

EMILY DICKINSON AND GOD: A STUDY OF THE RELIGIOUS VIEWS
EXPRESSED IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS AND LETTERS

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson for her religious views, especially for her relationship to God and to her religious background. The divergent opinions abroad regarding her faith suggest an individual search as the only real means for deciding what she believed. She has been referred to as an irreverent "rascal," as a "Sublimated Puritan," as a "New England Nun," as an original theologian. Certainly she has too complex a mind to be confined to any titles such as these.

I should hope that those who read this thesis would themselves go in search of Emily Dickinson, if unacquainted with her, for the endeavor is delightful. A witty, warm, charming person emerges from the letters, and they, in turn, make the poems more meaningful.

For his excellent assistance in the preparation of my thesis, I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Thomas Brasher. I should also like to thank Dr. Emmie Craddock and Dr. Robert W. Walts, who very kindly served on my committee.

I approached Emily Dickinson first through her biographers, Thomas H. Johnson and George F. Whicher. Then I read the letters, critical articles, accounts of life in

Amherst written by contemporaries, and finally the poems. By the time that I had reached her poetry, I knew that I would look for her relationship to orthodoxy, her record of soul-searching and renunciation of suffering, her interpretation of God, and her ideas about immortality. I had looked for these in her letters also, finding them often more revealing of her religious thought than her poems.

I used the Harvard Edition of The Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, with standard texts reproduced from the original manuscripts. The poems are numbered in chronological order as well as the scholars are able to assign composition dates by year to them. Since the poems have no titles, I have used the poem numbers in this edition throughout the thesis.

I have used the Harvard Edition of The Letters of Emily Dickinson, also edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Johnson has also included all of the prose fragments found among Emily Dickinson's papers. Another very valuable source was Jay Leyda's two-volume compilation of documents related to the life of Emily Dickinson and to her village and contemporaries. The records in The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson are arranged in chronological order.

In using material from the letters and documents, I have omitted ellipsis dots at the beginnings of entries which start in the middle of a paragraph to avoid their excessive use.

In reproducing the poems and the letters, I have made no silent changes; the original capitalization and punctuation stand in all poems and letters quoted. Emily Dickinson has some peculiarities in both punctuation and capitalization. She uses commas in rather unusual places, often misplaces or omits the apostrophe in contractions, uses dashes for pauses or for other marks of punctuation, and omits periods or other end punctuation. She sprinkles capitals rather liberally throughout her writing. She invariably uses it's for the possessive pronoun its. She uses some old-fashioned spellings--boquet for bouquet and wo for woe--and in many cases has misspelled words, such as vascillating for vacillating in Poem No. 915. Occasionally, she makes errors in grammar; most common of these is "He don't." Such are the difficulties of dealing with a private writer whose work has not felt the refining pen of an editor. To avoid the overuse of sic, I call attention to these errors and peculiarities here. I have used sic only for the misspelled words in the letters.

I have followed the current literary practice among scholars of using the poet's initials instead of her full name. In the case of Emily Dickinson, this device is certainly preferable to the all too-familiar "Emily," and "Miss Dickinson" seems inappropriate, too.

Since this paper is not biographical in nature and omits the details of ED's life after her year at Mount Holyoke, a

brief summary of her life after 1850 is included here. Even more important is an introduction to some of the friends who were a very significant part of her being: she called them her "estate."

After her year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary during the 1847-1848 term, ED, age sixteen, returned to Amherst, where she spent the rest of her life with the exception of a few months in Boston for eye treatment, a brief visit to Washington while her father was in Congress, and a visit in Philadelphia. Her withdrawal from the social scene was gradual, but the necessity to write, which required time, began to grow strong. She probably became aware of her destiny as a poet about 1858. It was in 1862, when her "creativity was at flood," that she decided to make seclusion her means of "participating in the common experiences of mankind."¹

Within the house and grounds of the Dickinson homestead, ED carried on her share of domestic duties, and no member of the family was aware of the extent of her writing. She and her sister Lavinia, always close in childhood, became even closer in maturity. Except for the fact that her brother Austin lived next door and that ED disappeared when most

¹Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography, p. 248.

guests came, the routine at the Dickinson household was not so very different from that of ED's youth. Edward Dickinson continued as a leading citizen devoted to public service and was serving in the Legislature when he died in Boston of apoplexy in 1874. In June of the year following her husband's death, Emily Norcross Dickinson suffered a paralytic stroke and was an invalid until her death in 1882. Her care was largely ED's responsibility.²

After Ed's return from Mount Holyoke, Susan Gilbert, just returned from school in Utica, New York, and her sister Martha Gilbert (Smith) became friends to ED. When Austin Dickinson began courting Susan, the friendship between Sue and ED became closer. Although ED and her sister-in-law had differences sometimes straining relations, the two women were for the most part fairly close through the years. ED often turned to Sue for her reactions to poems, and Sue saw more of ED's poetry than any other person during ED's lifetime.

The children in the house next door were of course very dear to their aunt Emily, who was fond of all children. Austin and Susan Dickinson had three: Edward (Ned) Dickinson, born 1862; Martha Gilbert Dickinson, born 1866; and Thomas

²For accuracy in recalling dates or significant events, I have consulted Johnson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, III, Appendix 1.

Gilbert Dickinson, born 1874. Gilbert's arrival so many years after that of the older children was the occasion of great joy in the Dickinson family. His early death, in 1883, was a crushing blow to them all--especially to ED.

Death claimed many whom ED dearly loved. One of the first of them was Benjamin Franklin Newton, whom ED identified as her "earliest" friend. A young lawyer who studied in her father's law office until 1850 when he started his own practice in Worcester, Newton was the first person who showed an interest in ED's writing. He it was who introduced her to the work of the Bronte sisters and Emerson. Because of his guidance she referred to him as her "preceptor." His death of tuberculosis in 1853 hurt ED very deeply.

Two other friends played tremendous roles in ED's life. One of these was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, whom ED met during the two-weeks visit there in 1854. Supposedly, she went to hear him preach; however, there is no record of this fact. It is known that Wadsworth called on her in Amherst in 1859. Circumstantial evidence indicates that ED fell in love with the minister, a married man and the head of a family. To what extent he was aware of her adoration cannot be known, but as the person she loved, he was the source of inspiration for much of ED's poetry. Evidently, he served in

the capacity of spiritual guide, too. His acceptance of a call to Calvary Church in San Francisco in 1861 with removal from Philadelphia in 1862 was a crisis in ED's life, for she feared that she could not keep her reason without his counsel. She turned her stress into a great outpouring of writing and turned for help to a professional writer, a man whom she was later to call her "safest friend."

On April 15, 1862, ED initiated a correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson in response to an article of his in The Atlantic Monthly called "Letter to a Young Contributor." Although he did not recommend publication for ED's verses and had little to offer as a literary critic, Higginson's answer to her letter resulted in a lifelong correspondence of great importance in American literature. The friendship was for ED a "life-saver." For this "rescue," she was to thank Higginson many years later in person.

There were other cherished friends who occasionally served as private audience for her poetry and to whom ED wrote affectionate letters. Among these were Samuel Bowles, son of the founder of the Springfield Daily Republican who succeeded his father as editor in 1851, and his wife Mary. Associated with Bowles on the Republican was Josiah Gilbert Holland, who later founded Scribner's Monthly in 1870. ED's friendship with Holland and especially with his wife Sophia Holland was

a close and endearing one; she often referred to Mrs. Holland as "sister."

Another warm friendship--this one of literary significance--was that with the author Helen Fiske Hunt Jackson, who was the daughter of Nathan Fiske, professor of Amherst College, and Deborah Vinal Fiske. Helen left Amherst to live with relatives after the death of her mother. Although she had attended school briefly with ED in childhood, the two did not really know each other until in the seventies. It was probably Higginson who arranged for the writers to meet. Helen Hunt Jackson urged ED to publish her work and did in fact manage to get one poem published in a book of anonymous verse titled A Masque of Poets. The friendship endured until Helen Jackson's death.

As ED withdrew from the outside world, her letters became more and more important to her. Most constant of her correspondence with relatives was that with her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross of Boston. Since the sisters were a part of her own childhood and since they did not marry, ED thought of them always as her "little cousins."

One other friend needs identification: Judge Otis Phillips Lord of Salem, one of Edward Dickinson's close friends. After Edward Dickinson's death, Lord, then a widower, continued to visit in Amherst, always calling at the Dickinsons'. In

her forties ED fell in love with Judge Lord. There is no reason to believe that her love for Wadsworth was reciprocated or had any physical manifestation; her second love, however, was a mutual love. Letters survive to attest to this fact. Judge Lord died in March of 1884. Few of ED's friends then survived; Samuel Bowles; Charles Wadsworth, who had returned to Philadelphia in 1869; J. G. Holland--all were dead. Helen Hunt Jackson died in 1885 and ED became ill. ED's death came in 1886.

CHAPTER II

LEGACY FROM THE PAST

Emily Dickinson, born in 1830 into the circumscribed world of Amherst, a small farming village east of the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts, came into the Puritan heritage when its impact on New England was more historical fact than present reality. In the Amherst of her childhood, however, a modified form of Puritanism was still in effect. Originally a precinct in the township of Hadley, Amherst had been a part of the domain ruled over by Solomon Stoddard, minister of Northampton, whose defiance of the church leadership in Boston made him the ecclesiastical authority in the Valley for fifty years, until his death in 1729. The influence of Stoddard and of his grandson Jonathan Edwards, who succeeded him, was still observable in the moral sanctions of the Valley in 1830.¹ Because of this influence, it will be well to look backward to the story of their time and to the beliefs commonly referred to as "Puritan."

Seventeenth-century Puritans believed that men had fallen into a state of sin, that in order to be saved from this sin

¹Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 8.

they must receive from God a special "infusion" of grace, that God chose to grant this grace to some and to withhold it from others, that He had from the beginning determined the chosen ones. The Puritans saw the sinfulness of man as an evident fact which in itself showed man's need for divine help. Men who did receive what they thought was God's grace learned of it in an "ecstasy of illumination." Obviously this ecstatic experience was given to relatively few. Puritan theology further held that men must be reasonable and just and seek an inward communication with the power that controls the world but that they must not expect that power to be limited by their human interpretation of what is reasonable and just.²

The Puritan version of Calvinism early included a doctrine known as "Covenant" or "Federal theology." This added doctrine held that after man's fall into sin God had voluntarily condescended to draw up a covenant with man in which He laid down the terms for man's salvation and pledged Himself to abide by them. The Covenant did not change the sovereignty of God; He still shed His grace only upon His elected ones. But the Covenant did prescribe the conditions

²Sources for this summary of Puritan beliefs are Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, The Puritans, pp. 54-63, and Perry Miller, Jonathan Edwards, pp. 30-32.

under which man might find some assurance of his standing. At the moment of "conversion," when the individual experienced an awareness of God's grace on him and believed in Christ, he was received into a contract with God. With this transaction on record, he was "inside" the Covenant, where, now redeemed, he was "safe." The Covenant of Grace appeared then as a qualification of that sterner doctrine that the redeemed depend directly on God. Here man is treated, at least formally, as a power in his own right.

It was the work of the Puritan preachers to explain that the Covenant of Grace not only gave men assurance of their salvation but also carried a moral obligation concerning their conduct. Feeling keenly the responsibility for converting as many of the unregenerate as possible, ministers looked upon their preaching as a possible "means of election." If they could drive the images of doctrine deep enough into the mind and make them beautiful enough to win their listeners' affection, then they might be the means of awakening sinners. This aim was theirs despite the fact that the effectiveness of any sermon for conversion or moral improvement depended upon the favor of God. Thus while professing that grace was the free gift of God and not a reward for merit, the clergy was offering inducements to rational men to open negotiations with God.

Puritanism had always understood that conversion is an experience, and the Congregational system, limiting the church membership to those who could offer proof of their spiritual illumination, had always assumed that conversion was distinguishable enough to be tested. Unfortunately difficulties had arisen in applying the test. As a result, the "Half-Way Covenant" was devised to take care of persons who were not entirely sure that they had had the experience. Those who could offer an intellectual faith and had a desire to accept the responsibilities of the Christian life were admitted to membership in the Church.

The distinction between the Covenant member, or "visible saint," and the Half-Way Covenant member appeared in relation to the two Church sacraments. Since the sacraments themselves were looked upon as "seals" of the Covenant, testifying to the compact between man and God, only Covenant members could receive both the Lord's Supper and baptism. Non-Covenant members were permitted to have their babies baptized, but on Communion Sunday they were denied the privilege of taking part in the Lord's Supper. As the infants grew, many of them, like their parents, could give no evidence of conversion and were also shut out. The time came when the congregation of unprivileged was greater than that of the "visible saints."

At this point a new compromise was due.³ Herein entered Solomon Stoddard, whose device for solving the dilemma separated the Valley churches into an association under his leadership. The practice initiated by Stoddard and deplored by Boston churchmen was to admit into his church all those who wished to receive communion as a "converting ordinance," excepting only the "openly scandalous." Stoddard argued that since man cannot know the divine will, there is greater likelihood that God will have mercy on those who accept the Covenant. Membership in the Northampton church grew after this relaxation, and Stoddard added even more to the number by occasional "harvests" during periods of revival.⁴

Puritan theology at this point had come a long way from its original position. With the passing of the years, the religious ideas of Boston and the larger towns became more liberalized than those in the Northampton area, for Stoddard had picked as successor his grandson Jonathan Edwards, who reasserted fundamental dogmas: the necessity of physical conversion, the reality of man's sinful nature, and the total dependence of man upon God. Because of the impact that Edwards had on the moral code of the Valley even to a hundred

³Ola Elizabeth Winslow, Jonathan Edwards, p. 104.

⁴Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 8.

years after he had preached in Northampton, his story will be traced more closely. It will also illustrate the struggle of the Puritan soul in nineteenth-century Amherst, where men were still expected to have a physical sensation of conversion, where the individual, still plagued by the sinfulness of his own nature and afraid that the wrath of God would damn him to hell, examined his spiritual state carefully and hoped he could give himself to Christ--perhaps during a religious revival.

Since Jonathan Edwards based his preaching upon the authority of his own experience, extracts from his Personal Narrative will be used to tell his story. Edwards, who with violent inward struggles had made seeking salvation the business of his life, recorded an unexplainable acceptance of the idea of God's absoluteness:

From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure. But never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was thus convinced, not in the least imagining at the time, nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's Spirit in it; but only that now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it. However, my mind rested in it; and it put an end to all those cavils and objections.

And there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, and from that day to this; so that I scarce ever have found so much as the rising of an objection against it, in the most absolute sense, in God's shewing mercy to whom he will shew mercy, and hardening whom he will. . . .⁵

After being reconciled to the idea of God's sovereignty, Edwards became aware of God's grace upon him. His soul longed after God and Christ so that he desired holiness above everything else. In the Narrative, he gave this account:

It was my continual strife day and night, and constant inquiry, how I should be more holy, and live more holily, and more becoming a child of God, and a disciple of Christ. I now sought an increase of grace and holiness, and a holy life, with much more earnestness, than ever I sought grace before I had it. I used to be continually examining myself, and studying and contriving for likely ways and means, how I should live more holily, with far greater diligence and earnestness, than ever I pursued anything in my life; but yet with too great a dependence on my own strength; which afterwards proved a great damage to me. My experience had not then taught me, as it has done since, my extreme feebleness and impotence, every manner of way; and the bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit there was in my own heart. However I went on with my eager pursuit, after more holiness, and conformity to Christ.⁶

Yet it was his own vileness which made him wish "to be infinitely low before God." From this desire came a vision of divine beauty which he described in the Narrative:

⁵Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections, p. 59.

⁶Ibid., p. 62.

Once as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful condescension. This grace that appeared to me so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception. . . . which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.

In addition to such mystical revelations, it is significant to note his spiritual self-examination, the lesson of complete dependence on God, and the consciousness of his own wickedness, which troubled him even after he had known God's grace. He returned to the theme of sin again in the following:

Often . . . I have had very affecting views of my own sinfulness and vileness; very frequently to such a degree as to hold me in a kind of loud weeping, sometimes for a considerable time together; so that I have often been forced to shut myself up. I have had a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness, and the badness of my heart, than ever I had before my conversion. It has appeared to me, that if God should mark iniquity against me, I should appear the very worst of all mankind; of all that have been, since the beginning of the world to this time; and

⁷Ibid., p. 69.

that I should have by far the lowest place in hell. When others, that have come to talk with me about their soul concerns, have expressed the sense they have had of their own wickedness, by saying that it seemed to them, that they were as bad as the devil himself; I thought their expressions seemed exceeding faint and feeble, to represent my wickedness.⁸

But the greater part of his account deals with his delight in the divine scheme of things. He closed the Narrative with this conviction: ". . . how meet and suitable it was that God should govern the world, and order all things according to his own pleasure; and I rejoiced in it, that God reigned, and that his will was done."⁹

Thus out of the authority of his own experience, Jonathan Edwards reasserted the absolute sovereignty of God. Impressed by the mystical enlightenment of his own soul to the justice and beauty of God's plan, he was to insist that every regenerated person must have a like sensation. From the drama of his own spiritual struggles, he was to preach the reality of man's sin, emphasizing his dependence on God at every moment.

When Jonathan Edwards became the minister of the Northampton congregation in 1729, a growing secularism was threatening traditional orthodoxy. Unorthodox ideas, such as Arminian theology, which threw upon the individual the responsibility

⁸Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁹Ibid., p. 72.

for interpreting the Scripture bidding him achieve his own salvation, undermined the foundation of Calvinism. The changes in faith and practice which had evolved within the New England Church itself were the result of the need to make theology coincide with everyday experience. Men had found it hard to reconcile the doctrine of total depravity to their daily lives. Their neighbors were not a bad lot of men; in fact, they were characterized more by virtue than by sin. The dogma of special election had suited an aristocratic society where it was not hard to see that God had set men apart in classes, but as social distinctions became less marked, individualism undermined the old class psychology. Traditional theology, on the defensive, was in need of a champion at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Such a defender--many believed--Jonathan Edwards seemed to be.¹⁰

Jonathan Edwards first drew attention outside his own parish when he preached a sermon July 8, 1731, at the Public Lecture in Boston. The title of his discourse, God Glorified in the Work of Redemption by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him in the Whole of It, indicated the doctrine he was reasserting. Because of the disturbing influence from Arminianism abroad, the conservative clergymen

¹⁰Vernon L. Parrington, The Colonial Mind, in Main Currents of American Thought, I, 148-152.

present were impressed by Edwards.¹¹ Since this sermon and subsequent discourses were published, Edwards had a wider influence than he would have had as a pastor preaching to a single congregation. Another factor extending his influence beyond his own parish was his link with the evangelical movements which culminated in what is known as the Great Awakening.

