

EMILY DICKINSON: NEW ENGLAND METAPHYSICAL POET

THESIS

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By

Arline G. Pettus, B.S.
(Gonzales, Texas)

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Arline G. Pettus

Gonzales, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

In 1886 in Amherst, a remote town in Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson died at the age of fifty-five, unrecognized as a great poet. Forty-six of the forty-nine packets in which she assembled her poems seem to include all the verses written between 1858 and 1865. She had created art from words, but her writings were not the conventional writings of her day.

To escape the inertness into which contemporary American writing had sunk was a goal of Emily Dickinson's. "They shut me up in Prose" could mean not only prose but also the conventional kind of verse.¹ Employing etymology, simple concrete terms, ironic contrasts, aphorisms, and grammatical shifts, she looked at the universal problems of mankind. My purpose in this study is to discover those elements in Emily Dickinson's writings of the nineteenth century that are similar to those used by the metaphysical writers of the seventeenth century.

I have used The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Since the poems are numbered

¹Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), p. 302.

in chronological order, I have used the poem numbers, identified by the letter P and the number of the poem, throughout my thesis. To quote from the letters, I have used the Harvard Edition of The Letters of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward.² In using these poems and letters, I have not altered the original capitalization, punctuation, spelling, or grammar.

²Three vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958.

CHAPTER I

THE METAPHYSICAL WRITINGS AND WRITERS

What does the term "metaphysical" mean? Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, third edition, 1965, gives the following definitions:

1: of or relating to metaphysics 2a: of or relating to the transcendent or supersensible b: SUPERNATURAL 3: highly abstract or abstruse 4: of or relating to poetry esp. of the early 17th century that is marked by elaborate subtleties of thought and expression.

Samuel Johnson, eighteenth-century writer, in his "Life of Cowley" applied the term "metaphysical" to a group of seventeenth-century poets whose thoughts, Johnson wrote, are obscure, whose images are inharmonious, whose conceits create parts instead of a whole, and whose exaggerations are unlimited. But Samuel Johnson admitted that their poetry had value and that "To write on their plane it was at least necessary to read and think."¹

In fact, metaphysical poetry encompasses all of life, the entire universe.

The metaphysical poem can be tried as the bridge erected between 'the finite and the infinite, the many and the one, the uttermost parts of the

¹Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose, ed. by Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), pp. 471-472.

universe and its center, the beginning and the end, evil and good, matter and mind, past and future, the chaos that life appears and the harmony it is found to be.²

Metaphysical poetry deals with the paradoxical elements in human experience. The vitality of seventeenth-century poetry, which often presents the ineffable experience, depends upon the concrete everyday observances for comprehension. And metaphysical poetry has some distinguishing characteristics: the use of metaphors, which are often extended; wit, often used in a serious context; and the wide use of logic. Ambiguity, another characteristic, makes use of certain kinds of metaphor, the pun, unusual syntax, and unclear meanings. Condensation is an important characteristic in metaphysical poetry. Furthermore, analogical thinking is an essential process for understanding truth.

Paradoxes, allusions, and conceits are used in metaphysical poetry. The paradox, in which conflicting meanings are observed in one figure, is necessary for analogical thinking. Conflict and contrast, important ingredients in this type of poetry, can be achieved through juxtaposition, irony, allusions, and ideas that appear to be opposite. But "the most distinguishing characteristic

²Henry W. Wells, "The Heritage of Technique," New Poets from Old, quoted in Sona Raiziss, The Metaphysical Passion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), p. 19.

of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry is the extended conceit."³ A conceit is extended to intensify, to enrich, and to deepen our understanding. To point out truth, the conceit is often employed by the metaphysical poet. Not many devices to explain abstractions escape the metaphysical poet.

Wit, another element in metaphysical poetry, is more than the everyday wit that amuses. In metaphysical poetry, irony is indispensable to wit.

This flair for combining homely idiom with learned terms, the vernacular with sophisticated or philosophical implications, tokens the daring but usually discriminating wit of successful metaphysical poetry.⁴

Metaphysical poets sought to convey their exact meanings through vivid images. "Their 'obscure' images are as cunningly framed to achieve the eloquence that accompanied formal excellence as any in the period."⁵

To amplify and illustrate are two the chiefest ornaments of eloquence, and gain of men's minds two the chiefest advantages, admiration and belief. For how can you commend a thing more acceptably to our attention than by telling us it is extraordinary and by showing us that it is evident? There is no

³Joseph Ellis Duncan, The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry, The History of a Style, 1800 to the Present (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 158.

⁴Raiziss, p. 201.

⁵Rosemond Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 32.

looking at a comet if it be either little or obscure, and we love and look on the sun above all stars for those two excellencies, his greatness, his clearness, such speech is amplification and illustration.⁶

To explain the invisible requires the visible. Those things that are not perceived by the five senses require the use of extended logic.

Some metaphysical characteristics have been found in the writings of many poets. Among the most representative metaphysical poets are John Donne and George Herbert. Sir Thomas Browne, a seventeenth-century prose writer, also writes in the metaphysical style.

An embarrassing assortment and number of poets suggest Donne in some quality or technique: Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. H. Auden, Eliot, MacLeish, Crane, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, Elinor Wylie.⁷

And other nineteenth-century New England writers wrote in the metaphysical style. What were the influences that caused Emily Dickinson of nineteenth-century New England to write in a metaphysical manner?

⁶John Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style quoted in ibid., p. 67.

⁷Raiziss, p. 11.

CHAPTER II

METAPHYSICAL INFLUENCES ON EMILY DICKINSON

New England writers, Emily Dickinson's reading, and the times in which she lived influenced her writing. "American critics generally appreciated the metaphysicals' transcendental qualities, their hard core of thought, and the union of body, mind, and soul reflected in their poetry."¹

. . . the Transcendentalists found their chief models in a seventeenth-century school of unorthodox versifiers. From the metaphysical poets--Marvell, Crashaw, Donne, and others--who had rebelled against the dulcet melodiousness of Elizabethan lyricists, these rebels against the nineteenth-century saccharinity learned something about the forcefulness which results from breaking up regular patterns.²

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the nineteenth-century American poet most frequently compared with the metaphysical poets, liked Donne, Browne, and Herbert. Because Emerson admired the metaphysicals, he quoted from them. He revealed his thoughts in "The Poet":

But the highest minds of the world have never ceased

¹Duncan, p. 69.

²Walter Blair, Theodore Hornberger, Randall Stewart, James E. Miller, Jr., The Literature of the United States (2 vols.; Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966), I, 743.

to explore the double meaning, or shall I say the quadruple or the centuple or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact; Orpheus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Plutarch, Dante, Swedenborg, and the masters of sculpture, picture and poetry.³

"The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign and stands on the centre."⁴ Emily knew Emerson's Poems (1847), which Ben Newton, who had come to her father's office as a law student in 1847, gave her. T. W. Higginson, ex-Unitarian minister and editor and writer for The Atlantic Monthly, urged writers in "Letter to a Young Contributor" to strive "in utterance."⁵ He praised Emerson for his ability to eloquently express his thoughts. In a letter to Mrs. Higginson, Emily voiced her admiration for Emerson's Representative Men as a "little Granite Book you can lean upon" (L 481). Moreover, Emerson lectured in Amherst and visited in the home of Austin Dickinson, Emily's brother.

Emily must have followed Emerson's advice from "The Poet." He had written, "The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly . . .

³Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays, Second Series, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (6 vols.; New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1926), III, 4.

⁴Ibid., III, 7.

⁵T. W. Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor," The Atlantic Monthly, IX (April, 1862), 404.

not with the intellect alone but with the intellect inebriated by nectar."⁶ His "Bacchus" begins with "Bring me wine, but wine which never grew / In the belly of the grape."⁷ And Emily Dickinson writes, "I taste a liquor never brewed" (P 214).

Henry David Thoreau, who was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817, had some of his writings published in The Dial. Emily Dickinson liked Thoreau and would have been impressed by this statement of Thoreau's: "My thought," he explained, "is a part of the meaning of the world, and hence I use a part of the world to express my thought."⁸

Thoreau resembled Donne chiefly in his idiom, rhythm, and metrics, but the thought and figures of the two poets are sometimes similar. He shared, for instance, Donne's delight in astronomical figures and his feeling for an almost mystic union in love:

We two that planets erst had been
 are now a double star.
 And in the heavens may be seen,
 Where that we fixed are.

The planets 'evermore with spheral song / Revolve
 about one centre.'⁹

Edgar Allan Poe, another of her contemporaries, "maintained that the writings of the metaphysicals 'sprang

⁶Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selections, ed. by Stephen Whicher (Boston: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1957), p. 233.

⁷Ibid., p. 445.

⁸Blair, p. 726.

⁹Duncan, p. 71.

immediately from the soul--and partook intensely of that soul's nature."¹⁰ Emily wrote of Poe, "I know too little of to think" (L 622). "I find it Friend--I read it . . . I thank you for them all--the pearl, and then the onyx, and then the emerald stone" (L 171). It has been thought that she intended the first letters of the gems to spell "Poe."

James Russell Lowell, critic and poet as well as editor of The Atlantic Monthly, thought that Donne wrote sublime poetry, and he could quote Donne's writings. Lowell had been classed with "such writers as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, by departing more frequently than his famous townsmen from the well-established verse patterns. Emily wrote T. W. Higginson that "one does not often meet anything so perfect" as Lowell's 'A Good Word for Winter'" (L 337).

