poetry can be understood by studying her as a poet in revolt. By noting the poems and letters which seemed to contain a refusal to conform, I had an approxima-

tion of what it was she rebelled against; thus the question "Revolt against what?" was resolved. Next, it was necessary to seek consistency in her rebellion to determine whether or not a pattern was implicit or perhaps even explicit. Recurring themes dealt with escape and freedom and with religion. To determine whether or not she rebelled against the confinements of paternal domination, it was necessary to do background reading on nineteenth century conventions of relationships of parents to children. All her biographers indicate that Edward Dickinson dominated his family after the fashion of a Puritan patriarch. The poems of escape, then, were an expression of rebellion against her father on one level, and, on another level, against the society which fostered such a convention. After reading background material on the Congregational church in the nineteenth century, I saw that her poetry dealing with religion was an expression of revolt against the established church.

Finally, knowing her poetry to be different from the poems produced at that time, I became convinced that she was in revolt also against contemporary conventions of versification. Her friendship with "H. H." and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, both prominent literary people, shows that she had first-hand knowledge of literary conventions. She read the poetry of Helen Hunt Jackson ("H. H.") and accepted Higginson as the one person to criticize her own efforts.

The third chapter is concerned with Emily Dickinson as an artist who would not conform to contemporary ideas relative to the proper form and content of a poem, and who, by virtue of her rebellion, wrote poetry outliving the popular, sentimentalistic verse.

CHAPTER I

REVOLT AGAINST PATERNAL DOMINATION

Edward Dickinson imposed barriers in an attempt to control the physical and mental freedom of his children, and although he outwardly succeeded with her, Emily escaped in her poetry--not only escaped but condemned his circumspect world. It was natural that Edward should dominate his children, for a characteristic of that conventional society was that sons and daughters should follow the dictates of their parents without question.⁶ Thus, if Emily were to escape the restrictions placed upon her by a conventional father, she would have to choose a means which would seem not to conflict with his sovereignty. She chose to escape by composing poetry in secret.

One method by which Edward sought to control his children was the denial of books to them. Novels, romances, any book, in fact, but the Bible was forbidden; "Edward eyed a strange volume as if it were a serpent."⁷ Books such as Longfellow's Kavanaugh, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, and Mrs. Child's Letters from New York had to be smuggled in to

⁶ Pollitt, Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of her Poetry, p. 245.

⁷ Taggard, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson, p. 49.

the young Dickinsons by Mr. Bowdoin, Squire Dickinson's law clerk. So that Edward would not become aware of the intrigue, Bowdoin hid the books in the crotch of a tree; Emily or her brother Austin then transferred them into the house and concealed them under the piano cover until an auspicious time came for their reading.⁸

Implied in this barrier to reading is a pattern which can be used as an aid to understanding the rebellious poetry of Emily Dickinson. The first division of the pattern consists of the convention itself, which, in the instance at hand, is paternal domination. The second division consists of Emily's consciousness of the convention from which issues the third division, which may be termed her revolt against the convention. What her revolt turned into most often was an instrument of compensation by means of which she gained access to the thing which convention denied. The convention of paternal domination existed. Edward was able to deny books to his children because of it. Emily, through her awareness, arranged to evade it by smuggling in books. The act of smuggling became thereby the instrument which supplied the compensation for one of the restrictions she felt that her father was imposing on her.

In a letter Emily wrote to her brother Austin, we see

⁸ Pollitt, op. cit., p. 55.

that she was conscious of domination:

We don't have many jokes, though, now, it is pretty much all sobriety; and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it's pretty much all real life.⁹

Edward imposed restrictions against the reading of poetry because it was not real life. He may have made this restriction because he suspected Emily of writing trifles in secret as many New England spinsters were doing.¹⁰

In a letter of Emily's to T. W. Higginson one again sees that her father kept the fence tight about her:

I had promised to visit my physician for a few days in May, but father objects because he is in the habit of me.¹¹

Escape from the limitations which her father imposed on her was impossible for

. . . Father takes care of the doors and Mother of the windows, and Vinnie and I are secure against all outward attacks. If we can get our hearts "under," I don't have much to fear . . .¹²

Emily and her sister were secure, in the sense that prisoners in a cell are secure. She could not gain freedom because she could not escape the convention of paternal

⁹ Bianchi, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 173.

¹⁰ "Many spinsters kept journals; lacking the joys of wedded life, they were permitted some of the frills and furbelows of Victorian authorship." Taggard, op. cit., p. 11.

¹¹ Bianchi, op. cit., p. 288.

¹² Ibid., pp. 150-1.

domination. She continues the letter:

I put on my bonnet to-night, opened the gate very desperately, and for a little while the suspense was terrible--I think I was held in check by some invisible agent, for I returned to the house without having done any harm!¹³

Emily's spirit would not let her break through the boundaries of her father's estate.

Emily Dickinson did not blandly accept the convention of paternal domination and its concomitant confinement to her father's home. She did not openly rebel; on the contrary, from all outward appearances she tolerated the situation and conformed as she was expected to do. But she was ever conscious of her imprisonment:

I never hear the word "escape"
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation,
A flying attitude.

I never hear of prisons broad
By soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars--
Only to fail again.¹⁴

The opening of the gate and the impossibility of stepping through, the eagerness with which she heard the word escape, and the futile tugging at the bars of her prison all indicate that she knew she was a prisoner and that she was

¹³ Bianchi, op. cit., pp. 150-1.

¹⁴ Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 22.

powerless to escape.

In another poem she compared herself to a chrysalis imprisoned within a cocoon:

My cocoon tightens, colors tease,
I'm feeling for the air;
A dim capacity for wings
Degrades the dress I wear.¹⁵

While her cocoon--her father and the convention he represented--was confining her, she was feeling for the air, attempting to find some means of compensating for her imprisonment.

Actually there was one avenue to freedom from the convention of paternal domination--marriage. But when the possibility of marriage is discussed as a means of freeing Emily from the boundaries of her father's control, Edward Dickinson becomes more than a conventional father.

. . . a spinster daughter was a misfortune to some men, but . . . Edward began to require Emily to become a spinster daughter, a daughter devoted, although¹⁶ not demonstrative, a daughter who would cling to home.

In other words, while conventional fathers dominated their children, there is no evidence that they sought to extend that domination into refusal to let them marry. Both Amherst legends and Emily's poems indicate that Edward did refuse to let her marry.

¹⁵ Dickinson, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁶ Taggard, op. cit., p. 41.

Emily twice saw chance for marriage and the escape
and freedom it would bring:

My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If immortality unveil
A third event to me,

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven
And all we need of hell.¹⁷

Two suitors, Newton and probably Humphrey and the freedom
they offered were lost to her.

Emily did not have to wait to see if immortality
might unveil a third opportunity for escape from a life of
confinement:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod;
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God.