In his Northampton parish Edwards continued the fight against Arminianism. Having heard rumors of this easier way to reach salvation, the people had begun to question the validity of their early teaching. Consequently, Edwards felt that it was his duty to prove to them by Scripture that the old doctrines stood firm. In presenting the case for orthodoxy, however, he added an emotional burden to his parishoners by using two old revival methods: appeal to fear and denunciation of individual sins. Listening to such a sermon as "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners," men began to cry out, "What must I do to be saved?" The first conversions took place in December of 1734, and the revival spread, with religious themes absorbing the thought and talk of the whole town for a brief period.¹²

¹¹Winslow, Jonathan Edwards, p. 153.

¹²Ibid., pp. 160-163.

There were certain marked stages which the hearer of revival sermons was expected to experience. At the outset he must know his own guilt as an actual hater of God; indeed, Edwards preached on the theme, "Men Are Naturally God's Enemies." In this way the hearer was brought to the conviction that God was just to condemn him and make him submissive to His sovereignty. He passed then from terror to passive acceptance, hoping that God would show him mercy. Finally redemption came; the humble heart felt joyful adoration in the unearned mercy that God would choose any so sinful as he. Sometimes Edwards had to persuade the penitents that the awe which they felt was the supernatural evidence of redemption that they were seeking.¹³

In May of 1735 the tension of the revival subsided. It was then that the men and women began to wonder about the wholesomeness of their emotional experiences. Although the very nature of a revival forbids that it last long, this pastor and many of his flock believed that its continuance had proved God's presence with them; therefore, when the spell was broken, they felt that God had withdrawn from them.¹⁴

¹³Francis A. Christi, "Jonathan Edwards," Dictionary of American Biography, VI, 32-33.

¹⁴Winslow, Jonathan Edwards, pp. 163-164.

Quieter conditions then existed in Northampton for several years, but Edwards believed that there would be a repetition of religious fervor. Eventually his uncompromising stand alienated him from his congregation, with his dismissal the result. His pronouncements, however, lingered on in the doctrines expounded from Valley pulpits and in the standards set in Valley conduct.

CHAPTER III

THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMHERST

It is the purpose of this chapter to present the Congregational Church of Amherst in ED's day, not only with the object of showing the doctrines and theological concepts evident but also with the intention of pointing out the human and secular viewpoint of the institution. For this purpose, I have used as much as possible the records left by contemporaries in letters, memoirs, and similar documents. The narrative begins about the time of ED's birth and continues into her adult life, at least to that age when she decided that she could not become a member of the Church.

In nineteenth-century Amherst men yet believed that God personally gave human beings worth because He chose them as His children, providing a plan for each human life. This strong relationship, which increased human responsibility for carrying out the divine will, made man directly accountable to God. Though the Creator spoke to his creature through the conscience, man's true guide for righteous living was the Bible, which was widely read in Amherst homes including that home which nurtured ED, who employed the phrases of the King James Version when they suited her needs.¹

¹Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, pp. 28-31.

A century after Jonathan Edwards, the New Englander was still very much aware of his own evil nature. He believed that only through God's mercy could he be redeemed. The first step toward redemption was the sinner's realization of his own guilt. Out of the agony of this realization, the penitent begged for God's mercy. Christ interceded; then the physical sensation of conversion came, bringing the certainty of forgiveness and deeming him worthy to join the church. Even then, however, the struggle was not over. Man must ever pray diligently that he not return to his evil ways. He must depend on Christ to show him the way to keep from falling back into sin. If he succeeded in living a righteous life, he could look forward to immortality, the hope which made the earthly life but a testing period for the life to come. Eternity was very real to the Puritan.²

In ED's childhood there were five Congregational churches in the villages within the town limits of Amherst. In addition to these were a small intermittent Baptist congregation and two Methodist meetings.³

The Dickinsons attended the First Parish Church, officially named "The First Church of Christ in Amherst, Massachusetts."

²Ibid., pp. 32-34.

³Ibid., p. 35. (Episcopal and Roman Catholic groups established congregations later.)

Although independent, the congregation functioned within the rigid doctrinal frame characteristic of the Connecticut Valley.⁴ Royal Washburn was minister of First Church when ED was born. At his death in 1833, Matthew T. Adam, a Scotsman from an Indian mission, succeeded to the pulpit.⁵ Upon his selection, one of his new parishioners, Mrs. Deborah Vinal Fiske, whose husband Nathan Welby Fiske was a professor at Amherst College, wrote to her Vinal family on Sunday evening, December 8, 1833: "A Mr. Adam . . . is to be settled over the village church here, next week; his manner of speaking is no good but he is considered a very pious man, & that is the chief thing. . . ."⁶

Later, on January 5, Mrs. Fiske reported the arrival of the minister and his wife in another letter to her family: "Mr. and Mrs. Adam board at the Tavern, it is said she is entirely ignorant of housework, & those among the people who were opposed to their settlement, prophesy all manner of trouble when they shall commence housekeeping."⁷ Besides the scrutiny to which the clergyman was subjected, her letter shows that

⁴Ibid., p. 37.

⁵Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, I, xxvii.

⁶Ibid., p. 23.

⁷Ibid., p. 24.

he was not the unanimous choice of the congregation. In reply to questions asked by her Vinal family, Mrs. Fiske answered on February 20: "You ask if Mr. Adam is an Episcopalian--no . . . but his manner--his voice, his tone is like the Episcopalians--he says Aamen and he has no idea of anything, but regular built sermons--familiar exhortations never seem to have entered his head."⁸

From another parishioner came a report on the minister and his standing with the church members. On June 19, 1834, Ann Shepard wrote to her sister Mary:

Our minister preaches most excellent sermons--no falling off, I can assure you--commenced last Sunday a course upon the Millennium--His labours are abundant--but he continues strong & vigorous--Is by no means "halt blind lame, or withered" in the slightest degree yet. But Alas! people don't all appreciate him--I often think him far too good--too learned for us. . . .⁹

By October 31 the opposition to Adam had grown considerably, for at a meeting of the parish on this date the minutes record the following: "Voted, That it is the sense of this meeting that some measures be taken to dissolve the connexion now existing between the Rev Mr Adam and the first Parish in Amherst."¹⁰ Among the reasons offered was this one:

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 26.

" . . . that the practice of the Rev Mr Adam relative to associating with neighboring Ministers, exchanging with them, and conducting social meetings, are not agreeable to the usages of the churches and Parishes in this vicinity."¹¹

This official action, which showed incidentally the narrowness of the church, evidently upset many members and shocked the minister who, according to Ebenezer Burgess, a tutor in Amherst, did not want to leave the town, an attitude which in turn alienated other members. Burgess wrote on November 16, 1834, to W. S. Tyler, an Amherst professor who was at Andover:

The parish is all in terrible confusion in endeavoring to get rid of the minister. He is reluctant to leave. . . . They chose a committee to talk with him about the matter. . . . He would have nothing to say by way of conference or concerning a council treated them uncereemoniously, and has alienated I believe the remaining friends he had in the church. . . .¹²

After the dismissal Mrs. Mary Adam, the minister's wife, complained in a letter to Mary Shepard, dated December 3, 1834:

I have cheerfully and frankly forgiven the Amherst people for all the unkind words they have spoken of me and for all their unkind thoughts and deeds--And when I look at my dear husband and see how grieved

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

he looks and then think of all he has done and all he had proposed to do for this people and then think of the barbarous treatment he has received I believe even the New Zelanders would have fared better--¹³

The congregation, labeled barbarous by one who had felt the brunt of their dismissal, evidently sought to avoid a similar situation with their next parson if length of time which elapsed before they chose a successor to Adam may be used as the measure. Indeed, 1835 and 1836 passed before the parish agreed upon a choice.¹⁴ During the interim a procession of candidates went by. Letters suggest the story. On December 10, 1835, Wellington H. Tyler reported to his brother William:

Mr. Treat is preaching (as a candidate I suppose) in the church here. Mr. Fowler of Binghamton preached two sermons here, one in Chapel & one in Church, about 2 weeks since. They are powerful & well delivered sermons, with some excrescences to be sure; but doubt if the majority liked him, I think well of him. Perhaps he would not always wear.¹⁵

There was still no minister at First Church on December 22, 1836, when Mrs. Fiske wrote to Martha Vinal:

The people have no pastor yet; the last candidate has just been condemned for Taylorism. I am almost of the opinion that ministers had better be settled for life according to the

¹³Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴Ibid., p. xxvii.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 31.

fashion of former years; removals from one place to another have become so common that neither pastors or societies think of making the best of each other--every little objection is made the occasion of a change. . . .¹⁶

The church officials did not overlook spiritual matters entirely. At a meeting of the church on December 30, 1836, the minutes record a vote to observe Monday afternoon as a "season of fasting and prayer for the conversion of the world."¹⁷

The flock still labored without a pastor when on February 25, 1837, William S. Tyler wrote his brother on the state of things. By now, a favorite candidate had emerged. Tyler wrote to Wellington;

No minister yet in the Old Church--None in Amherst--the "likelihood" of their getting one is a problem, that can be solved only by one more skilled in calculating chances than I am. They appear quite pleased with Mr. Bent, the present candidate--a man I should think, much like Mr. Washburn--with the same taste, good sense, sound theology, & as little energy of body & mind & as few of the graces of elocution.¹⁸

In spite of the deficiencies Tyler noted or perhaps because of his "good sense" and "sound theology," Josiah Bent, "the present candidate," became the new minister. On March 7, 1837,

¹⁶Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 36.

the members of the Church voted unanimously to invite him to become their pastor, "provided the Parish will unite with us in extending a call to him to become their minister."¹⁹

On April 20 Josiah Bent was installed. That day Mrs. Fiske wrote to Martha Hooker: ". . . he appears like a very amiable sensible man, one that will win the esteem and confidence of the enemies of religion."²⁰

Josiah Bent served as pastor until his death in November of 1839. He is the earliest minister that ED, of certainty, heard.²¹ Some of the events of his tenure are recorded in the documents of the time. Early in 1838 the minutes of the church record: "January 1st, being the 1st Monday in the year 1838, was observed as a day of Fasting and prayer. It was a precious season, and promising to the cause of religion amongst this people."²² The promise seemed on its way to fulfillment when in May of that year an Amherst correspondent wrote to the Boston Recorder a message reprinted in the Hampshire Gazette, May 23:

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., p. xxvii.

²²Ibid., p. 38.

There has been a highly interesting state of religion for some months past. There has been no special and unusual means employed in producing it. A means much blessed in the Rev. Mr. Bent's Society, were the visits of a committee of the church to every family connected with the congregation. . . . Eighteen have professed religion since the 1st of January in Mr. Bent's Society, and fifty or sixty have indulged hope.²³

Perhaps the correspondent depicts a season not unlike the "harvests" of Solomon Stoddard's day. This fruitful state of religion was not to last, however, for by December 19 Ann Elizabeth Shepard of Amherst wrote to her brother-in-law Seth Terry at Hartford;

There was a Church meeting last week--I did not attend it, but Mother was present. She said Mr. Bent expressed an unusual solicitude in regard to the state of religion among us--distressed at its low state--thought something should be done immediately to produce a change for the better--and advised that a Committee be forthwith chosen of members of the Church--to go and converse with all the individuals that compose it--in regard to their spiritual interests. He thought God blessed similar measures last year--and perhaps he would bless such means again to the good of this people . . . Mr. Bent does not visit his people but a very little--there is universal complaint on this score--neither does he give us any new well-studied discourses so as to make up for not calling on us.²⁴

Evidently Edward Dickinson held similar opinions on the preaching in Amherst. From Boston, where the Legislature was in session, Dickinson wrote his wife the following letter on January 20, 1839:

²³Ibid., p. 50.

²⁴Ibid., p. 51.

I have attended Park St. Church all day, & heard Mr. Aiken preach two of the best sermons that I have ever heard in my life--not excepting our "Bible Lectures." This afternoon's sermon, was proving the authenticity of the scriptures--& clearer reasoning, & more unanswerable conclusions, I never heard. . . . It was a real treat. If I could hear such preaching, every Sabbath, I would walk ten miles, in mud, knee deep. There seemed to be some body & soul to it--the preacher acted as if he was trying to prove something--& give his hearers some information. No church can help flourishing, with such preaching. As little regard as I have for such things, I was really charmed. It was an intellectual feast-- . . . I do really wish Providence would so order it, that we could, now & then, have something worth the trouble of hearing. I could never sleep under such preaching--& never tire.²⁵

Ann Elizabeth Shepard wrote again on the state of affairs in the Amherst parish, this time to Mrs. Fiske, who was then visiting in Boston. Dated January 24, 1839, the letter gave this information:

I have for months, discerned "the sign of the times" (In relation to ministers) they have been apparent here, & I dare say many others have seen the tokens of a coming storm. . . . A division on the exciting subject of Abolition seems to herald the tempests approach. . . . It may be that people are right glad of Abolition because it furnishes they think a sort of an excuse for quarrelling with the minister. When I heard Mr. Bent make the appointment for the Monthly Concert for Sabbath Eve, I trembled for him & thought you little know of what tinder-like combustibles your Church & Parish are composed, & you are perfectly unconscious that heterogeneous mass you are now throwing a coal of fire! . . .²⁶

²⁵Ibid., p. 53.

²⁶Ibid.

Though Josiah Bent's congregation had grown restive under his leadership, fate ordained that he not face the same type of dismissal received by Matthew Adam. By April Bent appeared exhausted during a busy evangelistic season and required assistance in his ministry. Mrs. Fiske wrote to Mrs. Hooker on April 10, telling of the minister's plight:

The revival in Amherst has brought a good deal of extra labour upon Mr. Bent and he is looking rather worn down; for a few weeks the people have hired assistance for him, but I understand he is to have it no longer for fear of creating uneasiness in the minds of those who must pay. What a stingy world this is!²⁷

Josiah Bent was able to carry on his work for several months more but not to the satisfaction of his congregation. On November 19, 1839, Mrs. Fiske again wrote Mrs. Hooker: "I fear the people here do not like Mr. Bent so well as they did, or as they ought to like so good a man. I think he has done all any man could with a very feeble wife and five children."²⁸ The Hampshire Gazette of November 27, 1839, carried the death notice of Rev. Josiah Bent, who had died on November 19, age forty-two.²⁹

Bent's successor, Aaron Merrick Colton, wrote very frankly of the "candidating" process to which prospective

²⁷Ibid., p. 55.

²⁸Ibid., p. 57.

²⁹Ibid., p. 57.

clergymen at Amherst were subjected. He preached his first sermon there on March 1, 1840. Of this experience he wrote in his Reminiscences (1889):

. . . Got through (Sabbath) day and evening somehow. The next morning the church and parish committees met at the office of Edward Dickinson, Esq. I was asked to be present. . . . Candidating! Whereunto shall I liken it? Behold and consider a fish caught with a hook, and hung up by the gills. To think of it; a man standing in a pulpit before a people, all eyes and ears eagerly intent on learning what manner of man this is. . . .

After nearly a two hours' talk, it was decided that I should remain and preach on the following Sabbath, and that, in the meantime, I should call on the families of the parish--committees taking turns in leading me about.³⁰

The members of the parish registered reactions to the candidate, with several mentioning him in letters. William S. Tyler wrote his brother Wellington at New York on March 2, 1840: "Mr. Colton, from Andover . . . preached last Sabbath. . . . He made a pretty favorable impression. . . . But it is a hard gauntlet to run, & my first impression from his manners & appearance was, that he could not succeed with this people. . . ." ³¹

The majority, however, did not share Tyler's opinion. In a letter to her daughter Mrs. Hannah Terry, Mrs. Deborah

³⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

³¹ Ibid.

Haskins reported a favorable reception of the candidate:

"Mr. Colton . . . has preached for a few times with good acceptance, a committee has been appointed by the Church to go round to all the families in the Church, and parish, nearly all are in favour of inviting him for a Pastor with but few exceptions."³²

On March 30 John Dickinson, clerk of the Church, recorded the following: "Voted that the Church invite the Parish to unite with them in inviting Mr. Aaron M. Colton to become Pastor & minister."³³

A. M. Colton accepted the call to come to Amherst. The investment procedure which followed this acceptance was described by Colton in his Reminiscences. On June 9 he met the Council of the Church with President Humphrey of Amherst College as moderator. The group then went to the meeting house where a large company, representatives of the Church, had met. Here he stood nearly two hours of examination. Then on June 10 he was ordained. On that occasion Dr. Humphrey charged the congregation:

When your pastor comes, receive him wherever you may be. Disturb no dust; make no apologies; do not spend the first half of the visit in complaining because he doesn't come oftener, and the last half because it is so short; but make his visit so pleasant that he can't stay away.³⁴

³²Ibid., pp. 60-61.

³³Ibid., p. 61.

³⁴Ibid., p. 62.

Under the new pastor's leadership the parish began to show signs of religious awakening. One parishioner, Samuel Mack, reported these signs in letters to his fiancée Rebecca Robins. On Sunday, June 20, 1841, just after returning from the evening meeting, Mack wrote her the following:

It was very interesting--there being uncommon seriousness among us & a few cases of conversion. . . . Mr. Colton . . . has preached eloquently & affectingly today--upon the "Excellency of the Law--"³⁵

In another letter to Rebecca, dated July 11, Mack mentioned hopes of a genuine revival. He also anticipated the time that he could share Colton's sermons with his fiancée:

There is quite a religious awakening among our people--& strong hopes are entertained by Mr. Colton & many in the church, that we are about to have a revival. It has come quite unexpectedly by myself & I understand to all the Church . . . I am already anticipating with how much pleasure we shall listen to & converse about such sermons as Mr. C. preaches. . . . Today he preached from "And the last state of that man was worse than the first." . . .³⁶

The seasons of religious enthusiasm came almost periodically. The next year, on the first Sabbath in May, the minister himself made a record of the morning service: "The attendance of the church was very numerous, and all the

³⁵Ibid., p. 70.

³⁶Ibid.

members rose, and solemnly renewed their covenant with God and with one another."³⁷

A less hopeful religious state existed the next year when on March 3, 1843, Mrs. Lucius Boltwood, whose husband was one of the founders of Amherst College, wrote to her sister Mrs. Ann E. Southworth (nee Shepard):

There has been some effort made in our church to arouse the professors of religion. A committee have recently been sent by the church to every member, and we hope their labour of love will not be in vain. There seems to be a desire in the church for a better state of things.³⁸

Sometimes the Church had concerns besides the minister and the state of religion: a member whose conduct warranted deprivation of church connection. The minutes of the Church on January 16, 1845, record a special meeting of the Church to hear a report on the case of Harriet Montague, daughter of Luke Montague and Irene Dickinson Montague, Edward Dickinson's sister. After a lengthy discussion the Church voted to suspend Harriet Montague from the communion of the Church for six months.³⁹ The records do not clarify the mystery of Harriet's sin nor the commotion raised when, six months later, the Church reviewed her case.⁴⁰ Mary Shepard gave this account of

³⁷Ibid., p. 75.

³⁸Ibid., p. 80.