William Cullen Bryant's poems were among those in the family library.

Elsewhere she quotes from 'Thanatopsis' and 'June'; and the inspired certainty that Bryant offers in 'To a Waterfowl' seem to be restated in these Dickinson lines:

These tested our Horizon
Then Disappeared
As birds before achieving
A Latitude

Our Retrospection of Them
A fixed Delight

¹⁰Ibid., p. 69.

But our Anticipation
A Dice--a Doubt--¹¹

"Thanatopsis," "To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe," and "The Death of the Flowers" are marked in a volume of Bryant's poetry owned by Sue Dickinson, Emily's sister-in-law. "The imagination is the most active and the least susceptible of fatigue of all the faculties of the human mind . . ." in Bryant's "On the Nature of Poetry" probably appealed to Emily.¹²

Of Theodore Parker (1810-1860) Emily wrote, "'I never read before what Mr. Parker wrote. I heard that he was 'poison.' Then I like poison very well.'"¹³ In 1841 in the South Boston Church, Parker delivered a sermon in which he "brought the debate over the historical authenticity of the miracles to a thunderous climax with the 'Transient and Permanent.'"¹⁴

Most of all, he was fascinated, as Emily Dickinson was likewise, by the unplumbed mysteries of the mind: But the Universe of Human Life, with its peculiar worlds of outer sense and inner soul, the particular

¹¹Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836-1886 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp.111-112.

¹²Ibid., p. 112.

¹³George F. Whicher, This Was a Poet: a Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson (New York: Scribner, 1938), p. 192.

¹⁴The American Transcendentalists, ed. by Perry Miller (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), p. 106.

faunas and floras which therein find a home, are still more complex, wonderful, and attractive; and the laws which control it seem to me more amazing than the Mathematic Principles that explain the Celestial Mechanics of the outward world. The Cosmos of Matter seems little compared to this Cosmos of immortal and progressive Man; it is my continual study, discipline and delight. Oh, that some young genius would devise the Novum Organum of Humanity, determine the Principia thereof, and with deeper than mathematic science, write out the formulas of the Human Universe, the Celestial Mechanics of Mankind.¹⁵

All of these contemporaries must have influenced Emily.

Besides her contemporaries, Edward Taylor (1645-1729), whose writings Emily certainly read, wrote like the metaphysicals, especially George Herbert.

His structure follows the 'metaphysical' pattern; that is, to borrow T. S. Eliot's description, 'the elaboration of a figure of speech to the farthest state to which ingenuity can carry it' and 'a development by rapid association of thought.'¹⁶

Taylor, like Herbert, uses many domestic metaphors.

Thomas H. Johnson, Taylor's first editor, believes that "Joy stands on tiptoes all the while thy Guests / Sit at thy Table, ready forth to sing" from "Meditation One Hundred and Ten, Second Series" may have been inspired by "George Herbert's 'The Church Militant': 'Religion stands on tip-toe in our land /

¹⁵Whicher, p. 193.

¹⁶Blair, p. 237.

Readie to pass to the American Strand."¹⁷ Emily most certainly was influenced by this metaphysical poet and pastor of the church at Westfield, Massachusetts, to use expressions that are similar to these by Taylor:

'I'lle Claim my Right: Give place, ye Angells Bright.
Ye further from the Godhead stande than I.¹⁸

Lord, oynt me with this Petro oyle: I'm sick.
Make me drink Water of the Rock: I'm dry.
Me in this fountain wash; my filth is thick.
I'm faint: give Aqua Vitae or I dy.
If in this stream thou cleanse and Chearish mee,
My Heart thy Hallelujahs Pipe shall bee.¹⁹

These writers of Emily Dickinson's New England world must have motivated her desire for other reading.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 245.

CHAPTER III

EMILY'S READING

Emily's reading, another influence, transported her beyond Amherst to all parts of the world. She seemed to be acquainted with a variety of writers. When her reading is examined, her meanings become clearer; moreover, her readings are significant. Knowing that a poet must have a comprehensive vocabulary, she searched for words and images.

Some of her esoteric words and allusions are explained by her reading. "John L. Stephens' Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan, a two-volume travel book available in the Dickinson family library" helps to explicate the word 'Batize' in one of her poems."¹ Emily had access to these books from her lawyer father's library: Pope's Homer, Don Quixote, Paradise Lost, Cowper's Poems, twelve volumes of The Spectator, The Works of Lord Byron in four volumes, Crabbe's English Synonymes, Franklins Essays and Letters, and an eight-volume edition of Shakespeare.²

¹Capps, p. 7.

²Ibid., p. 12.

Emily revealed some of her reading in a letter to Abiah Root, a friend, in 1847. "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" (L 18). In a letter to Austin Dickinson, Emily volunteered that she had finished an "examination in Euclid" and that her subjects were "Chemistry, Physiology, & quarter course in Algebra" (L 19). In a letter to Abiah Root in 1848, Emily listed her "feast" of books read at home during an illness: Longfellow's "Evangeline," Tennyson's "The Princess," Thomas Moore's "The Epicurean," and Marcella Smedley's "The Maiden Aunt," and two novels by Martin Tupper. She listed her studies as Astronomy and Rhetoric (L 23).

Besides these books, Emily probably studied the books recommended for admission to Mount Holyoke. One of these, Watts's Improvement of the Mind, was a small volume designed

to unfold and invigorate the faculties; to store the mind with the most useful knowledge; to subject every power, thought and pursuit, to the empire of reason; . . . in short, to prepare the mortal and immortal part of our nature, for the greatest possible usefulness and enjoyment both here and forever.³

Sir Thomas Browne's unusual style of writing became known to Emily in Newman's Practical System of

³Ibid., p. 104.

Rhetoric, a textbook at Mount Holyoke.⁴ Furthermore, she read The Atlantic Monthly. Higginson wrote of

the mode of writing which unites the smoothness of the eighteenth century with the vital vigor of the seventeenth, so that Sir Thomas Browne and Andrew Marvell seem quite as near to us as Pope or Addison,⁵

These were listed under "Recent American Publications" in The Atlantic Monthly: "Religio Medici, A Letter to a Friend, Christian Morals, Urn-Burial, and other Papers, by Sir Thomas Browne Kt., M. D. Boston. Ticknor & Fields. 16 mo. \$1.50."⁶ Emily must have read these because she wrote Higginson, "For Poets--I have Keats--and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For Prose--Mr. Ruskin--Sir Thomas Browne--and the Revelations" (L 261).

The King James version of the Bible appealed to Emily; therefore, her writings parallel the "seventeenth-century divines, whose language was both chronologically and professionally close to that of the newly translated Bible and whose works usually depended heavily upon it as a model."⁷ She uses many Biblical allusions and quotations in her writings.

⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁵Higginson, p. 405.

⁶"Recent American Publications" in The Atlantic Monthly, IX (March, 1862), 400.

⁷Capps, pp. 29-30.

Emily Dickinson has this sentence marked in Thomas a' Kempis' Of the Imitation of Christ: "'The greatest Saints avoided the society of men when they could conveniently; and did rather choose to live to God in secret.'"⁸ Emily wrote, "The Soul selects her own Society-- / Then--shuts the Door--" (P 303).

Emily could have studied the style and imagery of the metaphysicals from Edward Dickinson's and Sue Dickinson's books. They had "Chamber's ponderous two-volume Cyclopaedia of English Literature." This, along with Dana's Household Book of Poetry and Griswold's Sacred Poets of England and America, is now in the Dickinson collection at Harvard. A criticism of Herbert's poetry was "ridiculous conceits of coarse unpleasant similes" But Emily copied Herbert's "Matin Hymn," which was published in The Springfield Republican in 1876 as "Mattens." She also marked Henry Vaughan's "Early Rising and Prayer."⁹

Emily's interest in John Milton is reflected in her writing. She quoted from Paradise Lost, and in Dana's Household Book of Poetry, parts of "Il Penseroso" and "L' Allegro" are marked. She was acquainted with the writings of seventeenth-century writers.

⁸Ibid., p. 61.

⁹Capps, pp. 68-69.

Emily's familiarity with "Watts' Christian Psalmody, his The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, and a tiny volume entitled Village Hymns probably helped Emily in the use of hymn meter and gave her a source of imagery and metaphors for letters and poems."¹⁰ She absorbed all that appealed to her.

Emily was familiar with many other writers' works. Because she was acquainted with many of the seventeenth-century writers, it is not difficult to imagine that her curiosity drove her to search out other writings by these authors.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 73.

CHAPTER IV

EMILY'S NEW ENGLAND WORLD

The political, social, economic, and religious conditions of the seventeenth century resulted in metaphysical writing. During periods of stress and turmoil, writers may seek order in disorder. The problems that John Donne confronted in the seventeenth century were similar to those faced by Emily Dickinson. The disintegration of a way of life leads to metaphysical times.

New England's Calvinism with its stress on sin and predestination caused some to question and search all life. Many of her theological words, such as predestination, justification, election, and grace, Emily acquired from the sermons that she heard in childhood. The ferment of her New England was reflected in her poetry. "The seventeenth-century English poets and our own metaphysicals like Emily Dickinson were under compulsion to weigh conduct and conclusions in the scales of time."¹

By 1850 New England society, enjoying its

¹Raiziss, p. 197.

accumulated wealth, was experiencing social conformity. No longer did a rigid Puritan religion exist, but the outer unity pointed to an inner emptiness. If her New England society experienced mediocrity and slackness, her poetry condensed selective experiences into concise statements of truth. Like Donne, she revolted against the uniformity around her and transcended her historical situation.