Angels twice descending,
Reimbursed my store.
Burglar, banker, father,
I am poor once more.¹⁸

Twice had she lost men who were dear to her, and apparently
she blamed death rather than her father. Each time the lost
lover was replaced. For this third loss, probably Charles
Wadsworth, she blamed her father who, as a burglar, stole the
person who offered her freedom, and who, as a banker, kept

¹⁷ Dickinson, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁸ Hubbell, American Life in Literature, p. 514.

her locked safely in his vault. Just when she thought this third man could save her, he too was denied her:

Just lost when I was saved!
 Just felt the world go by!
 Just girt me for the onset with eternity,
 When breath blew back,
 And on the other side
 I heard recede the disappointed tide.¹⁹

Emily concluded from these fruitless affairs, each of which in spite of its brevity, offered love and freedom, that

For each ecstatic instant
 We must an anguish pay
 In keen and quivering ratio
 To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
 Sharp pittance of years,
 Bitter contested farthings
 And coffers heaped with tears.²⁰

She realized that she would spend the rest of her life in her father's home paying for the happiness she sought but which her father denied.

What kind of a person her father was is impossible to say exactly. He appears to have been a possessive person who wished to keep his children near him. Neither Emily nor her sister Lavinia left the Squire's household. Emily felt that he thwarted her chances for marriage. When Austin married and announced that he intended to go west with his

¹⁹ Dickinson, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

bride, Edward bribed him to stay in Amherst by building him an Italian villa behind the Squire's mansion, and by taking him into the family law office.²¹ Emily indicates in a letter to Austin that her father, besides being possessive, showed an attitude of spitefulness toward her:

T__ of S__'s class went to Boston yesterday; it was in my heart to send an apple by him for your private use, but father overheard some of my intentions and said they were 'rather small'²²

And to her Norcross cousins she writes that

I got down before father this morning and spent a few moments profitably with the South Sea rose. Father, detecting me, advised wiser employment, and read at devotions the chapter of the gentleman with one talent. I think he thought my conscience would adjust the gender.²³

If Edward felt that Emily was an ineffectual old maid with only one talent--a useless talent for raising flowers--and that her intentions were "rather small," a problem properly relegated to the psychologist of why he insisted on keeping her within the bounds of his will presents itself. We are more concerned with evidence that he did belittle his daughter and that he did determine to keep her under his domination. We are most concerned with the premise that she rebelled in order to compensate for this domination and that

²¹ Taggard, op. cit., p. 126.

²² Bianchi, op. cit., p. 177.

²³ Ibid., p. 251.

this rebellion helped make her the poet that she was. Emily herself appeared to have been conscious that the domination resulting in renunciation stirred her creative ability:

A death-blow is a life-blow to some
 Who, till they died, did not alive become;
 Who, had they lived, had died, but when
 They died, vitality begun.²⁴

She says in this poem that had it not been for the death-blow, referring either to her renunciation or to the loss of the third lover, which led her to renounce the life of the world, she would never have lived. If the thought in the poem did not so closely parallel the awakening of creative power in Emily Dickinson, one might say that she was playing with words in the Metaphysical tradition.

Emily relied upon poetry to compensate for her lack of freedom as the following poem reveals. Although she emphasizes the word escape, it is the poem which permits the escape:

"Escape" is such a thankful word!
 I often in the night
 Consider it unto myself,
 No citadel in sight.

'Tis not to sight the savior,
 It is to be the saved;
 And that is why I lay my head
 Upon this trusty word.²⁵

When there was no citadel in sight to which she might flee,

²⁴ Dickinson, op. cit., p. 204.

²⁵ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, p. 120.

no hope of liberty, she pondered over the word "escape" in a poem. She concluded that regardless of the restrictions forced upon her, she could compensate for them by creating freedom through her poetry:

No rack can torture me,
My soul's at liberty.
Behind this mortal bone
There knits a bolder one

You cannot prick with saw,
Nor rend with scimitar.
Two bodies therefore be;
Bind one and one will flee.²⁶

By realizing there was a prosperity whose sources lay within and consequently were not susceptible to changes in fortune, Emily concluded that

Reverse cannot befall that fine Prosperity
Whose sources are interior.²⁷

By utilizing these interior sources, Emily escaped the mental and physical confinement imposed upon her by a dominating father as he was representative of the conventional, patriarchal society.

²⁶ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 22.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 259.

CHAPTER II

REVOLT AGAINST ORTHODOX CONGREGATIONALISM

In consequence of the circumscribed life Emily Dickinson's father forced her to lead, she became aware of conventions throughout her Amherst world. Nowhere was the necessity to conform greater than in the orthodox church. That she rebelled against impinging religious dogma by compensating for what was unacceptable in the Congregational religious pattern is readily evidenced. How she rebelled against conventional religion can be seen in an account of what the conventional religious pattern was.

In the Protestantism of nineteenth century Massachusetts, one finds a dichotomy of belief. Puritanism, which had been revitalized in the first half of the preceding century by Jonathon Edwards, was the stronghold of the orthodox while the unorthodox adopted a position characterized as Unitarian.²⁸ By 1800, Unitarianism or liberalism, as it was then called, had pervaded Boston and churches in the immediate vicinity, but had not extended beyond them.²⁹ The orthodox received their greatest blow

²⁸ Willey, American Congregationalism in the Nineteenth Century and Entering the Twentieth, p. 8.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

in 1805 when Reverend Ware, a Unitarian, was appointed to the chair of divinity at Harvard, and in spite of protests from the ascendant orthodoxy, was retained in his position.³⁰ From that time on there was a division: in the east, around Boston, the liberals held sway; in the west, the views of the orthodox prevailed.³¹ Amherst was in the center of that part of Massachusetts ruled by the orthodox.³²

The Unitarian "heresy" consisted principally in disbelieving the doctrine of the Trinity, doubting the divinity of Jesus, and questioning the ability of the Holy Spirit to become personalized.³³ Secondly, the liberalists doubted the "inspiration and authority of the Bible; the phrase 'that the Bible is not a revelation, but only a record of revelation' was coined then."³⁴

On the other hand, the orthodox fortified their position by re-emphasizing the Edwardean elements of their creed.³⁵ The center of orthodox instruction was Andover Seminary, a school founded to ameliorate the damage done by

³⁰ Willey, op. cit., p. 8.

³¹ Loc. cit.

³² Whicher, op. cit., p. 7.

³³ Willey, op. cit., p. 7.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁵ Walker, A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States, p. 253.

liberalism in Harvard.³⁶ The most notable member of the Andover faculty was Professor Edwards A. Park, who dominated the institution from 1836 to 1881 by virtue of holding the chairs of Sacred Rhetoric and of Christian Theology.³⁷ It is important to note that ". . . the Edwardean elements in the creed were made more prominent."³⁸

Three terms appear frequently in this chapter: Congregationalism, Puritanism, and Edwardeanism. Puritanism and Congregationalism are synonymous, for ". . . from the beginning, the Congregational church was the established 'orthodox' Puritan church in America."³⁹ The theological system was patterned after that of John Calvin. The only substantial alteration that Jonathon Edwards (1705-1750) made in the Congregational pattern was his insistence that the Supreme Deity was a God of love as well as an Hebraic God of wrath and righteousness.⁴⁰ To know what kind of sermons Emily listened to before she stopped attending church, one need only to know what the essence of Edwardean

³⁶ Willey, op. cit., p. 9.