³⁹Ibid., p. 90.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. lxiii.

the incident in a letter on July 25 to her nephew Lucius Beltwood, at Andover:

Mrs. Colton can tell you of the unruly church meeting they had last week . . . at which they talked over Harr. Montague's case--& where Horace Kellogg wishes to have no Church Committee--but to have all matters brought up before the whole Church. . . . Miss Montague is still suspended--not because of her sin, but because there was so much suspicion manifested in her returning. . . .⁴¹

Another of Mary Shepard's letters--this one to her sister Hannah Terry on August 25, 1845--concerned not only the severity of Colton's Sunday morning sermon but also his appreciation of the humorous, an illustration indicating that not all which was said at the meeting house was serious and somber:

Mr. Colton preached yesterday from Hosea--"goodness is like early dews &c" in which sermon he lashed every one, except those who had not been to his meetings at all. . . . Prof Tyler in the P.M. preached one of his peculiar, witty, & satirical discourses--Rev. Mr. Colton seemed to enjoy it--I feared he would laugh out, on his Sofa!⁴²

A. M. Colton continued to please his congregation. The donation party, no doubt a supplement to his salary, nevertheless gave the church members opportunity to express their gratitude to the minister as well. Such an occasion was reported in the Hampshire and Franklin Express on January 30, 1846. Included in the account was the following poetic effort:

⁴¹Ibid., p. 94.

⁴²Ibid., p. 96.

The People to Their Pastor

With joy we present us before thee our Pastor,
In token of friendship to thee and thy Master;
And here would we offer from hearts full and free,⁴³
Our praises to him--our best wishes to thee. . . .

Having attended this donation party, ED mentioned it in a letter to her friend Abiah Root. She reported that the Coltons had received some very valuable presents from their friends and that she had had a pleasant time.⁴⁴

The bad conduct of Amherst's youth came under fire from the pulpit later that year. In a letter to her son on November 1, Mrs. Boltwood told of the results of Colton's sermon:

The Rev. Mr. Colton preached a real smart sermon last sabbath afternoon, taking up all the bad conduct of the young and old boys in this place. He took his text, and then went right into the business of all that is bad about the streets and especially on the Sabbath and about meetings in the evening. . . . There was an unusual stillness, that Sabbath evening in the streets, and to day not a boy or man was seen loitering on the steps as we went to meeting.⁴⁵

Perhaps 1850 was the high point in the pastorate of A. M. Colton, for in the religious history of New England it is known as the year of the Great Revival.⁴⁶ Colton's

⁴³Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁴The Letters of Emily Dickinson, I, 29.

⁴⁵Leyda, Years, I, 113.

⁴⁶Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, p. 91.

comments on this spiritual awakening were published January 9, 1851, in the New York Observer. Colton wrote the following account;

February came and went; but with it no instance of conversion. Was there to be a revival? Was the little cloud that had put forth . . . to pass away without dropping down fatness? One great obstacle was in the way: intoxicating drinks, in one form and another, and in great quantities, were sold in the village. The question of permitting this, was inserted in the warrant for the town meeting in March.⁴⁷

Very likely, the "little cloud" of which the minister wrote was a reference to the sudden death, at the age of thirty-nine, of the Reverend William A. Peabody, newly appointed professor of Latin, who died of scarlet fever on February 27, 1850, shortly after his arrival in Amherst.⁴⁸ The shock of this event produced a solemn atmosphere, one ready for spiritual leaven. There remained only the obstacle to be removed. Characteristically, this was to be found in man's conduct, easily identifiable to the minister as the sale of intoxicating drink. According to the minister's write-up in the New York Observer, the townspeople agreed with his identification of the spiritual impediment, for on March 4, in a town meeting, one of the largest ever held in Amherst, the town decided to prohibit traffic in intoxicating liquors.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Leyda, Years, I, 169.

⁴⁸Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, p. 92.

⁴⁹Leyda, Years, I, 170.

The revival anticipated materialized; it spread to the college. Edward Hitchcock, president of that institution, wrote of it in his "Private Notes," dated March 25:

It hardly seems possible & yet I am certainly in the midst of another general & powerful revival of religion in College, & in this my study only two nights since I met 24 enquirers--most of whom had begun to see light & comfort.⁵⁰

From Ipswich, where she was enrolled that winter in the Female Seminary, Lavinia Dickinson, age sixteen, wrote a letter to her brother showing her concern for spiritual matters and revealing that Austin had been affected by the revival. Carefully she had examined her own conscience and hopefully she thought of her brother and sister as ready to become Christians. The letter, probably written in March, stated:

Why, Austin, I cant tell you how very much the tone of your letter surprised me. The idea that my brother was thinking of religion seemed almost impossible to me, the thought gladdened my heart, however, & increased, (I hope) my own interest. How I wish I could talk with you about this important subject, for you might have so much influence over me. At times, I desire religion above all things, & this world seems small indeed, in comparison with the all important subject, then Satan besets me, & my interest diminishes.

Oh! Austin, if the spirit of God has awakened you, I entreat you not to grieve it away. Do become a Christian now. How beautiful, if we three could all

⁵⁰Ibid.

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 am afraid, this note will convey a wrong impression to your mind, & you may think me more changed than I am, but I feel so desirous, that My Dear Brother & Sister should become christians, even though I am not, that perhaps I have said more than I ought, if so, pardon it. . . .⁵¹

Another letter to Austin, written about this same time, shows the concern of youth for each other's spiritual welfare in this age of piety, particularly during a revival. Emily Fowler wrote to ED and Austin some time in March while she was ill. After expressing regret for her separation from them and her affection for them, she added:

Just now God is reminding us of our duty and our happiness in a different way from usual. I feel sure that there will be nothing of bravado or sneer about you, or of affectation or indifference--you would be above such miserable pretence. No one can be utterly thoughtless, if they are a spark raised above the brute, and the higher and clearer and more powerful the mind, the more eagerly will they seize these wondrous truths--Christ died for sinners, and we are all sinners. . . . Dear Emily--I wish I could see you and Austin too--If I had one of you, or both of you by me now I'm sure I could interest you a little while. . . .⁵²

On receiving a reply from Austin, evidently both evasive and skeptical, Emily Fowler wrote again to him:

⁵¹Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, pp. 95-96.

⁵²Leyda, Years, I, 170-171.

Oh--I cant reason--I cannot answer the quibble, and the doubt, but I can praise, and love my Savior--Dear Austin--he is yrs too--and he is waiting with open arms for you to recognize and claim him.⁵³

On April 3 ED mentioned the impact of the revival in a letter to Jane Humphrey: ". . . Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion and growing very careless. . . ." ⁵⁴

Again in May ED referred to the revival in a letter to Abiah Root. She mentioned the conversion of Abby Woods, assuming that Abby herself had written Abiah about this great change and about the state of things in Amherst;

. . . how the "still, small voice" is calling, and how people are listening, and believing, and truly obeying--how the place is very solemn, and sacred, and the bad ones slink away, and are sorrowful--not at their wicked lives--but at this strange, great change.⁵⁵

President Hitchcock presented another report on the religious state at the college in an article for the Express April 19. He cited statistics: of the 179 members at the college, 106 had "professed religion" and 30 had "indulged hope" during the revival. Studies continued as usual with little outward signs of emotion.⁵⁶

⁵³Ibid., p. 171.

⁵⁴Letters, I, 94.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁶Leyda, Years, I, 172.

On May 30 Mrs. Boltwood wrote her son of the conversion of Edward Dickinson the preceding Sabbath. Her comments included this statement: "He has long been struggling with his feelings."⁵⁷ Of Edward Dickinson's conversion, George Gould recalled this incident in his Notebook in an entry dated September, 1877:

While Hon. E. D. of Amherst was converted--who had long been under conviction--His pastor said to him in his study--"You want to come to Christ as a lawyer--but you must come to him as a poor sinner--"⁵⁸ get down on your knees & let me pray for yourself."

The Republican on June 8 reported that the revival in Amherst continued, without any noticeable loss of interest. The converts included men of middle age, some who had been indifferent to religious subjects.⁵⁹ According to A. M. Colton's summary in An Historical Review, the revival continued until late summer with more than one hundred fifty making profession of faith.⁶⁰ On Sunday, August 11, seventy people were admitted to the First Church of Christ by profession. Among that number were Edward Dickinson and Susan Gilbert,

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 176.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 178.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 176.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 178.

who was to become Austin Dickinson's wife.⁶¹ Lavinia Dickinson joined the church on November 3, 1850.⁶²

With the close of 1850 comes the close of this section intended to show in the words of ED's contemporaries the Church as it functioned in the minds and actions of its members during the poet's formative years.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., p. 182.

CHAPTER IV

EMILY DICKINSON'S HOME

The home to which ED was so strongly attached as a child and which she as an adult chose to make her entire physical world was of course a primary influence in her life. The ideals upon which that home was established were love, respect for individuality, and devotion to duty. The story of any family begins with the two people who founded it, and the letters of Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross written during their courtship reveal a deep love as the basis for their marriage. The couple met while Edward Dickinson was a student at Yale College and Emily Norcross, daughter of Joel and Betsy Norcross of Monson, was attending a finishing school in New Haven. They waited to marry until Edward had finished his law study and established a practice in Amherst. On April 29, 1828, shortly before their marriage in May, Edward wrote his fiancée of his hopes concerning their marriage:

My Dear, do you realise that you are coming to live with me? May blessings rest upon us, and make us happy--May we be virtuous, intelligent, industrious and by the exercise of every virtue, & the cultivation of every excellence, be esteemed & respected & beloved by all--We must determine to do our duty to each other, & to all our friends, and let others do as they may.¹

¹Leyda, Years, I, 4.

This extract seems an appropriate summary of the attitudes which governed his actions toward family and community.²

From his father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Edward Dickinson inherited a role of responsibility in Amherst. Samuel Fowler Dickinson, who practiced law in Amherst for many years, had been instrumental in the founding of Amherst Academy (1814) and Amherst College (1821). He had frequently served as representative of the General Court of Massachusetts from 1802 to 1827, and had been a member of the state senate in 1828. When his support of Amherst College led him into financial trouble, he moved to Ohio in 1833, where he continued to work for educational causes until his death in 1838. Edward Dickinson assumed the load left by his father. He became treasurer of Amherst College in 1835, a responsibility he held until his resignation in 1872, taking charge of the building program as well as handling the funds of this institution. Like his father, he was a representative in the General Court of Massachusetts, serving in 1838 and 1839 and again in 1874, the year of his death. A Whig in politics, he was elected as a representative to the Thirty-Third Congress, 1853-1855. Very active in the Hampshire Agricultural Society, which

²Unless otherwise documented, the sources for material on ED's early life in Amherst are Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 21-44, and The Letters of Emily Dickinson, III, Appendix 1.

sponsored an annual exhibition known as the Cattle Show, Edward Dickinson was president of the association in 1842.³ The Amherst and Belchertown Railway, established in 1853, was one of the public measures Dickinson supported. He served the community of Amherst in many other capacities, but more important to him than any role in public life was his family.

Three children were born to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson: William Austin in 1829, Emily Elizabeth in 1830, and Lavinia Norcross Dickinson in 1833. The proper care of his children was Edward Dickinson's main concern. When he had to be away from home, he felt even more keenly his responsibility for them. From Boston on January 21, 1838, he wrote Mrs. Dickinson these thoughts absorbing his attention:

My family is the object of my thoughts, & my exertions--and without them there would be little to prompt me to make exertion. The duty which devolves upon us, of bringing up our little children as they should be, is an important one--and we can not realise too deeply, our obligation to study the best course--and adopt the best methods of instruction & government--& set before them the best example for imitation. They are a trust committed to our care--& we must discharge that trust faithfully. . . . To take a rational view of life, & the object of it, is, at once, to place almost anything we value here, in the light of little importance--and if, as you believe, and I can't doubt, this life is a mere preparatory state for another period of existence, how important, to act with reference to such a state--and yet how little we really do seem to consider it. I need not tell you

³Leyda, Years, I, 77.

that no day passes without my having some reflections on this subject,⁴ in connection with you, & our dear little children.

In the letters to his wife Edward Dickinson frequently enclosed notes to the children. Typical of these is this one, dated January 17, 1838:

My Dear little Children, Your mother writes me that you have been quite good since I came away-- You don't know what a pleasure it is for me to have such good news from you--I want to have you do perfectly right--always be kind & pleasant, & always tell the truth, & never deceive. That is the way to become good--If you do right, & that everybody will--everybody will like you--I want to have you grow up & become good men & women--and learn all⁵ you can, so that you can teach others to do right.

One of the lessons that each of the children had to learn was to carry his share of the responsibility in the home, for in the Amherst of their childhood every family was a self-sustaining unit, growing its own fruit and vegetables and keeping enough stock for household needs. In such an arrangement there was much work to do. ED's letters frequently refer to gardening, which she thoroughly enjoyed; to the orchard; to the housework, which she liked not at all; to the many chores involved in operating the nineteenth-century domestic routine: to bread-baking; to pudding-making; and to preserving.

⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵Ibid., p. 41.

All three of the Dickinson children attended Amherst Academy. Like Amherst College, it was founded with the ideal of preserving the orthodox tradition, and this purpose affected the atmosphere of the school. The course of study, however, seemed adequate for the day. ED mentioned courses in English, composition, speaking, French, German, Latin, mental philosophy, geology, botany, and history. Daily worship and ecclesiastical history were part of the program, too. The academic year was divided into four terms of eleven weeks each. Students attended term by term as their situation permitted. ED did not attend any four consecutive terms, illness keeping her out upon several occasions.⁶ It was at the academy that ED made many of her girlhood friends, among them Abiah Root, daughter of Deacon Harvey Root of West Springfield, who was there for one year. Another Academy associate was Jane T. Humphrey of Southwick, who stayed with the Dickinsons while she attended the academy briefly. Later she was preceptress there (1848-1849).

As part of their education, Edward Dickinson sent his daughters off to boarding school for one year--ED to Mount Holyoke and Lavinia to Ipswich. Austin went on to graduate from Amherst College in 1850. Then, before entering Harvard

⁶Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 42.

Law School in 1853, he taught school briefly in Sunderland and for a year in Boston, and read law in his father's office. He was admitted to the bar in 1854.

The level of education at the college in Amherst was high. A book store, a printing press, and a newspaper contributed to the intellectual growth of the village. Good talk was no small part of the social gatherings of the elders, especially of those associated with the college. Although social life in Amherst was restricted, particularly in the light of its evangelical devoutness, there were outlets for social expression.

Two big social attractions of the year were the College Commencement in August and the Cattle Show in October. The Dickinsons took active part in both. Edward Dickinson gave a reception at Commencement, an important annual affair. ED appeared at this event even after she had ceased to go out. And the Dickinsons usually entered some of the exhibitions of the Cattle Show, which included prize competitions for every variety of livestock, agricultural produce, and domestic articles. The Dickinson men sometimes exhibited their carriage horses; the ladies sent flowers or kitchen products. Both father and son were prominent leaders in the management of the fair.⁷

⁷Ibid., p. 16.

There were other social amusements for the young. ED was as much a part of these social activities as any other young person in Amherst. On January 11, 1850, she wrote her uncle Joel Warren Norcross this enthusiastic summary; "Amherst is alive with fun this winter--might you be here to see!"⁸ She had in mind the New Year's celebrations, which she described more fully to Jane Humphrey on January 23, 1850:

There is a good deal going on just now, the two last weeks of vacation were full to the brim of fun. Austin was reading Hume's History until then, and his getting it through was the signal for general uproar. Campaign opened for a sleigh ride on a very magnificent plan to which my dear Jane would have been joyfully added, had she been in town. A party of ten from here met a party of the same number from Greenfield, at South Deerfield the coming next New Year's, and had a frolic, comprising charades, walking around indefinitely. Music, conversation, and supper set in most modern style; got home at two o'clock, and felt no worse for it the next morning, which we all thought was very remarkable. Tableaux at the President's followed next in train, a sliding party close upon its heels, and several cosy sociables brought up the rear. To say nothing of a party universale at the house of Sydney Adams, and one confidentiale at Tempe Linnell's.⁹

This season of merry-making which ED described was no isolated series. Not only were the Dickinsons invited into the homes of their friends for games, "candy scrapes" and the like, but Squire Dickinson was a gracious host who conscientiously

⁸Letters, I, 80.

⁹Ibid., pp. 83-84.

returned social obligations. Into his home came many guests, some of them brilliant and witty.

But it was the inner world of her family that had the greatest impact on ED. The Dickinsons reared their children in the tradition of the Valley. They had morning devotions and frequent Bible reading and attended church twice on Sunday. The Sabbath was "kept holy," but it was not a favorite day with the Dickinson children, or so their annotations in the two volumes of Swallow Barn by John P. Kennedy (1832) indicated. On page 153 of the second volume, Austin wrote this comment: "Sunday was always the most difficult day in the week to get through." To this, ED added: "Unless you have some such book as this to read."¹⁰ An older ED wrote Austin about the "Sabbath Day" in rather teasing tones, reflecting nonetheless the practice of this day, including Bible reading and devotions. The letter, dated June 8, 1851, was written when Austin was teaching school in Boston. ED described the scene at home: "Father is reading the Bible--I take it for consolation, judging from outward things. He and mother take great delight in dwelling upon your character . . . and Father's prayers for you at our morning devotions are enough to break one's heart."¹¹

¹⁰Leyda, Years, I, 90.

¹¹Letters, I, 111.

ED's letters to Austin show her close relationship to her brother and give revealing glimpses of the home she loved. Several excerpts from this correspondence are included here. All of the following were written in the period 1851-1853 at Amherst while Austin was either teaching school in Boston or attending Harvard Law School:

July 27, 1851

You are coming home on Wednesday, as perhaps you know, and I am very happy in prospect of your coming, and hope you want to see us as much as we do you. Mother makes nicer pies with reference to your coming. I arrange my tho'ts in convenient shape, Vinnie grows only perter and more pert day by day.

The Horse is looking finely. . . . The carriage stands in state . . . we have one foundling hen into whose young mind I seek to instill the fact that "Massa is a comin!" The garden is amazing--we have beets and beans, have had splendid potatoes for three weeks now. . . . The apples are fine and large in spite of my impression that Father called them "small."¹²

October 17, 1851

We are waiting for breakfast, Austin, the meat and potato and a little pan of your favorite brown bread are keeping warm at the fire, while father goes for shavings.

While we were eating supper Mr Stephen Church rang the door bell very violently and offerred [sic] to present us with three barrels of shavings. We are much overcome by this act of magnanimity and father has gone this morning to claim his proffered

¹²Ibid., p. 127.

due. He wore a palm leaf hat, and his pantaloons tucked in his boots and I could'nt help thinking of you as he strode along by the window.

I dont think "neglige" quite becoming to so mighty a man. I had rather a jacket of green and your barndoor apparel [sic] than all the mock simplicity of a lawyer and a man. . . .¹³

October 30, 1851

Father is staying at home the evening is so inclement. Vinnie diverts his mind with little snatches of music, and mother mends a garment to make it snugger for you. . . .¹⁴

November 16, 1851

Father and mother sit in state in the sitting room perusing such papers only, as they are well assured have nothing carnal in them. Vinnie is eating an apple which makes me think of gold, and accompanying it with her favorite Observer, which if you recollect,¹⁵ deprives us many a time of her sisterly society.