Poets who rebel against the uniformity around them often withdraw to create. Emily, like some of the seventeenth-century writers, sought isolation to create her art. William Dean Howells, contributor or editor for the Atlantic Monthly, Century, North American Review, and Harper's, wrote, ". . . and the interesting and important thing is that this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionairism."² But he added that Emily Dickinson was one of those rare writers "to whom art was dear."³

Emily Dickinson early joined the ranks of American writers who have radically revolted against the spiritual slackness and uniformity about them. Of her culture she once wrote

²Caesar R. Blake, Carlton F. Wells, The Recognition of Emily Dickinson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 24.

³Ibid., p. 24.

. . . Men die-- ternally--
 It is a truth--Of Blood
 But we--are dying in Drama--
 And Drama--is never dead--⁴

She was a descendant of one Nathaniel Dickinson, born in 1600 in England. Her curiosity could have led her to seek out the writers of this period. "Perhaps her appropriate setting would be the age of Cowley or Donne."⁵

⁴Dolores Dyer Lucas, Emily Dickinson and Riddle (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1969), pp. 41-42.

⁵Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson" in The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays; 1928-1955 (New York: Meridian, 1955), p. 212.

CHAPTER V

EMILY DICKINSON AND JOHN DONNE: THEIR PARADOXES

John Donne, born in 1572, is the most representative of the English metaphysical poets. His ability to think of opposites, to live in one world but to penetrate into another, and to graft these together gives Donne certain metaphysical qualities. A well-read scholar of his time, he penetrated life around him but questioned the whole universe. "The printed sermons represent the bountiful harvest of a wide and assiduous reading, and in addition reflect the emotional feelings which Donne himself experienced."¹ Thus, his poetry is an art, combining his own true self with the selected material around him.

This quest for understanding may have resulted from the changing times from 1590 to 1620 in England. The scholastic thinking of his day, useful in explaining the operation of the universe, was available to him. But he revolted against much that was "restric-

¹Herbert H. Umbach, "The Rhetoric of Donne's Sermons," PMLA, LII (June, 1937), 356.

tive and artificial and hackneyed and stale."²

Rejecting the conventional drabness around her, Emily, too, developed this "doubleness of vision" in her struggle to comprehend a "world of changeless things" in this world.³ This conflict between the visible and the invisible resulted in a scrutiny of every subject with richness of imagination. Emily's poems make the abstract things of the universe seem real and close. Thomas H. Johnson, her biographer, wrote, "Intense, cryptic, paradoxical, her life and her writing have a unity of purpose that battled to achieve and reveal a universal experience."⁴

Emily's use of paradox, like that of the metaphysicals, enabled her to analyze life. "Tis Opposites--entice" (P 355) explains her attraction for paradoxical arguments. "I rose--because He sank-- / I thought it would be opposite" (P 616) is an example of paradox and antithesis.

"We cannot think of Donne without thinking of

²Helen C. White, The Metaphysical Poets (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 77.

³Whicher, p. 288.

⁴Thomas H. Johnson, "Emily Dickinson: The Prisms of a Poet," Saturday Review, XXXIII, (June, 1950), 17.

relentless argument."⁵ The following is one of his arguments:

Thou canst not every day give mee thy heart,
 If thou canst give it, then thou never gavest it.
 Love riddles are, that though thy heart depart
 It stayes at home, and thou with losing savest it.⁶

Donne's love-poems, like "The Extasie" or "The Flea," use "the conceit of argument--making a new and striking point by a syllogism concealing a logical error."⁷ By using "the violent paradoxes on All and Nothing," Donne, by persuasive argument, makes "the impossible seem true."⁸

Emily Dickinson could weld opposites together through antithesis:

Water is taught by thirst.
 Land by the oceans passed.
 Transport--by throe--
 Peace--by its battles told--
 Love, by Memorial Mold--
 Birds, by the Snow. (P 135)

"Some things that fly there be" and "There are that resting, rise" (P 89) are paradoxes that help her

⁵Frank Kermode, John Donne (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1957), p. 11.

⁶John Donne, Poetical Works, ed. by Sir Herbert Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 18.

⁷Kermode, p. 11.

⁸Ibid., p. 23.

write about life's bafflement. Because she looked at life from all angles, she depended on paradox for a total view. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (P 1129) is a superb poem on the use of indirection to tell a truth. And slantness is possible in paradox.

"Donne's Paradoxes have, as we should expect, something in common with his satires."⁹ He writes of his disapproval of certain wrongs in the world in a satirical manner, often sending these messages to others sharing these same feelings. "Wee are fallen into such times as now the world might spare the Divell, because she could be bad enough without him."¹⁰ In "Loves Deitie" Donne writes, "I must love her that loves not me" and "Falsehood is worse than hate; and that must be, / If shee whom I love, should love mee."¹¹

Many of their poems about death contain paradoxes. In Donne's "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," he writes,

that he stands at the door to 'that Holy roome, /
Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore, / I
shall be made thy Musique.' And he preaches that,

⁹Evelyn M. Simpson, Donne's "Paradoxes and Problems" quoted in A Garland for John Donne, ed. by Theodore Spencer (Gloucester: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 27.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 28.

¹¹Donne, Poetical Works, p. 54.

though he would decline death in so far as it is
'a sordid Postern, by which I must be thrown out of
this world,' yet he would embrace it as it is 'the
gate, by which I must enter into Heaven.'¹²

"'So few that live have life,' Emily wrote a friend, 'so
few of Power.'¹³ One of her paradoxical arguments on
death is in this poem:

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become--
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun. (P 816)

And in another poem she expresses her paradoxical self
when she writes of the dead, "No Bald Death--affront
their Parlors--" (P 457).

Some of her best paradoxical poems concern the
enjoyment to be had by denial. The poem "Success is
counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (P 67)
reveals the greater success experienced by a dying
soldier than by the victorious one. This same theme
is expressed in Donne's writing, an idea which Donne
expresses in his "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse":

Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne,
Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.¹⁴

Emily quotes Biblical paradoxes in her writings.

¹²William R. Mueller, John Donne: Preacher
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 197.

¹³Charles R. Anderson, "The Conscious Self in
Emily Dickinson's Poetry," in AL (November, 1959),
XXXI, 294.

¹⁴Mueller, p. 176.

She wrote, "No Verse from the Bible frightened me so much from a child as from him that hath not, shall be taken even that that he hath" (L 788). "Had I known that the first was last / I should have kept it longer" (P 1720). And Donne makes these paradoxical statements:

Adam sinned, and I suffer; I forfeited before I had any Possession or could claime any Interest; I had a Punishment, before I had a being, and God was displeased with me before I was I; I was built up scarce 50. years ago, in my Mcthers womb, and I was cast down; almost 6000. years ago, in Adams loynes; I was borne in the last Age of the World, and dyled in the first.¹⁵

Other paradoxes are found in Emily Dickinson's prose. When Anne Holland married a few months after her father's death, Emily wrote Mrs. J. G. Holland, a very close friend, "Few daughters have the immortality of a Father for a bridal gift."¹⁶

To Thomas Higginson she wrote,

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her--
if she did not, the longest day would pass me on
the chase--and the approbation of my Dog, would
forsake me--then--My Barefoot-Rank is better (L 265).

Contrasts are used in sentence structure when a simple statement is contrasted with a complex sentence.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson: The Poet and Her Prose (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 16.

I lived on Dread--

contrasts with this complex structure:

To Those who know
The Stimulus there is
In Danger--Other impetus
Is numb--and Vitalless--(P 770).

Emily Dickinson, like John Donne, could evaluate life
through paradox.

Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By--Paradox--the Mind itself--
Presuming it to lead (P 910).

CHAPTER VI

IMAGERY

Emily's use of vivid imagery links her with John Donne.

Eccentric imagery, syntax, metrics, the denomination of her freckled person as 'Empress of Calvary,' her shrewd colloquies with God, a bee, or the spirit of a word, demonstrate in Emily's verse the same sense of the drama of the 'I' with which his meditative exercises informed the poetry of Donne.¹

Using the sea as a symbol for God and eternity, Emily writes, "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea--" (P 76). Donne frequently uses water as a symbol.

The requirements for achieving salvation are compared to the sea.

Though a part of every sailing ship must be under water and a part of every man's life be bent upon the activities beneath Heaven, yet the sails which give the ship its power are above the water, and the devout meditations of man, those aids to his heavenly voyage, are directed above the world to God.²

Through Emily's imagery, often of seemingly disparate objects, and through her concision, she

¹Judith Banzer, "'Compound Manner': Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets," AL, XXXII (January, 1961), 420.

²Mueller, p. 141.

achieves simplicity. Abstractions of all kinds are defined and described in her experiences. In "You constituted Time-- / I deemed Eternity" (P 765) abstractions which move upward are used between "you" and "I" to define time and space. The natural world contains similarities in "Distance--is not the Realm of Fox" (P 1155).

Both Emily Dickinson and John Donne were skillful with language. His fine intellect and mastery of vocabulary have been stressed, but he sometimes writes in a conversational style:

I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore; I talke on, in the same posture of praying. . . . A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of tomorrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spirituall things, perfect in this world.³

Many of Emily Dickinson's poems "are written in short measures, in which the effect of curt brevity is increased by her verbal penuriousness."⁴

Scientific terms supply metaphors for both poets. Mechanical as well as scholastic terms are

³Reiziss, p. 91.