³⁷ Walker, op. cit., p. 253.

³⁸ Loc. cit.

³⁹ Payzant, A Study of the Puritan Element in Emily Dickinson, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Schneider, The Puritan Mind, pp. 144-5.

theology was. Six works contain Edwards' basic theology. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," a sermon delivered in 1741,⁴¹ carried no intimation of God as a Being capable of experiencing love. Rather, Edwards portrayed God as a being who took pleasure in sending unregenerate souls to everlasting punishment. This was the Hebraic concept of God as a righteous and wrathful judge. In 1746 the "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections" was published.⁴² In it Edwards focused the best results of the Great Awakening on the problem of true personal religion and reached the conclusion that the Holy Spirit leads the chosen man into an attitude toward God which is impossible for the unregenerate man to grasp.⁴³ In 1749 Edwards published "A Humble Inquiry . . . Concerning the Qualifications requisite to . . . full Communion," in which he concluded that he could not administer the sacraments to un-regenerates.⁴⁴ In his fourth important work, the "Careful and Strict Enquiry into the modern prevailing notions of Freedom of Will," 1754, he concluded that since God orders His own existence and since man is an extension of the will of God, God must, then, order

⁴¹ Hubbell, op. cit., p. 25.

⁴² Walker, op. cit., p. 282.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 283.

⁴⁴ Loc. cit.

the existence of man.⁴⁵ In 1758 his fifth important work, "Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended," sought to show the depravity of man by tracing generations of man back to Adam.⁴⁶ Edwards' last important work was published in 1765, "The Nature of True Virtue," in which he stated that if a man is virtuous he will, because of his virtue, seek the highest good which is God.⁴⁷

These were the basic tenets, then, which were taught at Andover derived from Edwards' orthodox Puritanism with the added protestation of the love of God.

The chain linking Emily Dickinson to Edwardean Congregationalism by way of Andover Seminary was completed by the Reverend Aaron M. Colton⁴⁸ whose doctrines were "flawlessly orthodox."⁴⁹ Colton was minister from 1840 to 1853 in the church Emily attended.⁵⁰ From the time she was ten years old until she was twenty-three, she listened to sermons preached by him, a clergyman trained in an orthodox Congregational institution. Not only in church, but also in

⁴⁵ Walker, op. cit., p. 283.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 284.

⁴⁷ Loc. cit.

⁴⁸ Colton came to Amherst from Andover Seminary in 1840.

⁴⁹ Whicher, op. cit., p. 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 7, 9.

school, Emily received religious training. The influence of Amherst Academy, Amherst College, and Mt. Holyoke Seminary was such that Edwardeanism was the dominant theology throughout her life, for these institutions--all of them played important roles in her life--were dedicated to the faith that "the spread of Christian doctrines as interpreted by orthodox Congregationalism would free the world of its miseries and corruptions."⁵¹ The Dickinson family helped found Amherst College, and Emily attended Amherst Academy and Mt. Holyoke.⁵²

The rigid, formalized education that Emily had was church inspired and church dominated.

The connection between the College and the Academy . . . was very close. Of the seven principals who served while Emily Dickinson was a pupil, five were recent graduates of Amherst, and many of the assistant teachers were Amherst seniors. Two of them subsequently entered the ministry, two became missionaries, and one died before completing his theological training.⁵³

The College itself was dedicated to perpetuating orthodoxy. President Hitchcock was a firm believer in total depravity and otherwise his ideas fitted into the orthodox pattern.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Whicher, op. cit., p. 41.

⁵² For a fuller discussion of Emily's education see Whicher, op. cit., Chapters 3 and 4.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁴ Payzant, op. cit., p. 34.

Mary Lyon, preceptress at Mt. Holyoke College, believed in man's fall in Adam's original sin and the doctrine of the elect "whereby God, through the mediation of Christ, chose to redeem a portion of mankind, and condemn the remnant to eternal punishment."⁵⁵ "It was orthodox Congregationalism that dominated religious life in Amherst."⁵⁶

Even though she did not join the church, she was fully aware of its dogma. She could not help being aware of it after attending church and school in the orthodox community.⁵⁷

Because she did not join the church, Emily did not share the religious life of the community. The result was that Emily "was often considered sacrilegious by the orthodox of her day"⁵⁸

One form her revolt against conventional religion took was a refusal to believe in the Puritan God who beset man's path with pitfalls and then imputed his fall to sin:

⁵⁵ Payzant, op. cit., p. 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁷ Bianchi, in The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 66, suggests that Emily stopped attending church during her thirtieth year. Whicher, op. cit., p. 8, suggests she was a regular attendant at services until her twenty-fifth year. Either estimate indicates that she attended church long enough to be fully aware of the basic dogmas of the church.

⁵⁸ Bianchi, Emily Dickinson Face to Face, p. 254.

"Heavenly Father," take to Thee
 The supreme iniquity,
 Fashioned by thy candid hand
 In a moment contraband.

Though to trust us seems to us
 More respectful--"we are dust."
 We apologize to Thee
 For Thine own Duplicity.⁵⁹

This placing of the blame for original sin upon God, goes far to deny the whole Congregational doctrine of original sin and regeneration, for if it is the fault of God that man lives in a depraved state, then all that man can do is to apologize for God's own two-facedness.

In another poem she expressed displeasure with the authoritarian, self-sufficient God who had no concern for life. Here is what the orthodox said:

. . . God loves only himself, and he created the world with his own glory as his chief end. Obviously the happiness of human beings is not his end, for most human beings are lost.⁶⁰

And here is how Emily reacted to this doctrine:

It's easy to invent a life,
 God does it every day--
 Creation but a gamble
 Of His authority.

It's easy to efface it,
 The thrifty Deity
 Could scarce afford eternity
 To spontaneity.

⁵⁹ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 298.

⁶⁰ Schneider, op. cit., p. 145.

The perished patterns murmur,
 But his perturbless plan
 Proceed--inserting here
 A Sun--
 There--leaving out a man.⁶¹

Emily opposed the kind of "perturbless" authority which made decisions and would not consider changing them. The thrifty Deity had a universal scheme and He would allow nothing to interfere with it. God could as unconcernedly create a new star as He could snuff out the life of a man; nevertheless, His authority was not to be questioned, and conformist society insisted that he nevertheless be worshipped.