December 15, 1851

When I know of anything funny I am just as apt to cry, far more so than to laugh, for I know who loves jokes best, and who is not here to enjoy them. We dont have many jokes tho' now, it is pretty much all sobriety, and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that its pretty much all real life. Fathers real life and mine sometimes come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt!¹⁶

¹³Ibid., pp. 147-148.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 161.

March 18, 1853

Your letters are very funny indeed--about the only jokes we have now. . . . Father takes great delight in your remarks to him--puts on his spectacles and reads them o'er and o'er as if it was a blessing to have an only son.

He reads all the letters you write as soon as he gets, at the post office, no matter to whom addressed. . . . he reads them at the office, then he makes me read them loud at the supper table again, and when he gets home in the evening, he cracks a few walnuts, puts his spectacles on, and with your last in his hand, sits down to enjoy the evening. . . .

I do think it's so funny--you and father do nothing but "fisticuff" all the while you're at home, and the minute you are separated, you become such devoted friends; but this is a checkered life.¹⁷

June 5, 1853

It is Sunday, and I am here alone. The rest have gone to hear Rev Martin Leland. I listened to him this forenoon in a state of mind very near frenzy, and feared the effect too much to go out this afternoon. The morning exercises were perfectly ridiculous, and we spent the intermission in mimicking the Preacher, and reciting extracts from his most memorable sermon. I never heard father so funny. How I did wish you were here. I know you'd have died laughing.¹⁸

The letters show a closely-knit family with the father the dominant figure, though each one had an identity of his own. Even their humor tended to link them closer as they joined in laughter over the mimic of an outsider. Through

¹⁷Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 251-252. Evidently Martin Leland was a fill-in preacher while the parish was negotiating for a new pastor. The Reverend E. S. Dwight accepted the call to First Church later in the summer.

all the letters runs the Dickinson reluctance to accept separation. Although Austin was away from home, he could be sent for at any time since home affairs took precedence over other pursuits. The bond between family members remained strong. ED summed up the situation when she wrote Austin on April 8, 1853: "I think we miss each other more every day that we grow older, for we're all unlike most everyone, and are therefore most dependent on each other for delight."¹⁹

ED stood apart from her family in the respect that she alone made no profession of faith. Her mother had joined the Church in 1831, three years after marriage. Her father was forty-seven years old when he accepted Church membership in 1850, the same year that Lavinia joined at age sixteen. Austin became a member in 1856, the year of his marriage to Susan Gilbert. In the matter of religious faith, ED's individuality was respected by her family, though the others no doubt longed to have her safely on the "inside." Aside from little notes of longing such as Lavinia wrote from Ipswich, there is no record of any exhortation from them concerning ED's spiritual state. Indeed, when her father perceived the strain that separation from the family and the constant religious atmosphere of Mount Holyoke produced upon his daughter, he

¹⁹Ibid., p. 239.

determined that she would return home at the end of one year. Instead of turning to her family, ED made Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey her confidantes in her religious struggle. This struggle is the subject of another chapter.

None of the Dickinson children really outgrew the parental influence. Austin was the only one of the three who left the father's home. Whether family ties or other reasons were responsible, he gave up the idea of practicing law in the Midwest to remain in Amherst. He accepted a house which Edward Dickinson built next door to the homestead as a wedding gift when he and Susan Gilbert were married. He was to carry on the tradition of community service begun by his father and his grandfather before him. Near the end of her thirtieth year, ED deliberately chose never willingly to leave her home. Though Lavinia Dickinson continued to visit friends and relatives, who found her a welcome guest, she remained for the most part at home.

On October 25, 1851, ED wrote her brother Austin this description:

Home is a holy thing--nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it's portals. I feel it more and more as the great world goes on and one and another forsake, in whom you place your trust--here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden which not the sin of any can utterly destroy--smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and brighter than all the world beside.²⁰

²⁰Ibid., pp. 150-151.

CHAPTER V

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AT MOUNT HOLYOKE FEMALE SEMINARY

When ED was fifteen years old, her parents sent her to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary at South Hadley. Her year there was a decisive step in her spiritual life. Because educational institutions such as Mount Holyoke and the Wheaton Female Seminary at Ipswich which Lavinia Dickinson attended made concerted efforts to promote the evangelical aspect of the Christian faith, the period of attendance marked for many students a crisis in religious development. Such seemed the case for the Dickinson daughters. It was in 1850, her year at Ipswich, that Lavinia Dickinson joined the Church. It was at Mount Holyoke that ED found herself unable to accept the faith as presented by the religious leaders of her day and embarked on her own spiritual quest.

The religious struggle was not new to ED. Long before she enrolled at Mount Holyoke, she had felt the pressures applied by friends and teachers and her own tender conscience, and she was well aware of the need for conversion. The first expressions of her personal spiritual struggle are recorded in her correspondence to Abiah Root. In her letters to Abiah, ED first mentioned the idea of becoming a Christian in response to Abiah's confession of an "unsettled" religious

state. Fearing she might influence Abiah's decision, ED had delayed in answering the letter and, when she did write, confided that she had known similar feelings. With familiar terms ED, at fifteen, expressed longing to fit the pattern handed down. On January 31, 1846, she wrote this summary of her religious experience:

I have had the same feelings myself Dear A. I was almost persuaded to be a christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly--and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever. I have longed to hear from you--to know what decision you have made. I hope you are a christian for I feel that it is impossible for any one to be happy without a treasure in heaven. I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ.

When I am most happy there is a sting in every enjoyment. I find no rose without a thorn. There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill. I am far from being thoughtless upon the subject of religion. I continually hear Christ saying to me Daughter give me thine heart. Probably you have made your decision long before this time. Perhaps you have exchanged the fleeting pleasures of time for a crown of immortality. Perhaps the shining company above have tuned their golden harps to the song of one more redeemed sinner. I hope at sometime the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and the angels will consent to call me sister. I am continually putting off becoming a christian. 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--Last winter there was a revival here. The meetings were thronged by people old and young. It seemed as if those who sneered the loudest at serious things were soonest

brought to see their power, and to make Christ their portion. It was really wonderful to see how near heaven came to sinful mortals. Many who felt there was nothing in religion determined to go once & see if there was anything in it, and they were melted at once.

Perhaps you will not beleive [sic] it Dear A. 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. Many conversed with me seriously and affectionately and I was almost inclined to yeild [sic] myself to the claims of He who is greater than I. How ungrateful I am to live along day by day upon Christs bounty and still be in a state of emnity to him and his cause.¹

Almost with envy did ED consider those who could accept the traditional faith. The tone of the letter changed, however, as she contemplated eternity:

Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world be a releif [sic] to so endless a state of existense [sic]. I dont know why it is but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth--I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene--It does not seem to me that I shall ever close my eyes in death. I cannot realize that the grave will be my last home--that friends will weep over my coffin and that my name will be mentioned, as one who has ceased to be among the haunts of the living, and it will be wondered where my disembodied spirit has flown. I cannot realize that the friends I have seen pass from my sight in the prime of their days like dew before the sun will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, nor

¹Letters, I, 27-28.

can I realize that when I again meet them it will be in another & a far different world from this. I hope we shall all be acquitted at the bar of God, and shall receive the welcome, Well done Good & faithful Servants., Enter Ye into the Joy of your Lord. I wonder if we shall be a chosen band as we are here. I am inclined to beleive [sic] that we shall--and that our love will be purer in heaven than on earth. I feel that life is short and time fleeting--and that I ought now to make my peace with my maker--I hope the golden opportunity is not far hence when my heart will willingly yield itself to Christ, and that my sins will be all blotted out of the book of remembrance. Perhaps before the close of the year now swiftly upon the wing, some one of our number will be summoned to the Judgment Seat above, and I hope we may not be separated when the final decision is made, for how sad would it be for one of our number to go to the dark realms of wo, where is the never dying worm and the fire which no water can quench, and how happy if we may be one unbroken company in heaven.²

ED shared her concern for Abiah with their friend Abby Wood:

I carried your letter to Abby and she perused it with the same feelings as myself, and we wished together that you might choose that better part which shall not be taken from you. . . . Although I am not a christian still I feel deeply the importance of attending to the subject before it is too late.³

ED's next letter indicated that Abiah had been converted. Again ED recalled her own brief period of spiritual joy and lamented her present indifference. The lure of the world seemed even stronger to her despite the reasoning of friends who warned her of losing the opportunity for salvation. But ED seemed well aware of her danger as her letter, dated March 28, 1846, revealed:

²Ibid., p. 28.

³Ibid., pp. 28-29.

It is Sabbath Eve. All is still around me & I feel in a mood to answer your affectionate letter. I am alone with God, & my mind is filled with many solemn thoughts which crowd themselves upon me with an irresistible force. I think of Dear Sarah & yourself as the only two out of our circle of five who have found a Saviour.⁴ I shed many a tear & gave many a serious thought to your letter & wished that I had found the peace which has been given to you. I had a melancholy pleasure in comparing your present feelings with what mine once were, but are no more. I think of the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven as of a delightful dream, out of which the Evil one bid me wake & again return to the world and its pleasures. Would that I had not listened to his winning words! The few short moments in which I loved my Saviour I would not now exchange for a thousand worlds like this. It was then my greatest pleasure to commune alone with the great God & to feel that he would listen to my prayers. I determined to devote my whole life to his service & desired that all might taste of the stream of living water from which I cooled my thirst. But the world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her syren voice. From that moment I seemed to lose my interest in heavenly things by degrees. Prayer in which I had taken such delight became a task & the small circle who met for prayer missed me from their number. Friends reasoned with me & told me of the danger I was in of grieving away the Holy spirit of God. I felt my danger & was alarmed in view of it, but I had rambled too far to return & ever 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.

I feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice, from which I cannot escape & over which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help from above.⁵

⁴The circle of five included ED, Abiah Root, Abby Wood, Harriet Merrill, and Sarah Tracy.

⁵Letters, I, 30-31.

ED then referred to the revival at the College, hoping that it would spread to the village church and influence her and Abby. She thought youth the fit time for committal to God's service. To wait until age or illness has dimmed the charms of the world seemed to her a mockery. She then added this reflection, echoing very likely words spoken from the pulpit: "Surely it is a fearful thing to live & a very fearful thing to die & give up our account to the supreme ruler for all sinful deeds & thoughts upon this probationary term of existence."⁶

After reflecting on the Puritan concept that this life is a trial to determine the life to come, ED turned next to the subject of death. She sympathized with Abiah's loss of a friend, E. Smith. In relation to the girl's death, ED touched upon another teaching of the day. Regretting that she had not met the deceased friend, she wrote: "I was in hopes I might at some time meet her but God has ordained otherwise. I shall never meet her except as a spirit above."⁷

Still on the subject of death, ED related her first encounter with its reality, the death of her friend Sophia Holland, daughter of Seneca Holland of Amherst, who died in

⁶Ibid., p. 31.

⁷Ibid., p. 32.

April of 1844. Though she told no one of her grief at the time, ED now told Abiah that a deep melancholy had possessed her. She became ill and her parents sent her for a visit with Mrs. Dickinson's sister, Mrs. Loring Norcross in Boston, where ED's health improved. She concluded the letter with this commiseration on the death of Abiah's friend: "I know what your feelings must have been at her death & rejoice that you have consolation from on high to bear it with submission."⁸

In the period between this letter and the next one that had any mention of her spiritual struggle, ED experienced another period of depression resulting from a prolonged bronchial ailment which kept her out of the Academy for nearly two terms. Again the anxious parents sent her to Boston for a change of scene. According to her own account, she did regain her "usual flow of spirits" there. She was in Boston when she wrote Abiah on September 8, 1846, renewing the discussion on her spiritual state:

I am not unconcerned Dear A. upon the all important subject, to which you have so frequently & so affectionately called my attention in your letters. But I feel that I have not yet made my peace with God. . . . 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. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die. Pray for me Dear A. that I

⁸Ibid.

may yet enter into the kingdom, that there may
be room left for me in the shining courts
above.⁹

There was still longing for the required physical conversion, but ED's sincere scrutiny allowed her no pretensions.

With this religious struggle already a part of her experience, ED came to Mount Holyoke. The environment there will be presented from descriptions by ED's contemporaries, from the records of the Seminary Journal, and from ED's letters to family and friends.

Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon, fit into the evangelical pattern of the time. Since its founder was deeply concerned about the growth of mind and character of the young ladies who attended the school, intellectual standards were high and religious activities played a great part in the life there. Examination of the spiritual state of the students as well as their academic standing was routine procedure at the beginning of the term. A religious census revealed whether students had become Christian or not. The unconverted were of two categories: those who "had hope" and those who were "without hope." It was the role of the school and its staff to help the impenitent realize their peril and awaken them to a desire for conversion.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., pp. 37-38.

¹⁰Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 12-13.

The young women, most of them in their early twenties, whom Mary Lyon had attracted to the faculty were themselves seminary-trained and devoted to the task of higher education. Most of the young ladies under their charge came from homes in New England or New York, the daughters of professional men, merchants, and farmers. The students, referred to as "the family" by the founder, were divided into three classes: senior, middle, and junior. The classes were again divided into sections, with each section the responsibility of a teacher. In the 1847-48 term ED was one of two hundred thirty-five students who filled the school to capacity. Her roommate was her cousin, Emily Norcross, a senior from Monson, whose letters provide some comment on ED during this period. Although assigned first to the junior level under Miss Rebecca W. Fiske, ED was soon promoted to the middle class, presided over by Mary C. Whitman, who, as associate principal, was responsible for routine discipline.¹¹

The activities of the Seminary were recorded in a Journal, kept especially for the missionaries who had gone out from Mount Holyoke. The history recorded in the Journal emphasizes the periods of religious revival and places little stress on the daily routine of living wherein the

¹¹Whicher, This Was a Poet, pp. 64-66.

girls were mastering their lessons, doing the domestic chores of the institution, taking part in recreation, or entertaining guests. Thus, as George Frisbie Whicher, one of the able biographers of ED has warned, it would be an error to reconstruct the background of ED's year at Holyoke entirely from these official or semiofficial records.¹²

To give a more accurate picture of the Seminary, one from a secular viewpoint, Whicher relied upon the diary of William Gardiner Hammond, an Amherst sophomore. This young man learned in the spring of 1847 that the daughter of family friends was attending Mount Holyoke. When he went to call on Ellen Holman, whom he had never seen, he approached the Seminary with apprehension. Here is his account of his first visit there:

. . . Reached S. H. about 4½ P.M.: a passable little village (a very little one) not unpleasantly situated. The seminary is a large brick building with double portico in front. . . . Rang the bell in great terror, for fear of Miss Lyon and the assistant dragonnesses: a very plain young lady came to the door, and to my great astonishment on asking for Miss Holman I was shown into the parlor without any inquisition preparatory! This was a huge apartment sumptuously furnished with a rusty stove, cherry table, and multitudinous cane bottom chairs. . . . She (Nellie Holman) got a teacher to accompany us through the building, that being the requisition. . . . We saw all that was to be seen: the pleasant recitation rooms; the pleasanter chapel,

¹²Ibid., pp. 58-59.

or what corresponds to such; the little library and reading room where all but the strictly religious periodicals are carefully put away from Saturday till Monday: the huge dining room with its all but score of tables, and huger kitchen where the young ladies of the Seminary all labor an hour daily. We went through the long space-ways meeting any number of plain young ladies, and catching sly peeps into their little boxes of sleeping rooms: said "beautiful" at every eligible window, & did all the other things right and proper in viewing the building. Reflecting at last that I had nine miles to drive . . . I reluctantly broke away, with sincere promise of soon repeating my visit. . . .¹³

On another visit Hammond was invited to sit at Miss Lyon's table for the evening meal and was allowed afterwards to adjourn with Nellie Holman to the parlor. On the occasion of this visit, he recorded more details of activities at the school:

Saw some of the young ladies exercise in Calisthenics a species of orthodox dancing in which they perambulate a smooth floor in various figures, with a sort of sliding stage step; not unlike children's plays . . . the whole movement is accompanied by singing, in which noise rather than tune or harmony seems to be the main object. By a species of delusion peculiar to the Seminary, they imagine . . . all this very conducive to health, strength, gracefulness, etc. . . . Then went to tea by special invitation; or to speak more accurately went to water: for nothing more ardent is allowed.¹⁴

¹³Ibid., pp. 59-60.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 62.

These extracts from Hammond's diary show that a visitor found Mount Holyoke a less forbidding place than its reputation suggested; however, not all young ladies whose parents contemplated sending them to the Seminary displayed enthusiasm for the program there. Helen Maria Fiske, daughter of Nathan and Deborah Vinal Fiske of Amherst, questioned the attractiveness of the domestic chores assigned at the Seminary when her father talked seriously of her enrollment. Her reaction is recorded in a letter which she wrote her cousin Ann Scholfield, at Boston, on May 1, 1846. In jesting tone, she spoke of going to Mount Holyoke for these achievements: ". . . to learn how to make hasty pudding, & clean gridirons." Then she added this question: "What sort of a figure do you think I shall cut, washing floors, before breakfast, & cleaning stew-pans after dinner?"¹⁵

ED was plagued by no such reservations; indeed she was eager to attend the school, as her letter to Abiah Root, written on June 26, 1846, indicated:

I am fitting to go to South Hadley Seminary, and expect if my health is good to enter that institution a year from next fall. . . . You cannot imagine how much I am anticipating entering there. It has been in my thought by day, and my dreams by night, ever since I heard of South Hadley Seminary.¹⁶

¹⁵Leyda, Years, I, 108.

¹⁶Letters, I, 34.

A dream was realized when ED enrolled at Mount Holyoke. Characteristically, her first letter written at South Hadley was to Austin, the family member to whom she seemed closest. Aside from mentioning Rebecca Fiske, teacher in charge, who was a link with home since her brother Sam attended Amherst College where Austin at this time was a sophomore, ED made little reference to the school. She had this to say about her teachers: "I love Miss Fiske very much & think I shall love all the teachers, when I become better acquainted with them & find out their ways, which I can assure you are almost 'past finding out.'"¹⁷

Her next letter to Austin had two rather interesting items. She related this incident of one young lady who failed to meet the academic or moral standards of the institution:

A young lady by the name of Beach, left here for home this morning. She could not get through her examinations & was very wild beside. Miss Lyon said she should write her father, if she did not change her course & as she did not, her father came for her last night. He was an interesting man & seemed to feel very badly that his daughter should be obliged to leave, on account of bad conduct.¹⁸

In the postscript she sent this message to her father:

Tell Father, I am obliged to him very much, for his offers of "picauniary" assistance, but do not need any. We are furnished with an account-book,

¹⁷Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 51.

here & obliged to put down every mill, which we spend & what we spend it for & show it to Miss Whitman every Saturday, so you perceive your sister is learning to keep accounts in addition to the other branches of education. I am getting along nicely in my other studies & am happy--quite for me.¹⁹

Her final word was inclusion of a menu, with the pronouncement that it was a dinner "fit to set before a King."²⁰

ED was finding the seminary to her liking. The most complete account of her life there she wrote to Abiah Root. Because the letter reveals ED's reactions to the school and her growing realization of what separation from her family meant to her, most of the letter is included here. On November 6, 1847, ED wrote to her friend:

I am really at Mt Holyoke Seminary & this is to be my home for a long year. . . . It has been nearly six weeks since I left home & that is a longer time, than I was ever away from home before now. I was very homesick for a few days & it seemed to me I could not live here. But I am now contented & quite happy, if I can be happy when absent from my dear home & friends. You may laugh at the idea, that I cannot be happy when away from home, but you must remember that I have a very dear home & that this is my first trial in the way of absence for any length of time in my life. As you desire it, I will give you a full account of myself since I first left the paternal roof. I came to S. Hadley six weeks ago next Thursday. I was much fatigued with the ride & had a severe cold besides, which prevented me from commencing my examinations until the next day, when I began.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 52.