⁴Martha Shackford, "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson," The Atlantic Monthly, CXI (January, 1913), 93.

found in Donne's images. Emily, too, employed mechanical terms. She used "geometrical figures," and "like seventeenth-century writers she found it natural to think of God as a great circle."⁵ Donne uses a map with East and West separated by a great distance to show the relationship between God and man. Death and new life are viewed as a circle to show man's existence. Two circles are used to show this relationship in one of Donne's writings:

Their death was a birth to them into another life, into the glory of God; it ended one Circle, and created another; for immortality, and eternity is a Circle too; not a Circle where two points meet, but a Circle made at once; This life is a Circle, made with a Compasse, stamped with a print, an endlesse, and perfect Circle, as soone as it begins. Of this Circle, the Mathematician is our great and good God; The other Circle we make up our selves; we begin the Cradle, and Grave together by a course of nature.⁶

Emily uses "circumference" (P 883) and "compass" (P 477) to explore experiences. She writes, "No man can compass a Despair" (P 477). Donne uses the compass for a figurative device in "A Valediction: forbidding mourning."

Union is imagined first as a mathematical point where physical and spiritual union are the same; then as an expanding circle of which the point is the center. The analogy is complete when the

⁵Duncan, p. 81.

⁶Mueller, pp. 119-120.

two legs of the draftman's compasses become congruent in the lovers' embrace, so that the legs form a vertical line standing on the 'same' point. Thus Donne 'reduces' a Platonic abstraction to actual form by contracting the circumference, 'absence,' to the point, 'reunion' on the human scale, of the lovers.⁷

In Emily's "There came a Day at Summer's full" (P 322) "the metaphor of the double crucifixion embodies the intricate agony of the encounter between ill-fated lovers.⁸ Death is a "Convex--and Concave Witness--" (P 906). "In using a scientific and technical terminology . . . she is looking to the Metaphysicals as well as to the future; legal terms . . . may be thought of as seventeenth-century predilection."⁹ Donne "knew also the language of law, a knowledge enabling him frequently to press home his religious teaching and exhortation in legal metaphors."¹⁰

Mathematical terms appear in the writings of each. This is part of a sermon:

Here is a new mathematics; without a change of elevation, or parallax, I that live in this climate, and stand under this meridian, look up

⁷Tate, p. 244.

⁸David T. Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 13.

⁹Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 75.

¹⁰Mueller, p. 27.

and fix myself upon God, and they that are under
my feet, look up to that place, which is above
them, and as divers, as contrary as our places
are, we all fix at once upon one God, and meet in
one centre. . . .¹¹

Emily's mathematical terms appear in these poems:

Deal with the soul / As with algebra! (P 269)
Globe did not teach it / Nor Logarithm Show (P 433)
In broken mathematics / We estimate our prize (P 88)
We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering
ratio (P 125).

Astronomy interested Donne throughout his life.

He speaks of astronomical discoveries in "Anatomie of
the World: The first Anniversary":

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th' earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.
And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
When in the Planets, and the Firmament
They seeke so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:¹²

He wrote of the telescope and mentioned Kepler, Galileo,
and Copernicus. He speaks of going to "Galileo's moon
and other celestial bodies."¹³ Emily Dickinson liked
astronomical terms. In a poem beginning "'Arcturus'
is his other name--" (P 70) she continues, "What once

¹¹Raiziss, p. 94.

¹²Donne's Poetical Works, p. 237.

¹³Raiziss, p. 89.

was 'Heaven' / is 'Zenith' now--." These terms appear in another poem:

Enchantment's Perihelion
Mistaken oft has been
For the Authenic orbit
Of its anterior Sun (P 1299).

Emily Dickinson and John Donne both place a high value upon biblical language. As Kermode says, quoting Donne, "The Scriptures use metaphor of 'infinite sweetnesse, and infinite latitude', though they have, when necessary, concision as well as eloquence, simplicity as well as highly-wrought wit."¹⁴ In "There came a Day at Summer's full" (P 322) she uses "Resurrections, Sacrament, Supper of the Lamb, Calvaries," and others. Emily combines religion with other subjects in many of her poems:

Baptized--this Day--a Bride (P 473)
'Faith' bleats--to understand! (P 313)
Of pretty ways of Covenant-- (P 944)
No Man depose / Whom Fate Ordain (P 803)

Her affinities with the metaphysicals would suggest this incarnational and sacramental approach. . . . Once the birds seemed to her to be celebrating an 'unobtrusive Mass.' Again she felt she could partake of God through summer days as through the communion:

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze--
Permit a child to join.¹⁵

However, she is aware of the Puritan religious belief

¹⁴Kermode, p. 34.

¹⁵Duncan, p. 82.

concerning predestination and incorporates it into her poetry, using the terms of her New England background: "Of all the souls that stand create-- / I have elected-- One--" (P 664).

Emily must have agreed with this advice from Donne:

There are not in the World so eloquent Books as the Scriptures . . . they mistake it much, that thinke, that the Holy Ghost hath rather chosen a low, and barbarous, and homely style, then an eloquent, and power-manner of expressing himselfe.¹⁶

 . . . no metaphor, no comparison is too high, none too low, too trivially, to imprint in you a sense of Gods everlasting goodnesse towards you.¹⁷

Referring to Moses, she writes, "No Eye hath seen and lived" (P 890). She writes of Noah in a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross, "Mother went rambling, and came in with a burdock in her shawl, so we know that the snow has perished from the earth. Noah would have liked Mother" (L 339). New Testament references are numerous. In "Old Nicodemus Phantom / Confronting us again!" (P 1274) she refers to the Biblical verse John 3:4, "Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old. Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" Earlier, she had

¹⁶Kermode, p. 34.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 36.

written in a poem about spring: "And Nicodemus'
Mystery / Receives its annual reply!" (P 140). More-
over, the resurrection is important to both poets.
These words are found in Donne's Easter sermon for
1627:

But this much we may learne from these Heathens,
That if the dead; and we, be not upon one floore,
nor under one story, yet we are under one rooffe.
We think not a friend lost, because he is gone
into another roome, nor because he is gone into
another Land; and into another world, no man is
gone; for that Heaven, which God created, and this
world, is all one world This is the faith
that sustains me, when I lose by the death of
others, or when I suffer by living in misery my
selfe, That the dead, and we, are now all in one
Church, and at the resurrection, shall be all in
one Quire.¹⁸

Emily, whose real delight was in living, bases a poem
on Paul's writings in I Corinthians 15:42-43:

"Sown in Corruption!"
Not so fast!
Apostle is askew!
Corinthians I:15. narrates
A circumstance or two! (P 62)

And she exclaims in another poem:

"And with what body do they come?"--
Then they do come--Rejoice!
What Door--What Hour--Run--run--My Soul!
Illuminate the House! (P 1492)

Emily Dickinson and John Donne like to use
first person pronouns. She uses the personal pronoun
"I" in "I felt a Funeral in my Brain" (P 280) and

¹⁸Kermode, p. 33.

"A Door just opened on a Street--" (P 953). "This mode of particularizing is characteristic of Emily Dickinson; in her finest poetry it is the device which provided immediacy and relevance, transforming the abstract and the metaphysical into the concrete."¹⁹ Donne's expressions are much like hers.

He creates, as much as in some of the Songs and Sonnets, the illusion of a present experience, throwing his stress on such words as 'now' and 'this'. And, as often there, he gives an extreme emphasis to the personal pronouns:

Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
 Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.²⁰

Emily's colloquies with God are similar to Donne's "'Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse' or 'Batter my heart, three person'd God'."²¹ Like John Donne in "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" and "A Hymne to God the Father" Emily Dickinson speaks to God in a personal manner.

I am spotted--"I am Pardon"--
 I am small--"The Least
 Is esteemed in Heaven the chiefest--
 O occupy my House"-- (P 964)

¹⁹Porter, p. 63.

²⁰John Donne The Divine Poems ed. with Introduction and Commentary by Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), xxx.

²¹Kermode, p. 39.

Emily speaks of God as an equal and often in a somewhat disparaging way. In "God is a distant--stately lover-- / Woos, as He states us--by His Son--" (P 357) she expresses her doubts that God and Christ are one as Priscilla and John Alden were. She reasons that it would have been better to be left in "Atom's Tomb" because God does not hear nor answer (P 376). Emily is skeptical of God hearing prayer, which she defines as "the little implement" (P 437). And she demands, "Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth-- / Hast thou no Arm for Me?" (P 502). She questions Jesus in an almost mocking manner: "Jesus--its' your little 'John'! / Don't you know--me?" (P 497) In one of her most sacrilegious poems she makes this demand of God:

Papa above!
 Regard a Mouse
 O'erpowered by the Cat!
 Reserve within thy kingdom
 A "Mansion" for the Rat! (P 61)

In her use of imagery Emily has been compared with poets of the seventeenth century. Theodore Spencer comments on one of her poems which reads as follows:

I make his crescent fill or lack
 His nature is full
 Or quarter--as I signify,
 His tides do I control (P 909).