This God was, from Emily's point of view, a cruel God. Because He was undeviating and perturbless, cruelty was one of His characteristics. Even those who are predestined for heaven are beset with pitfalls and misery by the Supreme Deity:

Far from love the Heavenly Father
 Leads the chosen child;
 Oftener through the realm of briar
 Than the meadow mild,

Oftener by the claw of dragon
 Than the hand of friend,
 Guides the little one predestined
 To the native land.⁶²

The God who predestined a few for heaven and condemned the rest to perdition was not a God of love. Rather He was a

⁶¹ Dickinson, Further Poems, p. 41.

⁶² Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 251.

maligning Deity as she indicated in this letter:

We have no fires yet, and the evenings grow cold.
How many barefoot shiver I trust their Father knows who
saw not fit to give them shoes.⁶³

In her repudiation of the cruelty of God, she dealt with both the broad concept of human existence marked by misery, and the specific instance of the misery of those who were destined to be poor.

While Edwards believed in the efficacy of prayer as a means of attaining immediate communion between God and the human soul, Emily said no, prayer is vain because God does not care:

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!"⁶⁴

and

There comes an hour when begging stops,
When the long interceding lips
Perceive their prayer is vain.⁶⁵

Because she felt that prayer was trivial, Emily could describe it as:

⁶³ Bianchi, The Life and Letters, p. 251.

⁶⁴ Dickinson, Further Poems, p. 44.

⁶⁵ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 494, p. 252.

. . . the little implement
Through which men reach
Where presence is denied them.
They fling their speech

By means of it in God's ear;
If then He hear,
This sums up the apparatus
Comprised in prayer.⁶⁶

It is apparent in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson that Emily did not attempt to approach the traditional, authoritarian, perturbless God through "the little implement:"

They [the Dickinson family] are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their "Father."

Her letter states that the attitude her own family exhibited in prayer admitted the futility of attempting to commune with God because it was the same kind of attitude with which one might witness a distant, cold, unapproachable eclipse. Thus distrustful of prayer, Emily could easily say that while faith is a fine invention

. . . microscopes are prudent
In an emergency.⁶⁸

Emily rebelled against the setting of boundaries by the authoritarian God who was presented in church, in school,

⁶⁶ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 45.

⁶⁷ Bianchi, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 234.

⁶⁸ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 45.

and in her own home where her father's rule was unquestioned. The line that God drew was a line separating those whom He chose to save from those whom He chose to damn. Here was authority again. Here were fences one could not pass through. Rebelling as she did against the authority of her father and the household in which she was forced to stay, Emily found an extension of the same restrictions intolerable. One can see in the next lines that Emily had questions about the traditional heaven:

What is paradise? Who live there?
Are they farmers? Do they hoe?⁶⁹

In a letter to Samuel Bowles, she expressed an unwillingness to accept wholly the traditional opinion that a heavenly existence was far superior to an earthly one:

The charms of the heaven in the bush are superseded,
I fear, by the heaven in the hand occasionally.⁷⁰

In a poem she reiterated her doubts:

Which is best? Heaven,
Or only heaven to come,
With that old codicil of doubt?
I cannot help esteem

The "bird within the hand"
Superior to the one
The "bush" may yield me--or may not--
Too late to choose again.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 154, p. 85.

⁷⁰ Bianchi, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, pp. 202-3.

⁷¹ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 549, pp. 276-7.

Emily was skeptical in making her estimate of heaven:

We pray to Heaven,
 We prate of Heaven--
 Relate when neighbors die,
 At what o'clock to Heaven
 They fled.
 Who saw them wherefore fly?⁷²

Had she ever seen a soul borne upwards into paradise, her skepticism would have had its refutation. As it was, however, she continued to hold the heaven at hand superior to the traditional heaven in the bush.

Emily concluded that heaven as it was believed in by her society was undesirable:

. . . in the handsome skies
 I shall not feel at home
 I know,
 I don't like Paradise.

Because it's Sunday all the time
 And recess never comes
 And Eden'll be so lonesome
 Bright Wednesday afternoons.⁷³

An Amherst Sunday consisted mostly of two long church services, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.⁷⁴

Such frivolity as reading a number of The Springfield Republican, which finally dared to appear on Sunday, was unheard of; rather, the orthodox citizen refrained from

⁷² Dickinson, Further Poems, p. 48.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁴ Whicher, op. cit., p. 6.

reading his copy until the next day.⁷⁵ Because the paradise which her society believed in appeared similar to a grim Amherst Sabbath, Emily did not believe in it.

Since Emily found she could not accept the conventional God and prayer as a means of communing with God, it was, perhaps, only natural that she should criticize the Bible from which stemmed these conventions. She viewed the Bible as if it were the program of a melodrama listing the featured players:

The Bible is an antique volume
 Written by faded men,
 At the suggestion of Holy Spectres--
 Subjects--Bethlehem--
 Eden--the ancient Homestead,
 Satan--the Brigadier,
 Judas--the Great Defaulter,
 David--the Troubadour.
 Sin--a distinguished Precipice
 Others must resist,
 Boys that "believe"
 Are very lonesome--
 Other boys are "lost."
 Had but the tale a warbling teller
 All the boys would come--
 Orpheus' sermon captivated,
 It did not condemn.⁷⁶

The attitude in this poem is in sharp conflict with traditional attitudes toward the Bible as they were expressed by the National Council meeting in Oberlin, Ohio, on November 15, 1871:

⁷⁵ Whicher, op. cit., p. 13.

⁷⁶ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 249.

Congregational churches shall agree in belief that the Holy Scriptures are the sufficient and only infallible rule of religious faith and practice.⁷⁷

The Puritan believed in the authoritative character of the Word of God.⁷⁸ Rather than being the Holy Word of God, the Bible became, for Emily, a stage for the enactment of moralities: Satan, Marshal of the wicked; Adam's Fall and his loss of the Garden; Judas, the Great Defaulter; Sin, a precipice to be avoided by all but the "faded men" who wrote the "antique volume." A most unconventional alternative which would make Christians of everyone appears in the final four lines. If the Bible had someone like Orpheus, a pagan, to sing its message, then everyone would be captivated, for he did not condemn or predestine anyone for hell.

Emily felt that the Bible was too much concerned with sin and its punishment. In it, various commandments--limitations--were set, and transgressors of them were punished. Emily constantly struggled, not openly, but within, against boundaries, limitations and restrictions as she knew them to direct and control her earthly and her heavenly existence.

Emily had grave doubts about the conventional God, cruel and unheeding, whose heaven, if existent was undesirable, and whose Bible sought to condemn. Her soul felt the

⁷⁷ Walker, op. cit., pp. 409-10.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

ache of doubt in spite of such strong narcotics as persuasive, oratorical preachers:

Much gesture from the pulpit,
Strong hallelujahs roll--
Narcotics cannot still the tooth
That nibbles in the soul.⁷⁹

Emily rebelled against conventional religious patterns by compensating for traditional religious values which were lost to her. She advocated not a religious system, but a formless kind of devotion of her own, creating a God who condemned no one and a heaven which received all, both of which were in direct opposition to orthodox belief.