²⁰Ibid.

I finished them in three days & found them about what I had anticipated, though the old scholars say they are more strict than they ever have been before. As you can easily imagine, I was much delighted to finish without failures & I came to the conclusion then, that I should not be at all homesick, but the reaction left me as homesick a girl as it is not usual to see. I am now quite contented & am very much occupied now in reviewing the Junior studies, as I wish to enter the middle class. The school is very large & though quite a number have left, on account of finding the examinations more difficult than they anticipated, yet there are nearly 300 now. Perhaps you know that Miss Lyon is raising her standard of scholarship a good deal, on account of the number of applicants this year & on account of that she makes the examinations more severe than usual.

You cannot imagine how trying they are, because if we cannot go through them all in a specified time, we are sent home. I cannot be too thankful that I got through as soon as I did, & I am sure that I never would endure the suspense which I endured during those three days again for all the treasures of the world.

I room with my Cousin Emily, who is a Senior. She is an excellent room-mate & does all in her power to make me happy. You can imagine how pleasant a good room-mate is, for you have been away to school so much. Everything is pleasant & happy here & I think I could be no happier at any other school away from home. Things seems much more like home than I anticipated & the teachers are all very kind & affectionate to us. They call on us frequently & urge us to return their calls & when we do, we always receive a cordial welcome from them.

I will tell you my order of time for the day, as you were so kind as to give me your's. At 6. oclock, we all rise. We breakfast at 7. Our study hours begin at 8. At 9. we all meet in Seminary Hall, for devotions. At 10 $\frac{1}{4}$. I recite a review of Ancient History, in connection with which we read Goldsmith & Grimshaw. At 11. I recite a lesson in "Pope's Essay on Man" which is merely transposition. At 12. I practice Calisthenics & at 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ read until dinner, which is at 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ & after dinner, from 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ until 2 I sing in Seminary

Hall. From 2 3/4 until 3 3/4 I practice upon the Piano. At 3 3/4 I go to Sections, where we give in all our accounts for the day, including, Absence--Tardiness--Communications--Breaking Silent Study hours--Receiving Company in our rooms & ten thousand other things, which I will not take time or place to mention. At 4 1/2 we go into Seminary Hall, & receive advice from Miss Lyon in the form of a lecture. We have Supper at 6. & silent-study hours from then until the retiring bell, which rings at 8 3/4, but the tardy bell does not ring until 9 3/4, so that we dont obey the first warning to retire.

Unless we have a good & reasonable excuse for failure upon any of the items, that I mentioned above, they are recorded & a black mark stands against our names: As you can easily imagine, we do not like very well to get "exceptions" as they are called scientifically here. My domestic work is not difficult & consists in carrying the Knives from the 1st tier of tables at morning & noon & at night washing & wiping the same quantity of Knives. I am quite well & hope to be able to spend the year here, free from sickness. You have probably heard many reports of the food here & if so I can tell you, that I have yet seen nothing corresponding to my ideas on that point from what I have heard. Everything is wholesome & abundant & much nicer than I should imagine could be provided for almost 300. girls. We have also a great variety upon our tables & frequent changes. One thing is certain & that is, that Miss Lyon & all the teachers, seem to consult our comfort & happiness in everything they do & you know that is pleasant. When I left home, I did not think I should find a companion or a dear friend in all the multitude. I expected to find rough & uncultivated manners, & to be sure, I have found some of that stamp, but on the whole, there is an ease & grace a desire to make one another happy, which delights & at the same time, surprises me very much. I find no Abby or Abiah or Mary, but I love many of the girls. Austin came to see me when I had been here about two weeks & brought Viny & Abby. I need not tell you how delighted I was to see them all, nor how happy it made me to hear them say that "they were so lonely." It is a sweet feeling to know that you are missed & that your memory is precious at home. This week, on Wednesday, 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 you do you love your parents? They wanted to surprise me & for that reason did not let me know they were coming. I could not bear to have them go, but go they must & so I submitted in sadness. Only to think Abiah, that in 2½ weeks I shall be at my own dear home again. You will probably go home at Thanksgiving time & we can rejoice with each other.²¹

In her description to Abiah ED mentioned incidentally two activities related to the religious training of the school; morning devotions and Mary Lyon's lectures. The records of the Seminary Journal reveal a fuller description of the religious environment. Although the activities recorded there were written by teacher assistants zealous of showing evangelical achievements, the entries of the Journal must reflect the nature of conversation, lecture, and exhortation which contributed to the atmosphere of the school. Susan Tolman kept the Journal during the time that ED was enrolled. Her entries on September 30 and October 1 of 1847 mentioned the academic examinations being given at the beginning of the term. On both days Mary Lyon directed her remarks at devotions to the subject of absent and deceased friends, with her comments particularly aimed at those who were away from home for the first time.²²

²¹Ibid., pp. 53-56.

²²Leyda, Years, I, 122.

With academic examinations given, the staff turned to religious concerns. Several Journal entries are presented here as they give a relatively continuous narrative of the staff's evangelical efforts. These records show emphasis on traditional doctrines and practices including Puritan dislike for any Christmas observance. Here are the accounts, presented in chronological order;

October 2:

This P.M. the names of the professors of religion those who have a hope, and those who have not, were taken. I cannot tell you how solemn it was, as one after another arose. I saw more than one weep as her name was put down "no hope." There is a large class of this character will it be so at the end of the year.²³

October 14:

The religious meeting commenced this evening. . . . Miss Lyon meets with the Christians. The other large class is divided between Miss Scott & myself. . . . They were all requested to take their Bibles. The subject I took up was Human Depravity . . . nearly all seemed attentive.²⁴

December 16:

This A.M. at devotions Miss Lyon spoke to us upon the doctrine of Dependence upon God. She has been taking up for a few mornings past the great doctrines of the Bible, as Total Depravity, the Nature of Sin, &c.²⁵

²³Ibid., p. 123.

²⁴Ibid., p. 124.

²⁵Ibid., p. 132.

December 20:

Miss Lyon's meeting with the impenitent yesterday was one of interest. There is attention & some awakening but little deep feeling yet. She spoke to them more solemnly than at any previous meeting. . . . I am more & more convinced of the exceeding hardness & depravity of the heart, as I see how little effect, truths, presented & applied in her forcible manner, has upon those who listen.²⁶

December 21:

It is decided that we shall observe Friday (December 24) as a fast-day. Miss L. spoke of it both in the A.M. & P.M. of the reasons for & the manner of its observance. She appointed a meeting to be attended tomorrow by those of the impenitent, who had decided to observe the day.²⁷

December 24:

The day has passed. The house has been very still, quite as much so as on the Sabbath. We met for devotions at the usual time. . . . Miss Lyon met with all the impenitent as on the Sab. She continued the subject . . . the duty of giving our hearts up to the operations of the Holy Spirit. . . . At the close after pressing home the truths with much earnestness, she invited all who were willing thus to give up their hearts to the influences of the Holy Spirit to attend a meeting at 7½. . . . Those who wished to do so were to write a sealed note & put it in her note-box. . . . More than 50 wrote a note. There seems to be much awakening but not deep feeling except in a few cases.²⁸ . . . There are 25 of the Middle Class without hope.

December 25:

Attended to our usual business today. There has been a good degree of quiet. I have²⁹ hardly heard one "Merry Christmas" this Morning.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 132-133.

²⁹Ibid., p. 133.

December 27:

Mr. Beaman of N. Hadley preached for us yesterday. The text in the P.M. was "Whoever be he of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple." The sermon was very appropriate to our present state. The day was an interesting one. At Miss L's meeting in the P.M., she invited all those who felt anxious for the salvation of their souls, and were willing to answer questions to write her a note, and attend a meeting in her room, at 7. More than forty did so . . . Miss W. said there had been an increase of feeling since Friday. This is plainly manifest, yet there is not deep conviction of sin.³⁰

January 3, 1848:

We had devotions in the Hall, at the usual time. Miss Lyon . . . spoke of the great No. that must go down to death, the word would never reach them, many will begin the wail of despair today. . . . Mentioned the various excuses made by sinners, for not now seeking salvation, & submitting to Jesus. And showed how vain they were, how vain they would seem in the light of Eternity. . . .³¹

Two letters are inserted here to supplement the story presented by the Journal. One of these makes reference to ED, the student whose reaction is of greatest interest here.

In general reference to the season of revival, Mary C. Whitman reported real progress in a letter to Mrs. Andrew Porter, who had recently returned to Monson after visiting the Seminary, where she had taken part in the religious meetings. Dated January 11, the letter included the following account:

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 134.

A meeting was appointed in the morning for those who have indulged some hope of having found the Savior, thirty eight were present. . . . I could truly say what hath God wrought, whatever may be the case with some individuals, we have no doubt many souls have been truly born again.³²

That same day Emily Norcross, ED's roommate, also wrote to Mrs. Porter:

I attended another meeting of Miss Lyons this eve. I hope she will have them every Tuesday eve. She wished us to make it an object of prayer that the religion in our family might be continued. She said the very essence of prayer is its continuance and without it prayer is nothing. The same she said is true with religion and it is this which marks it from other things. She spoke of Eternity as being unchangeable and asked why we should not be unchangeable in our preparation for eternity . . . Emily Dickinson appears no different. I hoped I might have good news to write with regard to her. She says she has no particular objection to becoming a Christian and she says she feels bad when she hears of one and another of her friends who are expressing a hope but still she feels no more interest.³³

By this time, no doubt, the unconverted truly stood apart from those who were safely within the Christian fold. Although there was no compulsion to attend the meetings, the atmosphere was charged, and the feeling of guilt on the part of the impenitent must have been tremendous.³⁴ Of certainty ED made an appearance at a meeting on January 17. The following Journal entry described this meeting:

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., p. 135.

³⁴Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 13.

At the meeting in the P.M. Miss L. spoke from the passage in Joshua "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve" &c. also in Cor "Today if ye will hear his voice." At the close she invited all who had decided that they would to day to serve the Lord, and those who had to day felt an uncommon anxiety to decide to a meeting in her room. This you see would include all who were particularly anxious. There were seventeen present. Miss W. said some appeared to feel much. I trust some were enabled to say in truth I will serve the Lord. I know that some hope they were thus able to decide.³⁵

In a letter on January 17, Mary C. Whitman mentioned to Mrs. Porter that among the seventeen attending the meeting was Emily Dickinson.³⁶ Sarah Jane Anderson, Mrs. Porter's niece, also referred to ED's presence at the meeting in a letter which she wrote to her aunt that same day:

I believe Emilie (Norcross) wrote you last week, and probably she told you about her room-mate. She still appears unconcerned. Emilie (N) seems quite engaged, such as when you were here.³⁷ I do hope her example will do such as it ought.

ED herself wrote a letter to Abiah Root on January 17. In the postscript she had this to say: "There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject."³⁸ ED might have appeared "unconcerned,"

³⁵Leyda, Years, I, 135-136.

³⁶Ibid., p. 136.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Letters, I, 60.

but her attendance at the meeting and her comment to Abiah indicated otherwise. Certainly there was great concern for her, and of this she could not have been unaware.

After the two weeks' winter vacation, the meetings were resumed. Evidently ED did not attend the meeting on February 6 about which the Journal recorded the following:

A meeting was appointed at 9. P.M., for those who have indulged a hope this year. If any one who attended a meeting of the same kind before vacation, felt she ought not to do so now, she was to write a note. . . . Five new ones attended, one was not there, who had been before. She wrote no note however.³⁹

It is logical to suppose that ED was the "one not there." Although she had satisfactorily adjusted to the life at the seminary, she was tiring of the institution and its religious atmosphere. Her letters show that she was increasingly eager to return to her home. On February 17, 1848, she wrote to Austin:

Home was always dear to me & dearer still the friends around it, but never did it seem so dear as now. All, all are kind to me but their tones fall strangely on my ear & their countenances meet mine not like home faces, I can assure you, most sincerely. Then when tempted to feel sad, 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. But my good angel only waits to see the

³⁹Leyda, Years, I, 137.

tears coming & then whispers, only this year! Only 22. weeks more & home again you will be to stay.⁴⁰

ED was to return home sooner than she expected as her next letter to Abiah, written on May 16, 1848, reveals. During the winter ED had not been well. When word of her illness reached Amherst, the Dickinsons dispatched Austin to fetch her home, where she stayed for about a month. She continued her lessons, however, and kept up with her class. Evidently the Dickinsons realized the strain of separation on their daughter, for ED wrote Abiah that her father had decided not to send her to Holyoke another year.⁴¹ In the postscript to this letter ED referred to the spiritual crisis she had faced earlier, a decision which, no doubt, contributed to the strain of being at Holyoke:

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. Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all-important subject, but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world. I had quite a long talk with Abby while at home and I doubt not she will soon cast her burden on Christ. She is sober, and keenly

⁴⁰Letters, I, 62-63.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 65-66.

sensitive on the subject, and she says she only desires to be good. How I wish I could say that with sincerity, but I fear I never can. But I will no longer impose my own feelings upon my friend. Keep them sacred, for, I never lisped them to any save yourself and Abby.⁴²

This reference to her failure to experience conversion is the last one in the letters of the Holyoke period. The scholars consider this chapter very significant in ED's development. Johnson believes that her experience at Holyoke gave ED "a sense of inadequacy which she never fully overcame."⁴³ Whicher gives a more complete analysis of her year there:

. . . Superficially she may seem to have absorbed little from Mary Lyon. The life of seclusion that she later led was ostensibly the very reverse of the life of public service that Miss Lyon counselled. But it was not a life of inactivity. "Do what no one else is willing to do--go where no one else is willing to go," was the watchword of the Seminary. Many fulfilled it literally in the mission field. In a more subtle way Emily Dickinson also obeyed the militant injunction.⁴⁴

To fight aloud is very brave-
But gallanter, I know
Who charge within the bosom
The Cavalry of Wo- (126)

Emily Dickinson discovered finally and irrevocably at the Seminary that she could not share the religious life of her generation. One outlet

⁴²Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁴³Emily Dickinson, p. 15.

⁴⁴This Was a Poet, p. 70.

forever closed to her, not because she lacked religious feeling, but because she could not confine her religious feeling to the channels marked out for her. . . . she felt impelled to turn aside from the way of truth as her contemporaries understood it, and gropingly seek out her own path. Hers was to be a career of exploration, not of far-off islands, but of the desert places of the human soul.⁴⁵

Subsequent effects of the Holyoke experience are revealed in ED's letters to Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey, particularly those written in 1850, the year of the great revival at First Church. On the subject of the revival, she wrote the following in a letter to Jane Humphrey on April 3, 1850:

How lonely the world is growing, something so desolate creeps over the spirit and we dont know it's name, and it wont go away, either Heaven is seeming greater, or Earth a great deal more small, or God is more "Our Father," and we feel our need increased. Christ is calling everyone here. . . . Abby, Mary, Jane, and farthest of all my Vinnie have been seeking, and they all believe they have found; I cant tell you what they have found, but they think it is something precious. I wonder if it is? How strange is this sanctification, that works such a marvellous change, that sows in such corruption, and rises in golden glory, that brings Christ down, and shews him, and lets him select his friends! In the day time it seems like Sundays, and I wait for the bell to ring, and at evening a great deal stranger, the "still small voice" grows earnest and rings, and returns, and lingers, and the faces of good men shine, and bright halos come around them; and the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed. It certainly comes from God--and I think to receive it is blessed--not that I know it from me, but from those on whom change has passed. They seem so very tranquil, and their voices are kind, and gentle, and the tears fill their eyes so often, I really think I envy them. . . . You must pray when the rest are

⁴⁵Ibid.

sleeping, that the hand may be held to me, and I may be led away.⁴⁶

Her inability to experience conversion with the others was still a painful realization: ". . . the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed." In a letter to Abiah Root on May 7, ED again referred to the revival, impressed with the changes it wrought:

I presume you have heard from Abby, and know what she now believes--she makes a sweet, girl christian, religion makes her face quite different, calmer, but full of radiance, holy, yet very joyful. She talks of herself quite freely, seems to love Lord Christ most dearly, and to wonder, and be bewildered, at the life she has always led. It all looks black, and distant, and God, and Heaven are near, she is certainly much changed.⁴⁷

In contrast, she gave the following description of herself:

I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, and do work without knowing why--not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven--and I ask what this message means that they ask for so very eagerly, you know of this depth, and fulness, will you try to tell me about it?⁴⁸

In late 1850, when ED wrote the following to Abiah, her attitude seemed changed:

You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom--perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter.

⁴⁶Letters, I, 94. (ED refers to Abby Wood, Mary Warner, and Jane Hitchcock.)

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 98-99.

The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea--I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will⁴⁹ love you more. I'm afraid he don't love me any!⁴⁹

She had definitely set out on her individual quest. To describe it, she chose the metaphor of leaving the safe shore for the dangers of the sea, recognizing that she traveled solo. The extent to which she was alone was surely made plain to her when, about 1854, Susan Gilbert, at that time a very dear friend, began pressing her about her religious state. Their disagreement on spiritual matters seemed to threaten the friendship itself. On this matter ED wrote Sue a letter, stating her position with firm conviction. If the ties between them were dependent on her acceptance of the Christian faith, then ED would simply have to let Sue go her way. ED said that she would remain alone even under these conditions: ". . . though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me--there is a darker spirit will not disown it's child."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 104.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 306.

ED did not know what she would find--perhaps a "darker spirit"--but she had set out to search. Later in poetic form she described life's venture this way:

Down Time's quaint stream
Without an oar
We are enforced to sail
Our Port a secret
Our Perchance a Gale
What Skipper would
Incur the Risk
What Buccaneer would ride
Without a surety from the Wind
Or schedule of the Tide-- (1656)

CHAPTER VI

RELATIONSHIP TO ORTHODOXY

Even as she sailed out on her own daring spiritual search, ED turned to comment on the theological dogmas and teachings of the Church, on the people who attended its meetings, on the Book that guided Christian lives. Her ridicule was sometimes playful and sometimes caustic. Whatever the tone, her remarks are revealing of her thought, showing the orthodoxies she could not accept and the teachings she resented. Along the way she observed those who claimed the name of Christian and sought from them, especially from those whom she loved or respected, the explanation to their faith.