There is here the same development of thought through imagery, the same use of metaphor in a structural, not merely an ornamental, manner which we associate with metaphysical verse. The moon is

to this poem just what the pair of 'Compasses' is to Donne's "Valediction Forbidding Mourning." Without the image the thought and emotion would not be fused into unity; the image is both a poetic mortar and a short cut to communication.²²

²²Theodore Spencer, "Concentration and Intensity," quoted in The Recognition of Emily Dickinson, p. 132.

CHAPTER VII

WIT

The metaphysical writers of the seventeenth century were known for their wit. "Aristotle had recommended a decorous use of most of the elements conventionally attributed to wit: surprise, deception, antithesis, and the pun."¹ During the seventeenth century wit kept its original meaning.

Donne's poetry is filled with wit, analogues, and ambiguity. All critics agree that wit is one of Donne's qualities. Although his wit may seem complex at times, he wrote for those people who enjoyed thinking.

A comparison of Miss Dickinson with the metaphysicals calls attention at once to her habit of transposing an experience into new terms in a different realm of being and to her witty, mischievous or naive tone in a serious context."²

A logical analogy can be traced in this poem, drawn from Donne's wit:

Thus I reclaim'd my buzard love, to flye

¹Duncan, p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 78.

At what, and when, and how, and where I chuse;
 Now negligent of sport I lye,
 And now as other Fawknars use,
 I spring a mistresse sweare, write, sigh and weepe:
 And the game kill'd, or lost, goe talke, and sleepe.³

Donne's poetry is full of surprises because his mind is original. In a letter to the Countess of Bedford, he writes,

You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things
 (Vertue, Art, Beauty, Fortune,) new I see
 Rarenesse, or use, not nature value brings.

It is the intellectual use he makes of the compliments (which the age required) that distinguishes them:

For, as dark texts need notes: there some must bee
 To usher vertue and say, This is shee.⁴

. . . There are fine things in Donne's poem for the marriage of the Princess Elizabeth in 1613:

Up, up, fair Bride, and call,
 Thy starres, from out their severall boxes,
 take
 Thy Rubies, Pearles, and Diamonds forth, and
 make
 Thy selfe a constellation, of them all,
 And by their blazing signifie
 That a Great Princess falls, but doth not die.

Donne could not speak without wit; it is this naturalness that often redeems him.⁵

Donne's elegy "The Autumnall," beginning as a compliment to Lady Herbert, ends with a description of "Winter-

³Karl Watts Gransden, John Donne (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), p. 90.

⁴Delores Dyer Lucas, p. 42.

⁵Kermode, pp. 25-26.

faces" and souls looking for their teeth at the resurrection.

But name not Winter-faces, whose skin's slacke,
Lanke, as an unthrifts purse; but a soules sacke;
Whose Eyes seeke light within, for all here's shade;
Whose mouthes and holes, rather worne out, them made.⁶

In 1623 during Donne's illness, 'Thou art a metaphysical God', he wrote, 'full of comparisons.'⁷ He is a map to be examined in "A Hymn to God, my God in my sicknesse."

As West and East
In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection.

The Relique is a good example of Donne's unusual wit.

When my grave is broke up againe
Some second ghest to entertaine,
(For graves have learn'd that woman-head
To be to more than one a Bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,
Will he not let us alone,
And thinke that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their soules, at the last susie day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?⁸

"The tone of Donne's 'The Relique' is suggested in the sharp contrast of butterflies and 'Sunset's Yellow play' with 'eyelids in the Sepulchre.'⁹ Also "Another poem

⁶Donne's Poetical Works, p. 94.

⁷Kermode, p. 41.

⁸Donne's Poetical Works, p. 62.

⁹Duncan, p. 87.

explains that tickets to the grave admit but two--the bearer and the borne--and seat only one."¹⁰

The wit that was typical of the metaphysical poets in the seventeenth century seemed to be automatic for Emily. She wrote witty sayings at an early age and displayed her sense of humor in college by contributing witty articles to a magazine which she helped to start. T. W. Higginson, after he visited her, wrote that her conversation "consisted of a veritable barrage of wit--epigram, epithet, conceit, hyperbole, aphorism--illuminative flashes . . ."¹¹

She wrote wittily about the people whom she knew and the things that she observed. "Mrs. S. gets bigger and rolls down the lane to church like a reverend marble" (L 339). I Corinthians 2:9 was a verse that appealed to her: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." She referred to this verse from I Corinthians to write of her father's horse: "The horse looked round at me, as if to say 'eye hath not seen nor ear heard the things that,' I would do to you if I weren't tied!" (L 401) Emily Dickinson wrote Abiah Root, a friend, in 1846,

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: The Stairway of Surprise (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 5.

I think you must belong to the stiff-necked generation. I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam. You know there is no account of her death in the Bible and why am not I Eve? (L 24)

Her satires form an entertaining part of Emily's writings on the New England life about her. She wrote Austin in March, 1852,

Mrs. Sweetser is very feeble, Cant bear Allopathic treatment, cant have Homeopathic!--dont want Hydropathic--Oh what a pickle she is in--shouldn't think she would deign to live--it is so decidedly vulgar! (L 82)

As she became older, her satires improved. Writing of the formidable Aunt Elizabeth in 1863, Emily informed the Norcross cousins in 1863,

Libbie goes to Sunderland, Wednesday, for a minute or two; leaves here at 6½--what a fitting hour--and will breakfast the night before; such a smart atmosphere! The trees stand right up straight when they hear her boots, and will bear crockery wares instead of fruit, I fear. She hasn't starched the geraniums yet, but will have ample time, unless she leaves before April (L 286).

On occasion the witticisms became sardonic, and, as her satires are reported to have been, they are somewhat grim.

Emily, in a letter to T. W. Higginson, whom she consulted about her poetry after reading his "Letter to a Young Contributor," answered his letter: "Thank you for the surgery--it was not so painful as I supposed While my thought is undressed--I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown--they look alike, and numb" (L 261). She displays her wit and proves herself highly conversant with the basic

devices and techniques of the ballet in this poem:

I cannot dance upon my Toes--
 No man instructed me--
 But oftentimes, among my Mind,
 A Glee possesseth me, (P 326)

Emily used many techniques of wit in her writing.

When Mrs. Holland, a good friend, addressed a letter to both Emily and Vinnie, Emily's sister, Emily sent this reply:

A mutual plum is not a plum.
 I was too respectful to take the pulp and do not
 like a stone. Send no union letters. The soul
 must go by Death alone, so, it must by life, if
 it is a soul.
 If a committee--no matter. (L 455)

She pictured an indifferent God as a village store-keeper in this poem:

The Mighty Merchant sneered--
 Brazil? He twirled a Button--
 Without a glance my way--
 "But--Madam--is there nothing else--
 That We can show--Today?" (P 621)

Samuel Bowles, editor of The Springfield Republican, shouted to Emily when he visited her and she refused to see him, "Emily, you damned rascal! No more of this nonsense! I've traveled all the way from Springfield to see you! Come down at once!" Later she wrote him,

I went to the Room as soon as you left to confirm
 your presence--recalling the Psalmist's Sonnet to
 God, beginning
 I have no Life but this--
 To lead it here--
 Nor any Death--but lest
 Dispilled from there--

Nor tie to Earths to come,
 Nor action new
 Except through this Extent
 The love of you
 It is strange that the most intangible thing is the
 most adhesive.

Your "Rascal"

I washed the adjective (L 589)

Beginning with "It would have starved a Gnat--,"

(P 612) Emily compares herself to a gnat.

In a poem of metaphysical wit, which reminds one of Donne's 'Flea,' the poet plays upon the resemblance between herself and a gnat. 'The living child' had subsisted on such fare as would have starved a gnat. Though 'food's necessity' was on her 'like a claw,' there was no escape, for unlike the gnat she could not fly away, nor seek sustenance other than what was given to her. Nor had she even the art, as the gnat had, to 'gad' her life out by flying into the window pane.¹²

"In his letters Donne used a conceited manner in treating serious topics--even in writing of the death of one of his children."¹³ Emily, recalling Matthew 24:44, used her wit to write of the death of Dr. Stearns, who died suddenly, to the Norcross cousins: "'In such an hour as ye think not' means something when you try it" (L 471).

Ambiguity, which includes the pun, is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry. Emily made use of the

¹²Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York: [Am. Men of Letters Ser], 1952), pp. 154-155.

¹³Duncan, p. 21.

pun. "She--was mute from transport--" was written about a girl who had died (P 27). She speaks of the undertaker as "the Man Of the Appalling Trade--" (P 389). She employs a pun in the death poem, "One dignity delays for all--" (P 98) when she writes of "One mitred Afternoon--" and ends the stanza with "None evade this Crown!"

In

Unto like Story--Trouble has enticed me-- (P 295) the inner impulse is nicely reproached by the oxymoron 'perpetual motion' (with its suggestion of a pun on 'perpetual motion') in concert with the imagery of martial dedication and Christ-like commitment.¹⁴

In one letter she thanks a friend for a happy pun: "How lovely are the wiles of Words" (L 555). Emily's ambiguity is noticeable in these ways: "The indefiniteness of relationships of the syntax, the ambiguous reference or meaning of prepositions and other minor words (to, than, as); and the omission of connectives and principal sentence elements. The sparseness of punctuation marks adds to the ambiguity."¹⁵

Sue Dickinson, who received many poems from Emily, wrote in an obituary of Emily: "A Damascus blade gleaming and glancing in the sun was her wit."¹⁶

¹⁴Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson, p. 130.