Two poems indicate that Emily's God was a combination of the orthodox Jehovah, omnipotent God of righteousness,

. . . He is not a man,
His fingers are the size of fists,
His fists the size of men.
And whom He foundeth with His arm
As Himmaleh shall stand,
Gibraltar's everlasting shoe
Poised lightly on his hand⁸⁰

and a kindly Father to whom one could appeal in the same tone that a child might say "Daddy, make him give it to me:"

Saucy, saucy seraph
To elude me so!
Father! they won't tell me!
Won't you tell them to?⁸¹

⁷⁹ Quoted in Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson, p. 155.

⁸⁰ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 416, pp. 217-8.

⁸¹ Ibid., # 400, p. 210.

The latter is the gentle Father who would

. . . lift his little girl,--
Old-fashioned, naughty, ~~everything~~,--
Over the stile of pearl.⁸²

We might add that a synonym for "naughty" is "refractable or unruly."⁸³ Emily felt that her own God would claim her in spite of her rebellion.

That Emily thought of God as a flesh-and-blood father is further indicated in this poem:

Over the fence the strawberries grow;
Over the fence I could climb
If I tried, I know--
Berries are nice!

But if I stained my apron
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear! I guess if he were a boy
He'd climb, if He could!⁸⁴

This God was not "perturbless;" on the contrary, He was a father concerned with the most trivial happenings, a father who would scold her for a soiled apron.

Emily's God could be found in nature:

Some keep the Sabbath by going to church;
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister,
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;
I just wear my wings,
And instead of tolling the bell for church,
Our little sexton sings.

⁸² Quoted in Whicher, op. cit., p. 111.

⁸³ Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms; Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

⁸⁴ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 161, p. 90.

God preaches,--a noted clergyman,--
 And the sermon is never long;
 So instead of getting to heaven at last,
 I'm going all along.⁸⁵

Also, she indicated that her God was a God she could commune with in nature:

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.⁸⁶

Her God, then, was a kindly, paternal deity who was concerned with the most insignificant details, and who had enough of the conventional quality of omnipotence to be majestic. He was, in short, a God who could compensate for the conventional God in whom she could not believe.

Emily created also a heaven to compensate for the exclusive, conventional one:

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have ever seen in June, and in it are my friends--all of them--every one of them--. . .⁸⁷

This letter is a specific denial of conventional dogma.

Regardless of whether or not the Congregational doctrine of

⁸⁵ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, pp. 110-1.

⁸⁶ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 52, p. 34.

⁸⁷ Bianchi, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 199.

salvation of the elect permitted her friends to go to heaven, she expected to find them there. Emily held that text worthless which insisted that Adam's fall tainted mankind and that God bestowed grace on a select few and thereby predestined them for heaven.

Emily was confident that her own religion would be her salvation:

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.⁸⁸

The stimulus beyond the grave
His countenance to see,
Supports me like the imperial drams
Afforded royally.⁸⁹

Going to heaven!
I don't know when,
Pray do not ask me how,--
Indeed I'm too astonished
To think of answering you!
Going to heaven!
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the shepherd's arm!⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, pp. 188-9.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 288.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 202.

Because of the life Edward Dickinson forced Emily to lead, she became aware of restrictions which impinged on her freedom. Fences surrounded her. Her father watched to see that she did not escape. By extending this paternal domination to God, she found that conventional Congregationalism offered the same familiar pattern of restrictions ruled by a God perturbless and compassionless. Heaven was on one side of the boundary, the place of the condemned on the other side. As a genteel Amherst lady and an obedient daughter, she could not rebel openly. Instead, she compensated for her losses in a subtler way. Her own beliefs were her compensation. Wells offers an appropriate summary of her attitude toward religion:

/ Her many skeptical poems . . . as well as the total complexion of her work, reveal the essentially religious and spiritual nature of a woman eager for religious experience; but she was clearly dissatisfied with all churches and creeds.⁹¹

She gained religious experience by communing with her heavenly Father through nature. Avoiding ceremony, she believed what she chose to believe, that God was a kindly Father, that heaven was where one's friends were found, and that nature was a manifestation of God--in denial of orthodox patterns.

Although one might be tempted to force Emily into the

⁹¹ Wells, op. cit., p. 156.

Unitarian pattern, such a procedure is not justified. There is no evidence to indicate that she felt the influence of Unitarianism, in spite of parallels such as their respective criticisms of the Bible as a revelation. Her revolt was a purely personal reaction which led her to develop a formless kind of religious devotion.

CHAPTER III

HER ARTISTIC REVOLT AGAINST LITERARY CONVENTIONS

As Emily Dickinson was in revolt against social and religious conventions, she was also in revolt against those which governed prosody and poetic subjects. Except for her refusal to join the church, her outward life was lived along conventional lines. However, conventional society

. . . might as wise have lodged a bird
For treason in the pound⁹²

as force Emily to think along conventional lines. Outwardly she was a dutiful daughter. Inwardly she escaped her dominating father. Outwardly, although she did not join the church, "on the subject of her soul, she was on the whole sound."⁹³ The third aspect of her revolt, namely that she rebelled against the proclivity to conform to popular notions of what constituted poetry, concerns us because much of the greatness of her poems is due to her revolt against the conventions of popular sentimentalist poets of the nineteenth century. Study of this revolt gives fresh insights into the understanding of her poetry.

⁹² Dickinson, Unpublished Poems, p. 34.

⁹³ So Reverend Jonathon L. Jenkins who once interviewed Miss Emily on the subject of her soul, reported to her father. Whicher, op. cit., p. 9.

Emily was aware at an early age of the danger of losing one's freedom by living in a conformist society. When she was only fifteen, she wrote to her friend Annie:

How do you enjoy your school this term? . . . I expect you have a great many prim, starched up young ladies there, who, I doubt not, are perfect models of propriety and good behaviour. If they are, don't let your free spirit be chained by them.⁹⁴

A consciousness of society's demands for conformity and an outburst against these demands are in a letter to her brother Austin:

. . . permit me to accord with your discreet opinion concerning Swedish Jenny, and to commend the heart brave enough to express it--combating the opinion of two civilized worlds and New York into the bargain must need considerable daring--indeed it had never occurred to me that amidst the hallelujahs one tongue would dare be dumb . . . !⁹⁵

Austin's expressed opinions about Jenny Lind, not in agreement with conventional opinions, Emily thinks show a brave heart, for when society attitudinizes everyone is required to conform:

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
It is the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur,--you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Bianchi, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, pp. 111-2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

⁹⁶ Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p. 9.