There were two kinds of clergymen whom ED resented: the emotional "hell-fire" preacher and, at the other extreme, the broad liberal who was not sincere. She pretended to be impressed by a visiting evangelist in a letter written to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland on November 26, 1854:

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, and father and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole was true and I would not for the world 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. He preached such an awful

sermon though, that I didn't much think I should ever see you again until the Judgment Day, and then you would not speak to me according to his story. The subject of perdition seemed to please him, somehow. It seems very solemn to me. . . .¹

To this type of emotional speaker ED devoted an entire poem:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on--
He stuns you by degrees--
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Etherial Blow
By fainter Hammers--further heard--
Then nearer--Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten--
Your Brain--to bubble Cool--
Deals--One--imperial--Thunderbolt--
That scalps your naked Soul--

When Winds take Forests in their Paws--
The Universe--is still-- (315)

If she found emotional preaching an unpleasant experience, she was even stronger in her criticism of the broad churchman;

He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued
him narrow--
The Broad are too broad to define
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar--
The Truth never flaunted a Sign--

Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
As Gold the Pyrites would shun--
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
To meet so enabled a Man! (1207)

This clergyman was a "Liar" and "counterfeit." As one interpreter of the poem explains, such a "secular moralist"

¹Letters, I, 309.

aroused ED's resentment, and she here showed her contempt for the "complacent glibness" of liberalism.²

ED directed her attention to the church sacraments as well as to the preaching. In a letter to Austin, written July 6, 1851, she gave the following summary of church activities that Sabbath day:

I have just come in from Church very hot, and faded, having witnessed a couple of Baptisms, three admissions to church, a Supper of the Lord, and some other minor transactions time fails me to record. Knowing Rev A.M. Colton so thoroughly as you do, having received much benefit from his past ministrations, and bearing the relation of "Lamb" unto his fold, you will delight to know that he is well, and preaching, that he has preached today strange as it may--must seem, that just from his benediction I hurry away to you. No doubt you can call to mind his eloquent addresses, his earnest look and gesture, his calls of now today--no doubt you can call to mind the impetus of spirit received from this same gentleman and his enlivening preaching--therefore if you should fancy I'd looked upon the wine from walk or conversation a little fierce or fiery, bear all these things in mind!³

ED makes other references to the Communion Sacrament, which had little meaning for her. In May of 1874 she wrote the following to Mrs. J. G. Holland: "When a child and fleeing from Sacrament I could hear the Clergyman saying 'All who loved the Lord Jesus Christ--were asked to remain--' My

²Charles R. Anderson, "From a Window in Amherst: Emily Dickinson Looks at the American Scene," The New England Quarterly, XXXI (June, 1958), 158.

³Letters, I, 120.

flight kept time to the Words."⁴ She recorded a different reaction, however, in a letter to Clara Newman Turner in 1884:

The cordiality of the Sacrament extremely interested me when a Child, and when the Clergyman invited "all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ, to remain," I could scarcely refrain from rising and thanking him for the to me unexpected courtesy, though I now think had it been to all who loved Santa Claus, my transports would have been even more untimely.⁵

In a letter to Mrs. Joseph Haven, wife of a former Amherst professor, on February 13, 1859, ED declared that she did not listen to a sermon on "predestination" because she did not "respect doctrines."⁶ Several other comments made in letters reflect her contempt for church "doctrines." In a spirit of fun ED referred to the Resurrection in a letter to her cousin John L. Graves:

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! Congratulate me--John--Lad--and "here's a health to you"-- that we have each a pair of lives, and need not chary be, of the one "that now is"--⁷

To Samuel Bowles in late August of 1858 she referred to "our stately Resurrection" as a "special Courtesy," judging from

⁴Ibid., II, 524-525.

⁵Ibid., III, 835.

⁶Ibid., II, 346.

⁷Ibid., p. 328.

statements by the Clergy. Then she added: "Our Pastor says we are a 'Worm.' How is that reconciled? 'Vain--sinful Worm' is possible of another species."⁸

Two other brief statements, in themselves not related, reflect her attitudes toward pulpit pronouncements and Calvinism. To Susan Dickinson she wrote on September 26, 1858: "Presume if I met my 'deserts,' I should receive nothing. Was informed to that effect today by a 'dear pastor.' What a privilege it is to be so insignificant! Thought of intimating the 'Atonement' was'nt needed for such atomies!"⁹ Looking for a means of apology, ED wrote Mrs. Edward Tuckerman, wife of an Amherst professor, the following comparison in January, 1874: "I fear my congratulation, like repentance according to Calvin, is too late to be plausible. . . ."¹⁰ To be sure, these isolated statements carry little weight, but there are other more prominent expressions on theological teachings.

Among the Church dogmas that ED could not accept was the doctrine of infant damnation. In the following poem she showed resentment toward the God who punishes:

⁸Ibid., p. 339.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 520.

Far from Love the Heavenly Father
 Leads the Chosen Child,
 Oftener through 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. (1021)

She showed her contempt for the Calvinistic orthodoxy
 that only the "saved" get to heaven by calling attention to
 a pebble;

How happy is the little Stone
 That rambles in the Road alone,
 And doesn't care about Careers
 And Exigencies never fears--
 Whose Coat of elemental Brown
 A passing universe put on,
 And independent as the Sun
 Associates or glows alone,
 Fulfilling absolute Decree
 In casual simplicity. (1510)

Here, according to Johnson, ED was pointing out how ridiculously exclusive was the idea of a chosen few elected to salvation. Only the inanimate pebble can be happy since it alone can fulfill "absolute decree."¹¹ On one copy of this poem ED added this line: "Heaven the Balm of a Surly Technicality." Whether she referred to the theological orthodoxy or the Deity as the "technicality" is uncertain.¹²

¹¹Emily Dickinson, p. 234.

¹²Ibid.

ED objected to the methods of religious instruction of her youth. In a letter to Mrs. Holland written after Christmas, 1882, she recalled her childhood questions about the Bible: "The fiction of 'Santa Claus' always reminds me of the reply to my early question of 'Who made the Bible'-- 'Holy Men moved by the Holy Ghost,' and though I have now ceased my investigations, the Solution is insufficient."¹³ Another statement of her resentment toward religious instruction she expressed in the following poem:

Who were "the Father and the Son"
We pondered when a child
And what had they to do with us
And when portentous told

With inference appalling
By Childhood fortified
We thought, at least they are no worse
Than they have been described

Who are "the Father and the Son"
Did we demand Today
"The Father and the Son" himself
Would doubtless specify--

But had they the felicity
When we desire to know,
We better Friends had been, perhaps,
Than time ensue to be--

We start--to learn that we believe
But once--entirely--
Belief, it does not fit so well
When altered frequently--

¹³Letters, III, 756.

We blush, that Heaven if we achieve--
 Event ineffable
 We shall have shunned until ashamed
 To own the Miracle-- (1258)

Her later doubts arose, at least in part, from the distorted presentation she was given as a child. To her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross she wrote in early March, 1861, about the kind of instruction she thought appropriate: "I regret I am not a scholar in the Friday class. I believe the love of God may be taught not to seem like bears. Happy the reprobates under that loving influence."¹⁴

The Bible itself was a target of her pen. The following poem, sent as a message to her nephew Ned, was written in fun, though ED found much in Scripture that was objectionable even without "benefit" of Calvinistic interpretation:

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-- (1545)

¹⁴Ibid., II, 372.

No doubt ED was aiming her arrow at the "Thou shalt nots" of the Ten Commandments. In another poem, one which did not get beyond the worksheet stage, she pictured the Bobolink conducting a Sabbath worship service. This "Rowdy of the Meadow" either "overturned the Decalogue" or "swung upon the Decalogue"; both versions appear as possible lines in the uncompleted poem, showing if not the poet's opinion of Law as recorded by Moses at least more of her ridicule of organized religion. (1591)

Another Biblical teaching that ED could not accept was the idea presented in I Corinthians 15:42-43 that man was sown in corruption, in dishonor, and in weakness. To advance this idea, she declared, the "Apostle is askew!" (62) Other words leaped out at her. To James D. Clark, lifelong friend of Charles Wadsworth, she confided the following in a letter dated late 1882 after the death of her mother: "No verse in the Bible has frightened me so much from a Child as 'from him that hath shall be taken even that he hath.'"¹⁵

One other comment ED made about the Bible, this of a humorous bent, was written to the Norcross cousins in 1881: "We read in a tremendous Book about 'an enemy,' and armed a confidential fort to scatter him away. The time has passed,

¹⁵Ibid., III, 751.

and years have come, and yet not any 'Satan.' I think he is making war upon some other nation."¹⁶ Certainly these comments are no complete summary of ED's reaction to the teachings of the Bible. She was to choose from it those principles which measured up to truth in her standard and to discard the rest.

Professing Christians ever fascinated ED. She frequently questioned them, especially the ministers. It sorely vexed her that those who had overcome doubt themselves could offer no adequate explanation of their faith, particularly on the subject of immortality. And yet she turned to them in time of trouble. After the death of B. F. Newton, she wrote to Edward Everett Hale, his pastor, to inquire about Newton's last hours. In the letter, dated January 18, 1854, she asked the minister: "He often talked of God, but I do not know certainly if he was his Father in Heaven--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."¹⁷ Once she took her doubts to T. W. Higginson, recalling that he had been a minister. The following was written in June of 1877:

¹⁶Ibid., p. 694.

¹⁷Ibid., I, 283.

. . . Since my Father's dying, everything sacred enlarged so--it was dim to own--When a few years old--I was taken to a Funeral which I now know was of peculiar distress, and the Clergyman asked "Is the Arm of the Lord shortened that it cannot save?"

He italicized the "cannot." I mistook the accent for a doubt of Immortality and not daring to ask, it besets me still, though we know that the mind of the Heart must live if it's clerical part do not. Would you explain it to me.

I was told you were once a Clergyman. It comforts an instinct if another have felt it too.¹⁸

Another letter, this one written to ED in 1882 from the prominent clergyman Washington Gladden, pastor of a Congregational Church in Springfield, indicates that she wrote him after the death of Charles Wadsworth and during the illness of Otis Lord to ask him his answer to this question: "Is immortality true?"¹⁹ None of these ministers could help her, and ED was eventually to conclude that the answer lay within herself.

ED gave some attention to the shortcomings of the laymen of the Church. One group she ridiculed for hypocrisy--those who made the gestures of Christian service without love or genuine concern. She described these "brittle ladies" in the following poem:

What soft--Cherubic Creatures--
These Gentlewomen are--
One would as soon assault a Plush--
Or violate a Star--

¹⁸Ibid., II, 583.

¹⁹Ibid., III, 731.

Such Dimity Convictions--
 A Horror so refined
 Of freckled Human Nature--
 Of Deity--ashamed--

It's such a common--Glory--
 A Fisherman's--Degree--
 Redemption--Brittle Lady--
 Be so--ashamed of Thee-- (401)

Then she wondered about the layman's common reaction to death. Did even those who were assured of heaven find it less desirable than their words of salvation implied:

Of Tolling Bell I ask the Cause?
 "A Soul has gone to Heaven"
 I'm answered in a lonesome tone--
 Is Heaven then a Prison?

The Bells should ring till all should know
 A Soul had gone to Heaven
 Would seem to me the more the way
 A Good News should be given. (947)

From a position of detached amusement ED described her neighbor Mrs. Luke Sweetser in a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross as that good lady set out for church meeting one day in late April, 1873: "There is that which is called an awakening in the church, and I know no choicer ecstasy than to see Mrs. S. roll out in crape every morning, I suppose to intimidate anti-Christ; at least it would have that effect on me. . . ." ²⁰

²⁰Ibid., II, 505.

In a letter written to T. W. Higginson on April 25, 1862, ED described the Christians in her own family: "They are religious--except me--and address an Eclipse, every morning--whom they call their 'Father.'"²¹ Did she not suggest that they were pious but that they lacked any real understanding of the God they worshiped?

ED continued to attend church services with her family long after she had decided that she could not join the Church. As time passed, however, she increasingly found reasons for staying home. Her letters attest to this fact with many comments similar to this one made in a letter to Sue in February, 1852: "They will all go but me, to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon; the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me."²² Gradually she withdrew from attendance until by her mid-twenties she no longer went at all. Or, it might be more appropriate to say that she attended church at home, holding "services" such as that one to which she had invited Sue: ". . . come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love--shall intercede there for us!"²³

It is time to consider more deeply what ED believed about God.

²¹Ibid., p. 404.

²²Ibid., I, 181.

²³Ibid.

CHAPTER VII

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

It is difficult to know what ED meant when she spoke of God, though she made many references to Him and addressed Him directly in various ways. Her concept of God was not a stable one.¹ For identifying her spiritual ideas, she developed a special nomenclature. The God associated with terms such as "Infinity," "Awe," "Circumference," "Eternity," or "Immortality" will be considered in another chapter. The attention here is focused on God identified by the name "God," or by alternate terms occasionally used as "Jehovah," "Heaven," "Lord," and "Heavenly Father." The content will reflect the inconsistencies of ED's relation to God: she rejects and taunts the Providence of Orthodoxy; she leans toward the God of Love; she evaluates and sometimes resents the actions and traits of Jehovah; she stands in awe of the God of creation. Changing though her attitude was, she never reckoned without God: He was a real Person to her.

ED conceived of God as all-seeing, a God of light and glowing heat:

¹Thornton Wilder, "Emily Dickinson," The Atlantic Monthly, CXC (November, 1952), 47.

The Sun and Moon must make their haste--
 The Stars express around
 For in the Zones of Paradise
 The Lord alone is burned--

His Eye, it is the East and West--
 The North and South when He
 Do concentrate His Countenance
 Like Glow Worms, flee away--

Oh Poor and Far--
 Of Hindered Eye
 That hunted for the Day--
 The Lord a Candle entertains
 Entirely for Thee-- (871)

The concept of God as all-seeing is brought out again in the following poem, which deals with man's consciousness of his own wrongdoing:

Of Consciousness, her awful Mate
 The Soul cannot be rid--
 As easy the secreting her
 Behind the eyes of God.

The deepest hid is sightest first
 And scant to Him the Crowd--
 What triple Lenses burn upon
 The Escapade from God-- (894)

But this God who sees everything is the master secret-keeper: "Our little secrets slink away--/Beside God's shall not tell--" (1326). Toward this fact the poet has mixed emotions. At times, for example, when she considers the wonder that mystery adds to nature, she tells God to keep his secret (191). When she longs for revelation of a story, however, she thinks of man as unprivileged under the "interdict of God" (1088). The secret He guards most

carefully, of course, is death. In one poem she personifies the secret death as a neighbor boy acting as an agent for the secret-keeper, who now becomes a robber;

Death is the only Secret
 Death the only One
 You cannot find out all about
 In his "native town."

Nobody knew "his Father"--
 Never was a Boy--
 Had'nt any playmates,
 Or "Early history"--

Industrious! Laconic!
 Punctual! Sedate!
 Bold as a Brigand!
 Stillier than a Fleet!

Builds, like a Bird, too!
 Christ robs the Nest--
 Robin after Robin
 Smuggles to Rest! (153)

This power over death makes God appear in several different ways. In one poem ED addresses Him as "Burgler! Banker--Father!" (49) In another He becomes a broker, who for the "price of Breath" offers the "Discount of the Grave." The "dividend" for good men, of course, is heaven (234). The death of Susan Dickinson's two-year-old niece made the Deity appear to ED as "the redoubtable God." She so described him in a letter to Mrs. Holland in November, 1865, adding this remark about God: "I notice where Death has been introduced, he frequently calls, making it desirable to forestall his

advances."² In another letter to Mrs. Holland, written in 1882 after the death of Dr. Holland, ED wondered whether God was not "Love's Adversary."³ Then, about 1884, while grieving over the death of her nephew Gilbert Dickinson, ED wrote the following to Martha Gilbert Smith: "Ineffable Avarice of Jesus, who reminds a perhaps encroaching Father, 'All these are mine.'"⁴

ED resented the fact that God kept death such a well-guarded secret. In the poem beginning, "What did They do since I saw Them?" she longs to question friends who have died. If she had such opportunity, she would not allow them "to start for the Sky" until they had answered every question she wanted to ask. Only then would she "restore" her "booty" to that "Bold Person, God" (900).

But even apart from the master secret that He keeps, God is a distant Being. ED expressed this idea to Mrs. Holland in the spring of 1878: "They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse."⁵ In the poem beginning "God is a distant--stately Lover," ED

²Letters, II, 444.

³Ibid., III, 755.

⁴Ibid., p. 823.

⁵Ibid., II, 609.

reproaches God for his distance by comparing Him to Myles Standish, pointing out that He woos the soul vicariously through His Son. God, however, insures that the soul will not make Priscilla's error of choosing the Envoy instead of the Groom by making Myles and John Alden "Synonyme" (357). God's remoteness again seems the theme in the following poem in which His failure to grant ED's request makes Him harder than a "God of Flint";

Just Once! Oh least Request!
 Could Adamant refuse
 So small a Grace
 So scanty put,
 Such agonizing terms?
 Would not a God of Flint
 Be conscious of a sigh
 As down his Heaven dropt remote
 "Just Once" Sweet Deity? (1076)

ED touches on the theme of man's ignorance of life as well as death in the following poem. When He does make himself known, God comes as an intruder;

We knew not that we were to live--
 Nor when--we are to die--
 Our ignorance--our cuirass is--
 We wear Mortality
 As lightly as an Option Gown
 Till asked to take it off--
 By his intrusion, God is known--
 It is the same with Life. (1462)

Occasionally, God plays hide-and-seek with his creatures, sometimes allowing the game to become too "earnest" for man;

I know that He exists.
 Somewhere--in Silence--
 He has hid his rare life
 From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.
 'Tis a fond Ambush--
 Just to make Bliss
 Earn her own surprise!

But should the play
 Prove piercing earnest,
 Should the glee glaze
 In death's stiff stare,

Would not the fun
 Look too expensive
 Would not the jest
 Have crawled too far? (338)

Always there was the danger that God, growing too serious, would have Death serve Him once again. This possibility was an ever-present reality to ED. She wrote to Jane Humphrey about April, 1852, after the death of Jane's father, about this fear: "If God should choose, Jennie, he could take my father, too, and my dear Vinnie, and put them in his sky, to live with him forever, but I shall pray to him every day of my life not to take them."⁶

But ED found prayer less than a satisfactory means of communication and certainly no means of achieving desired results. In a moment of distress she cried out the following:

At least--to pray--is left--is left--
 Oh Jesus--in the Air--
 I know not which thy chamber is
 I'm knocking--everywhere--

⁶Ibid., I, 197.