¹⁵Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 241.

¹⁶Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, (2 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960, II, 473.

CHAPTER VIII

A UNIFIED SELF

Emily Dickinson, like John Donne, found the universal within herself. " . . . he looked into his mind and heart, and wrote."¹ Although Donne lived in the world, he was self-sufficient and in a verse-letter to his friend Sir Henry Wotton he wrote this message:

Be thou thine owne home, and in thy selfe dwell;
Inne any where, continuance maketh hell.
And seeing the snaille, which every where doth come,
Carrying his owne house still, still is at home,
Follow (for he is easie pac'd) this snaile,
Bee thine owne Palace, or the World's thy gaile.
And in the worlds sea, do not like corke sleepe
Upon the waters face; nor in the deepe
Sinke like a lead without a line: but as
Fishes glide, leaving no print where they passe,
Nor making sound; so closely thy course goe,
Let men dispute, whether thou breathe,²

Emily Dickinson, too, sought personal revelation. She writes, "The mind lives on the Heart" (P 1355). Emily Dickinson stresses the necessity of knowing oneself in these four lines:

Soto! Explore thyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The "Undiscovered Continent"--
No Settler had the mind. (P 832)

¹Raiziss, p. 71.

²Gransden, p. 25. 48

Thus, she places great importance on the self and the essence of life. She avoided most people because they had no substance within. To express this feeling she writes, "But Meat within, is requisite / To Squirrels, and to Me" (P 1073).

Emily is saying that nothing exists unless it first exists within when she writes,

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend--
Or the most agonizing Spy--
An Enemy--could send-- (P 683)

Emily Dickinson writes of a spider creating out of his own self the exterior design in "A Spider sewed at Night" (P 1138); "Himself himself inform" means that the spider does not tell the meaning of his design. In her search for meaning in the interior world of the self, Emily's poetry is the outward design. "The mind and heart, the consciousness, the self, the soul--whatever the word one wishes--this was the 'Magic Prison' she always explored in her poetry."³ She looks over the unimportant and insignificant things to exclaim that

The pedigree of honey
Does not concern the bee;
A clover any time to him
Is aristocracy. (P 1627)

She is unique among poets in that her mood is always lyrical; one finds a person in her poems rather than ideas examined objectively. This is largely due

³Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 222.

to the life of seclusion, which she led and to her habit of looking inward.⁴

By meditating on one particular incident in life, Donne could read his thoughts into all mankind.

Donne takes a series of traditional meditations on the decay of the world from its beginning in Eden to its final putrefaction in the present, juxtaposes them with a series of fulsome, exaggerated eulogies of Elizabeth Drury, and argues that they are one and the same thing.⁵

In the "First Anniversary" he uses the death of Elizabeth Drury, a friend's young daughter, to universalize all mortality. He expresses his opinion of man in "This man, so great, that all that is, is his, / Oh what a trifle and poore thing he is!"⁶ He makes this urgent plea:

. . . But up unto the watch-towre get,
And see all things despoyl'd of fallacies:
Thou shalt not peep through lattices of eyes
Nor leave through Labyrinths of cares, nor learne
In heaven thou straight know'st all⁷

"Another traditional concept utilized by Donne is that of man as a little world, a replica, in small,

⁴Donald F. Connors, "The Significance of Emily Dickinson," College English, III, No. 7 (1942), 626.

⁵John Donne, The Anniversaries, ed. with Introduction and Commentary by Frank Manley (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), p. 11.

⁶Spencer, p. 191.

⁷Gransden, p. 124.

of the cosmos.⁸ He believed that each person had the resources within to understand every other person. Donne speaks of man as a world in Meditation 8:

All mankinde is of one Author and is one volume; /
when one Man dies; one Chapter is not torn out of
the / booke but translated into a better language; /
and every Chapter must be so translated.

No man is an Island, intire of it selfe; Every man
is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine. If
a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the
lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were . . . any
mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in
Mankinde. And therefore never send to know for
whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee.⁹

Emily, like Donne, thought of the self as a little world and could universalize any particular experience.

⁸Milton Allan Rugoff, Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 43.

⁹Gransden, p. 172.

CHAPTER IX

A STYLE OF WRITING

"In a manner similar to Donne's . . . (the abruptness of the rhythm, the use of colloquial language, the implication that a listener is present), Emily Dickinson establishes a vivid sense of presence and of personality."¹ Moreover, their lines explode with verbal activity. The use of colloquial words and expressions sprang from the speech of the New England area. Emily writes, "Because I see--New Englandly / The Queen, discerns like me-- / Provincially--" (P 285). She uses the colloquial "heft" when she proclaims,

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons--
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes-- (P 258)

She absorbed into her thinking and writing the objects and surroundings of Amherst.

John Donne's surroundings had an impact upon his writing, too. "Many of the types of his time, the middle-class merchant, the returned traveller with his tobacco and his fantastic costume, the Puritan, the young peddler with his chaffering, jostle their way

¹Porter, p. 120.

through his pages."²

" . . . Accent on a conversational, personality-revealing style accounts for most of the 'personal' quality of Donne and his followers."³ One of the characteristics of Donne's poetry is the use of ellipses. Ellipses, used by Emily to achieve brevity, is one of her most distinctive characteristics.

Ellipses helps to emphasize the dignity of self and the self-assurance that constitute the subject-matter of the poem 'The Soul selects her own Society--':

Unmoved--she notes the Chariots--pausing--
At her low Gate--
Unmoved--an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat--⁴

To express directness and forcefulness in her poetry, Emily employs elliptical expressions, such as "Impossible to feign / The Beads upon the Forehead? (P 241) in one of her poems about death. Thus, elliptical statements enabled her to use only the very essential words. Paratactic sentence patterns, which characterized her writing, are characteristic of spoken English. Colloquial writing often results when many main clauses are set against subordinate ones. Speech patterns are created through the structuring of "What would I give to see his face?" (P 247) with questions followed

²White, p. 77.

³Duncan, p. 19.

⁴Lindberg-Seyersted, pp. 236-237.

rapidly by answers. The metaphysical poets may have influenced her to write in a conversational manner.

Neither Emily Dickinson nor John Donne hesitated to abandon regular meter to express themselves. Emily uses simple metrical verse, but her rhythm is often irregular.

Although Emily afterward employed the metres of poetry in her prose, the galloping three-foot line which begins with a dactyl or anapest is almost entirely confined to the prose of the eighteen fifties. It is not surprising that Emily's poems should follow much the same pattern.⁵

She searched for the most effective word to fit the rhythm. Her letters are like her poems in rhythm, and in a letter to Austin in 1851 she writes a poem with two prose lines in the same meter:

. . . there is another sky ever serene and fair,
and there is another sunshine, tho 'it be darkness
there--never mind faded forests, Austin, never mind
silent fields--here is a little forest whose leaf
is ever green, here is a brighter garden, where not
a frost has been, in its unfading flowers I hear
the bright bee hum, prithee, my Brother, into my
garden come! (L 149)

Emily and Donne both filled their poetry and prose with much verbal activity. Emily's use of Latin words to contrast with Saxon ones creates a verbal tension. "It is . . . a feeling for language that senses out the two fundamental components of English and their metaphysical relation: The Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions--the peculiar virtue of

⁵Higgins, p. 63.

English as a poetic language."⁶ Verbal dexterity was a device to enliven her poetry.

One of her delights was the use of be instead of is or are to give her poetry an archaic flavor. She uses be in the present indicative. "Eclipses be predicted / And Science bows them in" (P 415) is one example of this use. Emily also used the present tense subjunctive with other verbs besides be. She writes, "That if the Flesh resist the Heft--" (P 264). "Tell Him--I only said the Syntax-- / And left the Verb and pronoun out--" (P 494) may explain why she uses the present tense subjunctive in another line of the same poem, "But if He ask where you are hid." "Thomas H. Johnson interprets Dickinson's unorthodox subjunctive as 'a continuing or universal present indicative' which the poet apparently uses 'to universalize her thought to embrace past, present, and future.'"⁷

In the poem beginning with "Essential Oils-- are wrung--" (P 675) she is

seeking to escape from all particularity--of quantity, quality, even calendar--into the Absolute: rose decay, just as poet die, but perfume make summer.

The General Rose decay--
While this--in Lady's Drawer

⁶Tate, p. 225.

⁷Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 249.

Make Summer, when the Lady lie
In spiceless Sepulchre.⁸

Martha Dickinson Bianchi, her niece, spoke of her "'verbal rocket.'"⁹ Like Donne, she achieved forcefulness through her verbal skill.

⁸Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 67.

⁹Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 16.

CHAPTER X

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

Sir Thomas Browne, who lived from 1603 to 1682, saw many changes in the English world. Drawing apart from the tumult of a society that was changing the old order with corruption and shifting standards, Sir Thomas Browne sought solitude in order to speculate on the universal problems of life and death. His writings, which convey his own personal feeling and reasoning, take us into the seventeenth century. Withdrawing from the rigid religion of the seventeenth-century Puritan, Sir Thomas speculates on God in many ways, and that speculation often creates a paradoxical self. His curiosity and wonder, combined with his love of language, survive in his literature, much of which was not written for publication.