In conformity lay security, even though the society to whose conventions you conformed was completely insane. By such a society as that of Amherst, utter madness was judged more sensible than a proportionate amount of sense, because it was the opinion of the majority which determined all values. If one assented to the opinion of the majority, then one was considered a sane member of the majority; if one demurred, on the other hand, the same majority, would condemn him as dangerous to its cause--whether the nature of that cause were theological, social, or literary. Emily Dickinson knew what she was talking about, for she was, in a manner of speaking, the minority party in Amherst, though, to be sure, mostly a silent one. From the reactions of the then prominent literary figure, T. W. Higginson, to her poetry, she knew that minorities were condemned. It is no wonder that after her poems came out,

To staid puritan citizens of Amherst she appeared somewhat as Hamlet to the court of Denmark: an eccentric known for wild and whirling words.⁹⁷

She puzzled those people she was not just like, simply because she was not like everybody else of that day and place.⁹⁸

✓ The conventions of poetic composition against which Emily revolted were those practiced, say, by Felicia Dorothea

⁹⁷ Wells, op. cit., p. 87.

⁹⁸ Bianchi, Emily Dickinson Face to Face, p. 37.

Hemans, a widely popular British poetess.⁹⁹ Mrs. Hemans was by far the most popular woman poet. Branch, a specialist in the period from 1836 to 1860, which he calls the sentimental years, says, "There was a woman . . . whose every unshed tear had become a pearl of poetic sentiment."¹⁰⁰ Branch continues:

Her metrical variations were not many; the rhymes were exact, the melody was usually a mournful and melting cadence. This sameness of key tended to enforce the sameness of message--the beauty of pathos. A man dying the patriot's death on the battlefield; the boy upon the burning deck whence all but he had fled; woman enshrouding the modest scenes of home, or brooding over a little grave, or "watching the stars out by the bed of pain"--these were the tableaux of virtue she depicted in her most characteristic poems She was a singer of wide range. Her verses dealt with mountains, sea, and forest; with nature's tinier felicities, the silken rustle of the bending grass, the fragile beauty of wild flowers, the joyous life of the uncaged birds; with childhood, its angelic innocence and mystic flashes of truth . . . and with noble and affecting delineations of humanity favoring lofty Stoic virtues in her men and gentle ardors in her women.¹⁰¹

She was "humorless, ardently moral, expansively sympathetic."¹⁰² The popularity of such a writer as Hemans indicates that sentimentalistic literature was in vogue. Sentimentalism, which has been defined as "in general the mood of excessive sentiment, or too tender susceptibility, of mawkish

⁹⁹ Bianchi, Emily Dickinson Face to Face, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰ Branch, The Sentimental Years: 1830-1860, p. 107.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 109.

emotionalism; in literary art the deliberate use of these unrestrained excesses to produce a consciously calculated response from the reader,"¹⁰³ was the dominant literary convention of popular writing.

The various popular women's magazines, among them the Lady's Book of Louis Antoine Godey and Rex Graham's American Monthly Magazine, were the organs for the publication of much sentimentalistic literature in the United States around 1850.¹⁰⁴ Contributors included Anna C. Lynch, Sarah Anna Lewis, Mrs. Seba Smith, Mrs. Fannie Osgood, Mrs. Lydia Maria Child,¹⁰⁵ and Mrs. Lydia Huntly Sigourney,¹⁰⁶ "lady poets who were careful to avoid the reproach of immodesty."¹⁰⁷ Of these poets, Mrs. Sigourney was the most popular.¹⁰⁸ Mrs. Lydia Huntley Sigourney was an institution whom adoring critics dubbed "the American Hemans."¹⁰⁹ She even wrote elegies upon request to console "the owner of a canary bird which had accidentally been starved to death," and to

¹⁰³ Watt and Watt, A Dictionary of English Literature, p. 393.

¹⁰⁴ Branch, op. cit., p. 112.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁰⁸ Branch ventures the witticism that "she and George Washington were beyond criticism."

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 135-6.

comfort a father whose child "drowned in a barrel of swine's food."¹¹⁰ One gets a further insight into the kind of poetry written by Mrs. Sigourney from a contemporary panegyrist:

Her poetry is the poetry of home life; the affections clustering around the manifold objects of the domestic circle, and exhibiting in the varied scenes of man's changeful trial, the necessity and beneficial influence of virtuous feelings.¹¹¹

Branch adds that "Not surprisingly, she was fond of death-- the death of infants, foreign missionaries, sailors, cripples, poets"¹¹² Van Wyck Brooks calls the Mrs. Sigourney kind of poetry, poetry

Of the facile kind . . . of women, for women . . . in imitation of Tennyson . . . flaccid, stereotyped, and vague, abounding in hackneyed phrases and threadbare of conceptions It was often sicklied over with the palest thought and very seldom fresh, direct, or vital."¹¹³

When Mrs. Sigourney died, in 1865,¹¹⁴ Helen Hunt Jackson in a kind of Apostolic succession became the leading American poetess¹¹⁵ and apostle of sentimentalistic poetry. Helen Hunt Jackson, conforming sentimentalist, was born in

¹¹⁰ Branch, op. cit., p. 137.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Branch, p. 137.

¹¹² Loc. cit.

¹¹³ Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, p. 314.

¹¹⁴ Crawford, Kern, Needleman, Outline History of American Literature, p. 80.

¹¹⁵ Brooks, op. cit., p. 300.

Amherst and was a close friend of Emily Dickinson, nonconforming rebel. By establishing what kind of poet Mrs. Jackson was and by comparing Emily Dickinson with her, that is, using Mrs. Jackson's poetry as the backdrop against which to show Emily's poetry in full relief, we can see that Emily Dickinson was a poet of revolt.

Emerson, upon being asked if he did not think Helen Hunt the best "woman-poet on this continent," replied, "Perhaps we might as well omit the woman."¹¹⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, prominent New England critic, novelist, historian, and contributor to The Atlantic Monthly¹¹⁷ concurred in Emerson's opinion:

"H. H." reaches . . . the heart in a class of poems easy to comprehend, thoroughly human in sympathy; poems of love, of motherhood, of bereavement; poems such as are repeated and preserved . . . cheering, strengthening many a heart.¹¹⁸

The following poem of Mrs. Jackson's met with Higginson's approval:

Like a cradle rocking, rocking,
 Silent, peaceful, to and fro,
 Like a mother's sweet looks dropping
 On the little face below,
 Hangs the green earth, swinging turning,
 Jarless, noiseless, safe, and slow;
 Falls the light of God's face bending
 Down and watching us below.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Higginson, Short Studies of American Authors, p. 41.

¹¹⁷ Brooks, op. cit., p. 128.

¹¹⁸ Higginson, op. cit., p. 45.

And as feeble babes that suffer,
 Toss and cry and will not rest,
 Are the ones the tender mother
 Holds the closest, loves the best,--
 So when we are weak and wretched,
 By our sins weighed down, distressed,
 Then it is that God's great patience
 Holds us closest, loves us best.¹¹⁹

This poem exhibits characteristics typical of its genus.