Thou settest Earthquake in the South--
 And Maelstrom, in the Sea--
 Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth--
 Hast thou no Arm for Me? (502)

In another poem she indignantly looked back upon suffering that God had apparently ignored, suggesting that it would have been kinder of Him not to let her live at all than to have her experience such "smart misery":

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"--
 My Reason--Live--
 I had not had--but for Yourself--
 'Twere better Charity
 To leave me in the Atom's Tomb--
 Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb--
 Than this smart Misery. (376)

Yet human beings continued to employ prayer in their efforts to reach God. Their "apparatus" was not a very trustworthy "implement" according to this definition:

Prayer is 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 the Apparatus
 Comprised in Prayer-- (437)

In one poem ED explains why she stopped praying as she was taught to do in childhood, sadly acknowledging how blessed it would be to feel God's support in time of danger or stress:

I prayed, at first, a little Girl,
 Because they told me to
 But stopped, when qualified to guess
 How prayer would feel--to me--

If I believed God looked around,
 Each time my Childish eye
 Fixed full, and steady, on his own
 In childish honesty--

And told him what I'd like, today,
 And parts of his far plan
 That baffled me--
 The mingled side
 Of his Divinity

And often since, in Danger,
 I count the force 'twould be
 To have a God so strong as that
 To hold my life for me

Till I could take the Balance
 That tips so frequent, now,
 It takes me all the while to poise--
 And then--it ~~does't~~ stay-- (576)

At the same time that she has given a personal record of failure in prayer, she has again pointed out God's unknowableness, or man's inability to understand the baffling "mingled side/Of his Divinity."

ED decided that God really had no intention of answering man's prayers though He had instructed him to pray. Man appears the victim of a swindle, or huge joke, in the following satirical poem, which begins with the poet's explanation that her needs were "modest" ones--content and heaven. For them, in good faith, she petitioned God with these results:

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face--
 The Cherubim--withdrew--
 Grave Saints stole out to look at me--
 And showed their dimples--too--

I left the Place, with all my might--
 I threw my Prayer away--
 The Quiet Ages picked it up--
 And Judgment--twinkled--too--
 That one so honest--be extant--
 It take the Talc for true--
 That "Whatsoever Ye shall ask--
 Itself be given You"--

But I, grown shrewder--scan the Skies
 With a suspicious Air--
 As Children--swindled for the first
 All Swindlers--be--infer-- (476)

Several times ED referred to her belief that God does not answer prayer. To Dr. and Mrs. Holland she wrote the following in the autumn of 1853: "If prayers had any answers to them, you were all here tonight, but I seek and I don't find, and knock and it is not opened. Wonder if God is just--presume he is, however, and t'was only a blunder of Matthew's." Then she added: "I think mine is the case, where when they ask an egg, they get a scorpion for I keep wishing for you. . . ." ⁷ The scripture allusions employed here were humorously used to compliment friends whom she missed; nevertheless, such comparisons readily came to her mind. When her friend Maria Whitney was slow in writing to her, ED wrote this to Maria in late June of 1883: "You are like God. We pray to Him,

⁷Ibid., pp. 263-264.

and He answers 'No.' Then we pray to him to rescind the 'no,' and He don't answer at all, yet 'Seek and ye shall find' is the boon of faith."⁸ Another such assertion she made in a letter to Otis Lord on December 3, 1882: "Prayer has not an answer and yet how many pray!"⁹

ED did cite one example of answered prayer though her information significantly came as hearsay. It was William Tell whose entreaty the Almighty heard. Forced to shoot an apple from the head of his only son, Tell begged God's mercy as he sent his arrow toward the target. The poet reports: "God it is said replies in Person/When the cry is meant" (1152). But ED herself found no satisfactory relationship to the Deity through prayer:

There comes an hour when begging stops,
When the long interceding lips
Perceive their prayer is vain.
"Thou shalt not" is a kinder sword
Than from a disappointing God
"Disciple, call again." (1751)

ED found God guilty of duplicity in other areas besides prayer. In fact, God's was the "supreme iniquity," for He had created man in his likeness only to declare him "contraband" and to return him to the dust (1461). In another poem she asks God why he gives the loved if he must take them away (882). God's double-dealing is disclosed again in the following:

⁸Ibid., III, 780.

⁹Ibid., p. 753.

The Beggar at the Door for Fame
 Were easily supplied
 But Bread is that Diviner thing
 Disclosed to be denied. (1240)

Nor was God a very good promise-keeper; so this little verse suggests:

How ruthless are the gentle--
 How cruel are the kind--
 God broke his contract to his Lamb
 To qualify the Wind-- (1439)

And what of God and nature? How did He provide for his little creatures? Here is one way:

Victory comes late--
 And is held low to freezing lips--
 Too rapt with frost
 To take it
 How sweet it would have tasted--
 Just a Drop--
 Was God so economical?
 His Table's spread too high for Us--
 Unless we dine on tiptoe--
 Crumbs--fit such little mouths--
 Cherries suit Robins--
 The Eagle's Golden Breakfast strangles--Them--
 God keep His Oath to Sparrows--
 Who of little Love--know how to starve-- (690)

She found that God hides himself behind the ruthlessness of nature:

Shame is the shawl of Pink
 In which we wrap the Soul
 To keep it from infesting Eyes--
 The elemental Veil
 Which helpless Nature drops
 When pushed upon a scene
 Repugnant to her probity--
 Shame is the tint divine. (1412)

Though He attempts to hide behind the life and death struggle which goes on in nature, God evidently sanctions the process.

The poet cites frost as one example. Acting as a "blond assassin," the frost "beheads" the flower at its play and then passes on. The poem concludes: "The Sun proceeds unmoved/To measure off another Day/For an Approving God" (1624).

God had many other shortcomings, and ED felt free to call attention to them. For one thing, He was not always fair. The most flagrant example of mistreatment was God's injury to Moses:

It always felt to me--a wrong
To that Old Moses--done--
To let him see--the Canaan--
Without the entering--

And tho' in soberer moments--
No Moses there can be
I'm satisfied--the Romance
In point of injury--

Surpasses sharper stated--
Of Stephen--or of Paul--
For these--were only put to death--
While God's adroiter will

On Moses--seemed to fasten
With tantalizing Play
As Boy--should deal with lesser Boy--
To prove ability. (597)

The poet berates God not only for denying Moses the "Promised Land" but also for behaving in an immature and taunting manner. Then there was the case of Abraham who was ordered to kill his son Isaac. Flattered by Abraham's unhesitating obedience, the tyrant God demurred; thus Isaac lived to tell the tale which has this moral: ". . . with a Mastiff/Manners may prevail" (1317).

ED criticized several traits which she ascribed to God. In a letter to Dr. and Mrs. Holland in September of 1859, she commented on the fact that she had only one sister: "God was penurious with me, which makes me shrewd with Him."¹⁰ It was God's sternness with his "little ones" that she criticized to Louise and Frances Morcross in autumn, 1880: "A cup of cold water in my name" is a shivering legacy February mornings."¹¹ She also referred to God's jealousy. In a letter in late 1885, she described God as the "Criterion Lover," having in mind his commandment: "Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me."¹² In verse, apparently of light tone, she illustrates the trait in the setting of childhood:

God is indeed a jealous God--
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play. (1719)

On occasion ED was insulting to God. In one poem she turns down God's offer of a "Crown of Life" to those who are "Faithful to the end." Since it is given in return for what the heart gives God, the crown is a servile prize and not an emolument. The impact of the insult comes in the last stanza:

¹⁰Ibid., II, 353.

¹¹Ibid., III, 670. The scripture reference is Matthew 10:42.

¹²Ibid., p. 889.

"I will give" the base Proviso--
 Spare your "Crown of Life"--
 Those it fits, too fair to wear it--
 Try it on yourself-- (1357)

On other occasions ED was on intimate terms with God, perhaps the very reason she could deal so harshly with Him at times. In one poem she refers to Him as "our old neighbor," finding Him to be hospitable and even conceding at this point that "Prayer--remained--Our Side" (623). In another poem she pictures Him as a boy who would climb over the fence with her in search of strawberries if he could, a boy very different from that bully who dealt with Moses (251). Intimate indeed is the poem beginning, "Papa above!" in which she intercedes for a mouse overpowered by a cat (61). But ED found no permanent perspective from which to view God.

At one point she felt that no one really wishes to know God since man fears death and shuns the "Maker's cordial visage. . . . Like an adversity" (1718). She herself thought of heaven in various ways and viewed it with several attitudes. She doubts that she could ever feel at home there because "it's Sunday--all the time." Since God never makes a visit or takes a nap, one is always under his watchful eye. She suspects that she would run away except for "Judgment Day" (413). In another mood she imagines God as a schoolmaster explaining the mysteries of the universe to the saints (65). In the poem beginning, "I shall know why--when Time is over--" she sees

herself in the heavenly schoolroom where Christ will explain away the anguish which she is experiencing now (193). In one poem she finds that the door of heaven has been shut to her and asks this pathetic question:

Oh, if I--were the Gentleman
In the "White Robe"--
And they--were the little Hand--that knocked--
Could--I--forbid? (248)

From a more mature viewpoint she admits that her frequent doubt of heaven will cause her embarrassment in the event that it is finally realized (1258). But even as a "little girl" she prefers the idea of an old-fashioned Heaven with a Heavenly Father to the explanation from science that Heaven is "Zenith" now (70).

/ ED was much impressed with God, the Creator. She saw Him apart from his creation, though she was at times aware of Him in nature. "Spring is the Period/Express from God" begins one poem which asserts that no one can go out during March and April without a "cordial interview with God" (844). In another poem she declares that the moon and stars "substantiate a God" (1528). God the Creator inspires awe as the following testimony reveals:

My period had come for Prayer--
No other Art--would do--
My Tactics missed a rudiment--
Creator, Was it you?

God grows above--so those who pray
 Horizons--must ascend--
 And so I stepped upon the North
 To see this Curious Friend--

His House was not--no sign had He--
 By Chimney--nor by Door
 Could I infer his Residence--
 Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler--
 Were all that I could see--
 Infinitude--Had'st Thou no Face
 That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended--
 Creation stopped--for Me--
 Bud awed beyond my errand--
 I worshipped--did not "pray"-- (564)

She describes the Creator again in the following poem:

Just as He spoke it from his Hands
 This Edifice remain--
 A Turret more, a Turret less
 Dishonor his Design--

According as his skill prefer
 It perish, or endure--
 Content, soe're, it ornament
 His absent character. (848)

Sometimes men (the perished patterns) complain that God
 plays with His authority as creator:

It's easy to invent a Life--
 God does it--every day--
 Creation--but the Gambol
 Of His Authority

But the poet declares that "His Perturbless Plan" proceed (724).
 Later, in another poem, ED explains that human failure to
 understand the will of God lies in premature inference and
 faulty premises, not in God's purpose:

God made no Act without a cause,
 Nor Heart without an aim,
 Our inference is premature,
 Our premises to blame. (1163)

ED could believe in the God of Love. In letters she gave affirmation of such faith. She wrote the following to the Norcross cousins, probably in 1880: ". . . and love, you know, is God. . . ." ¹³ Offering consolation to Mrs. Holland, who was suffering from eye trouble in the spring of 1881, ED wrote this sincere statement: "I hope the Little Sister's Eyes have refrained from sighing--and very often carry them to the 'Throne' of Tenderness--the only God I know." ¹⁴ After the death of both parents, she wrote her aunt Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser, about 1883: "Thank you for loving my Father and Mother—I hope they are with the Source of Love." ¹⁵

Concerning God, ED felt and knew and doubted beyond what has been considered in this chapter. Other conceptions which she had about God and the meaning of life came out of a period of pain. Her reaction to suffering and the subsequent discovery of her soul will be explored next.

¹³Ibid., p. 677.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 690.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 828.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING AND SOUL-SEARCHING

The poems of the early sixties, especially those written in 1862, reveal that ED was experiencing a tremendous emotional distress. She described her ordeal in her second letter to Higginson as a "terror."¹ Her suffering has been associated with the removal of Charles Wadsworth to California at a time when she was struggling to acquire a firm faith of her own. Over the anguish caused by loss of her "tutor," ED sought to triumph. In the effort to uncover her own spiritual resources and to understand the meaning of suffering, she relied upon her Puritan background of introspection. The Puritan training developed the individual's ability not only to search the soul daily for evidence of God's grace but also to detach himself from an emotional or spiritual experience so that he could report objectively what he felt. ED had a full measure of this talent.²

The struggle for self-discovery must begin within. ED describes the conflict in this way;

¹Letters, II, 404.

²Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 162.

The Battle fought between the Soul
 And No Man--is the One
 Of all the Battles prevalent--
 By far the Greater One--

No news of it is had abroad--
 It's Bodiless Campaign
 Establishes, and terminates--
 Invisible--Unknown--

Nor History--record it--
 As Legions of a Night
 The Sunrise scatters--These endure--
 Enact--and terminate-- (594)

The battle, carried on alone and unknown to others, is made tremendous by the fact that the soul itself is an "imperial friend" or an "agonizing spy." The soul that is ruler of itself--that "Soul should stand in Awe" (683). This poem appears more significant when an earlier poem comes to attention. In "One need not be a Chamber--to be Haunted--" ED describes the "interior confronting" of ourselves as startling, like finding an "Assassin hid in our Apartment" (670). Later she finds that the soul which can rely upon itself--and its own rectitude--is not far from God (789). Such a soul really has no need to "go abroad" since "Diviner Crowd at Home/Obliterate the need--" (674). Because it can experience a relationship with heaven, "The Soul should always stand ajar," ready to receive its guest (1055).

The poems show a gradual progress in overcoming the terrors within and the circumstances without. She comes to view the soul as the "indestructible estate" which no one can

take away (1351). She recognizes the heart as "Capital of the Mind" and indicates that self-discovery is more than rewarding; it is an ecstatic achievement;

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind--
The mind is a single State
The Heart and the Mind together make
A single Continent--

One--is the Population--
Numerous enough--
This ecstatic Nation
Seek--it is Yourself. (1354)

Finally, her soul-searching leads to "Finite Infinity":

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. (1695)

Her search for identity within meant facing the problem of suffering. Certainly ED knew much about emotional pain before 1862, previously mentioned as the crisis year. Having experienced grief for those now dead whom she had loved and having known the feeling of inadequacy that accompanied her inability to be "converted," she was well acquainted with suffering. She searched, of course, for a meaning in human misery. In early May, 1862, she wrote to Louise Norcross, then taking care of the children of her uncle Joel W. Norcross, whose wife had recently died, about the mystery of suffering: "I wish 'twas plainer, Loo, the anguish of this world. I

wish one could be sure the suffering had a loving side. The thought to look down someday, and see the crooked steps we came, from safer place, must be a precious thing."³

Her poems reveal her associations with suffering. Early she finds that an ecstatic moment has a very high price:

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

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years--
Bitter contested farthings
And Coffers heaped with Tears. (125)

The proportion of pain far outweighs that of joy. Soon she discovers, however, that suffering is necessary to reveal the full meaning of an experience:

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land--by the Oceans passed.
Transport--by throe--
Peace--by it's battles told--
Love, by Memorial Mold--
Birds, by the Snow. (135)

The idea of learning through suffering recurs in the poem beginning, "To learn the Transport by the Pain" (167). Here she calls Pain the "mysterious bard" and men the "duller scholars." The teaching method that Pain uses is discipline. Through it the poet learns that pain is really power;

³Letters, II, 407.

consequently, she can endure every grief through the support that Pain provides (252).

While trying to resolve her pain, ED finds that the daily routine is extremely important:

I tie--my Hat--I crease my Shawl--
Life's little duties do--precisely--
As the very least
Were infinite to me--

She discovers later in this poem that "we cannot put Ourselves away." Her conclusion here is this:

Therefore--we do life's labor--
Though life's Reward--be done--
With scrupulous exactness
To hold our Senses--on-- (443)

She goes outside herself somewhat in the poem beginning, "I measure every Grief I meet." She wonders how the suffering of others compares with her own and concludes with this observation:

To note the fashions--of the Cross--
And how they're mostly worn--
Still fascinated to presume
That Some--are like my own-- (561)

She comes to associate her own suffering, particularly that related to the pain of love, with Christ's suffering, adopting the terms "cross," "Gethsemane," and "Calvary" to describe it. In one poem she recounts the record--only one Crucifixion, one Calvary--but this record is incomplete:

Our Lord--indeed--made Compound Witness--
And yet--
There's newer--newer Crucifixion
Than That-- (553)

The human suffering of Christ helps to measure the intensity of her pain, which, even here, she depicts with restraint.

Eventually she becomes more objective in her relationship with suffering. She finds the advantage of despair lies in experiencing it: "The Worthiness of Suffering like/The Worthiness of Death/Is found by tasting--" (799). The cost of pain is measured by the height reached:

The hallowing of Pain
Like hallowing of Heaven,
Obtains at a corporeal cost--
The Summit is not given.

To Him who strives severe
At the middle of the Hill--
But He who has achieved the Top--
All--is the price of All-- (772)

The grace bestowed upon the sufferer equals the price paid for the enlightenment of beauty or bliss. The realization of happiness comes, however, through experiencing its opposite:

Must be a Wo--
A loss or so--
To bend the eye
Best Beauty's way--

But--once aslant
It notes Delight
As difficult
As Stalactite--

A Common Bliss
Were had for less--
The price--is
Even as the Grace--

Our lord--thought no
Extravagance
To pay--a Cross-- (571)

In fact, even deprivation of desire is shown to be superior to achievement:

Delight--becomes pictorial--
When viewed through Pain--
More fair--because impossible
That any gain

The Mountain--at a given distance--
In Amber lies--
Approached--the Amber flits--a little--
And That's--the Skies-- (572)

Even though she can see the value of privation, pronounce defeat superior to victory, and acknowledge the lessons her soul learns, the poet finds that the painful experience remains with her:

They say that "Time assuages"
Time never did assuage--
An actual suffering strengthens
As Sinews do, with age--

Time is a Test of Trouble--
But not a Remedy--
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no malady-- (686)

Agony can, however, procure a "nearness to Tremendous" (963), a fact which shows that ED's introspection resulted in more than an understanding of the role of suffering. Besides experiencing moments of illumination wherein mighty truths came by intuition, sometimes even in the mystical sense, ED gained insight into her own conception of God and Heaven and felt wonder for the gift of life itself. She found the necessity to create poetry a divine though sometimes awesome inspiration.

The poems thus created show her various revelations. In them she frequently uses the terms she devised for expressing her own religious ideas. Among these, "circumference" is the only one which may need definition.

One explanation is that "circumference" suggests a range of meaning "from the basic bound or circuit of a circle to the area or space that the circle encloses . . . a kind of transcendental space-time. . . ." ⁴ A broader and more flexible interpretation suggests that "circumference" is ED's word for the projection of her imagination into the relationships of life, including those of nature and spirit. ⁵ In another explanation also applicable, "circumference" is defined as the "extension of understanding" beyond "mortal limits," even to the attainment of "divine reality." ⁶ Though the meaning varies somewhat in different contexts, the word "circumference" was very significant to ED, who declared to T. W. Higginson: "My business is Circumference." ⁷

The truth that circumference reveals may come through intuition as this poem declares:

⁴Herbert E. Childs, "Emily Dickinson and Sir Thomas Browne," American Literature, XX (January, 1951), 457.