In a letter to T. W. Higginson on April 25, 1862 Emily Dickinson writes, "For poets--I have Keats--and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose--Mr. Ruskin--Sir Thomas Browne--and the Revelations" (L 261). It is significant that she mentioned Sir Thomas Browne and that she followed his advice. She withdrew from society and wrote privately. Disliking the crowd, Sir Thomas

writes,

If there be any among those common objects of hatred I do contemn and laugh at, it is that great enemy of reason, virtue, and religion, the multitude; that numerous piece of monstrosity, which, taken asunder, seem men, and the reasonable creatures of God, but, confused together, make but one great beast, and a monstrosity more prodigious than Hydra.¹

Emily makes a similar statement to T. W. Higginson,

You ask of my Companions. Hills--Sir--and the Sundown--and Dog--large as myself, that my Father bought me--They are better than Beings--because they know--but do not tell--and the noise in the Pool, at Noon--excels my Piano. (L 261)

"The world that I regard is myself, it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast mine eye on: for the other, I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation."² And in the world of nature, especially the small things, he found the concrete images to explain the infinite. Emily was able to absorb the entire universe through her creative imagination in "The Brain--is wider than the Sky--" (P 632). Another poem of hers expresses her confidence in the self:

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

¹The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes, (4 vols., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), II, 1.

²Ibid., p. 11.

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

Browne's writings reveal his rich thought and his metaphysical conceptions. His Religio Medici, which was written for his own pleasure, contains his philosophy:

The severe schools shall never laugh me out of the philosophy of Hermes, that this visible world is but a picture of the invisible, wherein, as in a portrait, things are not truly, but in equivocal shapes, and as they counterfeit some more real substance in that invisible fabric.³

His great style of writing is certainly the seventeenth-century metaphysical style with

imaginative brilliance, half-lights, the suggestive and stimulating sparkle of epigrams, truths half dug out like fragments of statues, frankness, discursiveness, point rather than clearness, delight in flashing the facets of a paradox, a subtle art that knows how to choose words that push into the inlets and winding shores of the mind.⁴

He explored the universal subjects, and "he says in the Epistle Dedicatory to the Garden of Cyrus, he liked subjects which 'allow excursions and venially admit of collateral truths, though at some distance from their principals.'"⁵

³Ibid., I, 12.

⁴William Parmly Dunn, Sir Thomas Browne (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950), p. 38.

⁵Joan Bennett, Sir Thomas Browne (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), p. 53.

This avid curiosity about the mysteries of life is explained in Religio Medici when Browne writes of his task:

These are Contemplations Metaphysicall; my humble speculations have another Method, and are content to trace and discover those impressions hee hath left on his creatures, and the obvious effects of nature; there is no danger to propound these mysteries, no Sanctum sanctorum in Philosophy: The world was made to be inhabited by beasts, but studied and contemplated by man: 'tis the debt of our reason wee owe unto God, and the homage we pay for not being beasts; without this, the world is still as though it had not been, or as it was before the sixth day when as yet there was not a creature that could conceive or say there was a world.⁶

Emily, too, sought self-knowledge by living apart from the world to contemplate life and death. Because of skeptical natures, they questioned everything and searched everywhere. Using many figures of speech, they sought to make their findings comprehensible.

⁶The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, I, 22.

CHAPTER XI

SKEPTICISM

Emily Dickinson resembles Sir Thomas Browne in her skeptical nature. Both struggled as they questioned all of life.

But multiple belief itself often implies tolerance, and tolerance is often--if unconsciously--based on skepticism, as the case of Sir Thomas Browne will show, so that, paradoxically, skepticism can be the basis of multiple belief as well as of the rejection of all belief.¹

Through argumentation, meanings could be derived by looking critically at objects. This investigation resulted from skepticism, for a mind free of struggle and doubt will not seek to join things that are opposite.

His skepticism provided an incentive to explain his struggles in a metaphysical manner. In Religio Medici Browne speaks of his skepticism:

I have runne through all sects, yet finde no rest in any: though our first studies and junior endeavors may stile us Peripateticks, Stoicks, or Academicks, yet I perceive the wisest heads prove, at last, almost all Scepticks, and stand like Janus in the field of knowledge. I have therefore one common and authentick Philosophy I learned in the Schooles, whereby I discourse and satisfie the reason of other men, another more reserved, and drawne from experience, whereby I content mine owne. Solomon, that complained of ignorance in the height of knowledge, hath not onely humbled my

¹David Daiches, "T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot," quoted in Raiziss, p. 111.

conceits, but discouraged my endeavours.²
 Moreover, he declares that he is "thankful that I lived
 not in the dayes of miracles, that I never saw Christ nor
 his Disciples; I would not have beene one of the
 Israelites that passed the Red Sea, nor one of Christs
 Patients,"3

Emily knows what a skeptic must see in this poem:

Split the Lark--and you'll find the Music--

 Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
 Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true? (P 861)

Some think that Emily's reference to "Sceptic Thomas"
 may be to Thomas in the Bible, but some think that she
 may be thinking of Sir Thomas Browne, whom she so
 admired. Her poem beginning "Their Height in Heaven
 comforts not--" (P 696) speaks of "The House of Suppos-
 ition--" and ends with "This timid life of Evidence /
 Keeps pleading--'I don't know.'"

²Bennett, Sir Thomas Browne, p. 114.

³Browne, I, 18.

CHAPTER XII

"HERMETIC" MEANINGS

Emily Dickinson and Sir Thomas Browne both enjoyed the complex meanings which can result from the use of unusual words. They both found abstruse meanings in figures of science or mathematics. Dr. Johnson criticized Sir Thomas Browne's use of complex words, but he reached this conclusion:

His style is a tissue of many languages; a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions, with terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another. He must, however, be confessed to have augmented our philosophical diction; and in defence of his uncommon words and expressions, we must consider, that he had uncommon sentiments; and was not content to express in many words that idea for which any language could supply in a single term.¹

Emily Dickinson, in a similar way, captured thoughts with unusual words. "The Poet searched Philology" (P 1126) may explain her word-consciousness.

Emily Dickinson, who named Sir Thomas Browne as a favorite author, wrote "--My Business is Circumference--" (L 412). Her meaning of "Circumference" often resembles that given by Sir Thomas Browne:

¹Dr. Samuel Johnson, Life of Sir Thomas Browne quoted in Bennett, Sir Thomas Browne, p. 217.

"Trismegistus his Circle, whose center is every where, and circumference no where, was no Hyperbole."² To Emily Dickinson, the center is the mind, and the circumference is the whole universe to be explored. Her circumference is boundless. "The concept of 'circumference' is central to his philosophy and gives unity to his vast system of circle imagery. The poetry of ED is likewise rich in wheels, arcs, axes, cycles, discs, spheres, and orbits."³ The following poem helps to explain Emily Dickinson's conception of a poet's business:

The Poets light but Lamps--
 Themselves--go out--
 The Wicks they stimulate
 If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns--
 Each Age a Lens
 Disseminating their
 Circumference-- (P 883)

Emily Dickinson, like Sir Thomas Browne, employed unusual words, strange imagery, and compression of thoughts into one word.

Emily Dickinson used the word "Hermetic" in a poem beginning with "Strong Draughts of Their Refreshing Minds" (P 711). One of her critics explains Emily

²Sir Thomas Browne, III, 272.

³Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 55n.

Dickinson's use of the word in this way:

The more common meaning from alchemy, of airtight sealing, fits throughout: the allusion to the camel's capacity for storing water, the simile of 'Sealed Wine,' the implication of the poem itself as a vessel for preserving a rare elixir. Webster also gave her the richer meaning of 'Hermetic' as referring to the 'Books of the Egyptians' which treat of universal principles.⁴

In Religio Medici Sir Thomas Browne writes, "That allegorical description of Hermes, pleaseth me beyond all the Metaphysical definitions of Divines; . . ."5

Another unusual word "periphrasis" is used by both writers. Sir Thomas Browne writes in Religio Medici:

. . . where there is an obscurity too deepe for our reason, 'tis good to sit downe with a description, periphrasis, or adumbration; . . .⁶

Emily Dickinson uses the word in this poem:

While simple-hearted neighbors
Chat of the "early dead,"
We, prone to periphrasis,
Remark that birds have fled! (P 45).

Besides the words "Hermetic" and "periphrasis," Herbert E. Childs has pointed out others in an article "Emily Dickinson and Sir Thomas Browne."⁷

⁴Ibid., p. 45.

⁵Browne, I, 19.

⁶Ibid., I, 19.

⁷Herbert E. Childs, "Emily Dickinson and Sir Thomas Browne," AL, XXII, (January, 1951), 455-465.

Emily Dickinson liked exotic names, especially those of South American places. "Peru" seems to symbolize wealth in "Sister of Ophir-- / Ah, Peru--" (P 1366B). "Potosi" is another exotic place in her poem "Talk with prudence to a Beggar / Of 'Potosi,' and the mines!" (P 119). Sir Thomas Browne writes "I have not Peru in my desires."⁸

"Freckled Human Nature" (P 401) is a phrase of Emily Dickinson's that is discussed by Herbert Childs. She also speaks of "This dirty--little--Heart" (P 1311) as a "Freckled shrine--" (P 1311). Sir Thomas Browne comments on "this speckled face of honesty in the world."⁹ In one of her letters Emily Dickinson writes "We told you we did not learn to pray--but then our freckled bosom bears it's [sic] friends--in it's [sic] own way--to a simpler sky. . . ." ¹⁰

Herbert Childs cites Emily Dickinson's use of "the indefinite article a or an with an noun that does not ordinarily carry a singular article."¹¹ Using one of her favorite words "ecstasy," she attaches the indefinite article in the following poem:

⁸Ibid., I, 91.