First, the meter is simple. The first line is in a uniform trochaic tetrameter while the following line is trochaic with three complete feet ending with a catalectic trochee. Feminine endings alternate with masculine endings. In the first octet, the rhyme scheme is ab cb db eb. The second octet is identical in metrics and rhyme pattern.

Surely the poem reached the heart conditioned to sentimentalistic verse, for emotionality--the falsification of an emotion by attempting to intensify and prolong it--is prominent. In the imagery Mrs. Jackson employed is a clue as to how she achieved the tone of emotionality. In the first verse, the image of a cradle rocking silently and peacefully arouses in the reader's mind associations of the cradle, the innocent babe and the tender mother. The cradle image is not necessarily bad. Whitman's splendid "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking" shows what an artist can do with it. But Mrs. Jackson then presents to the reader the

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Cooke, The Poets of Transcendentalism, p. 230.

picture of a mother looking sweetly down at her baby. Such a picture was a formula. All mothers always looked sweetly at their babies, for then there was only one kind of mother-- a madonna-like figure not far removed from divinity itself.

The degree to which the next image, if indeed it can be called an image, is successfully presented depends upon each individual reader.¹²⁰ The picture of the earth turning, swinging, safe and slow like a cradle while light falls on it from God's face seems contrived and unsuccessful to the writer of this thesis. John Livingston Lowes points out that illusion is one of the conventions of poetry which has "its roots in the nature of the poetic medium itself" and in the "common consent which underlies the possibility of all communication whatsoever."¹²¹ Although the essence of poetic truth is accepted illusion,¹²² there are limits beyond which illusion does not go.¹²³ First, common sense prevents the willingness to accept illusion from being strained too far: "We grant the world of illusion freely, but we demand that there be a limit beyond which illusion

¹²⁰ Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism, asserts that individual differences as to whether an image is presented are enormous, p. 106.

¹²¹ Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, p. 27.

¹²² Ibid., p. 44.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 33.

cannot go."¹²⁴ The second control is the laws of nature. Ordinarily we do not accept violations of natural laws; on the other hand, if the poet overcomes us with such things but seems not to have done so, we accept him as an artist.¹²⁵ In the opinion of the investigator, Mrs. Jackson's poem fails on both grounds. The earth is not like a cradle; it does not swing slowly; it is neither jarless nor absolutely safe. She does not overcome the reader's unwillingness to accept unlimited illusions. Neither does she overcome our unwillingness to accept violations of natural laws.

Not only does Helen Hunt Jackson justify Higginson's approval of her, but she would also have justified the approval of admirers of Hemans and Sigourney. Wann summarizes the conventional attitude by saying that writers of New England showed antipathy to realism by striving to keep alive essentially outworn subject-matter and artificial forms.¹²⁶

Emily Dickinson's revolt against convention took its final form as an artistic revolt against the attitudinizing of a society which demanded that a poem be easy to comprehend, reach the heart, and have a moral purpose. Yet in

¹²⁴ Lowes, op. cit., p. 33.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 37-8.

¹²⁶ Wann, The Rise of Realism, p. 7.

this revolt the paradox of outward conformism and inner rebellion can be detected. Here is a poem, already quoted in Chapter II:

Far from love the heavenly Father
 Leads the chosen child;
 Oftener through the realm of briar
 Than the meadow mild,

Oftener by the claw of dragon
 Than the hand of friend,
 Guides the little one predestined
 To the native land.

This looks like any one of a class of conventional poems, and is in conventional verse form, yet it is used to express her revolt. As one scans the first quatrain, the familiar trochaic tetrameter line alternating with a trochaic trimeter line appears, with a rhyme scheme of ab cb. The same metrical pattern is found in the second quatrain, but one quickly notices that the rhyme is suspended. "Dragon" has no accompanying rhyme while "friend," "predestined," and "land" depend upon ultimate consonants for similarity in sound. Emily did not "disdain conventional devices . . . but these tricks are likely to take a characteristically impish turn,"¹²⁷ as is plainly seen in her abandonment of rhyme in the second stanza.

Emily did not abandon conventional verse forms. On the contrary, "more than half her published poems are

¹²⁷ Spiller and others, Literary History of the United States, Vol. 2, p. 910.

written in the familiar ballad stanza, the common meter of the hymn books."¹²⁸ However, a study of the representative Poems: First and Second Series reveals that in 63 per cent of the poems there is a violation of the ballad stanza she chose to use. For example in the poem

The heart asks pleasure first,
And then, excuse from pain;
And then those little anodynes
That deaden suffering;

And then, to go to sleep;
And then, if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor,
The liberty to die.¹²⁹

Emily employed what appears to be the common ballad stanza of four lines in alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter. However, where the ballad employed an ab cb rhyme scheme, Emily, intent on making the poem fit her ideal of non-conformity, did not, in this poem, use rhyme at all. One other difference is apparent: while the ballad alternated an iambic tetrameter line with an iambic trimeter line, Emily used two trimeter lines, a tetrameter line, and a final trimeter in each stanza. In other poems, her pattern of modification differs. Anyone who opens a volume of her poems will see many variations. Sometimes, in an eight-line poem, two lines will rhyme while the other six do not;

¹²⁸ Whicher, op. cit., p. 40.

¹²⁹ Poems: First and Second Series, p. 38.

frequently a line which would be in tetrameter in a ballad, is in dimeter. Often a poem will scan regularly until one reaches the final line in which she disregards rhyme and rhythm completely. Her variations are indeed plentiful. Though Emily took for her favorite poetic form the ballad stanza, she so dominated the form--so adapted it to her own purposes--that little remained but a shell, a hint that she outwardly accepted dominating conventions. Only three per cent of the poems in the volume selected as representative are entitled to be termed free verse.¹³⁰ But because she refused to let requirements of form dominate her, T. W. Higginson wrote, "Emily Dickinson never quite succeeded in grasping the notion of the importance of poetic form."¹³¹

Since we have discussed the mechanics of one of Emily Dickinson's poems in contrast with H. H. Jackson's,

¹³⁰ Since this genre of poetry is in the minority in Emily Dickinson's writing, it will not be dealt with at length. The following, however, is typical:

Soul, wilt thou toss again?
By just such a hazard
Hundreds have lost, indeed,
But tens have won an all.

Angels' breathless ballot
Lingers to record thee;
Imps in eager caucus

Raffle for my soul. (Poems: First and Second Series, p. 34.)