⁵Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 140.

⁶Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 56.

⁷Letters, II, 412.

You'll know it--as you know 'tis Noon--
 By Glory--
 As you do the Sun--
 By Glory
 As you will in Heaven--
 Know God the Father--and the Son.

By intuition, Mightiest Things
 Assert themselves--and not by terms--
 "I'm Midnight"--need the Midnight say--
 "I'm Sunrise"--Need the Majesty?

Omnipotence--had not a Tongue--
 His lisp--is Lightning--and the Sun--
 His conversation--with the Sea--
 "How do you know"?
 Consult your Eye! (420)

Here, through her inner experience, the poet seems to express
 a kinship with the faith of her religious tradition, though she
 denies the role of any formal explanations or creeds (terms).
 Indeed, she finds divine insight a solitary experience;

The Soul's Superior instants
 Occur to Her--alone--
 When friend--and Earth's occasion
 Have infinite withdrawn--

Or She--Herself--ascended
 To too remote a Hight
 For lower Recognition
 Than Her Omnipotent--

This Mortal Abolition
 Is seldom--but as fair
 An apparition--subject
 To Autocratic Air--

Eternity's disclosure
 To favorites--a few
 Of the Colossal substance
 Of Immortality (306)

Another illuminating experience she dramatizes in theatrical terms;

Like Mighty Foot Lights--burned the Red
As Bases of the Trees--
The far Theatricals of Day
Exhibiting--to These--

'Twas Universe--that did applaud--
While Chiefest--of the Crowd--
Enabled by the Royal Dress--
Myself distinguished God-- (595)

The God that the poet can see is identical with Truth, and Beauty is the expression of His love for man. Here is her description:

Truth--is as old as God--
His Twin identity
And will endure as long as He
A Co-Eternity-- (836)

In another poem she finds that Truth and Beauty are one; however, to know either of these the individual must be willing to suffer, to die for them (449). In reality Beauty cannot be achieved at all by man's efforts; like grace, it is bestowed upon him:

Beauty--be not caused--It Is--
Chase it, and it ceases--
Chase it not, and it abides--

Overtake the Creases

In the Meadow--when the Wind
Runs his fingers thro' it--
Deity will see to it
That you never do it-- (516)

Yet man must be receptive to Beauty, willing to behold or listen. Appreciation lies within (526). The resulting experience cannot be defined, but it is of divine nature:

The definition of Beauty is
That definition is none--
Of Heaven, easing Analysis,
Since Heaven and He are One. (988)

At times ED feels the gift of life itself is all-sufficient:

To be alive--Is Power--
Existence--in itself--
Without a further function--
Omnipotence--Enough--

To be alive--and Will!
'Tis able as a God
The Maker--of Ourselves--be what--
Such being Finitude! (677)

She also stands in awe of Poetry, equating it with Love:

To pile like Thunder to it's 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-- (1247)

God here is suggested as the inspiration behind the awesome creative force.

Sometimes she becomes so concerned with the business of circumference that she excludes God Himself:

Time feels so vast that were it not
For an Eternity
I fear me this Circumference
Engross my Finitude--

To His exclusion, who prepare
 By processes of Size
 For the Stupendous Vision
 Of His Diameters-- (802)

The idea of God's preparing man through various stages of development (processes of Size) for eternity (Stupendous Vision/Of His Diameters) seems a near-convergence with the Puritan interpretation that this world is a mere preparation for the next. And in the following poem she uses the old idea of Judgment Day to describe the fulfillment of circumference:

No Crowd that has occurred
 Exhibit--I suppose
 That General Attendance
 That Resurrection--does--

Circumference be full--
 The long restricted Grave
 Assert her Vital Privilege--
 The Dust--connect--and live--

On Atoms--features place--
 All multitudes that were
 Efface in the Comparison--
 All Suns--dissolve a star--

Solemnity--prevail--
 It's Individual Doom
 Possess each separate Consciousness--
 August--Absorbed--Numb--

What Duplicate--exist--
 What Parallel can be--
 Of the Significance of This--
 To Universe--and Me? (515)

Is this the ultimate reality? The poet seems to indicate so here, but she is not always so sure about this "Colossal substance/Of Immortality." In fact, about the supernal she had much more to say and even more to ask. Immortality is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER IX

IMMORTALITY

ED looked upon immortality in at least two ways: the immortality of the human soul after physical death as conceived in the Christian faith, and "Immortality," alternately termed "Eternity," which was the past and the present as well as the yet-to-be. The former interpretation she alternately believed and doubted to the end of her life; the latter she knew as certainty in flashes of enlightenment. Both interpretations will be discussed: first, the sureties and doubts of "traditional" immortality and then ED's conception of eternity as a continuous state, wherein the individual's identity remains.

There is evidence of belief in immortality in both poems and letters. In a very early poem she speaks of Death as calling our "rapt attention" to immortality (7). She seems to include herself in the following expression of faith:

Faith--is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what We see
Unto the Scene that We do not--
Too slender for the eye

It bears the Soul as bold
As it were rocked in Steel
With Arms of Steel at either side--
It joins--behind the Vail

To what, could We presume
 The Bridge would cease to be
 To Our far, vascillating Fleet
 A first Necessity. (915)

Another affirmation appears in this poem:

Death is a Dialogue between
 The Spirit and the Dust
 "Dissolve" says Death--The Spirit "Sir
 I have another trust "

Death doubts it--Argues from the Ground--
 The Spirit turns away
 Just laying off for evidence
 An overcoat of Clay. (976)

In the poem beginning, "I never saw a Moor," she declares the certainty of heaven (1052). Then, employing a favorite metaphor, she describes the fate of her soul:

If my Bark sink
 'Tis to another sea--
 Mortality's Grand Floor
 Is Immortality-- (1234)

In the letters her encounters with immortality rest on a personal basis as most references in them are the result of a specific death. To her aunt Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser, whose eldest son had died, ED wrote in February, 1870:

I know we shall certainly see what we loved most. It is sweet to think they are safe by Death and that that is all we have to pass to obtain their face.

There are no dead, dear Katie, the Grave is but our moan for them. . . . Henry had been a prisoner. How he coveted Liberty probably his Redeemer knew--and as we keep surprise for those most precious to us, brought him Ransom in his sleep.¹

¹Letters, II, 338.

In a letter to Higginson, dated March, 1876, she recalled the memory of her father, who had died in June, 1874:

When I think of my Father's lonely Life and his
lonelier Death, there is this redress--

Take all away--
The only thing worth larceny
Is left--the Immortality-- (1365)²

In another letter to Higginson, written in June, 1878, several months after the death of his wife, she wrote the following:

"With the bloom of the flower your friend loved, I have wished for her, but God cannot discontinue himself."³ She enclosed this poem in the letter:

How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread--
No Bridge below doth totter so--
Yet none hath such a Crowd.

It is as old as God--
Indeed--'twas built by him--
He sent his son to test the Plank,
And he pronounced it firm. (1443)

By 1880, the deaths which had occurred made immortality very near. To Mrs. Samuel Bowles she wrote of this fact in a letter in June of that year: "Immortality as a guest is sacred, but when it becomes as with you and with us, a member of the family, the tie is more vivid. . . ."⁴

²Ibid., p. 551.

³Ibid., p. 610.

⁴Ibid., III, 663.

The death of Samuel Bowles prompted the following poem, the words of which she later applied to Otis P. Lord also:

Though the great Waters sleep,
That they are still the Deep
We cannot doubt--
No vacillating God
Ignited this Abode
To put it out-- (1599)

Sometimes the death of a loved one made belief in immortality imperative. Such was the case in the death of her nephew Gilbert. Out of her anguish ED wrote a firm statement of faith sent to the child's bereaved mother in early October, 1883:

The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled--
How simply at the last the Fathom comes! The
Passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us--
. . . Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to
thee! . . .

I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet
velocity in everything that flies--His Life was
like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his
Elegy an echo--his Requiem ecstasy--

Dawn and Meridian in one.⁵

The same anguish produced at other moments questions and doubts. A letter to Mrs. Holland, suggesting that doubt, introduces again the problem of uncertainty. She wrote about Gilbert's death in late 1883:

⁵Ibid., p. 799.

"Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me," was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know--Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the little Grave at his Grandparents' feet--All this and more, though is there more?⁶ More than Love and Death? Then tell me it's name!

Other statements testify to her lack of assurance. In response to a letter from Perez Cowan, a cousin who had been ordained the preceding April, ED wrote in October, 1869:

"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."⁷ After the death of Samuel Bowles, ED wrote in early 1879 to her friend Maria Whitney, who had been close to him: "We cannot believe for each other--thought is too sacred a despot, but I hope that God, in whatever form, is true to our friend. . . . Consciousness is the only home of which we now know."⁸

Doubt again haunts her after the death of James D. Clark, who, a lifelong friend of Charles Wadsworth, had initiated a correspondence with ED after Wadsworth's death. ED wrote to Charles H. Clark, brother of the deceased, to inquire about

⁶Ibid., p. 803.

⁷Ibid., II, 463.

⁸Ibid., p. 634.

him. In mid-June, 1883, she asked Charles Clark this question: "Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure."⁹ In mid-October of the same year, she wrote Charles Clark again, this time enclosing a poem which was introduced by this remark: "These thoughts disquiet me, and the great friend is gone, who could solace them. Do they disturb you?"¹⁰ This is the poem:

The Spirit lasts--but in what mode--
 Below the Body speaks,
 But as the Spirit furnishes--
 Apart, it never talks--
 The Music in the Violin
 Does not emerge alone
 But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch
 Alone--is not a Tune--
 The Spirit lurks within the Flesh
 Like Tides within the Sea
 That make the Water live, estranged
 What would the Either be?
 Does that know--now--or does it cease--
 That which to this is done,
 Resuming at a mutual date
 With every future one?
 Instinct pursues the Adamant,
 Exacting this Reply
 Adversity if it may be, or
 Wild Prosperity,
 The Rumor's Gate was shut so tight
 Before my Mind was sown,
 Not even a Prognostic's Push
 Could make a Dent thereon-- (1576)

The friend she had in mind was Wadsworth, but the death of Gilbert as well as that of Wadsworth may have inspired the thoughts which troubled her.

⁹Ibid., III, 779.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 861.

The poems also express her doubts. One poem begins with an apparent affirmation of faith: "This world is not conclusion," but, as the poem develops, it becomes an expression of doubt. Beyond this life, invisible but positive, a "species" stands. Though it beckons all, this species baffles philosophers and puzzles scholars; yet for it martyrs have borne contempt, even crucifixion. Here is faith's reaction:

Faith slips--and laughs--and rallies--
Blushes, if any see--
Plucks at a twig of Evidence--

The poem concludes with doubt, indicating that the "narcotics" of sermon and song cannot "still the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul" (501).

In another poem she declares the idea of immortality is the "hardest Miracle/Propounded to Belief." She concedes that we do know something of the existence of Paradise: it is "the uncertain certainty," whose vicinity we infer by its "Bisecting/Messenger" (1411). Yet even faith in the conventional heaven gives no comfort to the poet:

Their height in heaven comforts not--
Their Glory--nought to me--
'Twas best imperfect--as it was--
I'm finite--I cant see--

The House of Supposition--
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps
To Me--shows insecure--

The Wealth I had--contented me--
 If 'twas a meaner size--
 Then I had counted it until
 It pleased my narrow Eyes--

Better than larger values--
 That show however true--
 This timid Life of Evidence
 Keeps pleading--"I dont know." (696)

ED felt more than discomfort in the precarious transfer between faith and doubt. In one of the prose fragments she described the ordeal of losing faith:

'Tis a dangerous moment for any one when the meaning goes out of things and Life stands straight--and punctual--and yet no content(s) (signal) come(s). Yet such moments are. If we survive them they expand us, if we do not, but that is Death, whose if is everlasting. When I was a little girl I called the Cemetery Tarrytown but now I call it Trans--a wherefore but no more and the if of Deity--¹¹ (Avalanche or Avenue) every heart asks which.

The "survival" that "expands" is the subject matter of this last portion of the chapter; that is, it concerns ED's own ideas--those which go beyond orthodoxy. Several points of her intuitive faith were discussed in the last chapter, in particular her idea that Love and Beauty are God's manifestations of Himself. As such, they are eternal. Two poems serve as reminders of the nature of Beauty and of Love:

Estranged from Beauty--none can be--
 For Beauty is Infinity--
 And power to be finite ceased
 Before Identity was creased. (1474)

¹¹Ibid., p. 919.

And of Love she wrote:

Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is Immortality
Nay, it is Deity--

Unable they that love--to die
For Love reforms Vitality
Into Divinity. (809)

Her ideas on immortality itself seem to make three points:
Eternity is now, it is continuous, and it witnesses fulfillment.
Here is one of her descriptions of heaven:

'Tis vast--as our Capacity--
As fair--as our idea--
To Him of adequate desire
No further 'tis, than Here-- (370)

In another poem she speaks of Eden as "that old-fashioned House/We dwell in every day" (1657). Men have always assumed that the "infinite" is a "sudden Guest," but she asks the question: "How can that stupendous come/Which never went away?" (1309). In one poem Eternity is personified, being even a part of her identity:

The Blunder is in estimate.
Eternity is there
We say as of a Station.
Meanwhile he is so near
He joins me in my Ramble--
Divides abode with me--
No Friend have I that so persists
As this Eternity. (1684)

One other poem testifies to her belief about eternity:

Forever--is composed of News--
'Tis not a different time--
Except for Infiniteness--
And Latitude of Home

From this--experienced Here--
 Remove the Dates--to These--
 Let Months dissolve in further Months--
 And Years--exhale in Years--

Without Debate--or Pause--
 Or celebrated Days--
 No different our Years would be
 From Anno Dominies (624)

The continuous quality of immortality is the theme of the following lines:

Those not live yet
 Who doubt to live again--
 "Again" is of a twice
 But this--is one-- (1454)

Resurrection of the body may seem necessary to orthodoxy, but immortality to her is a continuous life; in this same poem she calls immortality that "Costumeless Consciousness." The constant nature of immortality is illustrated again in the following lines sent to Sue sometime in 1884:

Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory--
 Both in one package lain
 And lifted back again--
 Be Sue--while I Emily--
 Be next--what you have ever been--Infinity--¹²

But eternity is more than a matter of time; it is a witness to the fulfillment of what is begun on earth. ED expresses this idea in several ways. In the following poem she shows that Christ as well as man is completed only in immortality:

¹²Ibid., p. 830.

Obtaining but our own Extent
 In whatsoever Realm--
 'Twas Christ's own personal Expanse
 That bore him from the Tomb-- (1543)

She expressed a similar idea in a letter of consolation to Richard H. Mather, a professor at Amherst College, after the death of his wife. In November, 1877, she wrote her friend: "That the Divine has been human is at first an unheeded solace, but it shelters without our consent--To have lived is a Bliss so powerful--we must die--to adjust it--but when you have strength to remember that Dying dispels nothing which was firm before, you have avenged sorrow."¹³ Two other encounters with death make her think of eternity as "expanse." To Higginson, whose baby had died, she wrote in the spring of 1880: "These sudden intimacies with Immortality, are expanse. . . ."¹⁴ And she sent these lines to Sue after Gilbert's death:

Expanse cannot be lost--
 Not Joy, but a Decree
 Is Deity--
 His Scene, Infinity-- (1584)

The individual identity is extended in immortality, too, and even the least is greater than all of nature. Such is the idea expressed in the following poem:

¹³Ibid., II, 594-595.

¹⁴Ibid., III, 661.

The Life we have is very great.
 The Life that we shall see
 Surpasses it, we know, because
 It is Infinity.
 But when all Space has been beheld
 And all Dominion shown
 The smallest Human Heart's extent
 Reduces it to none. (1162)

The idea of expansion is carried further in another poem in which God is described as a "Frontier" (1090).

The many references to immortality attest to the realness it held for ED--at least at moments. This chapter closes with two statements that ED wrote to her Norcross cousins in November of 1882 after the death of her mother. The statements are at once the old doubt and an affirmation of faith. The first one referred directly to her mother's death:

We don't know where she is, though so many
 tell us.

I believe we shall in some manner be cherished
 by our Maker--that the One who gave us this remarkable
 earth has the power still farther to surprise that¹⁵
 which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence.¹⁵

¹⁵Ibid., p. 750.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

After the death of Otis P. Lord, ED wrote to his kinsman Benjamin Kimball requesting Kimball to tell her about Lord's religious beliefs. In her reply to his letter, dated simply 1885, ED wrote this: "Perhaps to solidify his faith was for him impossible, and if for him, how more for us!"¹

In this indirect way, ED described her own faith, which was indeed not "solidified." Never did she know the sustaining strength of complete confidence in God. In her efforts to find the spiritual meaning of life, she faced God in about every way He was presented to her. From the "testimony" in the letters and poems, there seems little doubt that she rejected completely the God of orthodoxy, capable of damning babies, of choosing only a select few to inherit a heaven that was far from attractive anyway, and of going about getting angry with the wicked. But there was another God--one of tenderness--who manifested Himself in love and beauty and creative power. Unfortunately, this God was so sparing of His revelations that she doubted His existence. Yet the moment that she doubted Him, she doubted

¹Letters, III, 861.

her doubt; but there could be no "balm" in a religion that one doubted as fervently as he believed (1144).

Essentially ED was a very religious person. Since she had outgrown the faith of her contemporaries, since the winds of transcendentalism which blew into Amherst added little to her individual declaration of independence from orthodoxy, since she could not accept a life made meaningless without belief, since her own intuitive flashes of truth seemed inadequate, ED continued to seek and to ask to the very end of her life.

The certainty she most poignantly longed for was belief in immortality. Even after moments of firm assurance, she would feel compelled to ask someone whose opinion she cherished: "Is immortality true?" She wished for the reality of God, too. In the last message she sent to Higginson, shortly before her death in May, 1886, ED asked: "Deity-- does He live now?"²

The certainties denied her, she found her search worthwhile. If that eternity of fulfillment she pictured in some of her poems exists, then she was to know ultimate reality even as she suggests in this poem:

²Ibid., p. 905.

Each Life Converges to some Centre
Expressed--or still--
Exists in every Human Nature
A Goal--

Embodied scarcely to itself--it may be--
Too fair--
For Credibility's presumption
To mar

Adored with caution--as a Brittle Heaven--
To reach
Were hopeless, as the Rainbow's Raiment
To touch

Yet persevered toward--surer--for the Distance
How high--
Unto the Saints' slow diligence--
The Sky

Ungained--it may be--by a Life's low Venture--
But then
Eternity enable the endeavoring
Again. (680)

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