⁹Browne, I, 293.

¹⁰Higgins, p. 114.

¹¹Childs, p. 460.

A throe upon the features,
 A hurry in the breath,
 An ecstasy of parting
 Denominated "Death,"--(P 71)

Besides the words mentioned by Herbert Childs,
 the word "flye" appears in the poetry of both writers.

Sir Thomas Browne uses the word in Religio Medici:

There will I sit, like that industrious flye,
 Buzzing thy prayes, which shall never die
 Till death abrupts them, and succeeding glory
 Bids me goe on in a more lasting story.¹²

Emily Dickinson employs the same word in "I heard a Fly
 buzz--when I died--" (P 465).

Another similarity between Emily Dickinson and
 Sir Thomas Browne has been pointed out by George Whicher,
 her biographer.

Sir Thomas Browne in Religio Medici quaintly phrased
 his sense of God's unknowableness in saying, 'we are
 ignorant of the back-parts or lower side of His
 Divinity,' and Emily spoke of

parts of His far plan
 That baffled me--the underside
 Of His divinity.¹³

He explains that both may be thinking of the passage in
 Exodus 33:23: "and I will take away my hand, and thou
 shalt see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Sir Thomas Browne uses the word "antiquity" in
 speaking of God:

. . . for that indeed which I admire is farre before

¹²Browne, I, 23.

¹³Whicher, pp. 222-223.

antiquity, that is Eternity, and that is God himself; who though hee be stiled the Antient of dayes, cannot receive the adjunct of antiquity, who was before the world, and shall be after it, yet is not older then it: for in his yeares there is no Climacter, his duration is eternity, and farre more venerable then antiquitie.¹⁴

In a letter to the Norcross cousins Emily Dickinson sends this message:

Did you know about Mrs. J.--? She fledged her antique wings. 'Tis said that "nothing in her life became her like the leaving it." (L 339)

Emily Dickinson's ability to set off native words against those of Latin origin has been explored.

Sir Thomas Browne, one of Emily Dickinson's favorite authors, is a master at handling the two sets of words. He writes: "But man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnizing Nativities and Deaths with equal lustre, nor omitting Ceremonies of bravery, in the infamy of his nature."¹⁵

Furthermore, Emily liked abstract words, "especially those ending in --tion: exhilaration, revelation, perception, extinction."¹⁶ He used these abstractions:

In bivious theorems, and Janus-faced doctrines, let considerations state the determination. Look upon opinions as thou dost the moon, and choose not the dark hemisphere for thy contemplation.¹⁷

Because both believed that each person can

¹⁴Browne, I, 39.

¹⁵Lindberg-Seyersted, pp. 89-90.

¹⁶Childs, p. 465.

¹⁷Ibid., 465.

carry the world within his own mind, they looked within themselves.

I take my circle to be above three hundred and sixty; though the number of the Arke do measure my body, it comprehendeth not my minde: whilst I study to finde how I am a Microcosme or little world, I finde my selfe something more than the great.¹⁸

Emily Dickinson expresses a similar belief in this short poem:

Soto! Explore thyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The "Undiscovered Continent"--
No Settler had the Mind (P 832).

¹⁸Browne, I, 87.

CHAPTER XIII

EMILY DICKINSON AND GEORGE HERBERT

Emily Dickinson copied the following lines from George Herbert's "Matin Hymn," which was published in The Springfield Republican in 1876 under the title "Mattens," to put with her things:

My God, what is a heart,
Silver, or gold, or precious stone,
Or star, or rainbow, or a part
Of all these things--or all of them in one?

My God, what is a heart,
That thou shouldst it so eye and woo,
Pouring upon it all thy art
As if that thou hadst nothing else to do?¹

These lines were similar enough to Emily Dickinson's poems for one author to publish them as Emily Dickinson's in the first edition.

George Herbert, who was born in 1593 and whose mother was John Donne's admired friend, is like Emily Dickinson in many ways. They both employ domestic imagery to bring together the earthly and the heavenly. They found metaphors in the ordinary things of life. Building or construction terms, household words, and clothing supplied imagery to make the other

¹Capps, p. 69.

world understandable.

Herbert's collection of religious poems is entitled The Temple.

. . . The Temple is not to be regarded simply as a collection of poems, but . . . as a record of the spiritual struggles of a man of intellectual power and emotional intensity who gave much toil to perfecting his verses.²

He uses ordinary images to make abstract thoughts comprehensible. In his "Confession" grief is compared to a carpenter:

No scrue, no piercer can
Into a piece of timber work and winde,
As Gods afflictions into man,
When he a torture hath design'd

He gains his effects from the short, strong, familiar words of daily usage:

My throat, my soul is hoarse:
My heart is wither'd like a ground³

In a poem beginning "Myself was formed--a Carpenter--" Emily Dickinson uses a carpenter's tools to write of the poet as a builder:

My Tools took Human--Faces--
The Bench, where we had toiled--
Against the Man--persuaded--
We--Temples build--I said-- (P 488)

Emily Dickinson and George Herbert both looked

²T. S. Eliot, George Herbert, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962), p. 20.

³Joan Bennett M.A., Four Metaphysical Poets: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1953), p. 61.

within and spoke of the soul.

In a separate edition of The Temple owned by Sue several lines of "The Church-Porch" have been marked. Two of the marked lines express one of Emily Dickinson's characteristic attitudes: 'Dare to look in thy chest; for 'tis thine own; And tumble up and down what thou find'st there.'⁴

In "A Parody" George Herbert asks God to abide within his soul because "No stormy night / Can so afflict or so affright / As thy eclipsed light."⁵ In "The Banquet" he welcomes God: "With me, in me, live and dwell."⁶

Emily Dickinson writes the following poem:

The Soul that hath a Guest
Doth seldom go abroad--
Diviner Crowd at Home--
Obliterate the need--

And Courtesy forbid
A Host's departure when
Upon Himself be visiting
The Emperor of Men-- (P 674)

Both poets struggled to achieve inner harmony, and their poetry reveals this continual striving. "The Collar" shows George Herbert's resistance to God but ends with the realization that he has really been fleeing from God's love.

⁴Capps, p. 69.

⁵George Herbert, The Poetical Works with Life, Critical Dissertation, and Explanatory Notes, by the Rev. George Gilfillan (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1853), p. 194.

⁶Ibid., p. 191.

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
 At every word,
 Methought I heard one calling, Child.
 And I replied, My Lord.

His poetry is not the record of quiet saintliness,
 but of continual wrestling and continual submission;
 the collar is not easily worn:

My stuff is flesh, not brass; my senses live,
 And grumble oft, that they have more in me
 Than he that curbs them, being but one to five:
 Yet I love thee.⁷

This last quotation from "The Pearl" is similar to
 Emily Dickinson's lines: "The Subterranean Freight /
 The Cellars of the Soul--" (P 1225).

Both use concrete imagery of things, often those
 found in any household, to link the earthly and the
 heavenly. In "Confession" George Herbert writes "with-
 in my heart I made Closets: and in them many a chest."⁸
 Emily Dickinson writes "The Brain has Corridors--sur-
 passing / Material Place" (O 670). Both poets could
 write surprise endings. Emily Dickinson would have liked
 George Herbert's poem "Jordan" in which he creates a
 scene of much busyness but in which he learns to take
 a direct path to the source or God:

There is in love a sweetness ready penn'd:
 Copy out only that, and save expense.⁹

⁷Bennett, Four Metaphysical Poets, p. 54.

⁸The Poetical Works of George Herbert, p. 129.

⁹Ibid., p. 103.

CONCLUSION

Many have tried to penetrate the charisma of Emily Dickinson. Her themes and techniques resemble those used by three metaphysical writers of the seventeenth century: John Donne, Sir Thomas Browne, and George Herbert. From the window of her home in Amherst, she observed not only the New England world but also the whole world of mankind. She looked within herself and turned the ordinary events of her daily life into great poetry.

Emily Dickinson read much on many subjects. Her library at home contained many of the classics, which she mentioned in her letters. Moreover, her markings in books suggest an acquaintance with the metaphysical writers. The transcendentalists of her day were writing in a metaphysical manner.

Emily Dickinson wrote Thomas W. Higginson in 1862, "I marked a line in One Verse--because I met it after I made it--and never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person" (L 271). Of course, she was influenced by the writings that were available to her. Obscure, inexplicable, and often mysterious, Emily Dickinson wrote about life, death, love, immortality,

and other universal subjects. Believing that she was the center of the universe, she looked at things from all angles and tried to bring order to the world. Her clear vision enabled her to write wittily like the metaphysical writers. Using concise language, forceful imagery, and verbal dexterity, she projected her imagination into every area of life.

Emily Dickinson's domestic world provided images to explain the unknown world. She expresses her conception of the creative process in this poem:

This was a Poet--It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings
And Attar so immense (P 448)

This study has truly proved to be a serendipity. To partake of Emily Dickinson's poetry is a pleasure, but to compare her with John Donne, Sir Thomas Browne, and George Herbert is a rewarding experience. A reading of Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals her timelessness and universality. Emily Dickinson, the New England metaphysical poet, summed up her life in these lines:

My Splendors are Menagerie--
But their Competeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I am long ago,
An island in dishonored Grass--
Whom none but Beetles--know (P 290).

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