¹³¹ Higginson and Boynton, A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 131.

let us turn to a comparison of ideas in the two poems. An even more striking refusal, on Emily's part, to conform to conventional thought and emotion is evident. Mrs. Jackson's poem is a moral discourse which attempts by analogy to a sentimental concept of motherhood to show that God loves and comforts man most when he is weighed down and distressed. In denial of God's love, Emily's poem says that God leads even His favorites with no thoughts of love. More often by a dragon's claw, a very harsh term, than by the hand of a friend, God leads his chosen one through realms of briar. There is no sentimentality in this poem; on the contrary, it is opposed to the ideal for which poets like Hemans, Sigourney, and Jackson stood. It is interesting to notice the conciseness of speech in the Dickinson poem. While writers of sentimentalistic verse dwelt at length on feeble, suffering, tossing, crying babes, Miss Dickinson's subject, man in the same relationship to God as a child to his father, is very simply "the chosen child." Although she may have been in sympathy with "the chosen child," Emily placed her poem on a higher level than that of Mrs. Jackson's by not sentimentalizing!

(Emily Dickinson did not write sentimental poetry. Her work would not have reached the heart of a Higginson for it did not deal with bereavement, love, and motherhood: "When a new work is to be purchased," said the Lily, a

contemporary magazine,

let the first inquiry be . . . will it cheer the hour of sorrow, or console the heart in its moments of affliction.¹³²

Neither would her poetry have been approved for its easy comprehension. / In her endeavor to catch the "telegraphic thought," she preserved and communicated nothing but the kernel of her thought with "no rind, no glossy surfaces," regardless of how it puzzles other writers, such as Higginson.¹³³ By

experimenting with rhymes and rhythms, sometimes adding extra syllables to break up their monotony, sometimes deliberately twisting a rhyme . . . for the sake of harshness, she rebelled against the mellifluous effect of conventional poems.¹³⁴

in cryptic and often obscure verse. There are a great many poems which illustrate the cryptic and obscure qualities of Emily's verse, but the following are typical:

Time feels so vast
That were it not for an Eternity,
I fear me this circumference
Engross my Finity

To His exclusion,
Who prepares by rudiments of size
For the stupendous volume
Of his Diameters.¹³⁵

¹³² Quoted in Branch, op. cit., p. 127.

¹³³ Spiller, Vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 910-1.

¹³⁴ Brooks, op. cit., p. 326.

¹³⁵ Dickinson, Unpublished Poems, p. 31.

A Nearness to Tremendousness
 An Agony procures,
 Affliction ranges Boundlessness.
 Vicinity to laws
 Contentment's quiet suburb,--
 Affliction cannot stay
 In acre or location--
 It rents Immensity. 136

It would have been difficult for a conventionalist of the mid-nineteenth century to know what Emily had in mind when she wrote these two poems. Her use of the abstractions "Time" and "Eternity" coupled with geometric concepts of "circumference," "volume," and "Diameters" renders this poem almost incomprehensible. On this basis, the poem is a revolt against contemporary concepts that a poem should be easy to understand. However, if one accepts the poem as a playful exercise in metaphysics, then her theme--that immortality keeps time from subduing her--comes through. In the first stanza, lines 3-4, "would" is omitted while in line 6 of the poem, second stanza, the personal pronoun "us" is omitted. Supply these words and the poem reads: "Time is so vast that if it weren't for Him who prepares us for the stupendous volume of His own size, I should feel that Time would engross me."

In the second poem she again used abstractions: "nearness," "tremendousness," "boundlessness," "contentment," "immensity." Agony or pain has the quality of making a

136 Dickinson, Unpublished Poems, p. 148.

person aware of tremendousness. Affliction approximates infinity for it cannot stay in contentment's quiet suburb which is subject to the orderly restrictions of contentment. Since affliction cannot be limited, it extends into infinity. Paradoxically, Emily inserted her unconventional expression into a conventional ballad stanza.

These poems are highly compressed and cryptic. The omission of words indicates that Emily was interested not in nineteenth century ideal of ornament but only in the idea she was expressing. Not only these poems, but the majority of her poems she composed with an idea of intrinsic form, the fitting of an idea into a form which reinforces the intended meaning. Had the sentimentalistic writers used intrinsic form in their poetry we would not have had the rhythmical doggerel of

There came a burst of thunder sound;
The boy,--oh! where was he?
Ask of the winds that far around
With fragments strewed the sea,--

With mast, and helm, and penon fair,
That well had borne their part,--
But the noblest thing that perished there,
Was that young, faithful heart¹³⁷

but we would have had poetry:

¹³⁷ From "Casabianca" by Hemans, quoted in Cooper, Preface to Poetry, p. 30.

Gathered into the earth
 And out of story,
 Gathered to that strange fame,
 That lonesome glory
 That hath no omen here.
 But awe.¹³⁸

We have seen in the works of Emily Dickinson, who, with Whitman, poetically represented "the farthest pioneerings of the nineteenth century American mind . . ." ¹³⁹ a paradox of rebelliousness and conformism. Although "Her earliest rymes show a robust condensation, and . . . her mannerisms declare the instinctive independence of her craft, itself a protest against . . . verbosity . . ." ¹⁴⁰ and conventions of sentimentalistic prosody, she relied on the convention of poetic expression as a vehicle for her artistic revolt.

¹³⁸ Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, # 378, p. 201.

¹³⁹ Spiller, op. cit., p. 907.

¹⁴⁰ Loc. cit.

CONCLUSION

The poetry of Emily Dickinson is markedly different from what was produced by her contemporaries. This thesis has endeavored to show that much of this difference can be explained in terms of revolt: revolt against paternal domination, revolt against conventional religion, and revolt against conventions of prosody and poetic subjects.

She did not rebel openly against her father, but compensated for the freedom he denied her by freeing herself through poetry. As a rebel against the orthodox Congregational church, she refused to become a church member and compensated for the traditional values thus denied her by creating her own amorphous religion. Finally, Emily Dickinson rebelled against the conventions of sentimentalistic verse making. Had she conformed to conventional patterns, her poetry would undoubtedly be as unregarded today as that of Helen Hunt Jackson and Mrs. Sigourney.

Her rebellion was an inner one which has a parallel in the unconventional utterances within the framework of her poetry. But like the form of her poetry, which is essentially traditional, her life conformed to accepted patterns.

Emily was fully aware that she was a rebel. In one of the finest poems she ever wrote, Emily Dickinson tells us that she unyieldingly held to her convictions--convictions which made her a poet of revolt:

Unto like story trouble has enticed me--
 How kinsmen fell,
 Brothers and sisters who preferred the glory
 And their young will
 Bent to the scaffold, or in dungeons chanted
 Till God's full time--
 When they let go the ignominy, smiling,
 And shame went still.

Unto guessed creates my moaning fancy lures me,
 Worn fair
 By heads rejected in the lower country;
 Of honors there
 Such spirit makes perpetual mention
 That I, grown cold,
 Step martial at my crucifixion
 As trumpets rolled.

Feet small as mine have marched in revolution
 Firm to the drum.
 Hands not so stout hoisted them in witness
 When speech went numb.
 Let me not shame their sublime deportments
 Drilled bright--
 Beckoning Etruscan invitation
 Toward light!¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Dickinson, Unpublished Poems, p. 9.

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